

A BHAGAVAD GITA-INSPIRED LINKED LEADERSHIP MODEL

ACE V. SIMPSON^{1,*} , MIGUEL PINA E CUNHA² 

¹Brunel Business School, Brunel University London, London, UK

²Nova School of Business and Economics, Universidade Nova de Lisboa,
Lisbon, Portugal

India's *Bhagavad Gita* is a Sanskrit text that is increasingly being explored for leadership and management wisdom. We take a literal approach to engaging with the entirety of the *Gita's* 700 verses across its 18 chapters as a coherent whole and integrating the lessons into a linked leadership model. The model provides a flexible framework highlighting topics recognized as relevant to leadership, including self-leadership, integrity, virtue, servant leadership, motivation, team dynamics, culture, ecology, meaning, and purpose.

Introduction

In the face of wicked problems of irretrievable environmental destruction and endemic inequality that is underpinned in part by systemic racism, problems that by definition have no simple answers, calls have been made for reframing the narrative and objectives of business management and leadership—away from a narrow focus on maximizing profits for shareholders toward creating shared value for all stakeholders (Mayer, 2020). Essential to this reframing, is leadership that inspires a higher sense of purpose and meaning by living authentically and aligning with principles that transcend time and context, in terms of recognizing the infinite game (Sinek, 2019). Part of the problem has been a management education informed by attitudes

of short-termism in the achievement of superficial finite “wins” that are incongruous with sustainable or infinite individual, collective and planetary well-being. At this juncture, it might be helpful to humbly revisit the wisdom traditions that guided civilizations in living in harmony with nature over thousands of years. The wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*, presents such an alternative to leadership (Simpson, 2019).

Set on the battlefield of Kuruksetra thousands of years ago, just as the battle was to begin the protagonist, warrior prince Arjuna, experienced an existential crisis. The battlefield is an environment that can bring out not only the worst of human greed, hatred, violence, and fear but also the best of human kindness, compassion, and even philosophical reflection and deep spirituality.

Correspondence: Ace V. Simpson, Brunel Business School, Brunel University London, London, UK. E-mail: ace.simpson@brunel.ac.uk

JOURNAL OF LEADERSHIP STUDIES, Volume 15, Number 3, 2021

© 2021 The Authors. Journal of Leadership Studies published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of University of Phoenix.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

View this article online at wileyonlinelibrary.com • DOI:10.1002/jls.21786

Arjuna is concerned if his role as a leading warrior on a battlefield is aligned with the best of human values and not the worst. In his confusion and despair, he takes guidance from his friend and mentor, Krishna, lovingly playing the role of Arjuna's charioteer. Crisis can also give rise to renewal and the dialogue that unfolds provides the context for revealing wisdom that the *Bhagavad Gita* itself claims is timeless, having been passed down through a chain of *raja-rishi* (saintly kings) custodians, since the dawn of time.

Unlike Chanakya's *Artha Sastra* or the Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, the *Bhagavad Gita* was not written as a tactical or strategic manual to guide a king's governance. Rather, it is written as a text to guide virtuous and spiritual conduct, as spoken to a great leader Arjuna, by his guide, friend, and God, Krishna. While the *Bhagavad Gita* is not directly about governance, it is entirely relevant to leadership.

Approach

A limitation of most works exploring leadership lessons from the *Bhagavad Gita* is that they engage only with small passages, failing to provide a contextual understanding of the work as a whole (e.g., Chatterjee, 2012). Another approach to dealing with the theological implications of the *Bhagavad Gita* is to explain the verses metaphorically (Dhiman, 2018). In contrast we adopted an approach of studying the *Gita* as a whole (all 700 verses in 18 chapters) employing a literal hermeneutic approach while asking: *What are the leadership implications of this verse, section, and chapter?* To clarify linguistic and philosophical ambiguities, during the reading-translation process the first author turned to the older commentaries to see how tradition discusses the usage of a given word within a specific verse. In some instances (see below), the Sanskrit word has been left in brackets; giving the reader a sense of the broader philosophical concept being referenced. Through this adopted methodological approach (literal reading-complete text), a model emerged, the *Linked-Leadership Model* (linked derived from the Sanskrit word *yoga*, which translates as connection). The four main areas of the model run along two axes (Figure 1): (a) *self-leadership* drawing from the insight that the win is in the integrity of the *process* of attaining

