

## Learning Leadership Communication from Shakespearian Plays and Dramatic Characters

**\*Dr. Neera Jain**

\*Associate Professor & Area Chair, Business Communication, Management Development Institute, Gurgaon, 122001. India

### **Abstract**

Shakespeare, a 16<sup>th</sup> century renaissance poet and dramatist is an undisputed leader in English literature. He has enriched the world immensely with his thought and writings and his life and works have had a profound impact on the world. In his works, he touched every aspect, explored every dimension and described all the nuances of human life and nature. His plays therefore have come to acquire a universal significance and can be visualized as a microcosm of the entire universe woven into a kind of artistic tapestry. A study of his works gives important insights to modern executives on business disciplines of leadership, communication and management. The present paper makes an attempt to capture, organize and present some broad guiding principles of leadership that Shakespearian plays and dramatic characters offer for the development of leadership in today's business context.

### **Keywords**

Communication, Dramatic Characters, Leadership, Management, Shakespearian themes.

### **Introduction**

Leadership has been of interest to mankind for centuries, as reflected in the works of Confucius, Plato, or Machiavelli (Sorenson, 2000) and especially in the field of management (Alves, et al, 2004). Leadership, frequently seen both as a science and as an art (Tsai and Weu, 2004), consists of dilemmas and contradictory choices (Antonakis et al., 2004). March and Weil (2005) combine scholarly discussion with the great classical literature to reflect these dilemmas. Further, there has been an ongoing debate on how leadership can be taught to business students. It has been argued that management education needs to be extended beyond simple uni-dimensional knowledge of functional areas (Porter and McKibben, 1988) and have advocated using fiction (Harris and Brown, 1989; Shaw and Locke, 1993), poetry (Vaill, 1981) to initiate learners into the subject matter of leadership. Using the great classics of literature to teach the principles of leadership has thus been gaining popularity.

Of late, there has been a rapid revival of interest in Shakespeare. In the last few years, several studies have explored leadership and management in Shakespeare to derive specific lessons for modern leaders. For instance, Stevenson (1996) describes an attempt to use Shakespeare's plays to teach management principles in a leadership course. Henry V and Richard III provided contrasting examples of leadership behavior. Corrigan (1999) suggests that rather than eliminating the ambiguities often found in Shakespeare's complex characters, one needs to use their strengths and weaknesses as descriptive signposts for the modern leader. Adelman and Augustine (1999) effectively capture the rationale for studying the lessons of Shakespeare in a high-tech world. They argue that studying Shakespeare's characters, and the sticky situations they find themselves in, can offer busy executives advice about surviving in today's competitive marketplace. Robinson (2000) explains a systems approach to management as a sound basis in the management theories put forward by William Shakespeare through the words of characters in his plays. Egan (2000) discusses Shakespeare's Chronicles and their links to organizational behaviour and highlights lessons from history for those seeking to exercise power successfully and manage both individuals and groups. Whitney and Packer (2001) look at what Shakespeare has to teach leaders about the use and abuse of power, the skills of communication and persuasion crucial to a leader's success in achieving objectives, and reconciling and balancing values and responsibilities. Taking examples from Shakespeare's characters and plays, Leech (2001) illustrates the qualities and skills expected of an excellent communicator. Abell et al. (2005) describe a course 'Inspirational leadership –

Shakespeare's Henry V' that uses Henry's journey as the basis and explores some of the traits and styles of leadership. Offering important insight for leaders, Badaracco (2006) contends that, "serious literature offers a view from the inside. It lets us watch leaders as they think, worry, hope, hesitate, commit, exult, regret, and reflect. We see their characters tested, reshaped, strengthened, or weakened."

These studies have been mainly focused on the individual plays and a few dramatic characters of Shakespeare and specific lessons have been derived from them for modern managers and leaders. However, the present paper makes an attempt to capture, organize and present some broad guiding principles of leadership that his plays and dramatic characters offer for the development of leadership in today's business context.

