

# **Leadership Lessons from Bhagavad-gita**

A Commentary on Chapter One of Bhagavad-gita

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## Preface

The question may be asked: “Why another commentary on *Bhagavad-gita*? Hasn't more than enough been said already in the more than 700 commentaries available, and especially in *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*?”

The answer to this query is that enough can never be said about *Bhagavad-gita*. As Sanjaya relates to Dhrtarastra toward the closing of the book: “O King, as I recall this wonderous and holy dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, I take pleasure, being thrilled at every moment.”<sup>1</sup> We can continue to discuss and inquire about *Bhagavad-gita* unlimitedly, and never find the end of its ability to produce the most profound realizations about life, the universe, and the purpose and the person behind them.

It is also a fact that *Bhagavad-gita* speaks on many levels about many different things. This is the nature of scripture – it is *purnam*, or complete. Viewed from different angles it reveals itself in different ways. As Krishna tells Arjuna: “I shall now declare unto you in full this knowledge, both phenomenal and numinous. This being known nothing further shall remain for you to know”<sup>2</sup>.

How the *Bhagavad-gita* is able to address all conceivable issues in only 700 verses is part of its mystical potency. The opportunity exists for all time for devotees of Krishna and the *Bhagavad-gita* to perform the service of highlighting and explaining the *Bhagavad-gita*'s application to a given topic.

The focus of this commentary is on Leadership, and thus it is called “Leadership Lessons from *Bhagavad-gita*”.

What is leadership? There are many definitions of leadership that highlight its different aspects. John Maxwell, author of “The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership” defines leadership as “influence, nothing more, nothing less”. He goes on to say: “He who thinks he leads but has no-one following him, is simply taking a walk.” This is a functional definition of leadership, one that basically says that a leader is someone who has followers.

Leadership has been described by leadership educator Todd Duncan as “a total commitment to purpose, accompanied by the determination to carry it out.” This is a characteristic definition that describes the personal qualities of a leader.

My personal definition of leadership is two-fold. First of all, it is “the supply of vision and direction in a situation of confusion and uncertainty”. This is a definition that highlights the identity of the leader as a service provider. Secondly it is "effecting change to take an organization from one state to another, better state". This is a definition that helps to cast light on the nature of the service that the leader provides.

In his 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership John Maxwell presented the idea that

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<sup>1</sup> Bg 18.76

<sup>2</sup> Bg 7.2

leadership can be described as a set of principles that can be learned and applied. When practices align with these principles, leadership is effective.

In his book *Principle-centered Leadership* Stephen Covey takes this a step further. Not only are the *practices*, or the “how” of leadership governed by principles, but the actual *direction* and *goal* of leadership, or the “what” and “where”, are also subject to universal principles.

No-one can deny that Adolf Hitler was a leader in the sense that he effectively mobilized and directed the energy of many followers toward the pursuit of distant goals. However, not many people would be comfortable with a book entitled: “Leadership Secrets of Adolf Hitler”. We are sure that he is not a leader worthy of emulating. We have a sense that leadership is not only its form, but also its function, is governed by moral imperatives. These moral imperatives, signalled by our conscience, or our “internal compass” in the language of Covey, indicate fundamental principles of the universe. Leadership which conforms with these principles in terms of its form is *Effective Leadership*. Leadership which conforms with these principles in terms of its form and function is *Authentic Leadership*.

In these terms Hitler may have been an effective leader, but he was not an authentic leader. It's not just *how* you lead the people that is governed by principles that you should be aware of and consciously align with – *where* you lead them is also governed by principles. With great power comes great responsibility. Those who lead not in accordance with these principles, intentions notwithstanding, are guilty of misleading.

*Bhagavad-gita* describes these fundamental universal principles – the underlying framework of the universe that reflects the purpose of the universal architect. Leaders who align their practices with these principles will be effective leaders. Leaders who align their goals and the goals of the organizations they steward with these principles will be authentic leaders – leaders who are empowered to create a better world.

Leadership is absolutely crucial. As the oft-repeated saying has it: “everything rises or falls on leadership”. Failures or lack of leadership can be found near the root of all problems. At this present moment in time, with so many social and environmental indices tottering toward the red line, the world is crying out not just for effective leadership, but for authentic leadership. *Bhagavad-gita* contains the timeless principles that will empower leaders to be effective and authentic leaders. The greatest need at this point in time is for those people who have been called to lead to step forward and take up the Service of Leadership.

## Invoking Auspiciousness

I offer my humble obeisances to Lord Sri Krishna, the speaker of *Bhagavad-gita* and enunciator of universal principles (*sanatana-dharma*) of action.

I offer my humble obeisances to Arjuna, whose questioning lead to the conversation that forms the content of *Bhagavad-gita*.

I offer my humble obeisances to the *Bhagavad-gita*, spoken by Krishna on the battlefield of Kuruksetra 5000 years ago in the presence of some of the greatest leaders in the world.

I offer my humble obeisances to Srila Vyasadeva the compiler and editor of *Bhagavad-gita* and other Vedic literatures.

May Mother Sarasvati bless my tongue and cause me to say something of value to the world in bringing the relevance of *Bhagavad-gita* to contemporary problems to light.

My most humble respectful obeisances to Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, whose translation and commentary of *Bhagavad-gita* inspired many millions of people to apply its teachings in their lives.

My most humble respectful obeisances to my spiritual mentor, His Holiness Devamrita Swami, who mercifully reached down to pick me up from my fallen lowly condition, and continues to teach me the value of *Bhagavad-gita* in my own life.

May this commentary on *Bhagavad-gita* increase the harmony in this world and serve to raise leaders to a new level of effectiveness and authenticity.

