

# LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

## Abstract

The term “Leadership” is a noun and it means the action of leading a group of people or an organization. Leadership, both as a research area and as a practical skill, encompasses the ability of an individual, group or organization to lead, influence or guide other individuals, teams, or entire organizations. The existing literature on Leadership focuses on What is Leadership? What Leaders require to be successful? What is a Leader’s unique achievement? etc. There is little emphasis on the journey or the process that an individual undertakes or undergoes before becoming a Leader. The Author has made attempt to explore this area from his “Personal Experience of Leadership”. Leadership is an amazing and painful journey. At the end, the Author has developed a “Leadership Model” based on two Fundamental Blocks namely “Understanding of Life” and “Understanding of People”.

**Keywords:** Leadership Journey, Understanding of Life, Understanding of People

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## **I. OBJECTIVES**

The Research Paper has the following two objectives.

- To provide critical insights into the journey or the process that an individual undertakes or undergoes before becoming a Leader.
- To develop a “Leadership Model”.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The methodology adopted in this Research Paper is Action Research. Action Research seeks transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and doing research, which are linked together by critical reflection. The Author has used his personal experience of 21 years from April 2002 to March 2023 of having worked in 16 different Organizations across different locations in India in Industries spanning Life Insurance, Real Estate, Education and Telecom Service to Understand Life and Understand People, and reflect upon this understanding.

It is also possible to view this piece of work as a Case Study. A Case Study is a detailed study of a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon. The Author considers this masterpiece as a Research Paper as it is broader in spectrum than a Case Study, and that it contributes to the Research Gap that has been identified.

## **III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

According to W.C.H. Prentice, Leadership is the accomplishment of a goal through the direction of human assistants – a human and social achievement that stems from the leader’s understanding of his or her fellow workers and the relationship of their individual goals to the group’s aim.

To be successful, leaders must learn two basic lessons: People are complex, and people are different. Human beings respond to different kinds of motivation. One person may find satisfaction in solving intellectual problems but may never be given the opportunity to explore how that satisfaction can be applied to business. Another may need a friendly, admiring relationship and may be constantly frustrated by the failure of his or her superior to recognize and take advantage of that need.

W, C, H, Prentice argues that by responding to such individual patterns, the leader will be able to create genuinely intrinsic interest in the work. Managerial dominions should be small enough that every supervisor can know those who report to him or her as human beings. The man who successfully marshals his human collaborators to achieve particular needs is a leader. A great leader is one who can do so day after day, and year after year, in a wide variety of circumstances.

A leader’s unique achievement is a human and social one which stems from his or her understanding of his or her fellow workers and the relationship of their individual goals to the goal that he or she must carry out. Crude forms of leadership rely solely on single sources of satisfaction such as monetary rewards or the alleviation of fears about various kinds of

insecurity. The task is adhered to because following orders will lead to a paycheck, and deviation will lead to unemployment. It is important to understand that human beings are not machines with a single set of push buttons. When their complex responses to love, prestige, independence, achievement, and group membership are unrecognized on the job, they bring far less than their maximum efficiency to the task.

The one who leads us effectively must seem to understand our goals and purposes. He must seem to be in a position to satisfy them; he must seem to understand the implications of his own actions; he must seem to be consistent and clear in his decisions. The word “seem” is important here. If we do not apprehend the would – be leader as one who has these traits, it will make no difference how able he may really be. We will still not follow his lead. In other words, it is the impression he makes at any one time that will determine the influence he has on his followers.

For followers to recognize their leader as he really is may be as difficult as it is for him to understand them completely. Some of the worst difficulties in relationships between superiors and subordinates come from misperceiving reality. So much of what we understand in the world around us is coloured by the conceptions and prejudices we start with. Many failures of leadership can be traced to oversimplified misperceptions on the part of the worker or to failures of the superior to recognize the context or frame of reference within which his actions will be understood by the subordinate.

In its simplest form, leadership is influencing other people to follow. Therefore, anyone who can influence people to follow them has leadership qualities. Leadership happens at all levels within organizations and society, not just among those who work in defined “leadership positions”. Effective leadership enables followers to succeed. It sets direction, builds a vision and adapts as circumstances require. Leadership is about mapping out where you need to go to “win” as a team or an organization. It is dynamic, exciting and inspiring.