goals, rather than the goal itself; (b) *servant-leadership* toward others recognizing that all beings are spiritually equal though playing different roles and that true followership is inspired and voluntary; (c) *holistic systems* that hold all resources as gifts with their own qualities that can be harmonized or disturbed; and (d) *higher purpose* emphasizing heartfulness as that which gives higher meaning and purpose to all actions. These four higher-order categories can also be thought of as the four wheels of Arjuna's chariot; operating together as a system that facilitates the leader's journey with followers in transcending boundedness even while operating in a mundane environment (like a battlefield). Each wheel has subcategory pathways or spokes, which will be expanded below. Engagement with this model provides an understanding of the main inferred leadership lessons from the *Bhagavad Gita*, contributing unique perspectives on topics ranging from integrity, to virtue, motivation, team dynamics, culture, ecology, strategy, and purpose. We expand on each of these four "wheels" below.

SELF-LEADERSHIP

Self-leadership has five sub-processes or pathways: spiritual awareness, service orientation, virtuousness, authenticity, and mental discipline. The *spiritually aware* subcategory represents the linked-leader's awareness of his or her nature as an eternal spiritual being encased in a material body (2.12).¹ Even though the body dies, the soul exists eternally (2.16–21). Linked leaders cultivate a *service orientation* by gradually detaching from action's fruits (4.14, 20; 5.12, 14; 18.1–12), acting as a custodian with the recognition that everything and every being comes from and therefore belongs to the supreme (7.4–7, 10.8), the original Godhead (11.38) and source of knowledge and remembrance (15.15). Linked-leaders heartfully engage in *devotional service* or *bhakti-yoga*: thinking of Krishna (6.47, 9.34, 18.65) and linking-offering their every deed as an act of devotion (5.10, 9.27, 10.10, 12.8), offering their food (3.13, 9.26), regularly chanting Krishna's names in congregation (*kirtan*) (9.22, 10.8) or privately as meditation (*japa*) (10.25), hearing discourses on his teachings (9.22, 10.8), and cultivating loving relationships with his devotees (9.14), all of which will purify