# Chapter One

## 1

**Dhrtarastra said: O Sanjaya, after my sons and the sons of Pandu assembled in the place of pilgrimage at Kuruksetra, desiring to fight, what did they do?**

The *Bhagavad-gita* appears in the context of a much larger work, the *Mahabharata*, which provides the back story for the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, soon to be related by Sanjaya to Dhrtarastra. Readers wishing to gain a greater appreciation for the wider context of *Bhagavad-gita* are advised to read *Mahabharata* by Krishna Dharma.

Sanjaya was the charioteer of Dhrtarastra, who was a King. There are four primary leadership roles:

1. Strategic Leadership
2. Directive Leadership
3. Team-building Leadership
4. Operational Leadership

You have a unique character, with particular strengths and weaknesses. When you understand and play to your strengths you can develop your natural leadership ability, and you'll find that you are suited to a particular leadership role.

Effective leadership necessitates a leadership team with the right mix of aptitudes. One is too small a number for greatness, as the saying goes. Getting the right mix of people on the leadership team is crucial. Too many of one aptitude and there will be dysfunction of the organization or of the leadership team itself. Wrong mixes may manifest as a harmonious but ineffective leadership team, or a volatile leadership team characterized by internal strife. All of the four roles are necessary for a complete leadership team – in areas where one person is weak, another person is strong.

It is not ordinarily possible for one person to embody all types, and especially not to be good at all of them, because they have contradictory psychological characteristics. Such a personality is exceedingly rare. A person is generally strong in a primary leadership role, accompanied by a weaker predominant secondary role. Very rarely will a person be strong in three. Wherever there are strengths there are corresponding weaknesses. These weaknesses can become strengths when they are acknowledged and understood, and a team is built around them. "Know Yourself", and your area of contribution, is the beginning of individual effectiveness, leading to team effectiveness.

Persons who are suited to Strategic Leadership are thinkers. They lead out of a strategic strength. Their primary concern is *why* to do things. They love the challenge of understanding and planning. They value *knowing* over *doing*. This gives them a detachment which enables them to more accurately and objectively analyze the

situation. They value knowledge and *wisdom*, and admire perceptive and wise people.

To assess your strength in this leadership role score one point for each of the following characteristics of the Strategic Leader that you possess:

1. Analyst of reality
2. Create practical ways of converting vision into action
3. View emotions and sensitivity as detrimental to the cause
4. Do not hesitate to ask the hard questions
5. Do not mind creating controversy
6. Content to remain in the background
7. More loyal to the vision than to the people
8. Take great pride in being knowledgeable in their area of focus

The corresponding weaknesses of this type are the following:

1. Useful but generally not popular
2. Usually portrayed as insensitive and robotic
3. Usually happier working with ideas than people
4. Often take a long time to arrive at decisions
5. Lean toward perfectionism

The extreme archetype of this leader is Spock from Star Trek.

Persons who are suited to Directive Leadership, also known as Executive Leadership, are initiators. In the hazy smoke of battle (literal or metaphorical), while others are stumbling around in shock and confusion, looking for guidance, the Directive Leader is the one whose response is to charge forward boldly, and inspire others to follow them.

They love to direct, and are able to initiate action, and to sustain action. They value doing over knowing. A person with a reduced strength in this area may be able to initiate, but unable to sustain action. In terms of Myers-Briggs or Keirsey personality typing, this person is often an NT. They value competence and effectiveness, and admire competent and effective people.

In order to get an idea of how strong in this leadership role you are, score one point for each of the following characteristics that apply:

The Directive Leader:

1. Casts a compelling vision
2. Does not spend time or energy in the details of the process
3. High motivational capacity
4. Effective speaker
5. Good listener
6. Make people feel important
7. Intuitive decision maker
8. Air of confidence

9. Makes tough calls
10. Seldom compromises

The corollary weaknesses of this type are the following:

1. Disinterest in the minutiae of the process
2. Little patience in discussion about detail
3. Great with large groups but not especially warm with individuals
4. Restless
5. Have short attention span
6. Favour action over reflection
7. May ignore financial limitations and realities
8. Have a high interest in making good things happen now

In the language of Stephen Covey, the Directive Leader is all about *efficiency* – getting people moving up the hill. The Strategic Leader is all about *effectiveness*, making sure that the team is moving up the right hill.

The Directive Leader is about engagement – engaging himself or herself, and engaging others in the task at hand. The Visionary Leader is about detachment – stepping back and looking at the bigger picture. The two are generally complementary roles, and a person is generally better at one or the other.

The Strategic Leader enables the Directive Leader by providing him or her with strategic vision and direction. This is very valuable to the Directive leader as it ultimately makes him or her more effective.

In classical terms a Directive Leader is known as a *ksatriya*, and a Visionary Leader is known as a *brahmana*. Ksatriyas would act as Kings, and they would maintain an advisory staff of one or more brahmanas who would act as strategic input to their decision-making process.

Dhrtarastra is a ksatriya, a Directive Leader.

The Team Building Leader is all about people. They are natural people persons, and generate cohesion in any group that they are part of.

Their characteristics are as follows:

1. Enjoy organising people around a common cause
2. Rely heavily on their relational network
3. Charismatic
4. Generate high morale
5. Place high value on people
6. Ability to interact with a high variety of people
7. Receives loyalty and respect from the team

Their weaknesses are:

1. Hate paperwork
2. Waffle on detail
3. Tendency to ignore agendas, action plans, and budgets
4. Allow relationships to hinder progress
5. Get hurt by people

The Operational Leader is the final leadership role. This is a very practical, on-the-ground leadership role.

