

True leader in making

Wednesday, 03 February 2021 | Dr Abhishek Kumar



While humanistic leadership is still in its infancy and seen largely as a derivative of humanistic management, it is likely to become one of the most holistic methods of elucidating the idea of leadership, says *Dr Abhishek Kumar*

Leadership is one of the most studied and debated topic in human history. It is a thing of wonder that a fellow human being is elevated to a status reasonably and distinguishably above the rest. The role assigned to the rest remains to follow the leader. No wonder, Thomas Carlyle said, “Human history is nothing but the biographies of great men”. In today’s times, when everyone presents themselves as leaders, it is important to learn how to separate chaff from grain.

Leadership theories have attempted to do so and have move far beyond the 19th century argument of the great man theory, which said that leaders due to their superior intellect or heroic courage or even divine inspiration, influence the society they are a part. The journey of leadership theories have travelled a vast landscape of thoughts, from task focus to people focus, from transactional to transformational, from authentic leadership to servant leadership, from moral leadership to spiritual leadership.

Each one of them grasps the issue of leadership from a vantage point and offers a worldview that the leaders can choose to adopt. The most recent intervention in this field is humanistic leadership. While still in its infancy and seen largely as a derivative of humanistic management, it is likely to become one of the most holistic methods of elucidating the idea of leadership. The need for such a construct was felt in current times when a pandemic is raging through the world leaving millions jobless indicates towards a global movement towards making leaders more humane and less cut throat.

A global effort is underway involving eight major cultures of the world to theorise humanistic leadership through a bottom up approach. The cultures are from Japan, China, Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, UAE, India and the Amish community in the USA. Humanistic leaders from these countries were asked to relate stories of events and business situations that demonstrated their idea of humanistic leadership.

It was soon realised that humanistic leadership practices were closely connected to the roots of local culture. The study on China integrated the characteristics of three leaders with the core values of Confucianism. Researchers went on to develop a framework of Confucian humanistic leadership. It comprised five attributes, Tuijijiren (understand others by putting oneself into others' position), Yi yiwei li (making a profit by doing the right thing), Xiuji da ren (developing others by cultivating themselves first), Zhixing he yi (aligning the knowing with doing) and Yun zhijuezhong (seeking the balancing point amid different things). The five attributes interact with and mutually reinforce each other.

The study of humanistic leadership practices in India focused on the ethos of one corporation that has a history of more than one hundred years of exemplary labour relations. Researchers collected narrative stories from the leaders of top management on how the organisational values are translated into leadership behaviours and institutional policies. A thematic analysis of the stories was conducted which revealed that humanistic leadership is realised through seven values. They are — adherence to the founder's philosophy and the basic core values, leadership with trust, community as the key purpose of the enterprise, senior leaders as mentors and role models, abiding by the ethical code of conduct, employee-focus, and tacit alignment with Indian cultural values. Researchers subsequently grouped leadership with trust and community development as terminal values and the others as instrumental values.

Such studies across eight cultures created a picture of a humanistic leader as one who respects people as holistic human beings by taking care of his own needs as well as his followers' needs and motives. Who continuously improve himself while developing the followers to unleash their full potential; and who recognises and tries to take into account all stakeholders' interests while striving to pursue the common good.

Thomas Carlyle in heroes and hero worship traces the evolution of the idea of a hero and classifies them under categories, hero as divinity, hero as prophet, hero as poet, hero as priest, hero as man of letters and finally hero as king. Plato spoke of hero as the philosopher king. In humanistic leadership practices, we are probably coming close to realising the long-standing ideal of human race.

The writer is Associate Professor and Director, Staff Training and Development, Anant National University