Leadership Lessons from Movies

“The challenge of leadership is to be strong but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not a bully; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humour, but without folly.”

• Jim Rohn

Leadership has been the focus of training for long, not just in the field of management but also in numerous other fields such as sports, entrepreneurship, the police, the military, etc. However, it is not an easy quality to inculcate. Keeping aside the cases of people with in-born leadership qualities, the quality of leadership seems to be learnt best in the school of experience. However, today with the explosion in entrepreneurship and fast-paced economic growth, the need to equip people with the skills of leadership is at an unprecedented scale. It is, therefore, imperative to impart leadership quality in larger numbers of people by taking recourse to innovative means and novel approaches. In this context, the use of movies in conveying lessons on leadership has a prominent place. This hand-out discusses various aspects of the use of movies in leadership training.

The Discourse on Leadership

The discourse on leadership has evolved over time. Mahatma Gandhi’s words sum up this evolution – “I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles, but today it means getting along with people.” In the field of management, Peter F. Drucker was probably the first management theorist to define leadership. According to him, only someone with followers could be defined as a leader. Warren Bennis posited that leadership refers to the capacity to translate vision into reality. Bill Gates held that those who empower others can be called leaders. John Maxwell stated simply that leadership is influence, nothing more and nothing less. More recent thinkers such as Travis Bradberry and Kevin Kruse have defined leadership as “a process of social influence which maximizes the efforts of others toward the achievement of a greater good”.

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Similarly, Justin Bariso has defined leadership as “a process of social influence which works to increase the efforts of others in pursuit of a common goal”.

In the field of military science, probably one needs to look no further for definitions of leadership than the US army which defines leadership as “influencing people – by providing purpose, direction, and motivation – while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization”. In the field of competitive sports, one of the most notable definitions of leadership has come from Vince Lombardy, the famous football coach. According to him “Leadership rests not only upon ability, not only upon capacity – having the capacity to lead is not enough. The leader must be willing to use it. His leadership is then based on truth and character. There must be truth in the purpose and will power in the character”.

Kouzes and Posner (2002) have taken into consideration leadership in numerous walks of life and summarised the essential practices for effective leadership as follows:

- **Model the way**
  - Find your voice by clarifying your personal values.
  - Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.

- **Inspire a shared vision**
  - Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities
  - Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

- **Challenge the process**
  - Search for opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change, grow and improve.
  - Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes.

- **Enable others to act**
  - Foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust.
  - Strengthen others by sharing power and discretion.

- **Encourage the heart**
  - Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
  - Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

**The Magic of Storytelling and Films**

Storytelling has been an important method of imparting knowledge through the ages. Since times immemorial, folklore and fable have been used by people as the means of informing the next generation about their history, their values, their tribulations and their joys. Many great sages of yore, such as Jesus of Nazareth, used stories to drive
home their teachings. In India, *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* were collections of stories which had been used by ancient teachers to impart both moral values and principals of government to young minds. Similar practices exist in other ancient cultures, such as Greece. Stories can create a whole context, different from the lineal form of most lectures and textbooks, and this can make them relatable to learners. Stories are an excellent solution to the problem that most people, especially young people, can only be exposed to a limited range of life experiences, which is so very important in learning lessons in leadership. They have the capacity to supplement learners’ understanding of the broad universe of human experience. Just as stories have been used to teach ethics, moral values, principals of government, they can also be harnessed to impart lessons on leadership.

In the modern times, movies have emerged as the most prominent and evocative way of story-telling. Cinema can be thought of as the audio-visual version of storytelling. Many films are made with large budgets which enables them to deploy professional directors and actors, who strain every nerve to depict the circumstances of the narrative as closely as possible. There is also meticulous attention to such details as lighting, props, background music, the setting, with many verbal and non-verbal messages woven into the tapestry of the stories being told. The film-makers’ objective is to totally engage the viewer’s attention, to stimulate it and to completely immerse in the universe of the narrative. Plot development, character relationships and the like must be both convincing and entertaining if the film is to be received favourably by the audiences. Thus, films can afford a chance to the students to indirectly experience the moods, the woes, and other concepts such as available information, reliability of information, decision making styles, impact of particular decisions, etc. which have been put together by the film makers in the most painstaking and quality conscious way.