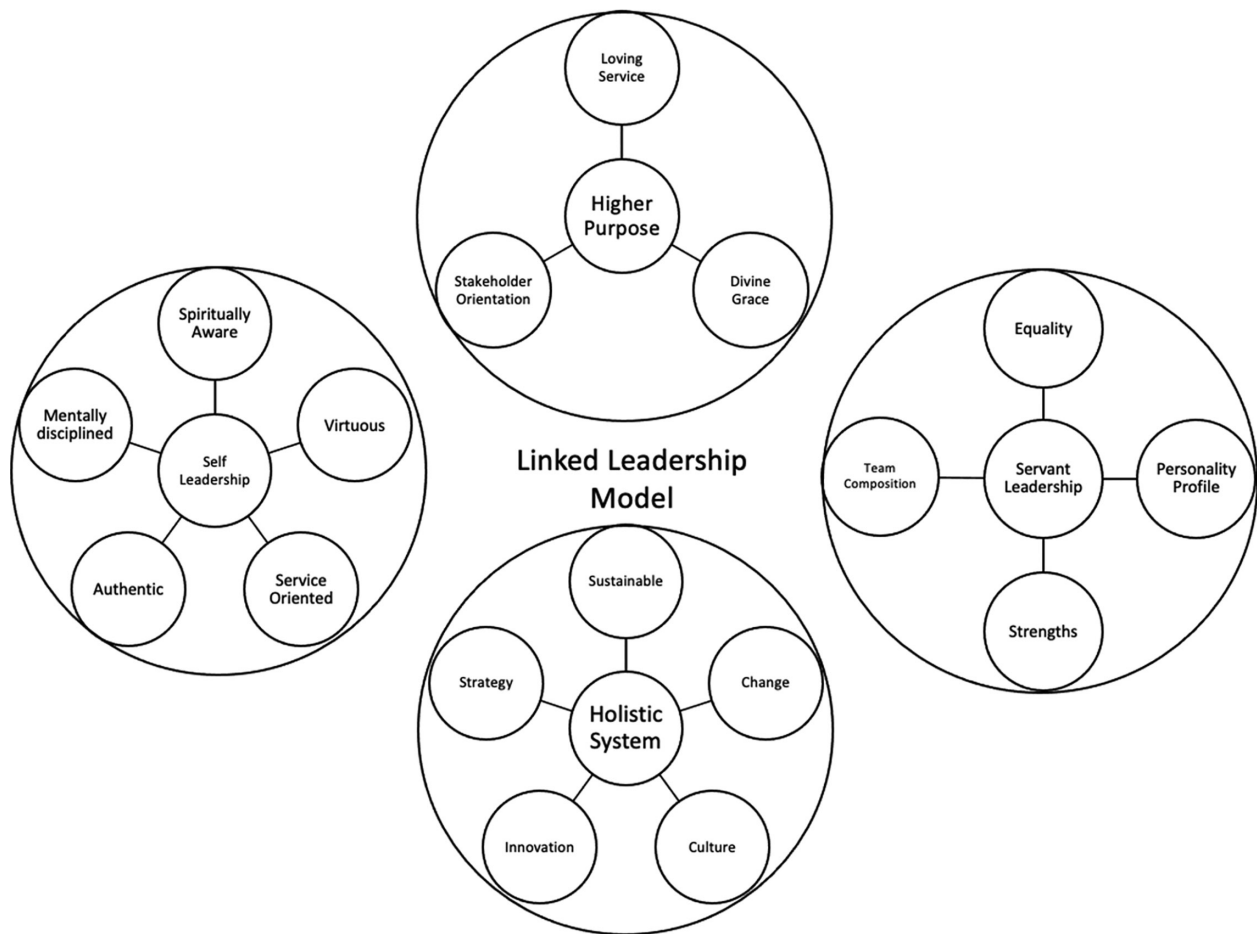


Figure 1 The Linked-Leadership Model Based on the Teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita

the heart (10.11, 12.9). Self-leadership also entails *virtuousness*. Linked-leaders cultivate virtue by defending *dharma* or the eternal natural law (1.1, 39; 4.7–8), and by making lifestyle choices that promote nature's quality of goodness (as opposed to ignorance or passion) (3.5, 27–29) in their diet (17.8), sacrifices (17.11), thoughts, words, and deeds (17.14–17), compassion (17.20), work (18.23, 26), resolve (18.33), and happiness (18.37). They practice *authenticity* by recognizing and leveraging their own strengths in virtue (13.8–12) and *dharma* role orientations (3.33–35; 18.41–48). Finally, self-aware leaders recognize the importance of making the mind their best friend, and not their worst enemy (6.6), and therefore practice *mental discipline* through cultivating equanimity, maintaining a work-life balance, managing time and developing paradoxical thinking. Competence in paradoxical thinking facilitates generating novel solutions by leveraging contradic-

tory but interdependent tensions such as those between stability and change, structure and flexibility, activity and spirituality (4.18), or most significantly the simultaneous oneness and difference between nature, the living beings and the supreme Godhead (4.24; 9.4–5, 15).