### **Leadership Lessons from Themes and Characters of His Plays**

Even in the 21st century modern managers and leaders need to learn a great deal about leadership and management from Shakespeare's characters. The messages range from the seemingly obvious to the subtle complexities surrounding the topics like leadership, power, authority, change, risk and crisis management. Shakespeare teaches them about loyalty and commitment, about honour and duty, about emotions and passions and also about their opposites. The narrative drive of his great plays creates the best case studies one can ever imagine. Only after having a perceptive grasp of the underlying messages of the dramatic action these insights can be applied to contemporary, real-life businesspeople and environments. Thus, armed with new understanding and insight into the human nature of leadership, modern leaders can expand the range of solutions available to them. .

### **Superiority of Action over Thought**

One of the most famous of Shakespearean tragedies Hamlet is a revealing story of complexity and challenges at work. Why should leaders take decision amid confusion? Should they allow their impulse to over-control logic and reasoning?

The main theme of Hamlet is the superiority of action over thought. The tragedy of Hamlet results from the fact that there is a lack of due balance "between our attention to outward realities and, inward thoughts. The effect of this lack of action is beautifully illustrated in the "inward brooding" of Hamlet. Hamlet is placed in the most stimulating circumstances that a human being can be placed in. He is the heir-apparent to the throne, his father dies in suspicious circumstances, and his mother excludes her son from his throne by marrying his uncle. This is not enough. The ghost of the murdered father is introduced to assure the son of the crime. However, what is the effect on the son? Still he delays action till action is of no use, and he becomes a victim of circumstances.

Hamlet, in Shakespearean world thus becomes a universal figure, a prefiguration of the human predicament relating to the conflict between essence and existence, thought and action. The character of Hamlet thus, illustrates an insight helpful for modern managers and leaders: the need for a timely and quick action. Only planning and doing nothing can paralyze the logical and rational faculties of the decision maker.

### **A Balance between Intellect and Morality**

Shakespeare's greatest characters provide fascinating insights into the executives' behaviours that can make or break individuals and organization: what do we stand for and what do we stand against. Can the leaders be guided by their logic alone? Or should their be a perfect mix of mind and heart, reason and emotion and intellect and morality. In *Othello*, Shakespeare points out the dangers of placing the intellect above moral faculties. The theme portrayed through the characters of Iago and Othello, "the dreadful habit of thinking of moral feelings and qualities only as prudential ends to means" which is done through undermining and consequent transmutation of the protagonist's consciousness by a villain of superior intelligence, is still relevant for modern managers and leaders.

Iago is a person alienated from his own self in other words, a person whose vain pride of intellect makes him fall in love with his own self. For him, there is nothing beyond self. Egotistical self-regard is the only reason through which reality can be apprehended. He relies on his own will but he possesses no real will. It was a reflection of his own inner chaos, a result of his pride in his falsified self. He, therefore, develops contempt for those whom he considers intellectually inferior to himself. In his efforts to disrupt the protagonist's spiritual integrity and cohesiveness, he shows his strong tendency to make dupe of those who are not intellectually so advanced. Iago reverses the order of things since "he places intellect at the head He is an intellectual villain who aims at disrupting the moral and spiritual foundations of Othello's existential edifice. The contrast between these two characters clearly brings out the difference between intellect and moral undertones. If Iago represents the intellectual position of a rationalistic villain, Othello shows the process by which the intellect overwhelms the moral faculties. The play may be taken as learning for modern managers that any alienation from the higher self and from society will make them succumb to their baser passions.

Shakespeare shows the dreadful consequences of placing the moral in subordination to the intellectual faculties in Richard III also. His cruelty, is the result his pride which emanated from his sense of being superior to others who are intellectually inferior to him.

### **Getting First Hand Information Is Key to Success**

This is a relevant advice to those modern managers and leaders who are too good for the world. They allow forming a small coterie around themselves and comprehending the reality through their eyes. This prevents them from using their own discretion. Othello's character is deliberately ennobled by Shakespeare and his love with Desdemona is almost idealized. Othello's trusting nature, his absolute trust in Iago is often revealed in his speeches with other characters. Othello's fall is brought about through his own noble qualities. His virtues are the very means of his ruin as his unsuspecting nature prevents him from realizing the evil and malignity of Iago's heart and he kills his noble wife.

