



Leadership Myopia

By S. Balasubramanian

The other day, I was listening to a panel discussion on CNBC TV18. It was the "billionaire's club", anchored by Govindaraj and the participants were Nandan Nilakeni of Ramalingam Raju of Satyam, Ramadorai of TCS, and Paul of Wipro. Of course, it is a moot point if these were the only companies in India eligible for the "billionaire's membership!"

What struck me the most was a remark made by Nandan. I heard him right. I heard him saying something like "perhaps we have two sets of values - one that will not change and another that may change contextually". If indeed that is what he said, it raises a whole lot of questions to be asked and, if possible, to be answered - by the leaders of our business organisations.

Some of us who have a passion for leadership studies have always believed that "values" are those that are nurtured, instilled, and cherished based on one's basic and fundamental beliefs, faiths and beliefs. And, values, in turn, give rise to the desired external outcomes of ethical standards, attitude, and behaviour. Values, by definition, ought to be those "that will not be compromised or changed, come what may".

For the unpleasant episodes in corporate America (and, unfortunately, at home in India) in recent years relating to some of the well-known and large business houses, there has been a lot of debate on what led to the crumbling of these organisations. Many researchers and experts on leadership came to the conclusion that eventually it was a result of "the CEO's greed and lack of integrity". Many experts have also pointed out that an organisation that is not founded on a strong base cannot expect to sustain, let alone grow, over a long period. We have seen how, even in our own country, organisations have embraced the concept of "corporate governance" and "codes of corporate governance" vigorously in recent times. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has issued codes of conduct that many well known companies have subscribed to. At Harvard Business School, there is talk of "virtues" in management.

The scorching pace at which the business environment has been changing and the impact of globalisation, changing aspirations and expectations of the youth, fast-paced lifestyle, have all provided temptations for change in values. But, in the midst of all this, there is growing realization that a business will only succeed and grow if it is founded on principles and beliefs. Increasing stress at work place, resulting in executives seeking solace with mushrooming "yoga" and "meditation" centres, has only reinforced the need to take a re-look at some of our fundamental values.

Leadership, apart from possessing "leadership qualities and characteristics", should aim to provide the much-needed relief to its followers, by unleashing the power of personal and professional commitment. Commitment to a cause and a purpose; not to mere financial results of an organisation. Leadership myopia would continue to exist if our current leadership chooses to ignore this at its own peril!

The question, then, is what ought to be the qualities and characteristics of emerging leadership? My own assessment and conclusion is that effective leadership for the future will be based on:

- * A strong commitment to a cause or purpose
- * A strong willingness to adhere to core values, come what may
- * A strong belief in self and others
- * A strong desire to make a difference, for betterment, in the lives of a large number of people
- * A strong achievement-orientation, not merely in material wealth, but in service to society

We need leaders who are fearless and humble, committed and vulnerable, outspoken and sensitive, value-based and flexible. It is a tall order, but with effort, we can make it.

As Rabindranath Tagore said, "where the head is held high and the mind is without fear...into that Haven of Freedom, my father, let my country awake"