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An evolutionary view of leadership

Thoughts on leadership and its relationship with rewards.

Mohit Kishore

A casual perusal of the management section of any bookstore would suggest that 'leadership' is the most desirable goal that people have for their lives. This may indeed be true, but evidence in the real world suggests that there is more to leadership than meets the eye.

In the real world, leadership is often bestowed upon an individual who is most likely to work in the interest of the group he leads, even if it means sacrificing his own well-being. While, the first-half of that statement is rather clichéd, the second part is the one that is more interesting. It is our tendency to choose leaders who will not work for their own self-interest that leads most people to actually not want to be leaders themselves. They will gladly be followers and reap the benefits of having a leader who will work to maximise the wellbeing of his constituency, rather than step on the pedestal themselves. This argument is also found in Plato's *Republic*.

Plato's *Republic* presents this idea through an argument between Socrates and Thrasymachus in the course of which Socrates says: "No one willingly chooses to rule and to take other people's troubles in their hand and straighten them out, but does ask for wages... In a city of good men, if it came into being, the citizens would fight not to rule. There it would be clear that anyone who is a true leader doesn't by nature seek his own advantage but that of his subjects. What kind of wages is Socrates referring to? The answer is — money, honour or a penalty if the individual refuses to lead." (Source: *Justice and the Leader*, by Plato from *Republic Book I* – Hackett Publishing, 1992)

[Leaders and wages](#)

Now, this seems to suggest that people only become leaders in order to get the above kinds of 'wages' and for no other

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reason. In other words, if there were no 'wages', no one would ever want to be a leader. This may be a bit far-fetched. Surely, history has shown us enough examples of 'wage-less' leaders such as Gandhi and Mother Teresa. The idea of 'servant leadership' developed by Robert Greenleaf suggests that a leader's role is purely to serve the needs of his constituency and not to increase his personal power or glory. In other words, for such leaders the wages, if any, are purely incidental.

Is there any way to reconcile these two schools of thought — one which suggests that all leaders work for tangible or intangible 'wages' and the other that suggests that leaders should only serve their followers and have no other goals? It may be instructive to view the concept of leadership as an evolutionary hierarchy. At the lower end of the hierarchy are leaders who are in it for the wages. Needless to say, they too serve their followers, but do so with personal goals in mind. As the leader evolves over time, the marginal utility of wages would decrease and finally reach a point where he demonstrates the qualities of a classic servant leader who is focused on the needs of others.

Servant leaders

Examples of such evolution are easy to find, particularly among business leaders who after many years of building great companies move on to set up charitable foundations that are not profit oriented (the Bill Gates Foundation for instance). In between these two extremes, there could be many other variants with differing ratios of 'wage' to 'wage-less' orientations.

Viewing leadership in this manner, as an evolutionary ladder, also helps us resolve Plato's problem of people not wanting to be leaders in the first place. The initial steps of this evolutionary ladder allow and encourage wages, thereby ensuring that people are motivated to take up responsibilities that they would have otherwise shirked, and the higher levels of the ladder are for people who are not in it for themselves.

The key thing then becomes identifying the right kind of leaders for the right kind of roles in society. An example of how things go wrong when there is a mismatch between the role and the wage orientation of leaders in that role is the political leadership in this country which has long been tarnished by cases of corruption by individuals who seek personal 'wages' over the larger good. On the other hand, middle managers in most businesses belong to the 'wage oriented' category, and they certainly seem to do justice to their roles by both maximising their personal gains as well as achieving

organisational goals.

In conclusion, it makes sense to allow and embrace both wage oriented and non-wage oriented leadership, provided that the extent of wage orientation in the individual matches with the leadership role that is on offer.

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

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