

GURUCHARAN
SINGH
GANDHI



KABEER IN KORPORATES

CORPORATE LESSONS FROM A GREAT MYSTIC

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GURUCHARAN SINGH GANDHI

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To KABEER, for holding my hand when things
needed to make sense.

To GURBANI, KEERAT and ANU,
whose time with me became a casualty to this book.

To ARJUN GANDHI, who should have been alive to see this.

And finally, to the hamlet of JHINKPANI –

to DAD, MOM and everyone there,

where it all began...

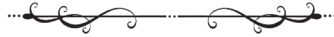
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GURUCHARAN SINGH GANDHI has traversed the dusty road from a little-known hamlet in Jharkhand to the corridors of the corporate world. He has steadfastly refused to outgrow his small-town boy identity while negotiating the megapolises of the world. His friends and foes refer to him affectionately as 'Guru' which he feels gives him an importance he otherwise lacks.

Guru considers himself a full-time corporate-*wallah* and a part-time writer. He is also a regular blogger, wherein he observes life alongside living it (www.mondaymusingsbyguru.blogspot.com). He runs marathons to clear his mind and reads Kabeer to cleanse his soul. Kabeer is his soul mate and they often have long conversations.

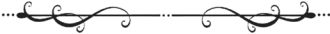
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CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION.....	7
1 PROOF OF A GOOD LEADER.....	10
2 LEADERSHIP AND COURAGE.....	18
3 ATTRIBUTES OF LEADERS.....	27
4 EMPATHY AND LEADERSHIP.....	41
5 THE TEXT-BOOKISH LEADER.....	49
6 THE PSEUDO LEADER.....	55
7 THE COMPANY YOU KEEP.....	65
8 WORK, COMPETENCE AND IDENTITY.....	80
9 THE NATURE OF TRUE PASSION.....	95
10 WHAT TRUE PASSION DOES TO YOU.....	102
11 DEDICATION.....	109
12 FOCUS.....	116
13 THE COACH.....	124
14 WHAT A GOOD COACH CAN DO.....	132
15 THE RIGHT COACH.....	140
16 THE GOOD COACH AND THE BAD COACH.....	145
17 HOW TO BE A GOOD STUDENT/LEARNER/COACHEE....	152
18 COURTING THE CRITIC.....	162
19 VIRTUES.....	176
20 EGO AND SELF-AWARENESS.....	189
21 INTEGRITY AND CONSISTENCY OF THOUGHT.....	209
22 WISDOM IN THE WORKPLACE.....	219
23 WISDOM OF LIFE.....	239
AFTERTHOUGHT.....	248
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	249

4 EMPATHY AND LEADERSHIP



There is a peculiar dichotomy in organisations today. While organisations take pride in branding themselves as caring and inclusive, the fabric of the organisation is often aggressive. Since goals are sacrosanct, and rightfully so in a highly metrics-driven world, a certain level of ruthlessness does creep into human interactions. It has become increasingly acceptable to be cut and dried, brutal and clinical in decision-making and general behaviour. Since organisations are business entities, and one of their core purposes is to create value, economic or otherwise, impatience with a lack of results is not only predictable but perhaps desirable.

However, leadership is something more. Anyone can be impatient with results; fret and fume when things do not get done; scream and holler at tasks not completed on time; shout and curse at deadlines missed or the suboptimal quality of outcomes. But it takes a genuine leader to understand the reasons for all of this and then put the train back on track.

Empathy, quite literally, means understanding another person's feelings, emotions and pain; putting oneself in the other person's shoes and understanding where it pinches. One may not be able to do anything about the shoe but at least one knows where it hurts and how it makes the person feel. From this emerges behaviour rooted in shared understanding, without which one can be either way off the mark or a heartless brute.

In the words of Steven Covey, leaders 'first seek to understand, before wanting to be understood'. True understanding is nothing

but empathy. Leaders understand the challenges of the context. They allow us to make mistakes but force us to learn lessons from them. They push us to the edge of our limits by making us do things we never thought we could, within deadlines we never thought possible, delivering quality beyond our imagination.

However, the above description is about tasks. An employee is a creature of emotion as much he is of tasks and processes. An employee feels joy, grief, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, remorse, frustration, meaninglessness, disillusionment, and sometimes anger. In these emotional moments he is fragile. Leaders deploy empathy during such taut moments to understand where the person is coming from. They use active listening to hear the unheard, and decode the iceberg to reach the real issue.

