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## Celebrating the Imperfect Leader

*There is no need to be perfect to inspire others. Let people get inspired by how you deal with your imperfections.*

—ROBERT TEW, BRITISH SPORTSMAN, AND  
CHAIRMAN, NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS LTD

The twenty-first century offers an interesting canvas for leaders. The political, economic and business environments across the globe are becoming increasingly complex and challenging. The social, political and business milieu is turning out to be more transparent and open to questioning. As a natural corollary, leadership in all its manifestations is taking on a new avatar, which can be defined as ‘Leadership 2.0’. In a world where old hierarchies based on class and social order are giving way to a new pecking order based on intellectual, emotional and entrepreneurial attributes, leaders are compelled to turn away from the factory-based Victorian model of leadership and adopt a new style of leadership. This is now taking root slowly but steadily across geographies around the world, thanks to globalization and liberalization.

So what is new about this new-age leadership? What are the defining characteristics that separate these leaders from the earlier brand?

## **Leadership 2.0: Emergence of the Imperfect Leaders**

Leadership 2.0 represents a new generation of leaders who accept their vulnerabilities and shake off the psychological pressure of looking perfect. The imperfect leaders of today believe that they are essentially human, with their own strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, while they are aware of their formidable strengths, they are equally comfortable with their natural weaknesses. In fact, it is being realized that in today's world, acceptance of one's imperfections is the stepping stone to good leadership.

This confidence of new-age leaders emanates from their perception that leadership is largely a group activity, as against individual heroism. The earlier approach focused exclusively on the individual as the leader and, therefore, mandated a set of traits, skills and styles for success. Thus, leadership expert Daniel Goleman would expect a leader to alternate between six distinct leadership styles—coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter and coaching—'each in right measure and at just the right time'. As against this, the imperfect leaders of today consider leadership as a group activity, where individuals in a diversified leadership team lend their strengths to it and compensate for the weaknesses of their teammates. This approach relieves leaders of the perceived burden of having a complete repertoire of skills and traits for their success. Instead, they prefer to build a well-rounded leadership team of individuals with the required skill sets for organizational success.

It is not that new-age leaders are different from their predecessors, who projected an aura of perfection and infallibility around themselves. The bare truth is that with the progress of civilization, even though *Homo sapiens* have changed their behavioural patterns, their basic nature, strengths and frailties have remained the same. There has been no fundamental change in their fears and apprehensions, aspirations and

motivations. It is therefore not out of place to observe that even across ages, leaders have been imperfect, as they, too, have had their strengths and weaknesses. The entire history of leadership can hardly project a personality without fallibility or imperfection. We have numerous examples of epoch-making leaders who have transformed generations of people and moved human organizations to newer horizons in spite of their own frailties. However, except for some rare examples of transformational leaders, such as Gandhi, who openly declared his weaknesses and converted them into his strengths, leaders in the past usually covered up their weaknesses and projected an aura of perfection and invincibility. The standalone, opaque and stable economies of their times, supported by a hierarchical society with an unquestionable respect for higher-ups, enabled them to create a smokescreen of perfection—a luxury modern leaders can ill-afford.

The driving forces behind this new approach to leadership are quite strong and pervasive. The onset of the knowledge economy, along with rapid globalization, is ushering in organizational changes that are making modern corporations less hierarchical. As information today is readily available across geographies, it facilitates long-distance teamwork by pooling in expertise from different parts of the world to deliver the required solutions. Further, with the emergence of multinational corporations, businesses have to cater to a variety of markets and customer needs, conform to their varying cultural sensibilities and comply with local laws and regulations. In a globally networked environment, marked by constant disruptions—economic, political and technological—and increasing ambiguities and complexities, organizational responses have to be swift and appropriate. With competitors breathing down their neck, coupled with analysts' and shareholders' activism, companies are already on a tightrope walk. The stakes are

higher, as misplaced or delayed organizational responses could be disastrous for the company, with wider implications.

In such a scenario, it is not possible for any one leader to have all the knowledge and competence required to address the issues facing the organization. The urgency with which issues need to be addressed and the required collaboration by distant and multi-location players having specialized skills also rule out the possibility of any one leader at the top dictating all the solutions. Further, in this age of increasing openness and transparency, if a leader attempts to hide a weakness and project a non-existent strength, the bluff is likely to be called soon.