The characteristics of an Operational Leader are as follows:

1. Provide stability to the organisation
2. Devise systems to make things run smoothly
3. They act as a hub through which people go in the organization
4. Often reports bad news, but is seldom responsible
5. Create new solutions to old problems
6. Often complement the other three aptitudes

Their weaknesses:

1. Easily slips from leader to manager
2. Dislike conflict
3. Fail to see the big picture
4. Lack motivational skills
5. Can be viewed as a hindrance to progress
6. Often lack the influence of the other three aptitudes

Sanjaya is part of Dhrtarastra's leadership team, and his formal position is that of an operational leader, in charge of the King's transport. However, his actual role is revealed in this verse. The King has approached him for guidance and for vision. Formal roles are one thing, but the real substance of leadership is influence, and as we have seen here, this depends on the personal qualities of a person.

## 2

**Sanjaya said: O King, after looking over the army arranged in military formation by the sons of Pandu, King Duryodhana went to his teacher and spoke the following words.**

King Duryodhana was the son of King Dhrtarastra. Dhrtarastra, while the eldest son of his father, was born blind, and was therefore skipped over in the succession of the kingdom. He and successive generations of his household were ineligible to sit on the throne while his younger brother Pandu, or his sons, the Pandavas, were alive. Although Duryodhana did not have a valid claim to the throne he felt that he should be King. With his father's tacit complicity he manipulated the situation to exclude the sons of Pandu, who was deceased, from the throne, and the pursuit of this policy eventually led to the military confrontation that provides the backdrop of *Bhagavad-*

*gita's* conversation.

Here Duryodhana approaches his teacher, Dronacarya.

Every person is a unique individual, with a unique mix of strengths and weaknesses, which make them uniquely suited to contribute in a particular organizational role.

Dronacarya has a personality with a highly developed primary leadership ability for Strategic Leadership, and also a very strong secondary ability as a Directive Leader. Both nature and nurture play a role in determining our career path, and Dronacarya's family heritage of teaching lead him to a career as a teacher and coach of Directive Leaders, or Ksatriyas.

The predominance of his *brahmana* nature – the Strategic Leadership capability - means that he is not satisfied simply doing things – he has a deep need to teach others to do things, accompanied by the capacity to understand the theoretical underpinnings that affect action.

The strength of his *ksatriya* nature, his secondary leadership ability, weakens his ability to act as a pure Strategic Leader, who deals with the really bigger picture issues.

This combination makes him uniquely suited to be a military advisor and teacher. He is a person who has a highly developed theoretical understanding of execution, greater than that of a pure Directive Leader, combined with a personal drive for execution that allows him to earn the respect of Directive Leaders. He is a warrior and a thinker.

While he is a warrior and a thinker, he is primarily a thinker, although his thinking is strongest in relation to warriorship. Therefore he is here referred to as Duryodhana's teacher. In the coming battle he will initially act primarily as a strategic advisor. Prior to the battle he trained Duryodhana in strategy, as well as tactical execution.

### 3

**O my teacher, behold the great army of the sons of Pandu, so expertly arranged by your disciple, the son of Drupada.**

Duryodhana here points out that the leaders on the other side of the battlefield, especially their strategist Drstadyumna, the son of King Drupada, were also students of Dronacarya. In the fratricidal war that resulted from Duryodhana's ill-advised pursuit of the throne the house of the Kurus was torn asunder and former comrades were pitched against each other.

Leaders are both born and made. Within every person exists the potential to lead others, to model exemplary behaviour and inspire others to rise to the occasion. Each of us has a unique character, and the particular style of leadership and leadership role that we are best suited for varies from person to person. The realization of this leadership potential often begins when it is recognized and nurtured by another leader who sees the potential within us and communicates their belief in what we can become.

Seeing the potential in others and nurturing that is part of being a leader. The real measure of a leader is not what they can accomplish personally or even through an organization, but how much they are able to empower others to realize their own leadership potential.

General Electric, under the stewardship of legendary CEO Jack Welch, become one of the world's most successful companies. While the company had a number of divisions that produced a variety of products, the product that most distinguishes Jack Welch as a leader is the number of former GE staffers who went on to become CEOs in other companies.

The best leaders help others to realize their full potential. They do not think: “Let me keep this person down so that they will never be able to take my place”, and in this way undermine and subtly sabotage their people. The best mindset to have in creating other leaders is to always be trying to recruit and train yourself out of a job. An authentic leader sees himself or herself as simply a placeholder, holding an office until the properly qualified person comes to take up the reins. They are always on the lookout for talented people, and encouraging and nurturing them.

In the case of Dronacarya, he had trained Drstadyumna even though Drstadyumna's father, King Drupada, was his enemy. Drupada and Dronacarya had been school mates. As children in the school they had pledged their firm friendship for life. Dronacarya, as the son of a *brahmana* or teacher, while he had a strong Directive Leadership ability, had gone on to become a teacher, while Drupada, from an aristocratic family, had gone on to become the chief executive of a kingdom.

Years later, when Dronacarya, now destitute, had approached Drupada for assistance he was rebuffed with the taunt that friendship could only be between equals. Drupada had become proud due to his opulence. Dronacarya left the reunion with his face burning and a desire to avenge the insult he had received. The strength that manifests as the motivating power of Directive leaders has a corollary weakness in the form of pride, and Dronacarya, as a borderline personality between Directive and Strategic Leader was not immune to this, as was more obviously the case with his former friend Drupada.

Had Dronacarya been born into a family with a tradition of executive leadership he may well have been a ruler, as was the case with his former friend Drupada. The fact that he later married a lady from such a ruling family further shows his affinity to that way of life. However, his family tradition was one of teaching, and thus this was the career that he entered. Dronacarya secured a position as a martial teacher in the royal house of the Kurus, and trained the Kuru princes, including both sides of the current conflict, in the art of war. It was customary in the Vedic culture that a graduating student give an offering to the teacher. Dronacarya asked his students to bring King Drupada to him bound hand and foot. First of all Duryodhana and his brothers attempted to do so, but they were repelled by Drupada and his men. Next the five Pandava brothers attempted, and were able to subdue Drupada and bring him to Dronacarya.

