



Qualities, not position, make a leader

The debate over nature vs nurture is old, but now most of us agree that leaders are not born but made

By K Jayshankar



With the elections around the corner, there is speculation on the likely winners and losers, as we get ready for the 'dance of democracy,' like some commentators call it. With cynicism about political candidates peaking right now, it is worthwhile to ask what it takes to be a leader.

The debate between nature vs nurture is an old one, but now most of us agree that leaders are made, not born. Of course, cynics will argue that it pays not just to be born in the right family, but also to be married into one to secure election tickets in India!

Renowned leadership guru Warren Bennis has said that a leader gets people to reach for common goals by helping them see aspects of the world differently. Leaders articulate a set of values and they personally embody them, thereby enhancing their ability to change mindsets and the framework of other persons.

While we still tend to look at a supreme 'leader' who will deliver us into the promised land of peace, prosperity and abundance, researchers have firmly concluded that leadership is not a position, but a set of qualities that distinguishes individuals because of the characteristics they display while responding to situational challenges. To futurist Joel Barker, a leader is 'someone you choose to follow to go to a place where otherwise you would not go alone'. It is an interesting thought as many of us would agree to the suggestion that in today's times, most of us are willing to democratically follow the route suggested by a leader if we are convinced about the destination that has been suggested by him. The voluntary nature that is indicated means that we have a choice of action given the multitude of options available to us in a free society.

If we were to highlight some of the essential tasks that a leader is expected to fulfill, they would include: Envisioning the future: In an unpredictable world, leaders give hope. Their ability to take the long view and look into the distant haze and describe a world that is likely to emerge becomes the rallying point for others to follow. Articulating (and living the) values: Given our pluralistic community, there is a greater onus on the leader to be true to his values, as what he does and more importantly, what he does not do speaks volumes today to followers who are watching every move in this 'live' world.

Motivating and generating positive action: Words alone are meaningless; today, leaders are required to convert paper goals into actual results as per the projected timelines. A classic example is the work done by E Sreedharan, the 'Metro Man', whose focus on operational excellence has been an exemplar to all of us who make excuses for failing to deliver on time.

Ability to listen and learn: Going beyond charisma, today's leader has to genuinely listen through a multi-level dialogue with his constituency calculated to pick up early signals of the unsaid needs. Couple this with the need for agility to learn on-the-go, given today's pressure-packed environment where it is impossible for the leader to have all the answers.

An empowered team: It has been said that only secure leaders give power to others. However, failure to create an empowered team to support your mission is a sure recipe for disaster.

One could go on, for this list is not finite. Sure, the classic example of all these elements is the Mahatma, but let me end with a living example of a person true to the above characteristics — Nelson Mandela. Madiba, as he is affectionately called, has silenced the sceptics not only by wielding immense positional power wisely, but also by walking away from it, using his moral influence to achieve results.