In fact, in the extremely uncertain, volatile and disruptive environment in which organizations are operating today, any attempt by leaders to aspire for perfection would be counterproductive and may lead to organizational distress. Contemporary leaders, responding to the demands of their environment, are therefore quick to embrace their imperfections.

### **I Am That: Embracing Imperfections**

Imperfections in a leader may be of different kinds. Some may be deficient in certain desirable soft leadership attributes such as communication, humility and consistency; others could be lacking in professional or technical skills related to their business. For example, there could be leaders who are not good at communication or do not understand the nitty-gritty of IT or may not have an in-depth understanding of the financial statements of their organizations. A clear understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, therefore, becomes the bedrock of their leadership strategy.

At a personal level, the awareness and acceptance of their vulnerability enables leaders to ward off criticism targeted at their weaknesses. In fact, it helps them set the right expectations

from them and enables them to focus on their strengths. Also, shorn of the burden of looking perfect, they don't waste their time and energy in creating a façade of perfection. Once they are their natural selves, they do not have to pretend to be on top of everything concerning their organization. In the process, they save their organization from any possible damage arising out of immature and uninformed decisions they could make in an attempt to look perfect.

However, the most important benefit from this shift in approach is that it gives leaders the much-needed emotional and intellectual space to look for the missing expertise outside of themselves—within their own organization or outside it. Thus, by bringing in missing expertise from outside, they make the leadership team more competent and ready to face challenges. Instead of the age-old practice of command and control, they tend to collaborate and co-create for achieving their common vision. As organizational complexities increase and business landscapes get globalized, they feel the need to take decision-making closer to the scene of action. To achieve this, they groom leadership within the organization and delegate authority and decentralize decision-making to improve organizational agility.

It must, however, be appreciated that being imperfect does not mean being incompetent. Imperfect leaders are the ones who convert their weaknesses into an opportunity to add to the organization's collective strength and make it ready to face the myriad challenges before it. It is, in effect, a strategic shift of focus from the leader's own personality to the needs of the organization and the demands of the environment.

### **Celebrating the Imperfect Leader**

In the light of these postulates, let's look at some leadership stories to understand how great leaders have sidestepped

their weaknesses and gone on to accomplish their mission and vision. These leaders belong to different ages, generations and professions. Their challenges were different and the environments in which they worked were also different. They had only two things in common, though—all of them were flawed in one way or the other, but they rose to the pinnacle of effective leadership. All by working on their strengths!

*Mahatma Gandhi: His Experiments with Chastity*

Gandhi, one of the greatest leaders the world has seen, is a fascinating example of an imperfect leader. The ‘half-naked’ and ‘seditious fakir’, as Churchill once described him, was the person who galvanized India to fight against the mighty British Empire and led India to freedom from colonial rule.

Was he an epitome of perfection in public perception? By no means was he even close to it. In his autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*, he admits his personal failings—giving in to unethical pleasures, mistrusting and mistreating his wife, not being an ideal son and so on. With respect to his relationship with his wife, he writes,

Her duty was easily converted into my right to extract faithfulness from her, and if it had to be extracted, I should be watchfully tenacious of the right. I had absolutely no reason to suspect my wife’s fidelity, but jealousy doesn’t wait for reasons. I must be forever on the lookout regarding her movements, and therefore she could not go anywhere without my permission.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, judged by the yardstick of personal ethics and public

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<sup>14</sup>M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Chapter 4, ‘Playing the Husband’, translated by Mahadev Desai, Beacon Press

morality, Gandhi comes out as an abject disappointment. His personal conduct and sexual life were always mired in controversy and invited widespread public disapproval. It was in 1906, when both he and his wife were thirty-eight, that he took a vow of brahmacharya, enforcing celibacy upon himself, and persuaded his wife to do the same. While this was a purely private vow, without caring for his wife's privacy he made it public so as to create an aura of sainthood around himself. But what became more questionable in the public eye was that while he advised newlyweds to stay celibate for the sake of their souls, he himself slept naked next to young, nubile and naked women to test his self-control.

