

A portrait of Swami Vivekananda, a prominent Hindu monk and philosopher. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a traditional orange turban and a maroon shawl over a light blue shirt. He has a serious expression and his arms are crossed. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# Leadership Lessons from Swami Vivekananda

By Dipti Sanzgiri

A good leader is one who has a clear vision of a better future - a future with which their own inner aspirations and values are aligned - and who is able to inspire and lead others towards making this vision a reality. A future for which people work not for their personal benefit, monetary or otherwise, but because they believe in the cause. Through the vision of the leader, people are able to see beyond their own gain and limitations and thereby find an opportunity to reconstruct their own self as they contribute. How wonderful this journey would be - for both the leader and those who follow him!

Unfortunately, these days we are unable to find many examples of such leaders, even though thousands of books have been written and countless training and coaching sessions have been undertaken on the subject of leadership. Perhaps in the single-minded pursuit of commercial and materialistic results, leaders today may be distanced from the fundamental

principles of life that are always present and relevant, and if ignored leads to, what might look like a movement forward but might actually be, a movement backward.

In this context, if there is one visionary that stands tall, that leaders today can learn from, it is Swami Vivekananda, one of the most celebrated spiritual leaders of India. It is testimony to his leadership that after 120 years of his passing away, the twin institutions that he founded, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inspired by the ideals of renunciation and service, continue to serve millions of men, women, and children, without any distinction of caste, religion, or race, through their hospitals, schools, colleges, rural development centres and many other social service institutions. (1) In a life-lived for only 39 years, only 10 of which were in public life, and within that too, a few years were spent abroad, he made an indelible mark on the spiritual consciousness of India.



Vivekananda, though an ascetic, engaged with life with an unmatched vibrancy; creating, organising, educating and building the national consciousness rooted in the rich spiritual legacy of his country. At the same time, he also embraced scientific thought and material progress that was much required for the country.

Vivekananda's impact as a leader was astonishingly and remarkably demonstrated at the World Religions Conference in 1893 at Chicago, USA. When he began his speech in his resounding voice with, 'Sisters and Brothers of America,' there was an outburst of continuous applause for an entire 2 minutes! In my humble understanding, I believe that with those few words, he unified everyone in the audience! The theme of universal brotherhood of the conference, suddenly became palpably alive in him! And perhaps, all those present could see in that instant an aspiration becoming an unambiguous reality, which deeply touched their hearts and souls.



***A true leader is willing to devote his life for a cause even though its results may not materialize during his life.***

In a short period of 10 years, Vivekananda created a treasure trove of spiritual knowledge, but more importantly, his life itself became an inspiration for us. He had clearly recognized the magnitude of human potential and therefore, he was pained to see it lying dormant amongst his countrymen, who were content being ruled by others. Consequently, he devoted his life to awakening and reminding his brothers and sisters of their true identity and their intrinsic nature, travelling widely all over America, England and Europe disseminating the core tenets of the philosophy of the Vedas. His speeches and prolific writings continue to inspire successive generations in India. They contain passionate and lucid explanations of the principles of life, and one can devote a whole lifetime in trying to grasp them fully. This is a small and humble attempt to take few lessons from his life and his teachings which could be very valuable for the leaders of today.

### A leader unifies:

Our world today is getting divided more and more into different categories, whether it is religion, geography, culture, race, gender, wealth, political alliance, caste, etc and under each one of these are further subdivisions that are increasing alarmingly! When we are divided, we see those who are not in the same box that we are in as adversaries and those who are, as our allies, who alone need and deserve our support.

This thinking limits our ability to see the whole: we are stuck in our isolated, individual silos not realizing that we are actually an interconnected whole, and any one of the pieces decaying, will decay the whole. In a commercial organization these divisions are reflected as Sales, Production, Finance, Human Resource etc., – each stuck with their fragmentary vision and very few having the desire or ability to see the whole.



Today, even with the increasing recognition of our interconnectedness thanks to technology, and the ability of our actions to impact each other from our small boxes, (demonstrated most recently by the pandemic), there are still unfortunately, no strong unifying voices to be heard.

Who can truly be a force of unification? Only those who are unified themselves, meaning those in whom there is an alignment between their thought and action: what they believe to be right, is what is reflected in their action. No mean feat!

Among Vivekananda's goals, was to awaken his fellow brothers and sisters to rise above the differences of religion, caste, and social & economic status. He said **"The great lesson is, that unity is behind all. Call it God, Love, Spirit, Allah, Jehovah - it is the same unity that animates all life from the lowest animal to the noblest man."**(2) Search for Unity is also the essence of Vedanta, the ancient Indian philosophy that he revived. Journeying across India, from north to south and east to west, meeting the masses, the kings, the traders, the poor, he gave the same message to all – **"Arise and Awake, stop not till the goal is reached"**.(3) Contextualising the teaching of Upanishads to the state of humanity at that time, he exhorted people to recognise that their vision is similar to that of a frog in a well,(2) that they must come out, embrace the vast ocean, open their eyes to the largeness of existence, and realize that we all are a part of the same ocean of life.



### **A leader awakens your inner strength, Will:**

Most of us are fearful of uncertainties and the unknown. We fear to tread on difficult, uncertain terrain and often give up before even trying. When we do attempt something tough, we look for quick results and if we don't see that coming, we again give up or switch to something else. This is when a leader needs to help people see their potential and possibilities, and the need for perseverance to actualize them. A river meets all hurdles and challenges with perseverance to fulfil its destiny of merging with the ocean. Vivekananda exhorted, **"To succeed, you must have tremendous perseverance, tremendous will. 'I will drink the ocean,' says the persevering soul, 'at my will mountains will crumble up.' Have that sort of energy, that sort of will, work hard, and you will reach the goal."** (4)

What an inspiring and vivid description of strength and possibilities! Can we awaken such Will for our goals? Do we have such belief in ourselves, conviction for our goal and the perseverance to achieve it? In fact, too often we give into our inner roadblocks such as inertia, fear, lack of clarity and conviction, or desire to be accepted and liked. Rarely do we experience the inner fire that Vivekananda is trying to arouse. But he reminds us that we indeed have such strength because that is the nature of the soul, our true identity, which we need to awaken.