Dronacarya then rebuked Drupada for having treated him as his inferior, and took away half of his kingdom. King Drupada seethed with resentment and desired to have a son who would kill Dronacarya. That son was Drstadyumna, who was later trained by Dronacarya himself, in spite of his knowing that fact.

The people we train as leaders may well go on to lead organizations that compete with us in the marketplace. This is a fact of life, and we should give everything that we can to help them to realize their potential, and celebrate their success. Long after we are gone from this world the legacy of leadership that we have contributed to will live on.

If we contribute to creating a culture of authentic leadership we can be sure the needs of the people will be served. Authentic leadership is not about you or me, it is about the people that we serve. As leaders we have to be bigger than ourselves, and serve a bigger cause.

#### **4 - 6**

**Here in this army there are many heroic bowmen equal in fighting to Bhima and Arjuna: great fighters like Yuyudhana, Virata and Drupada. There are also great heroic, powerful fighters like Dhrstaketu, Cekitana, Kasiraja, Purujit, Kuntibhoja and Saibya. There are the mighty Yudhamanyu, the very powerful Uttamauja, the son of Subhadra and the sons of Draupadi. All these warriors are great chariot fighters.**

Arjuna was Dronacarya's most brilliant student. When Drupada, who along with his son took to the battlefield on the side of the Pandavas, desired a son to kill Dronacarya, he simultaneously desired a daughter to give in marriage to Arjuna, who had, along with his brothers, subdued Drupada. Drupada so much appreciated Arjuna's skill that he wanted to have him as his son-in-law.

Executive leaders admire competent and effective persons. Like Drupada they are the “good sportsmen” who take a drubbing field and admire their opponent for their skill. Because authentic leaders serve a cause greater than themselves they are not subject to the same ego-insecurity that comes with a self-serving agenda. At the same time that they might admire a misguided leader for his effectiveness, however, they lament his lack of integrity with the principles needed to provide authentic leadership. When leadership abilities are used for personal or extended personal gain they are *misused*. Leadership is a service, and a leader is a servant of the people. Duryodhana desired the throne for his own personal gratification, therefore he was not an authentic leader and his leadership would be disastrous for the people.

#### **7**

**But for your information, O best of the brahmanas, let me tell you about the captains who are especially qualified to lead my military force.**

Duryodhana is speaking for the benefit of his staff, who are overhearing this conversation, as much as he is for Dronacarya. He has emphasised the presence of King Drupada and his son to remind Dronacarya of the seriousness of the situation and to inspire Dronacarya to engage in the battle without reservation. He now speaks to inspire his men, so that he will end his presentation on an inspiring note.

Duryodhana is casting vision, an important activity of a leader. One definition of leadership is “the supply of vision and direction in a situation of uncertainty and confusion”. Leaders help the people to have a vision that inspires and empowers them to direct their energy toward a distant goal in a harmonious fashion. It is said that seeing is believing, and leaders help people to see things that are as yet unmanifest, and so align their actions with that future reality in a way that brings it about.

Author Alvin Toffler put it: “You've got to think about big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction.” Leaders help the people to do this by casting vision, constantly reminding the people of the bigger picture they are a part of, and working towards.

The nature of this world is that everything tends toward decay and disorder. Vision is no exception. Organizations “leak” vision. Over a period of as little as two to three weeks an organization can lose sight of the bigger picture and get lost in the minutiae of the implementation details – missing the forest for the trees. Leaders have to constantly restate the vision to keep it fresh and vibrant.

Directive Leaders excel in casting vision, but crafting vision is especially the area of strength of Strategic Leaders. They have a highly developed ability to “feel” the future. To inspire people, a vision must be compelling. In order to be compelling it needs two things: first of all, it needs to include the people. A vision of someone else's future is not as compelling for me as a vision that includes me. Number two, it needs to be felt by the leader. Communication is all about transference of internal states through the medium of words. A leader needs to first feel it inside themselves before they are able to inspire others to feel it. The compelling vision of a leader is not simply an idea of what could be – it is what *should* be. It carries with it a moral imperative that is palpably felt by the leader.

When vision is aligned with eternal universal principles it is beneficial for everyone, and not simply for one particular group at the expense of others. Aligning vision with eternal universal principles must be a primary concern of authentic leaders. *Bhagavad-gita* is an exposition of those eternal principles, and persons with leadership ability who study these principles will be empowered to provide authentic leadership.

On a leadership team the Strategic Leaders provide vision aligned with eternal principles, and the Directive Leaders provide direction, aligning the people with the vision. The Team-building Leaders generate cohesion and keep the group together, and Operational Leaders provide leadership in the area of implementation. All types of leaders play vital roles. Some people will have ability in multiple areas, others will have ability focused in one area.

## 8

**There are personalities like you, Bhishma, Karna, Kripa, Asvatthama, Vikarna and the son of Somadatta called Bhurisrava, who are always victorious in battle.**

Please note that the critical factor that Duryodhana mentions in his favour is not the equipment or technology that he and his organization have at their disposal. It is not the strategic plan, it is not even his own ability – it is his people.

Researcher Jim Collins, author of “Good to Great”, led a team in a six year research effort which investigated the causative factors that distinguish good companies from so-called “good-to-great” ones, an arbitrary distinction created by the research group of a sustained, significant performance improvement that was so stringent that only 15 companies made the cut in the entire US economy over a 40 year period.

Among a handful of significant factors was the finding that the good-to-great companies had a relentless focus on what the researchers termed: “First Who, then What”. They use the analogy of a bus to explain this concept. Leaders in the good-to-great companies focused first on getting the right people onto the bus and making sure they were on the right seats, before deciding where to drive the bus. They were prepared to leave a seat empty for as long as it took to find “the right person”, rather than settle for someone who was less than ideal.