The fact remains that while Gandhi could successfully embrace poverty, chastity always eluded him. In his own ashram, while even husband and wife were forbidden to sleep together, for himself he had a different set of rules to conduct his 'experiments' and test his spiritual resilience. As he grew older, he increased the level of his challenges. Thus, when Dr Sushila Nayar, who was part of his 'experiments' for a long time, turned thirty-three in 1947, she was replaced by a much younger eighteen-year-old Manu, Gandhi's grand-niece, to sleep with him and test the seventy-seven-year-old man's spiritual fortitude. While people criticized him and started to desert his ashram, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel wrote to him saying that what he was doing was 'adharma' (immoral). To this, Gandhi retorted, 'For me Manu sleeping with me is a matter of dharma (moral duty). If I don't let Manu sleep with me, though I regard it as essential that she should, wouldn't that be a sign of weakness in me?'<sup>15</sup>

It was quite evident that like many great leaders, Gandhi

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<sup>15</sup>An odd kind of piety: The truth about Gandhi's sex life', *The Independent*, 2 January 2012

made his own rules as he went along. He lived by them and often elevated them as a demand of the cosmic order. In the 1970s, Dr Nayar revealed that the 'brahmacharya' experiment was only in response to criticism for his behaviour. As she put it, 'Later on, when people started asking questions about his physical contact with women—with Manu, with Abha, with me—the idea of brahmacharya experiments was developed... In the early days, there was no question of calling this a brahmacharya experiment.'<sup>16</sup>

Going beyond his personal life, even in his political life, Gandhi didn't live by some of the cherished values of the times. A self-opinionated person, he was highly undemocratic in his approach to issues of national interest. Some of the milestones in his political life bear testimony to his dictatorial attitude. During the Congress Tripuri Session in 1939, when Subhash Chandra Bose was elected the president of the Indian National Congress (INC), defeating Gandhi's candidate Dr Pattabhi Sitaramayya by a clear margin of 1,580 to 1,377 votes, Gandhi took it as a personal blow and almost declared war against Bose.

He said, '...I am glad of his (Subhash's) victory...and since I was instrumental in inducing Dr Pattabhi not to withdraw his name after Maulana Azad Sahib had done so, the defeat is more mine than his...'<sup>17</sup>

At this point of time, Bose was posing the greatest challenge to Gandhi's ideology and stature. As the Congress Working Committee (CWC) was still being controlled by Gandhi's followers, through a well-orchestrated scheme of

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<sup>16</sup>An odd kind of piety: The truth about Gandhi's sex life', *The Independent*, 2 January 2012

<sup>17</sup>Subhash Chandra Bose and Congress Tripuri Session 1939', *GKToday*. in, 9 August 2018



non-cooperation against the president, Gandhi ensured that while Bose could reign, he could not rule. Under his influence, twelve members, including Patel, resigned from the CWC. Frustrated, Bose resigned and went on to take an altogether different course of action to work for India's freedom.

Gandhi's undemocratic nature was again evident when it came to deciding who the prime minister of Independent India should be. After the Second World War, the British were actively considering granting freedom to India, and, by 1946, it was clear that India's Independence was just a matter of time. Following the 1946 elections, in which the INC won the maximum number of seats, an interim government was to be formed, headed by the INC president. At this point, the position of the INC president had become all the more crucial, as the person occupying the position would be the prime minister of Independent India. The then Congress president, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, was interested in contesting for the president's position once again, but Gandhi made his opposition clear. A dejected Azad had to fall in line. It was well known that Gandhi had a soft corner for Jawaharlal Nehru. However, when nominations for the post of president were made, of the fifteen regional Congress committees, twelve voted for Patel. None of them had voted for Nehru. Then Gandhi asked Acharya J.B. Kripalani to organize a few nominations for Nehru by members of the CWC, knowing fully well that only the regional committees were authorized to nominate.

He asked Patel to withdraw his name and thus Nehru became the first prime minister of India, against all democratic norms.

Did the moral aberrations in his personal life or the undemocratic behaviour in his public life deter Gandhi from rising to the pinnacle of transformational leadership? No. While all Gandhi's weaknesses were in the public domain, what was it

in him that made the people of India love him as a leader and catapult him to the heights of glory, so much so that even today he is revered as the Father of the Nation? Quite clearly, his leadership was built on his strengths and not on his weaknesses. His strength emanated from his undying commitment to truth and non-violence, which he used as powerful weapons in his fight against the British.

Gandhi's strengths overshadowed his weaknesses. His commitment to truth was so absolute that he disclosed all his weaknesses in his autobiography, written and published between 1927 and 1931. The highly conservative Indian society could have shunned him for the revelations made in his book. But his weaknesses were overshadowed by two of his indisputable virtues: the commitment to truth and the courage of conviction that truth had to be told, howsoever inconvenient it was.

