

Chanakya's Business Mantra: Leadership Connect

The more successful one becomes as a leader, the more other people will demand of his or her time. As a result the successful leader has to take difficult decisions on his or her accessibility –

'Should I be easily accessible or would I be perceived as not busy?'

'Should I make myself accessible to everyone in my organization?'

'How accessible should I be to my people?'

This challenge has another different dimension ie with respect to customers –

'Should I, as a Senior Leader, be available for customers?'

The above questions have no easy answers or formulae but Chanakya offers an important piece of advice:

“...He should allow unrestricted entrance to those wishing to see him.

For a king (Leader) difficult of access, is made to do the reverse of what ought not to be done, by those near him

In consequence of that, he may have to face an insurrection of the subjects or subjugation by the enemy” (1.19.26-28)”

Let us examine the wisdom behind each of the above sections in the modern context: not just in terms of the Leader's availability and accessibility but also the Leader's connect.

- **He should allow unrestricted entrance to those wishing to see him:**

Essentially, the Leader is a Leader due to his/ her people and leadership is the privilege bestowed for the service offered to the people. This places tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of the Leader - to be available and accessible - in touch with the team or organization, and through them, with ground realities. The same sutra can also be said to urge the Leader to be in contact with one's customers – in good times and unfavourable times.

Let's consider one dimension at a time - There are many ways for the Leader to stay connected today, including with effective use of Social Media. Many World Leaders today, whether it is Barack Obama of USA or Narendra Modi of India have shown how. However, this needs to be bi directional – communication, both to the Leader and from the leader. The flip side is that those who fail to communicate with the people or to whom, public have limited access, end up losing the faith of their people. The fall of the Manmohan Singh government in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, can be attributed in many ways to this single factor. The huge, so called “Modi wave” was but public emotions and opinion, swayed by a prospective PM through an aggressive campaign which not only allowed access to the people, rather which went to the people. “Unrestricted Entrance” also suggests procuring first – hand information, rather than what is reported to the Leader. In olden days, Kings used to often set out in disguise in their own kingdoms after sundown, in order to directly gauge the mood of their subjects.

We also know the many virtues of being in touch with the consumer – to understand what is liked or disliked, and understanding why...In fact, the study of consumer behaviour is an ongoing exercise that FMCG and other B2C industries build in as an integral part of Marketing. On the other hand, there are the classic examples of Premier Automobiles and Hindustan Motors and in more recent times, of Social media firms such as Orkut and MySpace, who lost touch with ‘present day’ realities and had to pay the price rather heavily. The ex DGP of Mumbai Police, D. Shivanandan in the book, “Chanakya’s 7 Secrets of leadership”, co-authored by Dr. Radhakrishnan Pillai, states the criticality of being in touch with the last link – the constables – for they are the ones who become the eyes and ears for the Leader. This exercise proved to be invaluable for the top cop to overcome the much feared underworld of his time.

- **For a king (Leader) difficult of access, is made to do the reverse of what ought not to be done, by those near him:**

The emphasis laid over here, by Chanakya, is on seeking facts; in the absence of which, the Leader can be easily misled either by others or by his own vanity.

"When you know what you are talking about, others will follow you, because it's safe to follow you," Fuld, CEO of Lehman Brothers said in his 2006 commencement speech at the University of Colorado Boulder. In 2008, Lehman entered the largest bankruptcy in history, which clearly suggested his loss of touch with reality. History is replete with examples of Leaders, doing contrary to what they should have done, in the absence of real time and authentic information. Lyndon B Johnson, former president, is known to have infamously led his country to war, which the mighty USA lost to Vietnam several years later, a far smaller country. Ironically, in this case he was led by “opinion polls”, which proved to be his undoing and he lost the next Presidential polls. This is a classic case of decision being led by perceived opinion rather than one’s direct connect with people. Many dictators are also examples of ones being blinded by their own power and by yes men. Even the best advice from well intended managers does not match the Leader’s first-hand experience and common sense.

- **In consequence of that, he may have to face an insurrection of the subjects or subjugation by the enemy:**

Until December 2010, all Arab countries were controlled by ‘benevolent’ dictators. The Arab Spring was a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests (both non-violent and violent), riots, and civil wars in the Arab world that began on 18 December 2010 and spread throughout the countries of the Arab League and surroundings. By December 2013, rulers had been forced out from power in Tunisia, Egypt (twice), Libya, and Yemen; civil uprisings had erupted in Bahrain and Syria; major protests had broken out in at least 7 other Arab nations. Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak, the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh all lost power and Gaddafi even paid with his life. What happened here? The rulers who “knew what is good for the people” had lost the faith of the people, for the world had changed without them noticing it.

Even Chanakya was able to overthrow the mighty king Dhananand of Magadh, with the help of his protégé Chandragupta Maurya, rather easily – this was because Dhananand, being intoxicated by power, had lost the trust of his people and contact with reality.

In the business world, General Motors and Delta Airlines in the USA, Daewoo Motors in South Korea, HMT watches and Kingfisher Airlines in India all held enviable positions in their respective industries till they faced ruthless onslaught of competition, which compounded with their disconnect with reality, led them to bankruptcy.

The above sutras simply demonstrate the timeless wisdom that a Leader needs to have regular access with his/ her own people, stakeholders and customers, right to the last level. One who follows this sage advice, is led by reality and success is likely to follow. Business Leaders such as Anand Mahindra set a stellar example of how to use Technology to enable them to do this well, complimented by in person connect.

Obviously, those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it!

Leadership Lessons

In current times, accessibility of a leader is a constant struggle of time between local and global responsibilities. As organizations have scaled, the physical accessibility of a leader continues to diminish. While leadership connect is a key metric in measuring engagement, most times these physical engagements end up being mass connects through large gatherings for the sake of convenience like open houses and town halls. The challenge is how can leadership presence still be personal in an impersonal construct? How can you maintain the emotional connect where leadership presence is experienced by everyone individually? The key to this question lies in the answer to 'who is a leader'? Can leadership be replicated at multiple levels to touch the last individual in the organization? Can the vision permeate which transcends physical accessibility?

The failure of managers to translate the leadership vision to action oft becomes responsible for the lack of leadership in organizations. Goals that are set by the CEO never cascade down to those below and the worker ultimately experiences only a transactional world.

A lot of literature emanating today questioning the relevance of Managers is frightening which also augments that the managerial layer has become a redundant layer. What is the role of a manager? Is the Manager a conduit for the leadership vision or an executer of tasks?

The role of a leader and the role of a manager need a transformative treatment to renew their relevance for the workforces today.

In a fast connected world, creative channels like social collaboration tools can help strengthen the media of communication across multiple layers of the organization and externally to consumers. Transparency builds trust and there is no downside to over communication.

We are facing a new generation that is constantly wired and influenced by messages on social media. Where is your customer today? What is the language that triggers their imagination? How do they emotionally connect with their environment? How do they build relationships? A world where leadership is established with 140 characters is a world lost to leaders and managers who do not leverage its potential. As discussed previously, we saw the elections of the largest democracy in the world, our country India being won on the strength of engagement that leveraged the power of social.

As in determining any channel of communication, it is imperative to understand its balance. A physical connect cannot be replaced by virtual connect, it can only augment it.

A leader or manager cannot replace their responsibility to connect, communicate and engage but creatively use diverse styles and tools to touch lives and inspire. In the words of Bryan Kramer "There is no B2C or B2B there is only H2H – Human to Human".