

Address to Students of SIESCOMS Aug 13, 2008

Dr. Sengupta, Professors of SIES Institute and my young friends,

At the outset I must thank Dr. Sengupta for this opportunity to meet you. This is my third successive year of addressing the students of SIES, on the subject of leadership.

Sir, I thank you for two reasons: firstly for this opportunity to interact with the students. They have just enrolled for their MBA, most of them do not have work experience, but they are never found wanting when it comes to keenness to learn. Students at this stage very often ask questions that make me think and reflect on my experience. I have always returned home with some food for thought.

The second reason for extending thanks is that this is the third year in succession that you have invited me. And every year the subject is same 'Leadership'. This makes me reflect on various aspects of leadership. Just in case, my young friends, you are thinking that I must be reading out the same speech every year, I must clarify that I do not do it.

In my last year's speech I put across two thoughts. Firstly, Leadership can be developed. Secondly, I explained the Kostenbaum's model, elucidating it with my real life experiences.

We will discuss 'Leadership Development' today. I had mentioned in my address last year that leadership can be developed. So we move on from that position to examine leadership development.

Why should I develop my leadership ability?

The first question we must ask and answer to ourselves is 'Why should I develop my leadership ability?' After all, organizations invest in developing leaders not from altruistic motives. Good leaders mean creating great organizations and that in other words mean good commercial success. So let us get one fact clear - it is that organizations have interest in developing leadership abilities among its managers because it is essential for its commercial success. This also means the purpose of activity is not the individual's development but the organization's commercial success.

It is possible that we as managers may find leadership development useful and that we may willingly submit ourselves for this activity. We may argue that leadership is not a functional skill but a general skill and therefore learning leadership increases our value. We may also argue that learning leadership will have a positive impact on one's personal life. This could be another reason why people may like to learn leadership. There is nothing wrong about imparting skills for commercial success. And there is nothing wrong about learning skills for improving one's competence. I am, however, uncomfortable with orientation of this activity.

Let me explain. In every organization there are stars, who are role models to many. Such persons' leadership style often becomes a subject matter of discussions and informal gossips. Such a star usually has his fan club. Ask managers of the same company fifteen years later and the chances are that they will not remember this star.

Why go so far? I would like to ask you: What happened to Sam Manekshaw? He played a crucial role in the creation of Bangladesh. Was he remembered thirty five years later?

Contrast this with a relative of yours who is no more and is still remembered fondly even forty years later. Our leadership leaves an indelible mark on family members, unlike organizations. So our leadership capabilities must impact the fortunes of the organization we work for; but more importantly, our leadership capabilities must impact the lives of our family members.

There is another reason for making a contribution to our family: not every role in the commercial organization is a leadership role. But every person, in a family is required to play a leadership role, sometimes as a father, or mother, and sometimes as an earning member, sometimes as a responsible son of his aging parents.

The point I am making is that our leadership abilities must benefit our families. Colloquially we say somebody has led a good life. Note the use of the verb 'to lead'. We imply that life itself must be lived with a purpose. Koestenbaum says that there are four aspects of leadership which are: Vision, Reality, Courage, and Ethics.

So the test of leadership development is not whether we are able to play our professional roles well. The test of leadership development is whether we are leading a life that is purposeful.

Having answered the question, "Why should we develop our leadership ability?" I would now examine the next question "How to develop?" This is actually a million dollar question or perhaps a trillion dollar question if you wish to take into account that dollar is weakening! Perhaps an easier question to answer is "How leaders develop?"

How Leaders Develop?

In my last address, I talked about four aspects of leadership. Those were Vision, Reality, Courage and Ethics. While examining the question "How leaders

develop?" we will search answers for how we can develop vision, comprehend reality, have courage and have our decisions on ethics. This will provide us a good understanding of how leaders develop.

Developing Vision

So let us first discuss how we can develop a vision. This is absolutely necessary because a leader is always concerned with future. Helen Keller summed up the importance of having vision so well, she asked: 'Is there anything worse than being blind?' Helen Keller was a blind person and she is posing this question. 'Is there anything worse than being blind?' 'Yes', she answered, 'A man with sight but no vision.'

How do we develop vision? It is well known that vision is not something like enlightenment that it suddenly happens. Vision is built over a period of time, usually a long period of dedicated work. Vision essentially represents an amalgam of a dream and challenge. To highlight the point that we develop vision as we work with dedication, I would like to mention the case of Muktangam. You may have heard of 'Muktangan' which is a drug de-addiction centre in Pune. Muktangam has done some pioneering work in the field of de-addiction. Dr. (Ms) Sunanda Awchat was a medical practitioner who founded Muktangam in very unusual circumstances. Dr. Awchat's friend approached her saying that her son needed help. Her son was addicted to brown sugar. Dr. Awchat had precious little experience of handling de-addiction cases, but her friend refused to yield and consult another doctor. With this began her work in de-addiction. It soon gained recognition. The P L Deshpande foundation donated generously without any conditions to setting up Muktangam. Since Dr. Sunanda Awchat was not familiar with drug de-addiction processes, she devised her own therapies *ab initio*; her success in making Muktangam an outstanding institution was not part of one vision. She and her colleagues constantly improved on their vision. The dream and challenges both became increasingly

bigger and ambitious. I have always felt that the vision snowballs with the passion and energy.