Equally unflinching was Gandhi's commitment to non-violence, which was repeatedly tested during the thirty-year struggle for India's Independence. His pledge to the ideal of non-violence was so strong that he suspended the nationwide Non-Cooperation Movement, launched by him against British imperial rule in India, because of an isolated incident of violence during the Civil Disobedience Movement based on non-violence, or satyagraha. The incident took place on 4 February 1922 at Chauri Chaura in present-day Uttar Pradesh. A peaceful crowd of protesters was fired at by the police, resulting in the death of a few agitators, which led to the burning of a police station by the angry mob, killing the policemen inside. Even though the agitation was at its peak across the country, Gandhi did not hesitate to call it off, much against the advice of his lieutenants.

Likewise, Gandhi refused to intervene and save the lives of three of India's celebrated revolutionary freedom fighters—

Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev. On 8 April 1929, Bhagat Singh, along with his friend Batukeshwar Dutt, had thrown two low-intensity bombs and leaflets in the corridors of the Central Legislative Assembly, seeking to draw the attention of the British government to their misrule in India. The revolutionaries thereafter shouted slogans and waited to be arrested. They didn't intend to kill anyone, and, indeed, the bombs hadn't.

However, Gandhi was not convinced, as he didn't approve of their violent means of freedom struggle. In spite of massive public sentiment in favour of the three revolutionaries, Gandhi agreed, as part of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of March 1931, that Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev be hanged.

Gandhi's success is a classic example of leadership inspired by the strength of character and personal convictions, and a unique ability to convert weaknesses into strengths. He was a person who never denied his weaknesses; rather, he was one who had the courage to disclose them to the masses. This strategy took the sting out of any criticism against him. Further, with single-minded focus, he utilized his strengths and converted them into a potent weapon in his fight against the British Empire. Before Gandhi came on the scene, India's struggle against the British was more or less an elitist movement, led by a few Western-educated leaders. It was Gandhi, dressed as the poorest of the poor Indian, who transformed it into a mass movement, cutting across geography, caste, creed and religion. His appeal for peaceful non-cooperation against the British struck a chord with the Indian masses, which showed unflinching resilience throughout the freedom struggle, even in the face of extreme violence at the hands of their oppressors, at times leading to mass death and destruction.

*Donald Trump: A Flawed Dream Merchant*

While Gandhi belonged to a different age, US President Donald J. Trump is the face of the imperfect leader in today's world. He is the most telling rebuttal of the trait-based understanding of leadership.

Right through his presidential campaign, he displayed a number of deeply problematic character flaws, any of which could have been good enough to throw him out of the race. His idiosyncrasies were not limited to his personal character but extended to his declared stance on public policies as well.

On the personal front, during the election campaign, not less than twenty-four women came forward accusing Trump of inappropriate sexual behaviour on multiple occasions spanning a thirty-year period.<sup>18</sup> He was accused of being a misogynist, a womanizer, and even talking lasciviously about his own daughter, Ivanka. Memes of his wife, Melania Trump,<sup>19</sup> a former model, were splashed across social media, as she was mocked about bringing transparency to the White House. While some of these were hotly discussed in the public domain, on his part, Trump, too, added to the negative vibe around his personality. Quite a few of these accusations, such as walking into the green room of beauty-pageant participants and patting naked models, were admitted by him and dismissed as 'locker-room talk'.

In his useful biography *Trump Revealed: The Definitive Biography of the 45th President*, *Washington Post* journalists Michael Kranish and Marc Fisher talk about 'Trump's morals failings'. It mentions his cheating on his wife, admitting to trying to

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<sup>18</sup>Amber Jamieson, Simon Jeffery and Nicole Puglise, 'A timeline of Donald Trump's alleged sexual misconduct: who, when and what', *The Guardian*, 27 October 2016

<sup>19</sup><https://me.me/i/melania-trump-will-bring-transparency-to-the-white-house-8shit-4235206>

‘seduce a married woman’, and bragging about how he could ‘grab women by the crotch...’<sup>20</sup>

Going beyond his lack of moral compass, Trump’s stance on matters of public policy displayed a horrible disdain for political correctness. He was perceived as indulging in tax evasion, appealing to racism, destroying social cohesion, and polarizing American society on issues of immigration and border security, among others.<sup>21</sup> Even worse, he was accused of taking the help of the country’s arch-enemy Russia to win the election.<sup>22</sup>

Further, in the three presidential debates with Hillary Clinton, he came across as brash and brazen, and an indiscreet and intemperate person. To top it all, in the age of live television, he criticized, ridiculed and insulted the media in no uncertain terms. Even now that he is the president of the US, every time he tweets on matters of state, he puts out an array of negative traits that old-school leadership scholars would be quick to denounce as Shakespearean ‘fatal flaws’.