### **A leader builds for long term:**

A true leader never has a short term agenda. He works towards building a future that is harmonious with life and helps society move forward. He inspires people to join him in this vision and bring out their best in pursuit of this future.



But this takes time. A banyan tree doesn't grow overnight. Its seed has the full potential – not only of the tree but of the entire forest, (if we are able to imagine that) - but it requires nourishment of the earth, air, sun, water and time. **“The majority of us cannot see beyond a few years, just as some animals cannot see beyond a few steps. Just a little narrow circle - that is our world. We have not the patience to look beyond, and thus become immoral and wicked. This is our weakness, our powerlessness.”** (5) How true is this in our times! Today, everyone looks for quick gains: Corporates are known for strategizing for short-term rewards delivered by the stock market, and this attitude has cost us severely, across almost all parameters, be it climate, economy or education. But a true leader is willing to devote his life for a cause even though its results may not materialize during his life.

***A leader is one who  
is able to lead  
himself, before he  
leads others.***

**A leader awakens the investigative spirit, he is a seeker of Truth:**

In his youth, Vivekananda was hugely impacted by western scientific thinking and he had an obsessive need to investigate every idea before accepting it as truth. In the beginning of his spiritual journey, in his search into the mysteries of life, he needed to experience every idea himself before accepting them, even from his own guru, Ramakrishna. He resisted many ways of Ramakrishna for long time, till he himself underwent experiences that helped him grasp the meaning of what Ramakrishna was transmitting. And Ramakrishna waited patiently, for his disciple to find all the answers himself.

Today, we accept so many things at face value, without even knowing who has said it! We assume many things, sometimes to avoid focusing on details that may reveal things that we don't want to see, or don't agree with, or have fear of dealing with. We also use language which conveys what we say as facts when most of the time they are not. They are either opinions, assumptions, judgements or inferences. But we don't communicate them as such, and so the words spread as truth! Through this process, we build 'alternate realities' and are lost in its maze: the comprehension of truth then becomes almost impossible. Today we need leadership that will guard the truth more than ever, and will inculcate and protect the culture of an investigative mindset.





And what about our own internal truth? Are we able to see our deepest motives for our actions clearly? Do we ever investigate our thinking by asking ourselves what is the source of the thought that I have now? How is it impacting me? How is it impacting what I create in my life and those that I connect with? The higher the role of leadership that I occupy, the more should be this investigative reflection, to ensure that my thoughts are leading me in the right direction. Unless we have the courage to see clearly our reflection in the mirror of truth, whether we see selfishness, ego, false pride or a very narrow mindset, we cannot grow as a leader.

Vivekananda showed by his own example, not to assume, or go by hearsay, but to rigorously self-investigate, to separate Truth from Illusion, both internally and externally.

**A leader uses service as a tool to discover oneself, as a practice of ethics:**

The concept of Servant Leadership is the idea that a leader's focus is to serve and empower others. And this way of leading is rightly acknowledged as a very desirable style since supporting others is seen as the high moral ground. While helping others in need is indeed important to do, Vivekananda reminds us that in fact the purpose of serving is not really about helping others. He said, **"We should always try to help the world, that should be the highest motive in us; but if we consider well, we find that the world does not require our help at all. This world was not made that you or I should come and help it.....in the long run, we shall find that helping others is only helping ourselves....."** (7) How does this work? Well, we begin to see the need in others only when we are

not self-obsessed. Empathy, generosity and compassion require a high level of consciousness which is able to see others' needs, and their current state clearly. This means that by practicing serving, I am actually working on elevating my own consciousness, which is slowly able to expand beyond myself to include others – maybe to begin with my family and friends, then the community, and finally, even further to include all of humanity! And in this process who am I helping? Myself!

The opportunity to empower others, whose ideas are different from mine is an opportunity to investigate my own thinking, to deal with my ego, to learn humility, openness, generosity and so much more. Therefore I need to be thankful to life for giving me this opportunity! I am not doing anyone a favour, on the contrary, I am being favoured by life! My subjective worldview, which used to see life through the filters of my need, opinions, likes and dislikes is now able to see beyond! And isn't this exactly the endeavour of a leader – to challenge and expand his worldview To be able to be more than just caught up in himself? This was the clear message of Vivekananda. He didn't say to serve those who need your help, he said help yourself by helping others.

All of the above is not at all an exhaustive list of the leadership lessons we can take from the life and teaching of Vivekananda. But if we were to take just one predominant idea, the underlying thread



that runs through and binds together all the concepts I have detailed, would be that a leader is one who is able to lead himself, before he leads others. He teaches and shows the way, by being an example. Whether it is courage, collaboration, vision, commitment, devotion, clarity, or ethics – he needs to BE the practical example of how it is done. There is no gap between what the leader asks of himself and what he asks of others. In fact, he asks far more from himself than others and thereby brings authenticity to his leadership.



Vivekananda's life was an example of: devotion to an ideal, with focus on action in the direction of the ideal without attachment to any reward; fearlessness in search for truth; and service to humanity as a way of life. With so many challenges confronting our world today, he is an exemplar of what we need: enlightened leaders who can once again awaken our inner strength to face the uncertainties of life with courage, to live and act harmoniously with others, and to persevere in building a society which is just and fair for all. △△△



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