Self-leadership provides a foundation that qualifies the linked-leader for leading others. Self-leadership competencies develop personal character, and healthy self-trust and self-respect that make the leader trustworthy and respectable in the eyes of others, providing leadership by example (3.20–25), that helps to develop leadership in others as a servant-leader.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Servant-leadership characterizes the linked-leaders' relational dealings, particularly those directly under their charge, but more broadly with all stakeholders through

collaborative leadership. The approach of servant-leadership inverts the traditional organizational hierarchical pyramid, placing the community at the top, served by customer facing staff, supervisors, department heads, divisional managers, and finally the chief executive, in that order. The chief executive, thus, is at the bottom of the inverted pyramid. The four subcategories of servant-leadership in the Linked-Leadership Model are equality, personality profiling, recognizing strengths and team composition. Each of these sub-components is both distinct as well as interconnected. *Equality* relates to the linked-leader's recognition that all beings, including animals, are spirit souls and are therefore spiritually equal (5.18–19). Physical differences in size, strength, intelligence, and capabilities all relate to the material body, not the self. Equality is demonstrated through humility in dealings with others, which includes asking for advice and listening to others (1.1; 2.7; 10.14), giving the effect of supporting balanced processing of all available information (facilitating better decision-making) and building trust (9.1). Equal vision is further expressed through impartial dealings, such as by not expressing bias, particularly hatred, toward any being (5.3, 14.22, 18.10). *Personality profiling* tools offered in the *Bhagavad-Gita* include the four *dharma* strength orientations: doer-executor, entrepreneur-resource provider, warrior-coordinator, and educator-researcher (3.33–35, 18.41–48); the three qualities of nature: goodness, passion, and ignorance (3.27, 7.12, 17.1–22, 18.9–10, 18–40); the 20 virtuous qualities of knowledge including introspection, forgiveness, humility, equanimity and nonviolence, and so on (13.8–12); and descriptions of the divine (16.1–3) and demonic (16.4, 16.7–23) dispositions. Linked-leaders can use these tools to evaluate their members' tendencies, attitudes, and values. These tools are further used to recognize *strengths*. Rather than overemphasizing the fixing of weaknesses or shortcomings in identifying their member's specific occupational *dharma* strengths (3.33–35, 18.41–48), or strengths from the 20 qualities of knowledge (13.8–12), linked-leaders help them to build their character and identify pathways for resolving personal challenges and cultivating and contributing to excellence in whatever they do. Finally, linked-leaders also use knowledge of the four occupational *dharma* types (3.33–35, 18.41–48) in *team composition* to facili-

tate effective group-community collaboration as a holistic system that benefits the whole.

HOLISTIC SYSTEMS

Linked-leaders hold a holistic systems perspective of their organization, community, planet, and the universe. Subcategories of this area relate to practical organizational functioning: sustainability, culture, change, innovation, and strategy. *Sustainability* is supported by seeing everything and everyone as part of the supreme (7.7–11, 9.4–10, 10.20–42), for all beings have the same divine origin in Krishna (10.2–6, 10.8). Linked-leaders, therefore, do not claim proprietorship of nature (4.14, 20; 5.12, 14; 18.1–12), but rather offer respect in their dealings with all things and beings, recognizing all as part of the absolute whole. The vision of the divine as the universal form (*Virat Rupa*) (11.5–7, 11.10–25) changes the leader's interactions with the resources under their supervision—nothing is taken for granted, exploited, or put in harm's way. Everything and everyone are recognized as having a role to play, as part of the great integrated whole. Linked-leaders also support sustainability by cultivating an organizational *culture* that promotes nature's quality of goodness, virtuousness and work-life balance through recruitment, recognition, reward, and promotion policies. Policies for cultivating a culture of goodness (3.5, 3.27–29) include promoting healthy food options (17.8) and encouraging positive attitudes, positive communication, and positive behaviors (17.14–17). Positive behaviors of respecting wisdom, cleanliness, and nonviolence ensure a safe work environment. These organizations are also characterized by a quality of compassion, cultivated not as a means of gaining personal fame or recognition but as a way of reaching out to support people in genuine need (17.20). Virtuousness can be further integrated into the organizational culture by promoting values that go above and beyond the letter of the law, to support *dharma* as eternal natural law (1.1, 39; 4.7–8). Relevant here are the 20 qualities of knowledge (13.8–12) which include nonviolence, forgiveness, cleanliness, and service, all of which should be recognized, and rewarded. Relatedly, virtuous cultures can also cultivate the 23 divine dispositions (16.1–3) and discourage the demonic dispositions (16.4, 7–23). Recruitment policies can also consider the four types of people who respect authority: the distressed, those in need, the curious, and those