#### **IV. MY EXPERIENCE OF LEADERSHIP**

Leadership is perhaps a painful journey. You have to learn to “Walk the Talk” and may be walk on a sharp knife and balance yourself. The reason I say this is that when your aspiration is bigger than others, people around you will make it harder for you to grow. In fact, never make the mistake of sharing your aspiration with others especially your manager. This is because, when your aspiration level is higher than your manager’s aspiration level, your manager will ensure that you do not get growth opportunities, make it very difficult for you to work in the organization and spread bad word of mouth about you. Essentially, your manager will suppress you, backstab you and ditch you. You will have to withstand it all and it will be a hard lesson for you.

Based on my experience and upon reflection, if you are good and extremely talented with high potential, you will face a lot of problems and barriers in your life in India. This is because, mediocre people around you will form a network or join together to pull you down. They will provide great resistance to all your moves and would dearly like you to fail. They will not allow you to work with maximum efficiency. You will be left alone with no one to trust and more likely you will decide to leave the organization for a better work environment. But this is not the right solution for you. The ideal solution would be that you withstand all the resistance, difficulties and problems caused by those mediocre people around you and

show to them and to the world that you can succeed in any work environment. For this, you will need the blessings, support and understanding of at least one person in the organization preferably the head of the company.

The important question is how do you take all the people who are different under your fold and make them work together with their maximum efficiency towards the objectives of the organization. Based on my experience and upon reflection, almost all the organizations in India are run “Top Down”. Orders are given by people at the top and the rest of the employees are expected to abide by them. Positive Reinforcement and Negative Reinforcement are used by managers to get the desired behaviour from employees. This is essentially controlling the behaviour of employees.

Real engagement with employees, complete understanding of their motivation and nurturing them probably does not take place in Indian organizations. According to my point of view, Human Resource (HR) function is actively involved as far as recruitment and selection of employees are concerned. But they do not show the same level of participation in the case of career development of employees. If I ask a question, “Who is responsible for career development of an employee?” and provide three options 1. Company 2. Company + You 3. You, the answer will be the third option which is “You”.

In any relationship building, two elements are important which are “Respect” and “Trust”. If either of these two elements are missing, the relationship between any two entities is not sustainable. Remember, no one can or will help you to gain the Respect and Trust of your superiors, colleagues and subordinates. It all depends upon how do you perform and conduct yourself in the organization. If you lose Respect and Trust, it is very difficult to build it again and you may have little choice but to leave the organization. When I am talking about Respect and Trust, I am not referring to absolute or 100 per cent Respect and Trust. That is fairly theoretical and does not occur in real world. But what I am referring to is a critical level of Respect and Trust which results in working relationship and leads to productivity in organizations.

The most difficult thing to decipher is people. This is because people are complex and each one is different. What I have experienced is that when one works or deals with people, he or she is really dealing with the “Ego” of the person. This is especially true when one has a conversation with his or her superior or with someone who controls the proceedings. It is more likely that such persons will not admit their mistakes, will cover up their mistakes and go to the extent of putting the blame on you. You will have to use all your experience to manage such situations without falling a prey to it.

Organizations in India more often discriminate people and there is a lot of subjectivity involved. One area where this can be seen is Performance Appraisal. One fact you should clearly understand is that your superior will allow you to grow in an organization or provide a growth opportunity to you provided he or she also grows or gets benefitted. If your superior does not grow or does not get benefitted, he or she will not allow you to grow. This can happen in spite of stupendous performance from you and excellent potential on your side. HR persons in all probability do not intervene in such situations. So, it would not be prudent for you to go to HR persons for support. You probably have no option, but to look for growth outside the organization.

It is a common trend to see superiors give growth opportunities to individuals whom they like, who are nice to them and who have a good relationship with them. Your experience, performance, knowledge, skill, attitude and potential are secondary. This can be a cruel and a shattering experience for many. This trend is so entrenched in the Indian context that you will find a number of people who are good, talented and have the right attitude but still do not have good work opportunities. This situation is true across Industry, Academics and Research.

I am putting forward a simple question. Whether an individual is working for an organization or for his or her superior? This is an intriguing question and you may wonder why I am asking this question. It is true that an individual is working for an organization as he or she is an employee of the organization. But, in reality an individual is working for his or her superior. Your superior controls you and he or she can decide your future.