What is the lesson this story holds for us? I will sum it up as, 'Give your best consistently, and accept challenges.'

Can you teach somebody how to give his best effort constantly? Can you teach someone to accept challenges? Obviously the answer is NO.

How to be in touch with Reality?

We have discussed about how vision develops. Let us discuss the second aspect which is reality. A realist knows what can be achieved, what is possible, what are various currents and undercurrents that favour or otherwise, doing something. In Leadership Development how can we ensure that leader at all times has a good feel of the reality? Leaders adopt various methods for knowing the pulse of people as well as various factors that will affect their performance. As a child, all of us have read stories of how a king would take a tour of his city in disguise, meet people and check what they are concerned about. How I wish our Ministers did something similar. Sometimes they do, but then they do not move in disguise and ensure that TV cameras follow them! Industry leaders hold 'Town Hall' meetings and 'Open Houses'. The most remarkable reality check ever done by a politician was Sunil Dutt's walk from Kerala to Kashmir. He met hundreds of villagers, people of different communities. Sunil Dutt himself confessed that the experience completely changed his perception of India, her people and their issues.

When we talk of perception of reality, the catchword is 'perception'. And perception is intentional. That is one of the biggest discoveries in psychology. Let me explain this statement 'Perception is intentional'. Imagine you are entering a dim lit room. You see some objects, you don't see some and you don't see their colour and contours. Now you switch on a light and you see

things clearly, you increase light fully; you will now see all objects with their colour, contour and even distance between them. When we make efforts to understand things we do this act of throwing light on the subjects of study and we understand them, rather we perceive them differently.

Can you teach people how to perceive the reality? The answer is no.

How to develop courage?

The next aspect is 'Courage'. Can you teach anyone to be courageous? All of know the answer. But we have seen and read stories of how ordinary men and women display exceptional acts of courage. These are usually very visible when we are fighting against something. You will remember a film in which a young married woman watched her maid being raped by a relative. She stands up for the victim and has to fight relatives and many powerful men. I do not know whether you have heard this another story. You will recall that a company called 'Mafatlal Engineering' was closed down. That was an act with very dubious merit. One worker stood against it and fought. He was instrumental in taking the matter to Supreme Court where the closure of Mafatlal was struck down. What makes ordinary men and women to do these courageous acts? A sense of injustice, in my opinion. These very few men and women might be otherwise timid; they would be very reluctant or even afraid of bungee jumping although that activity is not likely to cause any physical harm. Yet, on certain occasions they have displayed great courage.

Another act of courage which originates from duty, and not in injustice, is the story of Sam Maneckshaw. In March 1971, the Pakistani Army cracked down on Bangladeshi leaders and others killing 50000 people. Millions of refugees fled to India. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi toured the border. After assessing the grim situation she turned to Sam Maneckshaw and asked 'What can our Army do in this situation?' 'Nothing' Maneckshaw replied. The entire group of bureaucrats and ministers were shocked. The Army Chief explained that the Army was not

ready, troops were not properly positioned and weather will allow the enemy to open battle in Himalayas. There was a whispering campaign against Maneckshaw but he stood his ground solidly. General Maneckshaw advised the Prime Minister that the right time for war would be six months later. He explained the reasons. General Maneckshaw's refusal to be hustled into taking rash decision and his courage to put forth an unpalatable point of view to the Prime Minister finally saw India win the war.

So the question is how can we take acts of courage in leadership roles? And how can we get others to do it?

So we come to the question again, can you teach people to be courageous? Obviously, No.

How to act ethically?

The fourth and the last aspect is ethics. I am tempted to quote Dr. Martin Luther king Jr. here for it is so apt. He said in his speech:

Cowardice asks the question: Is it safe?

Expediency asks the question: Is it politic?

Vanity asks the question: Is it popular?

But conscience asks the question: Is it right?

And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular; but one must take it because it is right!

How true! Our conduct must be governed by moral principles. A leader does not face ethical issues in every situation, but there are times when these issues confront a leader. These issues have always been important but they have gained greater importance today because wild fluctuations in business provide temptations to business leaders. The trouble is that moral principles are often not enforceable in law. The Ambani brothers can go on fighting even after the

division of assets, they seek to enforce their agreement against each other. Recently Mukesh invoked it when Anil was planning to acquire a South African Company. Moral Principles are best implemented through a code of conduct. Many managers who leave Asian Paints do not join a competitor. Contrast this with Pepsi and Coke whose executives are ever willing to join the other! How does this happen? I think the conduct of leaders creates a certain ethic which ensures it. How do we get people to value unenforceable moral principles over a financial advantage?

Can this be taught? Obviously, No.

So we have seen that there are four aspects of leadership: Vision, Reality, Courage and Ethics and none of them can be taught. That's a very bad news indeed!

How to evolve as a Leader?

I think the problem lies in the words that we use. We talk of leadership skills or competencies. The connotation is that it can be acquired. I think the correct phraseology is 'evolving as a leader'. Evolution is a gradual process; it is slow and it impacts the way you respond to the problems and issues, it impacts the way you relate to the world.