Leaders in the comparison companies, in contrast, would often start out with the idea of where they wanted to go, then get people onboard to go there.

Leaders in the good-to-great companies could be compared to “helpers of a thousand geniuses”, whereas the leaders of the comparison companies were often “geniuses with a thousand helpers”.

Getting the right people is fundamental. Both Duryodhana and Arjuna spent a lot of time and energy recruiting for this battle. Sun Tzu, in his classic treatise the Art of War states leadership as one of the five essential factors that determine ultimate victory.

Vikarna is mentioned here amongst the other big names of Duryodhana's leadership team not because he is of the same caliber as the others, but because his loyalty was in question. Previously, as injustices had been meted out by Duryodhana on the Pandavas, Vikarna alone had spoken out in protest against Duryodhana's actions. Duryodhana, in a calculated move, mentions Vikarna in an attempt to influence him, appealing to his ego.

Vikarna, however, changes sides just before the battle, when the opportunity is given to do so. Duryodhana's force is numerically superior and seems more likely to prevail in this final battle in a war that up to this point he has been winning. Vikarna, however, is loyal to a higher cause than his own self-aggrandizement or even self-preservation, and must do what he understands to be right. This is a hallmark of an authentic leader.

## 9

**There are many other heroes who are prepared to lay down their lives for my sake. All of them are well equipped with different kinds of weapons, and all are experienced in military science.**

The caliber of a leader can be understood by the caliber of the leaders they have around them. Insecure leaders tend to recruit persons who do not threaten them. They like to feel like the smartest person in the room. They limit others growth potential in order that they might not be outshone.

Truly great leaders, however, surround themselves with the brightest people they can find, and empower them to do their best work. They provide a working environment in which leaders are able to reach their full potential, and provide opportunities for them to do significant work.

By doing this they secure the loyalty of their staff. Real loyalty comes when a leader has made an investment in the development of the people they lead - when they have empowered those persons and helped them to become more effective.

In the case of Karna, who was the illegitimate half-brother of the Pandavas, Duryodhana had stood up for him when he had first appeared as an unknown in the Kaurava court. He had personally vouched for him and granted him a royal title of a principality, conceding some of his own land. This act of empowerment and trust earned him Karna's undying loyalty. Even when Karna found out his relationship to the Pandavas, he was still unable to give up his allegiance to Duryodhana.

Duryodhana here mentions the equipment and experience of his people. Having the right people is essential, but making sure that they have the right tools to do their job is also important.

## 10

**Our strength is immeasurable, and we are perfectly protected by Grandfather Bhishma, whereas the strength of the Pandavas, carefully protected by Bhima, is limited.**

Duryodhana is casting the vision for his people. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric and author of *Winning*, explains that “the leader defines the situation”. In the language of famed management expert Max Dupre, “the leader's first duty is to define reality.” Whenever there is a crisis leaders do not allow others to step up and define the situation – *they* define the situation.

In this case the words that Duryodhana uses in the Sanskrit text of *Bhagavad-gita* can be interpreted to mean completely the opposite to what has been rendered here, a remarkable linguistic feat by the author of *Bhagavad-gita*, which indicates that although he is a powerful and effective leader, because his leadership is not aligned with the fundamental universal principles that will be described in this book, he is ultimately doomed.

## 11

**All of you must now give full support to Grandfather Bhishma, as you stand at your respective strategic points of entrance into the phalanx of the army.**

Having addressed Dronacarya with the others overhearing, Duryodhana now addresses the rest of his people directly, urging them to give their effort in a coordinated fashion. By casting vision transparently he has ensured that everyone knows what is going on. When communication is fluid within an organization there can be a high level of shared vision and shared situational awareness. With this access to vision leaders can be self-synchronizing. The natural tendency of leaders is to initiate action. If strategic vision is not shared across an organization the tendency will be for leaders to initiate action which doesn't necessarily contribute to the overall goals or momentum of the organization.

One, unfortunately common, response to this situation is to chastise and restrain individual initiative. This severely constrains the effectiveness of the organization and can lead to loss of talented personnel. The best response is to make sure that communication is fluid up, down, and across the organization, and that vision is shared and constantly restated.

It has been said, with good reason, that good management consists of having the *ability* to get the right people, and the *humility* to get out of their way while they get the work done. Making sure that the people have the vision is a necessary step to releasing them to realize their full potential in the service of the organization and its goals.

Micromanagement, a sure-fire way to burn out both leaders and followers while severely limiting organizational efficiency, can be the result of three things:

1. An insecure leader

2. Incompetent recruitment resulting in the wrong people in the wrong roles
3. Lack of vision casting

In the case of Duryodhana he is confident that his people will do what is necessary.

## **12 - 13**

**Then Bhishma, the great valiant grandsire of the Kuru dynasty, the grandfather of the fighters, blew his conchshell very loudly, making a sound like the roar of a lion, giving Duryodhana joy. After that, the conchshells, drums, bugles, trumpets and horns were all suddenly sounded, and the combined sound was tumultuous.**

Bhishma, the elder statesman of the Kuru dynasty, present on the side of Duryodhana, blew his conchshell, rousing the spirits of the troops. The symbolism of the conch is significant, as will be revealed in the next text.

## **14**

**On the other side, both Lord Krishna and Arjuna, stationed on a great chariot drawn by white horses, sounded their transcendental conchshells.**

In contrast to the conchshell sounded by Bhishma, the conchshells sounded by Arjuna and Krishna are described as “transcendental” (*divya* in the original Sanskrit). This is an indication that the leadership of Arjuna and Krishna is in accordance with underlying universal principles, as will be further explained in this work.