This characteristic of Othello's character can be contrasted with that of another Shakespearian king Henry V. He tries to get first hand information on his own. He disguises himself and walks among his soldiers the night before the battle and manages to get valuable information. Unlike the sugar-coated advice from his lieutenants, what he gets from the rank and file is something very different.

### **Incapability of Resigning The Sovereign Power**

The problem in *King Lear* gives modern leaders a new insight about the issues of inheritance and succession. Are they dispassionate enough to abdicate the chair at the appropriate time? Are they wise enough to decide the heir apparent to their position? Any whimsicality on this issue may lead to total destruction and utter suffering for the whole organization.

The play presents a study of the mind and mood of Lear, whose character, passions and sufferings constitute the main theme of the play. In Lear we find a feeble and selfish king who is unable to identify his successor through any rational means. This however was a result of the fact that his desire to transfer his power was not genuine. Through out his life, Lear has developed the habit of getting his commands obeyed instantly. Lear's anxiety, his distrust and jealousy all originate in Lear's wish to continue to enjoy his powers. The triple division of the kingdom and Lear's trial of love shows that though he has transferred his powers yet he is unwilling to do so practically. Cordelia's negative reply provokes the vanity of his pride. Kent's punishment very clearly shows this inherent contradiction in Lear's character. At one moment he divests himself of power but at the very next moment he is sticking to it. The play brings out a characteristic defect in Lear's personality, his incapability of finding a suitable inheritor to the throne which results from his unwillingness to transfer his powers.

### **Over Ambition Leads To Crime**

Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* offers an important lesson for today's business executives, e.g., one of the worst strategies is vying for power simply to have more power. That's not the smartest boardroom tactic, but many power-hungry managers do the same thing by firing the employees who once supported them. Their ambition not only destroys them but is also dangerous for the growth of the organization. (Whitney, and Packer, 2001)

This Shakespeare shows through the character of Macbeth, Banquo and Lady Macbeth. Ambition is the dominant trait of Macbeth's character. However, Shakespeare has shown that the witches can exercise their powers only on those who are prone to evil. The seeds of evil were there in Macbeth himself. The witches appeared to Banquo also, and he too was a fated beneficiary of their prophecies; but it was Macbeth, who surrenders himself to the evil design of the witches. The difference in their behaviour shows that the prophecies of the weird sisters were only an externalization of Macbeth's heart-felt desires. He had already nurtured the hopes to be the king. Macbeth therefore reacted very differently from Banquo. The hypocrite in Macbeth overcomes the voice of his conscience. He hopes to avoid the mental torture he experienced after one crime by committing another. Macbeth, thus with his eyes fixed on the throne becomes a victim of his own ambition and is not even aware of the means he employs to achieve his temporal end. It was not the witches but his own choice that led him on to the course of crime. The witches may know the future but they are not given control over man and destiny.

### **Put People First**

A leader is the guiding force for his people. He motivates them, inspires them, educates them yet respects their individual identity. He in turn earns his position through the respect of those around him. This lesson is derived by making a contrast between two Shakespearian leaders. Henry V, Shakespeare's most heroic character, inspires his followers to realize their full potential. He is an example of a leader who is able to spur his followers to success in the battle despite their unwillingness. Following speech which proves to be a turning point of a battle before the walls of Harfleur shows that Henry stands with his troops and leads them into battle.

If we are marked to die, we are enough

To do our country loss; and if to live

the fewer men, the greater share of honour

God's will, I pray thee wish not one man more

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold/But if it be a sin to covet honour

I am the most offending soul alive.

The speech — when Henry rallies the troops during the battle of Harfleur - is very persuasive. It is a superb example of motivation, strategy and crisis management. The battle has been going on for some time. Henry with his English troops is besieging this northern French town. They are facing strong French opposition who has a strong defensive position. Henry's troops were beginning to falter. He rallies them with a speech that represents one of the clearest examples of a leader providing - in Tom Peter's words a 'lasting commitment to a new strategic direction'.