A Leader is one who is likely to confront all the conventional things that I have stated above. It is important to understand what differentiates a Leader from a Manager. There are numerous textbooks and material available on leadership. But many of the things that they emphasize, managers can also perform them. Based on my experience, the single most distinguishing attribute that separates a Leader from a Manager is the “ability to take personal risk”. All leaders take personal risk in their lives while managers do not and their focus is always to minimize risk. If you are consistently taking personal risks and you reflect upon them, then you can pat yourself on your back because you are a Leader.

I have been involved in Academics and Research in the area of Management in India for more than a decade. The Management Institutions in India focus on producing stereotypes. The students are encouraged to attend classes, reproduce what the faculty has taught them or is in text books without even questioning them. The focus is on attaining higher grades without the emphasis on learning, reflection and personal transformation. It is an unwelcome trend. Many miss out on important aspects such as experiencing life, understanding life and understanding people. They probably cannot become leaders.

People are complex and each individual is different. They think and say something on one day and on the very next day, they think differently and say something else. For example, as Managing Director of Subakaran Associates, TATA AIA Life Insurance, I am involved in the recruitment and selection of Financial Advisors for my company. These Financial Advisors later become Life Planners or Business Associates in their career. I do recruitment advertising and send messages to my target audience who are active jobseekers based in Hyderabad. I provide them three options after they go through the brief recruitment message namely 1.Yes Interested 2.Need More Details 3.Exit (Not Interested). One prospect chose the option “Yes Interested” and I received the message. I called him and confirmed the interview date and time. On the interview date, two hours before the interview time, I called him twice in order to remind him. He did not answer my calls. So, I sent him a message asking him to call me. Imagine what he did. He chose the option “Need More Details”. People are so fickle minded. They do not have constant thoughts. They do not stick to one thought and they do not keep up commitments. The hardest part of my job is to be nice to these people.

We all have certain pre-conceptions about a Leader such as a leader is a popular person, is charismatic, has mass appeal, has a number of followers and so on. According to me, all these pre-conceptions are not important characteristics of a leader. For instance, a

leader may be a less popular person in an organization or he or she may have a smaller number of followers. What is important for a leader is the ability to see the bigger picture, to think differently and unconventionally, take the appropriate and correct decisions, inspire his or her employees and lead the organization in the uncertain and ever-changing world today.

As per my point of view, to become an effective leader in today's context, it is perhaps important to talk less, listen more, observe more, understand all the things that is happening around you and control employees. Never mind if employees like you or not, whether they are friendly to you or not and whether you are popular or not. All these things are not within your control and all these things are unimportant. You have to have wide experience inclusive of both work experience and life experience to understand people and take appropriate decisions.

So, the question is how do you gain the correct understanding of people. You have to probably spend the first 20 years of your career in laying your foundation. You will not make any money during this period. Whatever money you earn, you will have to reinvest. You have to put yourself in different situations with different people across different locations. You will get some fundamental ideas about people, their desired goals, their motivation and why they behave the way they do. You will have to use this experience to conduct yourself in an organization and keep most of the employees at arm's length. I am certain that no one can play with you or shake you and you will be able to control employees effectively.

People Management is a useful and important skill to have. Good Leaders can manage employees on a large scale even though only few employees will be reporting to him or her directly. If you have excellent people management skill and have demonstrated that in your career, it is more likely that an organization will provide a team of employees to work under you. In India, part of the reason why an individual is able to manage a team of employees is because of the position he or she holds and the power and authority that comes along with this position. The less power and authority that one uses, the more skilled the person is. It is important to understand that leaders are more likely not to misuse the power and authority that they have.

It is common to observe "Power Struggles" in organizations. An individual or a group of individuals try to influence other individuals or groups and probably would try to dictate terms to them. Most of the employees aspire to gain power so that they can control their environment but when asked, they will deny that they have need for power. Aspiration for power is still a deeply held secret among employees.

Thus, Leadership is a long journey. You need to have "Understanding of Life" and "Understanding of People" in general. These two are the fundamental building blocks. In addition, you need to have "Varied Exposure". To gain varied exposure, you need to have worked in multiple organizations across different locations or if you have been working for the same organization for a prolonged period of time, you need to have worked in different functions or roles across different locations.