with a genuine love for knowledge and learning (7.16); and the four who disrespect authority: those who are grossly ignorant, those who disregard virtue despite having received training, those who are arrogant and commit hubris, and those with demonic tendencies (7.15). *Change* is recognized by the linked-leader as a constant (2.14). Rather than assuming stability as the norm, change is recognized as the status quo. The linked-leader, therefore, structures the organization to flow with change rather than against its currents. Strategies to facilitate ongoing learning, adaptability, and change include promoting cross-organizational knowledge sharing, uploading information in real time, and making it accessible to all members rather than keeping all information private and accessible only to top managers. *Innovation* is supported in organizations led by linked-leaders via the metaphysical process of connecting with the Supreme Soul, the interface linking every living being and all of matter (15.12–20). Appearing like a flash of lightning in the consciousness, inspiration has a central place in much of human achievement, be it artistic creativity, scientific development, or business innovation. *Strategy* is facilitated within organizations led by linked-leaders through a process of recognizing and accounting for the five factors of action (18.13–14) comprising: the place-field (organizational space or industry), the agent (individual, team, or organization, or community corporate entity), the means (tools, equipment, and resources), the effort (including processes, skills, and strategies), and Providence (divine sanction or grace, serendipity, destiny, acts of nature).

HIGHER PURPOSE

Linked-leaders are philosophical in nature and undertake organizational activities with the objective of supporting higher purposes such as heartfulness or loving service, invoking divine grace, and a stakeholder orientation. The higher objective of the linked-leader is to offer everything they do, including all of their organizational activities, in *loving service (bhakti-yoga)* to the supreme (broadly understood to include the universe as part of the personal Godhead). This includes emphasizing process by detaching from the fruits of action and instead offering the fruits in *bhakti* (4.14, 20; 5.12, 14; 18.1–12), recognizing that everything comes from and therefore belongs to the supreme (7.4–7, 10.8). It also

involves seeing worldly activities as supporting engagement in more direct *bhakti* practices (such as chanting, remembering, hearing, and so on; see under *Self-Leadership*). Devotional practices invoke *divine grace* upon the individual linked-leader as well as upon the followers they lead. Divine grace disrupts the conditioning influence of material nature in the bounded game of action and reaction or *karma*, facilitating transcendence to the infinite spiritual platform (12.6–7, 18.56–62). In this process Krishna preserves the strengths of those who are devoted and makes up for any limitations or weaknesses (9.22). The linked-leader has a *stakeholder orientation*, seeking to provide benefit, not only for the shareholders of the organizations they lead but also for employees, customers, suppliers, the community, and the environment. This stakeholder orientation is on account of recognizing that everything and everyone comes from and therefore is part of the supreme (7.7–11, 9.4–10, 10.20–42). Acting as a custodian of resources or a servant-leader facilitates more detached and objective decision-making conducted in the best interests of stakeholders as opposed to personal gains. The notion of the universe as the form of the divine, as depicted in the *Virat Rupa* (11.5–7, 11.10–25), has at least three powerful implications for the linked-leader: (a) everything and everyone must be treated with service and respect and never with hatred (5.3, 14.22, 18.10); (b) nothing can be controlled or possessed as one's own; the leader's role is, therefore, that of a custodian or steward (4.14, 20; 5.12, 14; 18.1–12); (c) the leader is never far from the divine—all that separates the leader from the divine is the leader's consciousness and having the divine eyes to see (11.8) the presence of the divine everywhere (7.7–11, 9.4–10, 10.20–42, 11.8). The linked-leader, therefore, sees it as their higher purpose and sacred spiritual duty to act for the benefit of all stakeholders as an interconnected whole.

