



Compassionate Leadership



The best leaders have servant attitude, humility, empathy, honesty, and willingness to walk a mile in other person's shoes.



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As I have written in previous articles in Pallikkutam, Covid-19 has been a great awakener and a teacher. Among the many negative aspects that became evident with Covid-19, it has however taught us an important way of living—being a “servant leader.” No doubt having leadership attributes is important but exhibiting the high qualities of a leader who practices what textbooks teach, collectively leading towards common goals and caring for the people are critical necessities. In fact, global traditions have been emphasizing the importance of learning and high living by what good books teach and by observing.

Tamil poet-saints like Thiruvalluvar and Manavala Mamunigal labor hard in their monumental Tamil works like Thirukkural and *Upadesarathinamalai* to highlight the fact that one should preach what they practice. In fact, the archetypal philosopher and poet Manavala Mamunigal emphatically states in his mellifluous Tamil text, that a leader is the one who is not just qualified with knowledge alone but should practice good deeds what one has learnt (*Upadesarathinamalai* text, Poem 61).

As is the case with the ongoing pandemic, it is not easy to take a decision that will satisfy everybody. However, a leader is the one who should analyze the situation and decide on the solution that will provide greater good to the society. Vaccine recommendations, enforcing face masks and physical distancing when and where appropriate are classical examples which civic and national leaders have encountered. Such decisions must be based on science, data, and other attributes, emphasizing the fact that service becomes the most critical aspect of leadership.

Who is a Leader?

In talking about leaders, Larry Montague, President and CEO of 100-year-old Technical Association of Pulp and Paper Industry puts it clearly, “All leaders are different, so there are many different attributes that leaders should have. The best leaders I have had the privilege to work with had the following attributes such as servant attitude, humility, empathy, honesty, and willingness to walk a mile in other person’s shoes.”

“A leader must have several attributes including compassion and care for team members, principles of ethics such as honesty, truthfulness, and fairness, and people skills such as ability to gather a team, motivate them, and identify areas of improvement,”



Larry Montague

articulated Yad Senapathy, founder and CEO of Dallas-based Project Management Training Institute. This institute trains leaders who manage projects and whose clients have included participants from fortune 500 companies including Amazon, Google, and Apple, as well as public entities such as the US Air Force, US Department of Labor, the White House, and the FBI.

Dr Steven Presley, who helped with the setting-up of first Covid-19 testing facility in the State of Texas at Texas Tech University when the pandemic outbreak happened believes a leader should have five essential attributes: (1) altruism; (2) moral courage;

(3) tenacity; (4) patience and (5) charisma, in that order of priority.

Planning and Implementation

With information technology making the world a flat place, it has become possible to obtain information by all sections of the society—a much needed and welcoming global change. Leaders can no longer be authoritative but need to be inclusive, seek inputs from colleagues exhibiting shared governance. While it is a valuable quality to seek input, a leader should gather information from all sources and take a decision and exert efforts to implement the ideas. However, due to unknown and unexpected events if the implementation of plans proves to be wrong, and/or hits into stumbling blocks, a leader needs to change the course, always looking towards future.

“The most important skill for a leader to have is to allow the team members to make mistakes in the process of innovation and growth,” stated Yad Senapathy.

Good leadership begins with good planning. Sometimes an initiative may prove to be serendipitous proving to be of immense value after many



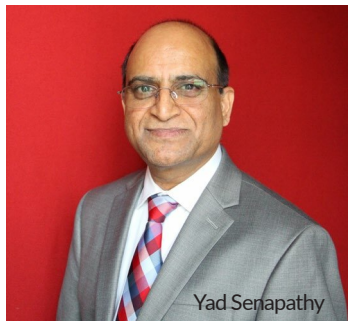


years of its beginning. The Institute of Environmental and Human Health at Texas Tech University began as a multi-institutional collaboration to develop countermeasures to chemical and biological threats way back in late 1990s. The planning and years of multidisciplinary research has enabled the institute to be the first laboratory in the State of Texas to undertake Covid-19 testing at the outbreak of the viral pandemic. Who would have thought two decades back that this institute will play an important role in saving lives during Covid-19? This shows the importance of foresight, planning, implementation and more importantly diversification as and when need arises—this happens due to thoughtful leadership. This institute as it has been undertaking “mission-linked research,” aimed at protecting humans and the environment, took an important step in enhancing its capacity to have a Biosafety Laboratory, Level 3 (BSL-3), which proved to be timely and useful in building the first Covid-19 testing capability in the State of Texas in the United States.

Building such a capability would have involved consultations and convincing several stakeholders. “A true leader cannot and should not expect or hope to satisfy every person they lead. The effective and successful leader should strive to “satisfy” or accomplish the vision and mission of the organization/team they lead as a whole,” stated Professor Presley.

Training and Leadership

In professional fields such as medicine, in many countries it is mandatory that physicians and allied health professionals constantly enrich their knowledge by staying on top in their fields with latest information. Many professional fields have accredited professional training, which leads to professional qualifications such as



Yad Senapathy



Dr. Steven Presley

ACA, FCA, CPA, etc. Leaders should keep themselves constantly updated with knowledge in their profession and motivate their colleagues to engage in professional associations and be informed of new developments.

“As a matter of fact, I’d argue that leadership qualities are a learned skill than something you are born with,” emphasized Yad Senapathy. Montague agreed and stated, “None of us came out of the womb with leadership skills. We all have different personalities and skills that we learned from observing others.”

Outreach and Engagement

Training for professionals need not be just academic training that leads to degrees but be engaged with their peers in the field. Outreach and engagement with fellow peers will prove out to be useful in many ways for personal and professional development. Right from post-secondary education, as soon as one enters the college, it is good to be associated with professional,

debate and other associations that deal with shared governance such as student government associations. In this competitive world, it is not only the subject matter expertise matters, but other soft skills are also critical. Leaders need to have good decision-making abilities and more importantly good convincing and communicating skill. Again, these necessities have become evident in the ongoing pandemic crisis. While scientific data clearly backed the efficiencies of different vaccines against SARS-CoV-2, effective and convincing communications are needed to counter misinformation.

“Talk less and listen more is the key to better communication,” stated Larry Montague.

Keeping Spirit High

Leaders are like sport coaches who must train their team, keep the spirit high and push the team forward towards the unified goal. Global leaders like Mahatma Gandhiji and Martin Luther King, Jr took an important cause such as freedom, civil rights and brought the masses together towards achieving the goal. If we look at the life of these great leaders, they were motivators with extraordinary messaging skills and more importantly their care for people.

In talking about compassionate leaders, Senapathy stated, “If you do not take care of your team members’ basic needs such as physiological, social, and security needs, all the leadership skills you may have will not come to rescue.”

In emphasizing the need for compassionate leaders, Montague added “People don’t care about what you know until they know how much you care.” In addition to being a compassionate leader, Dr Presley stressed about the importance of moral courage and tenacity.

Leaders must be servant leaders who can lead us to the next level! 