

Leadership Lessons from Anna's Protest

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It was almost like history repeating itself. After sixty five years or so, here was another diminutive but determined elderly man, dressed in white, fasting to register his protest against the policies of the regime in Delhi. The fact that this happened in a new century of a new millennium did make some differences. Primary difference was in the manner and speed at which the messages were propagated – and the mediums through which this happened. But a lot of things remained the same –because human nature has not changed much over the centuries. Nor have the principles and tenets of leadership.

So, like the original Mahatma, Anna Hazare was the David that took on the might of the Goliath that is the establishment, and like his role model, brought it down to its knees. The extraordinary response elicited by this very ordinary looking man has some crucial lessons for all of us aspiring to lead others in various capacities. Here is an attempt to analyze the methods adopted by Anna Hazare, to understand what was it that worked for him to bring about a change of this proportion, and to see how it can apply to other situations.

Goal Setting

Anna Hazare started the agitation with a clear cut goal in sight. The aim was to get the government to form a committee to draft the Lokpal Bill, which should include members of the civil society. The goal was unambiguous and clearly stated. The deliverables were measureable. Contrast this with the numerous protests and demonstrations in the past against corruption, price rise and myriad other ills that plague our system. Not one of them had such clear and tangible goals. That Anna's goals are progressively revised is also abundantly clear from subsequent developments. Having got the government to agree on the formation of the drafting committee, Anna has laid down the next goalpost – the due date for passing of the Lokpal bill.

Lessons - *Having such clear goals is a something that all leaders must emulate and aspire for. After setting the goals, it is important to communicate them clearly to all the stakeholders, and also display unflinching commitment towards achieving them. Having attained a goal, it is not sufficient to rest on your laurels. You need to look further and get ready for the next challenge.*

Clarity of Thought

Seeing the events of the past few days unfold, the clarity of thought displayed by Anna Hazare was abundantly evident. It was this clarity which helped him narrow on to an actionable aspect of tackling corruption – passing of an effective Lokpal Bill. It helped him frame an effective strategy and putting it into action. He probably realized that the creation of an independent Lokpal with adequate powers is the single most effective step that can be taken to fight corruption in the current scenario. Therefore he focused his efforts in achieving that.

Lessons – *in the complexities that we deal with in today's environment, clarity of thought is an essential attribute of an effective leader. It helps in breaking through the 'noise' and clutter and get to the heart of the matter, to take effective decisions to take the best path towards the desired outcome.*

Power of Intent

There have been numerous movements by political parties and other organizations in the recent past. Many of them focused on the same issues that were brought up by Anna Hazare. Some also received a lot of media attention. However, none of these were able to catch popular imagination and obtain the kind of overwhelming public endorsement and participation as this particular campaign. One of the reasons for this was that people had no doubt about Anna's intent. The campaigns by political parties and other groups were seen as motivated by political or similar interests rather than a genuine desire to bring about a change in the system. Anna Hazare clearly had no other axe to grind, and there was never a question about his intent. A few motivated rumor campaigns that were initiated ascribing political motives to him lacked credibility and were ineffective and short-lived.

Lessons – As a leader, there should never be a doubt about your purpose. As long as you are seen as someone with a genuine intent to do as you say, and do that with the motives that you ascribe to your actions, you will be able to build trust amongst others. Having built that trust, people would willingly follow you and do as you direct. On the other hand, if your actions or utterings are seen as being motivated by ulterior intents, it would be difficult to build credibility.

Importance of a Leader

We saw a spontaneous public support quite similar to that evoked by Anna's agitation a number of times in the recent past. The public gatherings and candlelight vigils immediately after the 26/11 Mumbai attacks are one example. At that time too, the public outcry against the politicians as a class was high, and people clearly wanted some alternatives to the prevalent apathy and systemic failures. However, such movements did not amount to much, and ultimately petered out after a few days. The difference this time around was the presence of an effective leader to direct and lead the movement. This, combined with the clarity of goals mentioned earlier, resulted in a positive outcome this time around.

Lessons – every organization, movement or endeavour requires effective leadership. No amount of intent and action can achieve the desired result in the absence of such a leadership. Although success is a result of the concerted action of each member of the team, it is the catalytic presence of a leader that assures it. The leader not only inspires and provides a rallying point, but is also the one who sets goals and directs the endeavour all along its path towards achieving these goals.

Timing

The timing of Anna's agitation was just right. Coming in the wake of the numerous scams of massive proportions, its message echoed with the common man and gained immediate public support. The overwhelming response from the public was because of this – the people were fed up with corruption, and here was someone who was providing an outlet for their frustrations. A movement that was taking the government head on, and asking for credible action against corruption. Besides, because of the assembly elections scheduled in some states, the government could not continue to ignore the demands as it would have had negative impact in the elections.

Lessons – a leader must have an impeccable sense of timing. As the cliché goes, 'There's a time and place for everything'. A good leader is one who recognizes an idea whose time has come, and capitalizes on it effectively.

Questioning Established Norms

The government's initial responses to Anna Hazare's demand were along predictable lines. "Such demands are against the established norms. This is not how things are done in a democracy. There is no constitutional provision for such a committee." Anna, however, was unfazed by these responses, and stuck to his demands. He asserted that the norms are established by the government itself, and if there is ample evidence of popular support, the government can change the norms to set a new precedence.

Lessons – most organizations will have their share of speed breakers disguised as people, who will only be too happy to give a hundred reasons why things cannot be done. The most common of these is "this is the way things have always been done around here." A leader must have the ability to question established norms to find new ways in which things can be done.

Candor

The media reported contents of several missives exchanged between Anna Hazare and political leaders. In all his responses, Anna displayed uninhibited candor, something that left very little room for empty assurances. By being direct and forthright in his replies, he denied any maneuver space to the government. His candid responses to every platitude highlighted the contrast in the tone of the communications from either side, and served to attract even more people to his cause.

Lessons – tact and diplomacy have their place. However, candor in a leader not only showcases his earnestness and commitment, it builds his credibility amongst followers. A forthright setting forward of views leaves very little scope for ambiguity on the other side too, and is a winning quality every time.

Modeling Success

Anna Hazare's methods bore a clear resemblance to those adopted by Mahatma Gandhi during the independence struggle to great effect. It would be safe to assume that Anna studied the Mahatma and his struggles very closely, and made a conscious effort to emulate the great man. What worked for Mahatma Gandhi more than half a century ago seemed to work well for Anna as well.

Lessons – learning from and emulating great leaders is a powerful method of preparing oneself for leadership. There is no reason why what has worked well in past will not work again.

Every one of us is a leader in our own sphere – even though the size of that sphere of influence may vary. The leadership lessons can therefore be learnt, modeled and adapted for our specific situation to great effect.