

# Managing lives at work: Lessons from Bhagavad Gita

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## Abstract

This review of literature critiques the insights manifested in Bhagavad Gita to be applied in modern organizations to effectively manage people at work. A narrative review of relevant articles known to the authors on Bhagavad Gita was conducted. Among the lessons of the Bhagavad Gita, it is found that empowering employees through 'Bakthi', 'Yukthi' and 'Mukthi' lays the foundation stone of effective Human Resource Management (HRM). Further, Bhagavad Gita supports the generally held belief of no one has the right to remain in the society without performing any work. Moreover, to be beneficial for both individual employees and organizations, it is recommended in Gita to nurture a divine work culture (*daivisampat*) which involves fearlessness, self-control, tolerance of scarification and assertiveness.

**Keywords:** Human Resource Management, Empowerment, Performance Management, Work Culture

## Introduction

Bhagavad Gita means the '*divine song of the god*'. It teaches various paths to gain self-knowledge or inner peace. Indeed, it is a complete guide to practical life and provides all that is needed to raise the consciousness of man to the highest possible level. It includes the sermon given by God Sri Krishna to Prince Arjuna regarding the correct techniques of managing followers (Dharmaratnam 1987; as cited in Satpathy&Muniapan 2008). On one hand, the Bhagavad Gita is a spiritual text. On the other hand, it is a guidebook for practising managers and professionals to manage employees properly. The spiritual insights manifested in the Bhagavad Gita are universally applicable regardless of the time and the context.

Human Resource Management (HRM) is the people dimension of management. It is nothing but managing lives at work. Not like other professionals, HR Managers

have to manage lives; not files, records or systems. Hence, HR professionals have to be compassionate to employees at any cost. The numbers and figures of net profit, cash flow, assets, earning per share and etc. are the quantitative return of how employers treat employees at work. Further, it is said that, if the customer is a king; the employee is the king of the king. If the customer is a god; the employee is the god of the god. Indeed, without having satisfied employees it is impossible to create satisfied customers; without having loyal employees it is impossible to create loyal (*repeated*) customers. Thus, managing people at work properly is considered a key success factor for any business organization.

Rest of the current paper reviews and reports the insights manifested in Bhagavad Gita relating to managing people at work, performance management, empowering people at work and the establishment of a '*Daivi*' work culture in organizations.

### **HRM from Bhagavad Gita**

Human Resource Management (HRM) is the process of managing the human resources within the organization efficiently and effectively. Today's HR managers and consultants can benefit from the philosophy of Bhagavad-Gita, which can serve as a guide in HRM. A mere reflection of western HRM approaches might not be appropriate especially in the Asian context due to differences in the cultural environment. Even though many of the recent HRM approaches continue to emerge, the Bhagavad Gita has remained and will remain to be applicable and continue to contribute to HRM for many centuries to come (Nanda 2016).

Lord Krishna preached in Bhagavad Gita that success and prosperity can be attained by:

*"While we take care of the Devas (through the basic act of Yagna), Devas, in turn, take care of us. This sense of mutual dependency begets ultimate success and prosperity in the long-run".*

From the Management perspective if we look at it, if the organization serves the employees well in material and in immaterial means it will result in employees to be motivated and work effectively and further, this will enhance the retention of the employees within the organization (Mahadevan 2009). This simply does highlights the notion of '*if the customer is a king, the employee is king of the king*' which is prevalent within the modern human resource management context.

Further, it is stated in the Bhagavad Gita that:

*"He who shares the wealth generated only after serving the people, through work done as a sacrifice for them, is freed from all sins. On the contrary, those who earn wealth only for themselves, eat sins that lead to frustration and failure".*

This does states how the subordinates or the employees have to be treated by a proper leader nor the organization. This attitude leads to a stage where the worker begins to feel the presence of the supreme intelligence guiding the embodied individual intelligence. Such de-personified intelligence is best suited for those who sincerely believe in the supremacy of organizational goals as compared to narrow personal success and achievements (Bhattathiri 2007). Simply, this does emphasize that more we treat employees in the right way they will tend to focus on the achievement of the organizational goals than their personal goals and be more committed towards the work. Indeed, employees' loyalty and the commitment are the outcomes earned for the organizational conduct towards them.

Further, Bhattathiri (2007) mentioned that the Bhagavad Gita is full of cause and effect theory, making the doer responsible for their own deeds. This is a significant insight to develop employees to be responsible and accountable for the own work.