Effective leadership follows principles of practice which empower it to effect change. Authentic leadership follows principles of purpose which empower it to effect holistic positive change. Duryodhana was expert in applying the principles of practice, and as such he was able to amass a large force of capable, competent leaders. However, he had no interest in any purpose other than his own - the goal and direction of his leadership was not in accord with principles, therefore he was *misleading* these people. Leadership which follows principles in its form but deviates from or ignores universal principles in its function is actually little more than manipulation. A leader has been given a gift in the form of their ability to lead. With great power comes great responsibility. A leader exists within the context of a universal order, as do the people he or she leads. It is the responsibility of the leader to know what that universal order is, and to lead in accordance with it. *Bhagavad-gita* is just for this purpose.

## **15**

**Lord Krishna blew His conchshell, called Pancajanya; Arjuna blew his, the Devadatta; and Bhima, the voracious eater and performer of herculean tasks, blew his terrific conchshell, called Paundra.**

Krishna had vowed not to fight in the battle, but to join one side of the conflict. His army, however, *would* fight on the other side. Duryodhana elected Krishna's army, and Arjuna chose to have Krishna on his side. Krishna is the enunciator of the fundamental universal principles described in *Bhagavad-gita*, and as He will explain later, their source. The inner meaning of His appearing on the side of the Pandavas, which was substantially weaker in strength than Duryodhana's side, is that leadership which is lacking in effectiveness, in efficacy, due to a lack of understanding of the principles of practice is preferably to leadership which is lacking in alignment with

the principles of purpose. It's better to be going in the right direction at 5 miles an hour, than off a cliff at 100.

For all the efficiency of modern western civilization we see a number of alarming statistics, among them rates of violent crime, suicide, divorce and other indicators that efficiency is not everything.

## **16 - 19**

**King Yudhishtira, the son of Kunti, blew his conchshell, the Ananta-vijaya, and Nakula and Sahadeva blew the Sughosha and Manipushpaka. That great archer the King of Kasi, the great fighter Sikhandi, Dhrishtadyumna, Virata, the unconquerable Satyaki, Drupada, the sons of Draupadi, and the others, O King, such as the mighty-armed son of Subhadra, all blew their respective conchshells. The blowing of these different conchshells became uproarious. Vibrating both in the sky and on the earth, it shattered the hearts of the sons of Dhritarashtra.**

Yudhishtira, Nakula, and Sahadeva are three of the five Pandava brothers. Arjuna and Bhima are the other two.

## **20**

**At that time Arjuna, the son of Pandu, seated in the chariot bearing the flag marked with Hanuman, took up his bow and prepared to shoot his arrows. O King, after looking at the sons of Dhritarashtra drawn in military array, Arjuna then spoke to Lord Krishna these words.**

In this opening chapter of the *Bhagavad-gita* we are given some insight into the character of an authentic leader. The internal psychology of an authentic leader, their area and scope of concern, are revealed in the following conversation between Arjuna and Krishna.

## **21-23**

**Arjuna said: O infallible one, please draw my chariot between the two armies so that I may see those present here, who desire to fight, and with whom I must contend in this great trial of arms. Let me see those who have come here to fight, wishing to please the evil-minded son of Dhritarashtra.**

Duryodhana is described as *durbuddeh* – evil-minded. The word *buddheh* refers to intelligence, and the modifier *dur* indicates misuse. Everyone has a certain amount of different types of intelligence. Recently the idea of “emotional intelligence” has risen to prominence. There is also the more traditional (in the West) idea of the type of intelligence measured by IQ. Even the ability to mix and match colors is a type of intelligence. Different people have different mixtures of intelligence, and how they elect to use these talents is up to them. Duryodhana had a large degree of talent and intelligence, but he chose to utilize them in pursuit of a program of his own devising, without reference to universal principles. He did care about anything more than seizing the throne for himself. Thus he is described as evil-minded, or a misuser of his intelligence.

## 24

**Sanjaya said: O descendant of Bharata, having thus been addressed by Arjuna, Lord Krishna drew up the fine chariot in the midst of the armies of both parties.**

The stage is set. At this point of the Mahabharata, after many chapters detailing the intrigues, the betrayals, the trials and tribulations of the Pandavas, the decisive battle, where the fate of the kingdom will finally be decided, has at last arrived.

It is at this point, with the audience on the edge of their seats, that this crucial conversation, an exposition of principles to guide leaders, takes place. Appropriately it takes place in the open field between the two armies, representing a gathering of the greatest leaders of the time.

## 25 - 26

**In the presence of Bhishma, Drona and all the other chieftains of the world, the Lord said, Just behold, Partha, all the Kurus assembled here. There Arjuna could see, within the midst of the armies of both parties, his fathers, grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, friends, and also his fathers-in-law and well-wishers.**

Krishna has arranged for this situation, in order to allow this exposition of eternal principles to take place. He now makes the final adjustments to the setting for this lesson. *Bhagavad-gita* is a collection of principles accompanied by a specific, extreme case – Arjuna's situation. Arjuna is faced with a dilemma, which Krishna is indicating with his use of the terms “Kurus” to describe the family members. Dhrtarastra was deliberate in the opening words of *Bhagavad-gita* to draw a distinction between his sons and the sons of his brother Pandu, the Pandavas. Here Krishna identifies both branches of the family as descendants and members of the house of Kuru. This is not a war between two different families, two different nations, or two different groups of people. This is a fratricidal conflict between close relatives and former comrades-in-arms.

## 27

**When the son of Kunti, Arjuna, saw all these different grades of friends and relatives, he became overwhelmed with compassion and spoke thus.**

Here we hear about the first characteristic of a leader – compassion. The dictionary defines compassion as “Deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it.”

The moral authority of a leader and the moral imperative of their vision derives from this quality in their character. Leaders are problem solvers. They identify a problem and seek to solve it. The problem that they seek to solve involves relieving the suffering of others.