**Training on Leadership**

Kouzes and Posner (2002) studied numerous of cases and conducted thousands of interviews with leaders in all walks of life and concluded the following on leadership training:

- Leadership can be learned
- Anyone can learn leadership skills
Leadership development is, in essence, a type of self-development. According to them, about 80% of leadership is learnt through experience.

Another notable point is from Andragogy, the science of adult learning. According to andragogy, adults learn better under the following circumstances:

- Their individual learning needs and styles are satisfied
- Their existing knowledge and experience is valued and used
- They are able to actively participate in the learning activity; and
- The practical aspects of the learning are stressed on.

**Leadership Training through Movies**

Billsberry, Leonard and Charlesworth (2012) have surveyed management literature to identify the advantages in imparting leadership lessons through movies. According to them, there are three main points: (i) enhancement of teaching; (ii) process of learning; and (iii) medium as message.

When movies are used for enhancement of teaching, they are supplementary to traditional teaching methods, such as lectures and presentations. In other words, movies are used alongside traditional methods, in order to bolster and support the latter. Video material can be used to illustrate theory, show occasions for practical application, and provide a context for discussion and analysis. Such use can help the learner get clarity and insight, which may not always be possible in classroom teaching. Videos can bring the practical world into the classroom virtually, they can help frame situations to explain complex phenomena or concepts, and build up a whole universe of cultural norms, routines, and etiquettes of the time in which the events occurred. They can help the leaners discuss about possible scenarios in other contexts (in terms of space or time). Traditional methods of teaching tend to become rather sterile and uninteresting over time, so that adding inputs in the form of videos and films can bring in an element of drama, intensity and dynamism to leadership concepts. Films and videos can give a more complete picture of work and working life than lectures or even management cases.

When movies are used for the process of learning, the idea is to engage learners in a more active way, in cognitive terms, which can enable better retention in them. Kuzma and Haney (2001) have estimated that students retain 10% of what they read versus
50% of what they see and hear. Movies rely a lot on amplifying emotions and this is known to enhance memory. Experience has shown that sessions in which movies or videos are used (and this information is available with learners) tend to enjoy excellent attendance and capture the attention of the learners.

When movies are used as medium as message in training, the idea is to teach principally through video material. They are not supplemental, rather they are the basis of conveying an idea, which is reinforced among the participants through analysis and discussion. For instance, a movie may show a particular approach in a certain context. This may then be used to understand the critical elements that led to the outcome, and also to discuss how the same narrative can be seen from different angles, or how lateral thinking can be applied, etc. Teaching and movie are intertwined in this approach. Some trainer see the advantage in using movies/video because it enables a clear separation between the observers and the situation, enabling better analysis through class or group discussion. The film becomes the common reference point.

There are also other advantages in using movies/videos in leadership training. In recent years, corporate scandals have come to light in which people in leadership positions displayed poor ethical conduct. Movies speak to the wider society and tend to promote ethical behaviour, which is a desirable input in leadership training. Further, the media consumption pattern of the modern generation is influenced/geared towards multiple media. If trainers do not adapt to the current media consumption pattern, they risk losing the attention and interest of learners. Bain (2004) has posited that the greatest teachers and trainers think of teaching as an opportunity to create more supportive learning environments. If trainers flex to include videos/movies in their teaching techniques, it will enable them in this direction. Blasco et. al. (2011) have argued that leadership consists of technical knowledge and skills only partly. The rest consists of refining attitudes, acquiring virtues and incorporating values. The former can be done in a traditional classroom setting, but the latter requires reflection. Learning through movies can motivate reflection. Teaching using movies triggers disclosing motives and emotions, and this allows questions, expectations and dilemmas to arise for both learners and faculty. Movies provide a narrative model grounded in the learners’ familiar world that are framed in emotions and images.
An Element of Risk