### **Performance Management and Total Quality Management**

Performance management is the continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and teams and aligning their performance with the organization's goals (Desseler 2014). This is concerning in evaluating the performance of the employees to ensure that they were able to attain the goals and objectives assigned to them.

Total Quality Management (TQM) is a set of guiding principles that represent the foundation of a continually improving organization. It's an application of quantitative techniques (a hard aspect of TQM) and HR (a Soft aspect of TQM) to improve all the processes within an organization and exceed customer needs now and future.

A famous shloka in Bhagavad Gita illustrates:

*“You have the right to work but never to the fruits of the action. Further, you do not have the right to the root cause of the fruits of action. You also do not have the right to remain in the society without performing any work”*

This shloka does address the areas on how the work has to be performed. Mahadevan (2009) discussed the meaning of this shloka as follows. The last verse of the shloka of which indicates that not having the right of living the society without doing any work has been discussed earlier through the concept of 'karma'. The other verses do contain a deep meaning of which it does address the modern context of managerial activities.

These verses of shloka do address of working without considering the results of the action and the root cause of action. This can be mainly addressed by addressing the side consequences of the result oriented culture. For an example being result

oriented will make people tend to avoid risks and be risk-averse. Simply, this addresses the fact of taking off the preoccupation with the results and have a proper process orientation by setting up a proper basis of performance management. This is the basis of modern performance management and Total Quality Management theory. Further, people being more result oriented will make them get lost in work resulting in the motivation to be low and the innovation of the business to be low. These studies do broaden the perception of the people and made them think out of the box (Mahadevan 2009).

### **Empowering People at Work**

Empowerment is the process of delegating authority and resources to do an activity, but not to perform them freely. This motivates the employees within the organization and enhances innovative ideas. This is practised widely within the organization since it does generate many innovative ideas and is a prominent practice in learning organizations. Also, empowerment is a training technique as well as it is a coaching technique in the modern commitment-based management.

Someswaranada (2005) mentioned in his book '*Business Management the Gita Way*', that the Indian wisdom offers theory P (P for Parent) where manager goes through the three steps of empowering the subordinates (as cited in Reddy 2009). The first step would be '**Bhakti**'; where the manager should establish effective relationships with employees. Effective relationships are not given-up at any cost. Secondly, it will be '**Yukti**'; where the manager should focus on the development of the intellect of the subordinates, and finally the '**Mukti**'; where the manager should give the freedom to employees at work. Also, this type of culture will be a work-family support culture in which employees are motivated to work and balance the rest of their lives as well. Hence, it does mirrors out again that the modern management practices which were practised nowadays within the industry have been elaborated in Bhagavad Gita long way back.

### **Nurturing a Divine Work Culture for People**

Work culture is an important factor which will help to retain the current employees and to attract the potentials. A *compassionate work culture* will help the organization to the attainment of the goals of the organization successfully and in long run, it will help to develop a powerful *employer brand* within the job market.

According to the studies of Bhattathiri (1999), Sri Krishna has elaborated two types of work cultures. One is '**daivisampata**' which means a divine work culture. It advocates in '*daivisampatas*' that the right and true way of managing a business and its stakeholders. '**Daivi**' work culture involves fearlessness, self-control, sacrifice, straightforwardness. Another one is the '**Asuri**' work culture which

involves egoism, personal desires, and improper performance. Creating a 'daivisampat' work culture to become a global business to tap the potential avenues is strongly highlighted in the insights of the Bhagavad Gita. Hence, according to the Gita way, an effective work culture is about active and rigorous efforts in pursuit of given or chosen tasks. Further, it has been found that 'Daivi' work culture would be more required for the effective functioning of the organization and to attain the goals and objectives.

## **Conclusion**

Human Resource is considered as the most important resource in any context. In the business context that is people at work. Ultimately, managing a business organization is nothing but managing its people. Having understood the significance of managing people at work in a compassionate manner, the current content analysis of extant literature pertaining to the teachings in Bhagavad Gita was conducted. As per the Gita way, treating employees as lives not as employees, empowering them through 'Bakthi', 'Yukthi' and 'Mukthi' and nurturing a divine work culture were found as basics for managing lives at work. Hence, this review concludes by recommending the Gita way to be followed in managing lives at work for modern practising managers and professionals in the field of HRM.

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