### **Multi Dimensional Leadership**

Most of the modern research on leadership is based on certain implicit assumptions. It abstracts, generalizes and oversimplifies rather too much and presumes leaders to be one-dimensional in their characteristics, expecting them rather romantically to be nice, rational and gentle heroes endowed with all possible socially desirable traits and characteristics. It

simply ignores how characters change their personality, style and behavior from situation to situation and from scene to scene. It also ignores the preponderance of absurdity, of the daily politics of power and of the Machiavellian plotting and scheming organizations. It brushes aside the essential element of complexity in the leadership situation, and the fact that leaders are also human figure with some tragic flaws and frailties. The real complexity of the leader character is reduced to simplistic dimensions and the leaders are believed to be consistent from scene to scene, with universal traits or behaviors.

In Shakespeare, it is most often the one-dimensional leader such as King Lear, Richard II, or Mark Antony that fails to perform effectively. According to Shakespeare, the most successful leaders are those who grow and develop amidst the challenges of their lives, which learn leadership lessons from their own mistakes. In Shakespeare, power is personified in complex people; Shakespeare's Henry V is a leader able to exhibit multiple people as in various situations. The plays Henry IV and Henry V chronicle the journey of a leader amid a scenario of political instability. He begins his path to the throne rather inauspiciously by living what might be termed a dissolute life and enjoying the company of the persons like Falstaff, an agreeable buffoon. Harry must travel a long path to self-awareness that tests him and that will, in the end, take him to his destiny as ruler. Living in a messy, complex, chaotic, ambiguous and contradictory world that constantly requires compromise and negotiation; he comes to develop multiple characteristics. Henry V realizes that leadership is not a bed of roses and that power and respect have to be earned not commanded

Tis not the balm, the sceptre, and the ball,  
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial...  
Not all these, laid in bed majestical,  
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave  
Who with a body filled and vacant mind  
Gets him to rest, crammed with distressful bread (Act 4)

Henry V is participative in learning the ropes from the troops in one scene, a hero giving a rousing speech to motivate the troops in another scene, and in the same act, becomes the ruthless Machiavellian Prince, threatening to rape all the women and kill all the babies if the town does not surrender immediately. Along the way he makes some difficult decisions – including putting to death some of his old friends for breaking the law, and severing ties with Falstaff. He condemns his old friend to be hanged so the troops will know he is serious about his invading army refraining from looting and raping (a common practice to compensate otherwise poorly paid soldiers). The character is remarkable for its lessons on transformational leadership, charisma, and follower empowerment. In terms of leadership technique, King Henry exemplifies what contemporary theory generally associates with effective, inspiring leadership.

### **Managing Change for Success**

Shakespeare's romantic comedy, *The Tempest* reveals the vital ingredients of a successful change initiative. How can we overcome the resistance to change? Can we manage different reactions? How can we develop enthusiasm among others to truly embrace the new? Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, is the consultant to guides us. Merchant of Venice presents us with a model of Princely Leadership (Boje, 2000) that is relevant to today's Business student. This play is a critique applicable to today's global corporate model of financial capitalism.

### **Women Leadership in Shakespeare**

Theatre in Shakespearian times were not meant for women. They rarely appeared on the stage. A few attended the theatre at all. It was too low a place for them. The parts of women in plays were acted by men and boys. Shakespeare however imparted his female figures a life of

their own. In many of his plays they occupy centre stage. They are not only beautiful and innocent but also witty and intelligent. In the play *As You Like It* the heroine, Rosalind enables a “life-affirming transformation for everyone around her, without a formal leadership position”. She brings about a meaningful change without any formal power-base? True leaders don’t always require a formal leadership position. They strive to facilitate others achieve their real potential. Similarly in *The Merchant of Venice* the heroine Portia plays a key role in turning the apple cart down. Even when they play negative roles, they keep the strings in their hands. Lady Macbeth, “a fiend like queen”, is a woman of lofty determination and appalling courage.