Guy Kawasaki, former technical evangelist for Apple and venture capitalist, recommends the 10/20/30 rule for Powerpoint presentations pitching a company for venture capital (a form of vision casting). Basically the rule states that there should be 10 slides, the presentation should go for 20 minutes, and should use 30 point fonts.

The 10 slides are the following:

1. Problem
2. Solution
3. Business Model
4. Underlying Magic
5. Marketing and Sales
6. Competition
7. Team
8. Projections
9. Status and Timeline
10. Summary and Call to Action

The presentation begins with identifying the problem. Sometimes a presentation fails to identify the problem that is being addressed. A vision of a solution looking for a problem will be ineffective in motivating the people, in this case venture capitalists. The first thing they need to hear is: “What is the pain that your product or service will relieve?”

Arjuna is here mentioned as the son of Kunti. Women are generally more compassionate in their nature than men, so it is fitting that Arjuna is referred to as the son of his mother in this regard.

## **28 - 29**

**Arjuna said: My dear Krishna, seeing my friends and relatives present before me in such a fighting spirit, I feel the limbs of my body quivering and my mouth drying up. My whole body is trembling, my hair is standing on end, my bow Gandiva is slipping from my hand, and my skin is burning.**

Here the nature of Arjuna's feelings is presented. Duryodhana had no such reaction to the situation. His only concern was how to motivate his people to secure victory on the battlefield. His vision has no component of relieving the suffering of others. Rather than relying on loyalty to a vision and a higher cause, his recruitment strategy relied on personal loyalty to himself, or to remuneration that he was able to provide.

King Salya was an uncle of the Pandava brothers, and travelled overland with his army to join them in the battle. Approaching the site of the battle Salya arrived at a staging area which had been prepared in anticipation of him and his army. It had many facilities for his men, including lodgings and refreshments. As Sun Tzu explains, the maintenance of an army in the field is terribly expensive for the kingdom, so the provision of facilities such as these was no mere gesture but a substantial aid.

Salya and his forces put up for the night and rested well, served by the staff of the encampment. In the morning, rested and well fed, Salya requested the staff to introduce him to their host, as he wished to pledge his loyalty. Expecting to meet Yudhishthira, the eldest of the Pandavas, he realized he had been tricked when the door of the tent was whisked aside to reveal Duryodhana.

Leadership in its purest form is found in volunteer organizations. In a volunteer organization leaders are unable to leverage job security or monetary incentives. They

rely on the pure substance of leadership – influence and the good will of those they would lead.

Duryodhana's pitch consists of the problem that he wants to be King, and the solution of killing the Pandavas. There is no compassion in this, there is no deep awareness of the suffering of others coupled with the desire to relieve it. It is not a compelling vision except for the part which says: “You can share in the spoils with me”, and this appeals to a certain type of person only.

*Bhagavad-gita* is an extreme case to prove a point. We can see how Duryodhana is an extreme archetype of the self-absorbed, manipulative leader. Arjuna is about to demonstrate the other end of the spectrum. However, just how extreme a case *Bhagavad-gita* is will be fully revealed after this, when Krishna shows how even Arjuna's current level of leadership falls short of what is required of an authentic leader.

### **30-31**

**I am now unable to stand here any longer. I am forgetting myself, and my mind is reeling. I see only causes of misfortune, O Krishna, killer of the Kesi demon. I do not see how any good can come from killing my own kinsmen in this battle, nor can I, my dear Krishna, desire any subsequent victory, kingdom, or happiness.**

This is Arjuna's calculation of the situation. Unlike Duryodhana, who relishes the idea of vanquishing his enemies and enjoying the throne, Arjuna finds himself in a dilemma – entering into the battle and laying waste to his kinsmen, which they will do whether they ultimately win or lose, does not appeal to him. And the idea of ultimate victory and the reclaiming of the throne after such a massacre has no attraction for him.

### **32 - 35**

**O Govinda, of what avail to us are a kingdom, happiness or even life itself when all those for whom we may desire them are now arrayed on this battlefield? O Madhusudana, when teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law and other relatives are ready to give up their lives and properties and are standing before me, why should I wish to kill them, even though they might otherwise kill me? O maintainer of all living entities, I am not prepared to fight with them even in exchange for the three worlds, let alone this earth. What pleasure will we derive from killing the sons of Dhritarashtra?**

Here we feel the full import of the situation. Duryodhana has callously divided the entire family and driven it to the brink of annihilation through his ambition. Arjuna, however, wants no part of this. On the one hand we see the extreme greed and disregard for consequences of Duryodhana. On the other hand we are seeing Arjuna's compassion and concern for others. His desire to sit on the throne is certainly not strong enough to impell him to kill all these people, his dear family members.

### **36**

**Sin will overcome us if we slay such aggressors. Therefore it is not proper for us**

**to kill the sons of Dhritarashtra and our friends. What should we gain, O Krishna, husband of the goddess of fortune, and how could we be happy by killing our own kinsmen?**

Non-violence is not accepted by Arjuna as a universal principle. Violence, as with everything else, is neither intrinsically good nor bad. What matters is how it is used. Everything that exists has its proper use, and knowing when something is appropriate and when it is inappropriate is the art of expert management.

In the case of aggression, Vedicly it is understood to be appropriate for warriors to respond with force when they or the people they are sworn to protect are threatened with force. Use of force to deter aggressors is necessary – as George Orwell put it: “People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

However, Arjuna's use of the word “such” in reference to these aggressors indicates that while he accepts the need to use violence in situations where it is necessary, in this case, an extreme case, where he is called to use violence against his own family members, he feels such a use of force to be inappropriate.

