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Leaderless groups: A case against hierarchy

Mohit Kishore

For organisations whose main output is knowledge (software, media), a leaderless approach does seem to be an interesting alternative.

In his treatise *Dastambu*, Mirza Ghalib documents the events in Delhi at the time the revolt of 1857 broke out. He writes: "Band upon band of soldiers and peasants had become as one, and far and near, one and all, without even speaking or conferring together, girded their loins to their single aim... City after city lies open, without protectors, filled with men who have none to watch over them, like gardens bereft of their gardeners studded with trees stripped bare of leaves and fruit." (*Ghalib - Life, Letters and Ghazals*; Ralph Russell; Oxford University Press 2003)

While Ghalib's political leanings are not the subject of this article, what is interesting is his view that the men behind the mutiny were leaderless and hence not worthy of being taken seriously.

Are there any examples to prove that a leaderless group can actually lead to efficient outcomes? Can independently-deciding

individuals help a group achieve its goal?

History suggests that in certain situations leaderless groups can indeed achieve a stated objective. Leaderless resistance movements such as guerrilla warfare are a good example of this. Terrorists too tend to operate in independent cells (and not hierarchies). This probably explains why they manage to escape from beneath the eyes of hierarchical intelligence agencies.

Key advantages of a leaderless group include the fact that there is no centralised command and control system, which is vulnerable to attack. Each small group or individual behaves independently based on some shared values. This means that the group is not burdened by traditional hierarchical chains of command, bureaucracy and red-tape in its decision-making. Additionally, affinity of group members towards the cause is likely to be much higher since there is no central authority who forces membership and neither are there any negative consequences of giving up membership. In other words, only truly passionate individuals would aggregate in such a group.

Clearly, leaderless groups are structurally efficient. Are they functionally effective too? In the best-selling book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Suroweicki argues that large, independent groups of people are smarter than an elite few (leaders/ experts). For instance, on *Who wants to be a millionaire*, audience polls got the correct answer 91 per cent of the time, while the `phone a friend' experts got it right only 65 per cent of the time. He identifies four prerequisites for a `wise' crowd — diversity of opinion, independence, decentralisation and aggregation. There must be a diversity of opinion within the group, which is independent of the views of other members. The group must not have any central chain of command and there must be some way of aggregating various individuals'
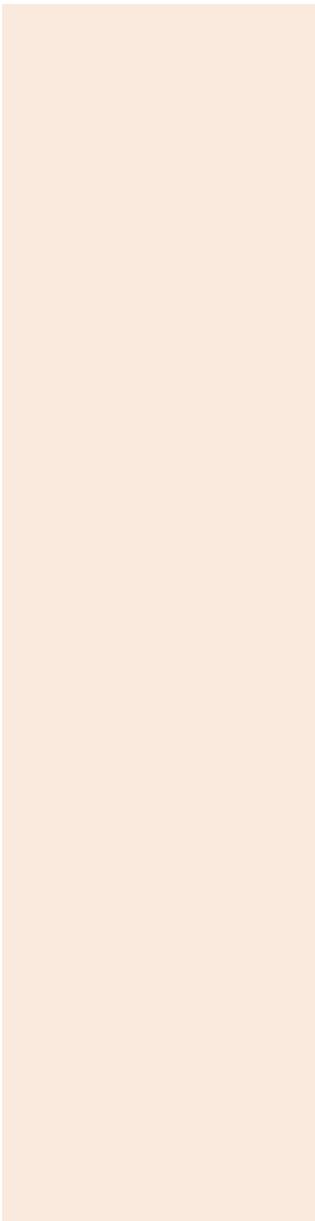
viewpoints.

The Wikipedia model

Wikipedia (a freely editable online encyclopaedia) is a good example of tapping into the wisdom of crowds. Individuals across the world collectively edit articles to produce content that is by and large of very high quality. There is, of course, the stray incident involving a writer editing an article to depict a deliberately biased point of view. However, Wikipedia does have a core team of editors who scan content for such anomalies. Thus, in effect, the people who contribute to the Wikipedia project are like a leaderless group, which is loosely monitored by a core team of editors.

An interesting thought experiment to conduct would be to evaluate whether such a model can be extended to other kinds of organisations. How could one structure an organisation to tap into the wisdom of crowds? Needless to say, leaderless groups are not suitable for certain kinds of organisations — for instance, a manufacturing organisation would clearly need a highly supervised environment. However, for organisations whose main output is knowledge (software, media) a leaderless approach does seem to be an interesting alternative. Open source software movements clearly show that people don't have any hassles creating intellectual property free of cost — with little or no supervision — if they believe in the larger cause.

Purely from a human psychology perspective, a group with a `leader' necessarily means that one individual becomes bigger than both the cause as well as the other individuals in the group. While this is good in a political cause (like apartheid) where it is important to truly inspire people, it may not be particularly useful in a more everyday cause, like a company that makes a product or service. In the latter, having

overarching leaders can lead to harmful political behaviour and other efficiency-dissipating activities that can lead to drop in motivation levels. On the other hand, people are happiest when they work for causes (not people) much larger than their individual selves. In fact, offering work as a service to the Lord, without worrying about one's ego or the end result, finds support in the *Bhagvad Gita* too. Maybe, it's time organisations experimented more with leaderless set-ups (perhaps within individual divisions if not entirely). History certainly shows that it can work well in a number of contexts.

(The writer, an alumnus of XLRI, works with a multinational financial services company.)

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