On top of it, you must have progressed in your career on merit. This is to say, that your experience, performance, potential, knowledge, skills, attitude, behaviour, initiatives, energy, emotional balance, professional relationships and networking should have led to your progress. The more you have progressed out of merit, the more the respect and trust you get

from all the people around you. At the same time, you need to understand that you need to be ethical. Based on my experience and upon reflection, the truth is that it is not possible for any one individual in this world to be 100% Ethical. What is required is that you should be well above the threshold ethics level which is expected and accepted.

When you embark your journey on “Leadership Path”, people around you more likely would dislike you and would not become friendly colleagues with you. The reason is simple and it is because you are not like them. For instance, they may get involved in unnecessary gossips and talk about other people while you do not get involved. Therefore, they see you as different. They do not understand and appreciate that differences exist amongst people. They just want you to conform to their norms. When you begin to succeed on your leadership path, they become jealous of you. They will pull you down, not cooperate and collaborate with you, make it harder for you to succeed, eagerly wait for you to fail and ultimately, they are baying for blood.

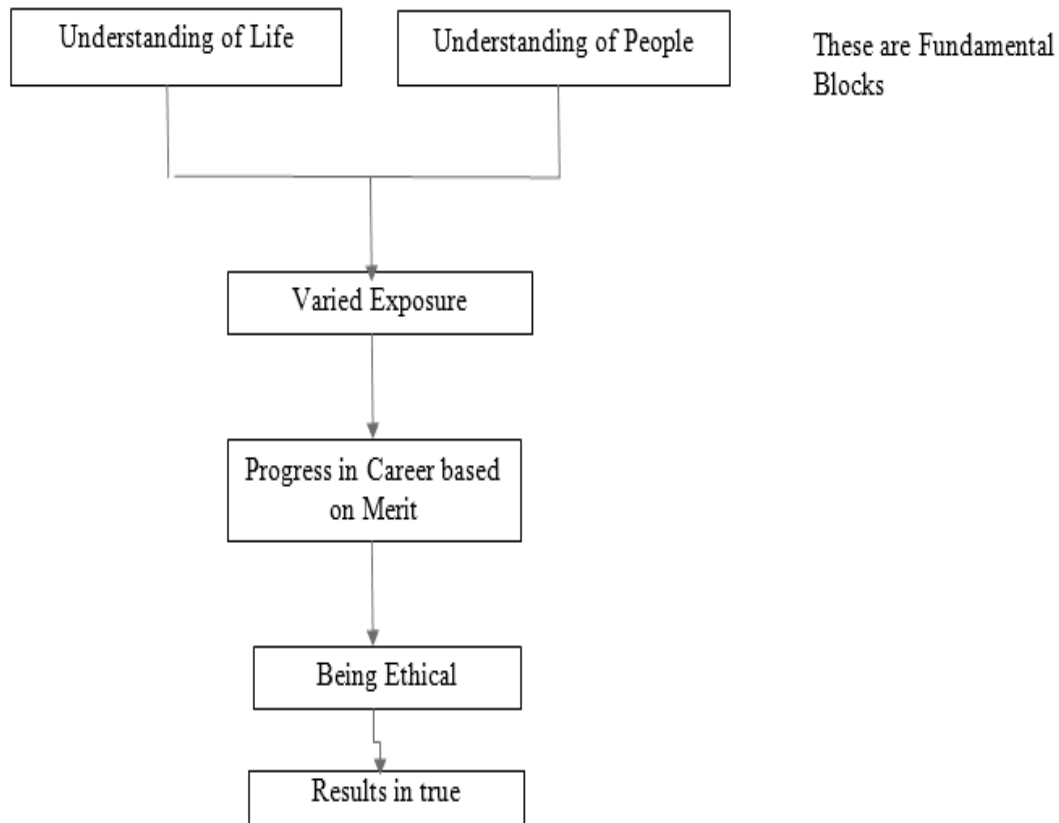
The people become so cruel and insensitive that they do not contemplate the emotions and the pain that you would go through, how stressed you may become and how lonely you may feel. In almost all the situations, the head of the organization and the HR people just do not intervene but instead they wait for which side wins or becomes successful. Thus, individuals embarking on a leadership path many times have to wage lonely battles. I hear from many people this statement “Please adjust to the Environment and to the Superior”. Most of the employees follow this statement thinking that it is the wise thing to do. This is because they work for monthly salary and they work to live. They usually do not find deep meaning in work. They find that deep meaning somewhere else in their lives.