Before we dive into what Kabeer has to say on the role of empathy in leaders, let me hasten to add that empathy should not be misconstrued as patience with and tolerance towards non-performance. It is precisely the intellectual and emotional ability to see empathy and the drive for results as being non- contradictory, that is the mark of a good leader.

कबीर तेई पीर है, जे जानै पर पीर ।

जे पर पीर न जानही , ते काफिर बे पीर ।।

He is the wise one, who understands others' pain

The one who does not, is not the wise one.

Good leaders are problem-solvers and not blame-fixers. They fix problems not people. Leaders are able to focus on solving problems when they develop the eye for where exactly the problem lies, showing their teams that they see what the rest cannot. This has to be done in a non-threatening and amicable way without naming scapegoats.

There are archetypal personalities we see as leaders. Here are some of them.

1. **The wild-goose chaser:** Such leaders refuse to accept that the task is practically not possible, the goals unrealistic and the strategy they have so eloquently paraded, downright silly. They still push forward on a wild-goose chase, driven by their own fancies and egos. In the process they generate stress in the system. Externally, it can appear to be a genuine attempt to push the system to better itself, but internally, such methods corrode the pillars because, well, it's a wild-goose chase and everyone but the leader can see it. Such leaders need a healthy dose of realism.
2. **The 'I am telling you' type:** These leaders cannot tolerate questioning or clarifications. The task has to be delivered because he says so. Questions are seen as insubordination. It hardly matters that you are driving a 100-cc motorbike and the task is to launch a vehicle into space!
3. **The sloganeers:** This kind is a slogan merchant. He has one for every occasion. The tragedy is not that he believes the slogan (which he must if he wants others to do so), but that he believes it to be the answer to all organisational problems. They are often chest-thumpers, high on corporate testosterone, with plenty of bravado. What they do is the corporate equivalent of jingoism. One hears pet phrases like 'nothing is impossible' or 'impossible is nothing', 'let's go all out', 'do or die', 'let's reach the next orbit' etc.
4. **The 'heads will roll' type:** This one is a mean machine. At the end of every task gone wrong, he needs a head to roll, which is certainly not his. He refuses to see why things went wrong, why the cookie crumbled the way it did, and most importantly, his part in the collapse. Like an ancient Indian ritual, all he needs is a sacrificial lamb.

5. **The 'on the high horse' type:** This kind of leader sits on a pedestal and has absolutely no inkling of ground reality. His version of the world is from Star Trek days. His recommendations are lost in a time warp. A once successful manager, he has lost touch with what works and what does not today. However, he is unwilling to tolerate anyone who tries to tell him this.

Success often breeds insecurity. The above types may sound exaggerated, but any cubicle-wallah will tell you they have indeed met, seen, and worse yet, worked for these archetypes.

Kabeer says a leader understands the other person's pain, angst, situation, and context; he understands it as if it were his own. The leader who cannot understand his employee's circumstances, cannot lead him.

Empathy plays out in the corporate context in many ways. It begins by the leader's willingness to listen to the employee's story – without judgement and without the inherent need to respond. It goes further by listening to what has not been said – the emotion and angst behind the words or silence. It uncovers how the employee actually feels, not how he should feel. Great leaders seek to deal with any residues that may become barriers in future engagements, impacting the performance of the employee.

Many leaders are too blind or too insensitive to do all this. Over time, leaders without empathy end up leading teams bound only through work transactions. Empathy makes a leader human – and only human beings can move others to deliver on performance.

कबीर पढ़ना दूर कर, अति पढ़ना संसार ।
पीर न अपजै जीव की, क्यों पावै करतार ।।

*No point reading books and intellectualising
He who has no empathy, cannot find God.*

Another archetype that should be added to those mentioned earlier is: **The intellectual**. There is increasing evidence of this archetype in an age of increasing management education and the dissemination of models and theories. This type can rattle off all the theories ever written about on organisation-building and believes that problems can be solved through them. He analyses, over-analyses, slices and pilots, looking only for hard evidence.

The reality is, however, that the most well-read, the ones with the most academic qualifications, do not often become successful leaders. They do have a head start and it does appear for a while that they are the fast movers and shakers. But they soon hit a ceiling. They have two limitations. One, they can solve technical problems but not human ones. Should they encounter any such, they try to solve it logically and technically. To a hammer, the whole world is a nail! Two, they can solve only those problems whose solution has already been captured in books. New problems need new solutions, often not found in any book. Leaders who last the longest are those who go beyond books and models and reach out to employees at a human level, are empathetic to their issues, and relate to people very different from themselves.