### Conclusion

Shakespeare has swayed humanity for hundreds of years. He saw life as theatre and theatre as life. His works are phenomenal, encompassing the entire spectrum of human consciousness and development. Scattered throughout his works, apart from countless passages of poetic beauty, are gems of practical wisdom and philosophical truth, of generalized reflections on human life and moral truth and of strategic as well as tactical tips for practical day to day guidance which are as true, relevant and valuable today as when they were written. Modern leaders can “dust off the old textbooks because studying Shakespeare's characters - and the sticky situations they find themselves in - can offer busy executives advice about surviving in today's competitive marketplace” (Augustine and Adelman, 1999) His wisdom can guide even modern managers and leaders in today’s challenging environment.

### References

- Abell, A., et al. (2005), ‘The game’s afoot’ – Leaders, managers and Henry V’, *Impact*, **8** No. 2.
- Adelman, K. Augustine, N. (1999), *Shakespeare in Charge: The Bard's Guide to Leading and Succeeding on the Business Stage*, Miramax Books.
- Alves, J. C., Manz, C. C. and Butterfield, D. A. (2004), ‘Developing leadership theory in Asia: The role of Chinese philosophy’, *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, **1** (1). 3-27.
- Antonakis, J., et al. (2004), ‘Methods for studying leadership’, In J. Antonakis, A. T. Cianciolo, and R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The nature of leadership*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 48-70.
- Badaracco, J. L. (2006), *Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership Through Literature*, Harvard Business School Press.
- Bell, M. (2002), ‘*Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*’, Yale University Press.
- Boje, D. M. (2002), ‘Merchant of Venice - A Clash of Feudal, Banking and Commercial Capitalisms’, <http://business.nmsu.edu/~dboje/pages/orderform.html>
- Brawer, R. A (2000), *Fictions of Business: Insights on Management from Great Literature*, Wiley.
- Brown, P. (2007), ‘Can Shakespeare really be a useful management tool?’ *The Independent*.
- Corrigan P. (1999), *Shakespeare on Management: Leadership Lessons for Today's Management*, Monarch Books.
- Egan, M. (2000), Managers as kings: Shakespeare on modern leadership *Management Decision*, **38**, 315-327.
- Ford, J. (2005), ‘Leadership lessons from Shakespeare prove timely’, *UVA Online*, **35**.
- Goddard, H. C. (1951), *The Meaning of Shakespeare, Volume 1* Phoenix Books, University Of Chicago Press.
- Harris, C., and Brown, W. (1989), ‘Teaching business ethics using fiction: A case that failed’, *Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal*, **13**, 38-47.
- Leech, T. (2001), *Say It Like Shakespeare*, McGraw- Hill, New York.

- March, J. and Weil, T. (2005), *On Leadership*, Blackwell Publishing.
- Pinciss, G. .M. (2005), *Why Shakespeare - An Introduction to the Playwright's Art*, Continuum, New York.
- Porter, L. W., and McKibbin, L. E. (1988), *Management education and development: Drift or thrust into the 21st century?* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Puffer, S. M. (1991), *Managerial insights from literature*. Boston: PWS-Kent.
- Robinson, B.( 2000), 'The game's afoot [leadership skills]' *Engineering Management Journal*, **10**, Issue 2, 81 – 84.
- Shaw, G., and Locke, K. (1993), 'Using fiction to develop managerial judgment', *Journal of Management Education*, **17**, 349-359.
- Taylor, M. (2001), *Shakespeare Criticism in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Tsai, P. T. and Weu, W. Y. (2004), *Leadership: Theory, Practice & Research*, Liwen Culture Publishing Co., Ltd, Kaohsiung City, Taiwan.
- Vaill, P. B. (1981), 'Thoughts on using poetry in the teaching of OB', *Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal* , **6**. 50-51.
- Whitney, J. O. and Packer, T. (2001), *Power Plays: Shakespeare's Lessons in Leadership and Management*, Simon & Schuster.