His argument here is two pronged. In the first instance he argues that it is inappropriate (sinful), and in the second that there will be no good result from it. People are sometimes prepared to compromise on principles “if the price is right”. Arjuna here communicates to Krishna that even if his integrity were for sale, he is not hearing the kind of offer he would need to close the deal.

### **37 – 38**

**O Janardana, although these men, their hearts overtaken by greed, see no fault in killing one's family or quarreling with friends, why should we, who can see the crime in destroying a family, engage in these acts of sin?**

Arjuna's concern is not simply another shade of Duryodhana's self-interest, held by someone with less evolutionary right to survive. Duryodhana is concerned about himself only, at the expense of others. By this argument that Arjuna introduces here he reveals that he is not simply spineless. His sphere of concern is wider than his own self-interest.

### **39 - 40**

**With the destruction of dynasty, the eternal family tradition is vanquished, and thus the rest of the family becomes involved in irreligion. When irreligion is prominent in the family, O Krishna, the women of the family become polluted, and from the degradation of womanhood, O descendant of Vrishni, comes unwanted progeny.**

Arjuna is concerned about the wider sociological implications of his actions. His level of vision extends far beyond the immediate consequences and considers the larger impact. Duryodhana thinks only of himself and his immediate desires and agenda. Arjuna shows himself to be a leader of a higher caliber through this consideration of the wider issues – the bigger picture.

The family unit is the basis of human society, although at present in the increasingly globalized consumer society this is being supplanted by the individual consumer as

the basic building block.

When family traditions are disrupted or destroyed, as will be the result of this battle, the women of the family become vulnerable to exploitation. There is no family structure to bring pressure to bear to enforce responsible behaviour – no father to “bring the shotgun to the wedding”. The results of this are children who are many times not economically supported by their biological father, and do not enjoy a stable social and economic situation for their upbringing. These children grow up with an underlying psychological impression that they are in fact unwanted, and this influences their future as members of society. Children from broken homes are disproportionately represented in statistics of violent crime, substance abuse, and suicide. Due to a lack of a successful model of stable family life they are also disproportionately represented in divorce statistics.

Arjuna's concern for this is a symptom of his compassion, and an indication that he has the character needed to be an authentic leader.

#### **41 -42**

**An increase of unwanted population certainly causes hellish life both for the family and for those who destroy the family tradition. The ancestors of such corrupt families fall down, because the performances for offering them food and water are entirely stopped. By the evil deeds of those who destroy the family tradition and thus give rise to unwanted children, all kinds of community projects and family welfare activities are devastated.**

Traditionally the family unit has been responsible for socialization, education, and social welfare, including the maintenance of the elderly. Parents would invest their time, energy, and income in their children, and when they advanced in age their children would return the favour and take care of them.

Today children are routinely abandoned by one or both parents, and parents are encouraged to store away some of their income during their productive years in order to “not be a burden on their children” in the future. Young people are encouraged to seek self-actualization through an independent lifestyle of consumption along with a partner. Both elderly parents and children are seen as a hindrance to this pursuit of self-actualization through consumption, and thus fertility rates are at an all time low in Western countries, with negative population growth in many populations.

Elderly people are left to fend for themselves, abandoned by their children and relegated to old folks homes where they live in isolation from the family. In this way the family as the basic structural unit of human society has become replaced with the individual consumer. This is the result of the destruction of the family tradition.

Arjuna demonstrates through his concerns that aside from the legality of the succession, he is more the indicated person to sit on the throne than Duryodhana.

#### **42**

**O Krishna, maintainer of the people, I have heard by disciplic succession that those who destroy family traditions dwell always in hell.**

This is another verse that can be read two ways – “those who destroy the family traditions dwell always in hell”, and also “those whose family traditions are destroyed

dwell always in hell”.

The problems that arise from the destruction of the family tradition lay the individual vulnerable to social, economic, and personal exploitation from infancy through to old age.

### **43**

**Alas, how strange it is that we are preparing to commit greatly sinful acts. Driven by the desire to enjoy royal happiness, we are intent on killing our own kinsmen.**

Keenly aware of the implications of the battle that is at hand in a way that Duryodhana clearly is not, Arjuna laments his involvement. In fact Duryodhana is the one who is driven by the desire to enjoy royal happiness. As will become clear from Arjuna's deliberations in this chapter and the next, his own motivation is something quite different.

### **44**

**Better for me if the sons of Dhritarashtra, weapons in hand, were to kill me unarmed and unresisting on the battlefield.**

In the face of this realization, Arjuna loses his will to fight. It is more than simple cowardice. He realizes what the outcome of this battle will be. Arjuna's concerns are well founded. The battle will take place, and the unravelling of the social structure will begin to take place soon afterwards.

### **45**

**Sanjaya said: Arjuna, having thus spoken on the battlefield, cast aside his bow and arrows and sat down on the chariot, his mind overwhelmed with grief.**

Arjuna is in a clear dilemma. In neither case can he see a good outcome. Either he fights and wins, in which case he kills his family members, the family tradition is destroyed and society is irreparably damaged, or else he is killed, with the same destruction of the family tradition. He reasons that the best course of action would be to die unresisting, and in this way preserve the family tradition.

These are all characteristic sentiments of an authentic leader. An authentic leader is a servant of the people and is aligned with and serving something greater than himself or herself.

However, Arjuna's compassion, while admirable compared with the mentality of Duryodhana, is still insufficient to elevate him to the position of an authentic leader. Intentions notwithstanding, without alignment with universal principles admirable sentiments are insufficient to empower a leader to do what is right. In any situation it is practically impossible to calculate the possible outcomes, and any empirical method of assessing courses of action quickly degenerates into a question of probabilities. Leaders must provide clarity in uncertain circumstances. Krishna is about to enlighten Arjuna to fundamental principles that will illuminate the way forward for him, and empower him to be an authentic leader, acting in knowledge selflessly in the service of the people.