Use of movies in imparting leadership lessons is nevertheless fraught with some risks. Schreier (1990) has enumerated some of these. First and foremost, the question to ask is – is there a good fit? The trainer must be conscious that he/she is using the film either to supplement or as the main prop for a particular concept or perspective on leadership. Movies are made with the intent to entertain, not specifically to familiarise viewers with any leadership theory. If the fit is not checked well, the exercise will likely not be productive. A good example is the movie *Chariots of Fire* which is about two athletes and the determined way in which they compete. This movie can be a very good resource when discussing a topic such as *motivation* and its sources, but spectacularly inappropriate for a topic such as *delegation and control*.

Second, movies tend to have relatively long run-time. Add to that, time will have to be allocated towards pre-viewing briefing, post-viewing de-briefing and discussions. Thus, organising a session which makes use of movies must take into account the stiff time requirements.

Third, the objective of the film-makers is to display a narrative in an absorbing way. They definitely have an incentive to include drama or action or emotion in the narrative. All this can easily overwhelm the viewer (the trainee) – they will take in the story but may well miss the learning aspect. That is why the trainer must give a briefing before the movie/video viewing session and explain to them what all things they must look out for. Specificity is really important. This way, even if one or many participants/trainees have seen the movie, they will still find the session engrossing.

Fourth, in the debriefing after the movie/video watching exercise, there is a high possibility of the participants dwelling on various side-issues seen in the movie. However, the trainer has a responsibility to bring them back to the topic under discussion, to emphasise to them that the real objective is to get an insight into a particular topic rather than a meandering discussion.

Billsberry, Leonard and Charlesworth (2012) have pointed out another potential risk. They have advised trainers to be conscious of the fact that although movies/videos represent the world in a way that is more evocative than other media, they are not a complete representation of reality. The ‘reality’ that they represent is, in fact, managed, manipulated and dramatized. Consequently, the universe that they show is potentially
incomplete or partial, or exaggerated. Trainees/participants must be made aware of the fact that what they are watching and later analysing is a sort of reality but not the real world itself. The darker/unknown side of the leader should not demotivate the viewers.

**Structuring the Session**

Due to the risks described in the previous section, it is imperative to structure a movie/video based session properly. Structuring of the session begins with the planning, followed by a three-step process of conducting the session itself.

- **Planning:** The trainer must be clear about the learning objective, i.e. what is it that the trainees/participant must gain after attending the session. Examples could be – ‘what is situational leadership?’, or ‘what is moral courage?’. Then, the trainer must identify the movie/video clip that he/she plans to use. Gritton et al (2016) have suggested a framework, a set of questions for the trainer:
  - Why a particular film is being selected?
  - How does the film illustrate the topic concerned?
  - How can this film be used to foster critical thinking?
  - How to deal with the sensitive issues (if any) that get shown in the film?
  - How to use the film in the session (e.g. full movie followed by discussion; showing clips, then pausing and discussing)
  - How to address copyright issues, if any?
  - Will the film be able to make learning a fun experience? If so, how?

- **Conduct of the Session:** There are three steps here -
  1. **Set-up:** The trainer must give some background – What is the topic being covered? What is the narrative of the movie (briefly)? This part of the session should be brief, yet it should be detailed enough to provide adequate perspective and understanding of exactly who the characters in the movie are, the specifics of the story/scene, and any important relationship and personality nuances. When the clip begins, all participants should understand what they are about to view.
  2. **Display:** The trainer must allow the movie to be run in an environment where there are no unwanted distractions and the
participants can concentrate on the material. If the idea is to show only clippings, it is important to know when to stop (showing too much of the movie might disengage the participants or may confuse them and showing too little will leave them baffled since they will not be able to identify what the trainer is trying to illustrate).

iii. **Debriefing:** The trainer must give participants some time (especially after a movie) to collect their thoughts or to review their notes etc. Then, he/she may pose three-to-four open ended questions to the participants, for them to ponder over. Thereafter, the trainer can let discussions commence for a stated time period, with the condition that the participants will not all speak at once and that they will address the whole gathering, not any individual members. The notable points being made can be highlighted (e.g. by writing them on a flipchart). At the end, the learning point can be reinforced – if need be, by showing short clips from the movie. This will help bring closure to the session and to the lesson that was intended to be illustrated.

