Leadership in a Digital World

Sachin Tendulkar announced his retirement last week and the expected coverage of his records, statistics etc. followed in every medium. Sachin and his retirement made me think of leadership from when he started in an analog world, to where he is ending it, in a digital world.

I see leadership as the sum of three parts. The first is the leadership because of the power and the position of the role. The second is thought leadership and the third is followership. Sachin didn't have success as a captain. So, he was not a formal successful leader the way we measure leadership. Sachin had a terrific cricket brain and was the thought leader of his generation. Sachin played for 24 years and played under many captains. He was a great follower. So in the triad I outlined, he wasn't a leader but he was a thought leader and a great follower.

Everyone is attracted to the 'power' of leadership and some thrive on it. To be a leader you need the natural confidence and charisma, humility, accessibility and the ability to deliver results with a team. Some people can never be leaders, they are selfish, incompetent, and some are insecure or too scheming. They continue in leadership roles hurting people and the institution they represent. To be a good leader, one needs to honor leadership.

Thought leadership requires a sharp and fine mind, it means staying up to date on multiple disciplines and it is about thinking structurally on issues challenging the institution. Thought leaders bring rare courage to discussions and issues.

Followership is not something you boast about. You want to go to your mother and say " Mom, I am the leader of a twenty member team' and not " I am one of ten followers to my boss". This stepchild treatment of followership is also true of management literature. I typed 'leadership' before I wrote this piece and I got 108 million articles on the Internet. I repeated this by typing 'followership' and the Internet threw up less than half a million articles. So, there is a 200-factor difference in terms of leadership to followership material!

Followership is where Sachin is the best role model for a 'power hungry' India. Great followers work for the institution and not the boss. Great followers take pride in their delivery to the boss and the team. Great followers don't sway with the wind when the leader changes.

What stops us from being great followers? Is it because we feel that followership is inferior to leadership, or, we see followership as taking and executing orders? Mr. Damodaran, ex SEBI chief said something at the AIMA meeting that struck a chord. He said that 'corruption' is seen as India's biggest problem; in his view our biggest problem is 'sycophancy' which leads to corruption. We seem to produce more sycophantic followers and not followers with a backbone!

Is our image of a hero idealistic, someone who has the answer to all problems, someone without frailties, a problem? A good leader shares his vulnerabilities with his/her team, thereby building emotional connection and inviting help from followers. It is in the frailties and vulnerabilities that leaders need great followers, someone

who can balance that for them. Sachin's mere presence as a player would have been a huge support to any demons in a captain's mind.

The best followers at work are people who back you as the leader, build the institution and its values, who take adequate ownership of both responsibility and accountability. One without the other makes a poor follower and creates headaches for the leader. Sachin embraced responsibility and accountability as a follower.

Leadership in a digital era when Tendulkar steps down is different from leadership when he started. How?

Digital technology is changing information flow, knowledge access and hierarchies in organizations. Thought leadership in a digital information democratic society is both easy and difficult.

We need good leaders to build followership. The digital age enables people to 'follow' whom they want either for intellectual stimulation or a vicarious pleasure of knowing more about the person. This 'followership' is voluntary and benefits the follower in improving thinking and understanding of difficult issues. Every company wants 'volunteers' and not 'employees', like a non-profit organization that excites volunteers about its cause. This band of digital followers give a leader thought leadership beyond the boundaries of his company, function and industry forums. This is a positive for leaders pursuing thought leadership.

Being a leader in a digital world requires the leader to connect in person, to express ideas succinctly in the digital medium and to build both internal and external followership. Leaders will be expected to be responsive digitally. Leaders of the past used their power and 'silence' was a default option to uncomfortable issues. In a digitally connected world, leaders are forced to respond, else will be labeled inefficient or incompetent or indifferent.

Leadership, thought leadership and followership can flower in a digital world; equally, one can trip easily too. Leadership in a digital world is binary, zero or hero!!