Having said that the next question is how can we help people evolve into good leaders or in leading a good purposeful life? Let us go back to the story of Dr. Sunanda Awchat.

At Muktangan I met a person who was externed because of his criminal activities and was a drug addict when he was brought there. Today he is a reformed man, he has passed 12th std examination, subsequently passed his graduation and he was running the Muktangan's canteen that serves 100 persons. He remains at Muktangan although cured of drug addiction long ago.

He has stayed on because his life has been positively impacted and he wants to make such impact on other's lives too. But then he was influenced by a nurturing yet tough Dr. Sunanda and he allowed others to influence him.

Do we really allow others to influence us? Do we get inspired by others? Have we really thought about what our source of inspiration could be?

I recently came to know about the leadership development program of the London Business School. This program admits Chief Executives of various organizations. There are, I am told, no theories taught. This group of Chief Executives was taken to meet certain persons who had brought about great transformations. They were, for example, taken to meet a Head Mistress of a school which had so poor performance that it was about to be closed down. The Head Mistress had turned it around to make it one of the most respected schools. It was for the Chief Executives to draw their lessons and inspiration from the transformations story.

My learning has been that leadership abilities can be evolved through inspiration and not thru instruction.

And is there a formula for inspiring others? Obviously No!

So we are at a peculiar conclusion that the four aspects of leadership can not be taught, and action cannot be generated to inspire people. Leadership cannot be taught but it can be learnt. You cannot inspire others; you can draw inspiration.

The answer is obviously that it is for the individual to take responsibility for his own evolution as a leader and unless he does so, nothing will work to develop him as a leader. The organisations can only provide an environment conducive to development, but development is in our hands.

What do we mean by taking responsibility for one's evolution as a leader? It means maintaining a learning attitude. It means being open to understanding a different point of view. It means being open to influencing. It means venturing out to take new experience. Remember that while we do not know how to inspire others, we know conditions under which people can draw their inspiration.

People who draw their inspiration are always those who have a passion to do something, an innate urge to do something. The sources of inspiration could be different. I draw inspiration from books. A good thought, a good story inspires me. Some draw their inspiration from a visual, so when you see Sachin batting you feel much energised to do something. For others it could be the role models. Hariprasad Chaurasia says that any beautiful thing inspires him to deliver good performance; it could be a beautiful flower, or the face of a beautiful lady. It has been said that you should practice meditation if you wish to increase your sensitivity.

It is often not possible for one person to manage so many aspects. It is here that an individual requires a mentor. But very often people have certain reservations about mentoring. There are in my opinion two mental blocks to accept mentoring. The first one is lack of self awareness. Many of us have wrong and fond notions about our capabilities. We are also those who neither accept nor act on feedback.

The second mental block is about asking for a resource or help. We seem to consider asking for help as evidence of one not being intelligent or something that is not manly, something that is negative. In practice, however, we find that those who are resourceful are likely to be more successful, they are often called 'Go-getters'. We seem to harbour a mindset that if at all I will take

guidance or mentoring, I will take it from the best. And we are willing to wait for such a mentor to arrive on the scene.

So why should we undergo mentoring? My answer is that we need mentoring because it helps us strengthen relationships, spot and correct a pattern of behaviour to which we are blind and it helps us enrich our lives through the perspectives acquired with our mentor.

Sometimes, the mentor can unravel the latent talent within his protégé. Mr. Guru Narayana, the Chairman Emeritus of Excel Industries Ltd asked Mr. P D Thosar (HR Manager) to translate Bhagwadgita in Marathi verse. Thosar had never written any poetry so he was shocked at this suggestion. He laughed it off. Guru Narayana asked Thosar to choose any one shloka and translate it in Marathi verse. Thosar did this with some effort. Guru Narayana then told Thosar, 'I have proved to you that you can translate Gita in Marathi verse. If you can do one shloka, you can do all shloka'. Thosar had no answer; he proceeded to translate Bhagwadgita in Marathi verse. It is now published as a book. This is a classic case of a mentor unravelling talent of his protégé.

Let me sum up my message. Leadership development is an evolutionary process. We must own our evolution as a leader. It is only then that we will be open to influencing, absorbing inspiration, developing a learning attitude. Leadership can not remain compartmentalised to our professional life; it must mean leading a purposeful life. Our evolution should be oriented towards this purpose. We must reflect on our experiences to guide ourselves in the journey of evolving as a leader. On the journey to discover ourselves we may need help and we should find a mentor who will help us discover our strengths and limitations. The trouble is that all of us want to develop into leaders by taking the capsule of a training program. Let us appreciate that it takes time, a good time to evolve as a leader.

My young friends, evolving as a leader is time consuming yet simple. Perhaps I may have made leadership development look very difficult. It really isn't. Somebody has said, 'Men are wise in proportion not to their experience but to their capacity for experience'. That gives all students here a ray of hope. You do not have wait till you have grey hair like me to evolve as a leader.

Good luck to you on your journey of leadership my young friends!

Thanks you.

Vivek S Patwardhan

Aug 13, 2008