Final Reflections

In a world increasingly grappling with what have been recognized for some time as paradoxical “wicked problems” (Churchman, 1967; Schad & Bansal, 2018) stemming from complex global interconnectedness and shared resources, looking back to the timeless wisdom of the Linked-Leadership Model derived from a literal reading of the *Bhagavad Gita* provides surprisingly

“fresh” holistic perspectives on leadership. The linked leader integrates the self, others, nature, virtue, as part of a divine purpose as *yoga*. It is not required to be a believer of the *Bhagavad-Gita* to benefit from its important lessons of this flexible playbook that has crossed the ages without losing its vitality and appeal, and that is as useful today as it has been in the past to address the paradoxes of life and leadership (Berti et al., 2018; Donaldson & Harter, 2019). Whatever the motivation in engaging with this wisdom, whether approaching it out of curiosity, as a spiritual seeker, or as a faithful devotee, the *Bhagavad Gita* itself respectfully and nondogmatically offers a choice with Krishna’s concluding words: “I have thus explained to you this most confidential knowledge. Reflecting on this fully, do as you wish” (18.63).

Acknowledgments

Miguel Pina e Cunha is grateful to the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/2019, UIDB/00124/2020 and Social Sciences DataLab, PIN-FRA/22209/2016) and POR Lisboa and POR Norte (Social Sciences DataLab, PINFRA/22209/2016).

Note

¹Here we cross-reference verses in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The verses are generally cited within brackets in the order of chapter and verse. Accordingly, (2.12) references Chapter 2, Verse 12.

References

- Berti, M., Simpson, A. V., Cunha, M. P., & Clegg, S. R. (2018). *Elgar introduction to organizational paradox theory*. Edward Elgar.
- Chatterjee, D. (2012). *Timeless leadership: 18 leadership sutras from the Bhagavad Gita*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Churchman, C. W. (1967). Wicked problems. *Management Science*, 14(4), 141–142.
- Dhiman, S. (2018). *Bhagavad Gitā and leadership: A catalyst for organizational transformation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Donaldson, W., & Harter, N. (2019). Leadership in a constant liminal loop: How can I be authentic when I don’t know who I am? *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 13(3), 6–14.
- Mayer, C. (2020). The future of the corporation and the economics of purpose. *Journal of Management Studies*, 58(3), 887–901.
- Schad, J., & Bansal, P. (2018). Seeing the forest and the trees: How a systems perspective informs paradox research. *Journal of Management Studies*, 55(8), 1490–1506.
- Simpson, A. V. (2019). *Leadership lessons from the Bhagavad Gita*. Sage.
- Sinek, S. (2019). *The infinite game*. Penguin.
- Ace V. Simpson is Reader in Human Resource Management and Organizational Behaviour at Brunel Business School, Brunel University London. Ace studies organizational compassion, paradox, positive organizational behavior and positive leadership. His research output includes publications in Academy of Management Review, Journal of Management and Management Learning. Ace is also the author of Leadership Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita (Sage, 2020), co-author of Positive Organizational Behavior (Routledge, 2020) and co-authored Elgar Introduction to Organizational Paradox Theory (Edward Elgar, 2021). Communications can be directed to ace.simpson@brunel.ac.uk.*
- Miguel Pina e Cunha is the Fundação Amélia de Mello Professor of Organizational Studies at Nova School of Business and Economics, Universidade Nova de Lisboa. He studies organization as process and paradox. His research has been published in journals such as the Academy of Management Review, Applied Psychology: An International Review, Human Relations, Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, Journal of Management Studies, Organization, and Organization Studies, among others. His recent co-authored book publications include Elgar Introduction to Organizational Paradox Theory (Edward Elgar, 2021) and Paradoxes of Power and Leadership (Routledge, 2021). Email miguel.cunha@novasbe.pt.*