Empathy cannot be faked and certainly not for long. A leader who is not genuinely interested in knowing what an employee is feeling or is incapable of relating to what the person is going through, or who brushes aside those feelings as inconsequential, is unlikely to be a leader of any consequence. The truth about leadership is that there must be followers willing to give him the right to lead them. Only a leader armed with the power of empathy can make others follow him.

Empathy does not mean tolerance to non-performance, but that issues leading to non-performance will be understood and addressed. *It also means that non-performance has to be solved, not*

punished. It does not mean that employees will not be pushed and their limits challenged. But the necessary emotional support will be provided during the process. Finally, empathy does not mean mistake will not be confronted, but that human dignity will be left intact during that confrontation.

जा घट प्रेम न संचरै, सो घट जानु मसान ।
जैसे खाल लुहार की, सांस लेत बिन प्राण ।।

*The body without love is like a graveyard;
Like the blacksmith's bellows, which have breath without life.*

Increasingly, traditional business education with its emphasis on quantitative models and theories is not producing leaders who can lead modern corporations into the future. It is no wonder then, that management education today includes subjects like ethics, integrity, principles and sustainability. The classical worldview is that corporates are best served when led by left-brained, metrics-loving, logical and algorithmic leaders. The popular myth is that the road to the corner office is powered by ruthlessness and dog-eat-dog one-upmanship. Sayings like 'good guys don't end up being first' betray how entrenched such myths have become. It is exactly in the context of the 'more is better' and 'more at any cost' philosophies that the global financial crisis of 2008 was analysed.

All leaders have one thing in common – they can galvanise a group of people towards a reality that does not exist at that point of time. Hence, for hundreds to enrol in an idea or ideal that exists only in imagination or on paper, demands faith in the leader. How is this faith generated? The starting point is the leader himself – his credibility, believability, and sincerity. More often than not, teams, departments and organisations spend millions to launch a new initiative and the leader goes berserk with a high-pitched motivating spin, leaving the team questioning his credibility and

sincerity. A great idea in the hands of a low-credibility leader is a sure-shot failure, while an average idea in the hands of a credible leader has a strong chance of success.

Apart from credibility, all great leaders possess the amazing ability to relate to people. They reach out to all as human beings. They do not shy away from showing their emotional side, even when it is fashionable to be stoic. They relate to others, irrespective of hierarchy, unburdened by the weight of designations. Such leaders do not cultivate aloofness and inaccessibility, but express their vulnerabilities, confront their weaknesses and admit their mistakes. By doing so, they endear themselves to those they lead.

Employees are led by humans, not designations or corner offices. It takes a human being to lead another human being. The more human their touch, the better leaders connect with their teams. Robots do not inspire. In this context one can view the hollowness of many a contemporary leader's attempt to stage-manage his image. Image-building is fragile. Relatedness is strong.

Kabeer says a place without love is like a graveyard. It has no life. It has no vitality, just as the blacksmith's bellows breathe (transfer air), but have no life in them.

In a status-conscious world, leaders, more often than not, build their image around material status symbols such as the car they drive, where they live, the clothes they wear, the accessories they carry, the social circle they move around in. They wish to be seen by the world in a particular way. Belonging to such a circle includes some but alienates many more. Great leaders transcend such limitation and belong to all constituents. Barack Obama once said: 'I am President of the Democrats and the Republicans.' Great leaders are inclusive. It comes from being human, not an image. Maya Angelou reminds us: '...we all have empathy...but may not have the courage to display it.'

KEY LESSONS

1. Leadership is more than impatience with results.
2. The employee is a creature of emotion as much as tasks and processes.
3. Good leaders are problem-solvers, not blame-fixers
4. Empathetic leaders are willing to listen without judgement or the need to respond. It is also about listening to what is not said.
5. Empathy does not mean tolerance of non-performance, but being understood. It means non performance will be solved not punished.
6. A great idea in the hands of a low-credibility leader is a sure-shot failure, while an average idea in the hands of a credible leader has a strong chance of success.
7. People are not led by designations or corner offices, but by another human being.
8. Great leaders belong to all constituents, even those opposed to them.

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