**An Example**

In conclusion, this hand-out will briefly describe an example of using a movie to illustrate a concept in leadership.

*Title of the movie* - Erin Brockovich.

*Plot Summary* - Erin Brockovich was an average divorced single mother struggling to raise her three children. Her two marriages had collapsed and she was seriously injured in a traffic accident. She had won a small amount of legal settlement, not sufficient to make the ends meet, and so her attorney, Ed Masry, gave her a job out of kindness. While working for Ed, she came across an innocuous-looking case, which she proceeded to investigate thoroughly. In doing so, she went well beyond her mandated clerical job-profile. A utility giant (M/s Pacific Gas and Electric Company) had been knowingly polluting drinking water in a small town of California (Hinkley) for the past 30 years. This had played havoc with the health of the town’s residents. The
subsequent litigation based on her work became the basis for a record settlement fee of US$333 million, paid by the utility giant for the victims.

Concept to be illustrated – Situational Leadership. Essentially, this style of leadership holds that Effective leaders are those who can recognize what followers need and then adapt their own style to meet those needs. It has two elements – ‘leadership style’ and ‘development level of followers’. Within leadership styles, the leader must adjust the relative importance of ‘directive behaviour’ (establishing goals, defining roles, setting timelines, determining methods, etc.) and supportive behaviour (communicating with group members, listening, praising, encouraging, etc.). Development level of followers refers to the degree to which followers have the skills/competence and commitment/motivation necessary to accomplish a goal.

Illustrative Points (Things to Look Out for) –

- How Erin doggedly investigates the case in spite of her many constraints
- How she wins the trust of the town’s residents, who thought very highly of the utility giant
- How she persuades residents of the town with health problems to join together for a special type of lawsuit (to prevent the corporate giant from exploiting loopholes to escape liability)
- How she earns respect of her boss and even gets a raise in her salary.

A few other movies, which can be used for leadership training are tabulated below:

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<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Title of the Movie</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Concept for Illustration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Gandhi</td>
<td>How a London-educated, anglicised and well-placed Indian lawyer evolves into an apostle of peace and non-violent resistance to British rule in India, transforming the country, especially its political landscape and society in the process.</td>
<td>Transformative Leadership</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Twelve Angry Men</td>
<td>How a single, intrepid, tactful jury member convinces the other eleven jury members to</td>
<td>Situational Leadership</td>
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<td></td>
<td>parse the evidence in an unbiased manner and help deliver a more balanced decision. This movie has also been made in Hindi (Title: <em>Ek Ruka Hua Faisla</em>), which depicts the same story in an Indian context, with minimal alterations.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Invictus</td>
<td>How Nelson Mandela strives to build an inclusive South Africa as its first native African president. He tries to forge a sense of fellow-feeling and compassion among both the native Africans and the white settlers.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>The Bridge on the River Kwai</td>
<td>How a senior British commander, taken prisoner by the Japanese during World War II, builds an excellent bridge in Burma with the help of his soldiers (who had become POWs, like himself). His task-focus distracts him from his ultimate mission of defeating his country’s enemies.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>School of Rock</td>
<td>How a substitute school teacher builds a sensational musical band from his students, who were apathetic and uninterested till he came into their lives.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Newton</td>
<td>This is a Hindi language movie which narrates the difficulties faced by Newton Kumar, a low level bureaucrat, who is deputed as presiding officer of a polling booth during elections in an Extremism affected area.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Ek Doctor Ki Maut</td>
<td>This is also a Hindi-language movie. It shows the tragic tale of a short-tempered junior doctor who makes a scientific breakthrough but is unable to shine in the</td>
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bureaucratic set-up in India. Ultimately, he decides to move abroad.

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References:


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