Remember, when you decide to embark on the leadership path, that it will be an extremely difficult and arduous journey. There will be many battles on your way. You may win some battles while you may lose the remaining battles. The battles you have lost will turn into rich experiences for you reminding you what you should do and what you should not do. But keep telling yourself that the most important thing is to “Win the War”. You may lose some battles along the way. Never mind them but win the war.

One intriguing question still remains. When people are so different from you and have mediocre mindsets, how you will be able to take them into your fold and lead them. Based on experience and upon reflection, I have come to the conclusion that it is very difficult to change people. This is because, at the end of the day, people will do what they want to do. So, my philosophy is appreciate them for what they are, utilize their knowledge, skills and attitude to the best extent possible, do not become intrusive in their lives and just focus on the organization meeting or surpassing the set goals. Do this day after day and year after year. I am certain, you will be successful.

## **V. LEADERSHIP MODEL**

I have developed my “Leadership Model” and it is provided below.



## VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, leadership is all about understanding the environment, influencing the environment and controlling the environment to meet the organization's objectives. Beware of traps set by people, never get involved in unnecessary discussions and mind your own business. Otherwise, you will get caught in a whirlpool from which it becomes quite difficult to escape.

Which is more powerful? The "Power of Will" or the "Power of Skill". This is an interesting topic of discussion. When you have two parameters like Will and Skill, the normal tendency for anyone is to create a 2 X 2 Matrix and plot People on this Matrix. Based on experience and upon reflection, I would say that the "Power of Will" is much stronger and goes further when compared with the "Power of Skill". I would like to explain this with the example of two sports legends: Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

I am a big fan of Roger Federer and followed his tennis for the past 20 years. He announced his retirement in September 2022. As per my evaluation, he was the most skilled tennis player across all surfaces. He played with grace and style. His skill enabled him to win 20 Grand Slam Titles. But he lacked the power of will when compared to his skill. For instance, he had two match points and was serving at 40 – 15 in the fifth set against Novak Djokovic in the 2019 Wimbledon Men's Final. But he could not cross the line. Novak Djokovic won the match.



As far as I know, Roger Federer has lost two Wimbledon Quarterfinals after being 2 – 0 up in terms of number of sets. Also, I do not remember instances of Roger Federer coming behind from 0 – 2 sets down to win Grand Slam Matches. In my estimate, if Roger Federer had a greater Will Power, he would have won many more Grand Slam Titles.

On the other hand, Rafael Nadal is full of grit and determination. In 2022 Australian Open Final, he came from behind 0 – 2 sets down to defeat Danil Medvedev. Rafael Nadal has overtaken Roger Federer’s tally of 20 Grand Slam Titles and he is still playing. My conclusion is “Power of Will” is much bigger than “Power of Skill”. So, even though you may not have the required skills but if you have the motivation, determination and the will power, you can embark on the “Leadership Journey”.

Leadership is an amazing and painful journey. I say it is “Amazing” because it provides you an unique experience which most of us will not have. At the same time, I say it is “Painful” because most of the times you will have to do it alone in this journey. Many people do not take this Leadership Journey because they fear the unknown, they are hesitant to travel “the road less travelled” and they want to belong to a larger group of stereotypes. Leadership is a choice you make in your life and it has nothing to do with your position, designation or title.

To be successful, leaders must understand two things. 1.People are complex and 2.People are different. That is why, it is important to understand life and people and build your experience based on these two pillars. If you do this, I am certain that one day you will become successful.

## **VII. UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION**

This Research Paper is unique as it provides critical insights to the Research Gap that has been identified by the Author on the subject of “Leadership”. Leadership is a choice that an Individual makes in his or her life. It has nothing to do with Position, Designation, Salary or the amount of Wealth amassed. There are several misconceptions about true Leadership and this Research Paper has dispelled some of those misconceptions.

## **VIII. IMPLICATIONS**

This Research Paper has implications for Organizations, Educational Institutions and Research Institutions to gain clarity on Leadership and how to identify the right Individuals for Leadership Positions. Human Resource Function needs to transform itself and become more proactive and participative in the Career Development and Real Engagement of Employees. Great Organizations will be those where its Employees find no significant Internal Reasons to look at Job Opportunities outside.

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