Following eight years of an ‘honourable leadership’ provided by Barack Obama, ably supported by his graceful wife Michelle, the prospect of Trump’s leadership appeared to be outrageous and outlandish, verging on near-disaster for the US. Not only is the US the richest nation in the world today, it has a high stake in the global order as well. The White House has been the seat of the most powerful head of state in the world since 1945, and the US president has at his fingertips the power to unleash nuclear disaster, which could

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<sup>20</sup>Walter G. Moss, ‘Unlike Obama, Trump Has No Moral Compass’, History News Network, George Washington University, 6 October 2018

<sup>21</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald\\_Trump\\_2016\\_presidential\\_campaign](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Trump_2016_presidential_campaign)

<sup>22</sup>Max Boot, ‘Let’s not lose sight of the real scandal: Trump was elected with Russia’s help’, *The Washington Post*

annihilate the Earth. The entire world had watched Trump's unorthodox presidential campaign with anxiety, concern and curiosity. And yet, the US elected Trump as its leader. How?

Evidently, Trump's weaknesses did not come in the way of his being anointed the leader of the most powerful nation in the world. It is, rather, his strength—the power of his dream for the American people and which appealed to the American electorate, who voted in his favour—that got him the presidency. His call to 'make America great again' resonated with the majority of American voters, who were getting impatient with the rising cost of living and healthcare, the falling employment rate and the decreasing influence of the US in the affairs of the world. Fed up with conventional and manipulative politicians, the people of America saw in Trump a successful businessman who talked straight and could lead them to a better life and living, and bring back the fading glory of the US.

It is not that Americans have been unmindful of the moral aberrations of their leaders. The recent example of Harvey Weinstein, the former Hollywood mogul, is a case in point. He was sacked as co-chairman of The Weinstein Company following charges of sexual abuse and harassment levelled at him by a host of Hollywood actresses during the #MeToo movement. In similar circumstances, recently, Josh Randle, the then president of Miss America Organization, had to resign following his remark about the physical appearance of 2013 winner Mallory Hagan, even though the comments were made in a private e-mail conversation and even before he had joined the organization.

Even in the past, the leading Democratic Party aspirant, Gary Hart, had to bow out of the presidential race in 1987 once his affair with Donna Rice was broken by *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald*.

The moral and behavioural transgressions of Trump could be considered far worse than those of the others cited above. In fact, Trump could be a perfect example of what a leader should not be in a conventional sense. However, even in the face of all the fatal flaws in his character, the liberal democracy of the US elected him as its leader, ignoring the tough challenge from a suave, eloquent and experienced Hillary Clinton, who was on the cusp of making history by becoming the first female president of the US. This example should wake us up to the need for a relook at the morality tales that we have been fed for ages and to face the fact that a leader's character is never the be-all and end-all of his leadership. While positive character traits are important for leadership success, they are not its sole determinants. Leadership, being a multidimensional phenomenon, has multiple factors that determine its success. Moreover, as human beings are complex, displaying both positive and negative traits, a one-way approach to understanding leadership leaves much about it unsaid. It has to be studied in all its dimensions.

*M.S. Dhoni: An Imperfect Captain Cool*

The previous two examples were from politics. Let us see one example from the world of sports. Mahendra Singh Dhoni, considered the most successful captain of the Indian cricket team, appropriately nicknamed Captain Cool, is a living example of an imperfect leader. Popularly known as Mahi among his friends, he is as admired for his cricketing skills and achievements as for his cool and charismatic leadership. During his nine-year captaincy from 2007 to 2016, he led the Indian team to unprecedented heights and unparalleled glory. He led India to victory in different formats of the game, winning the World Twenty20 Cup, the World Cup, the Champions Trophy, the Asia Cup, the Commonwealth Bank series, the

Compaq Cup series and the Celkon Mobile Cup, to name a few. In the Indian Premier League (IPL), he led his team, Chennai Super Kings, to the trophy in both 2010 and 2011. Under his leadership, India won eleven bilateral ODI series and the country's winning percentages in ODIs and Twenty20 were 59.57 per cent and 59.28 per cent, respectively. In a rare recognition of his charismatic career, a biopic titled *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* was also made in 2016, which was quite a box office success.

But more than his cricketing genius, it is his leadership that has mesmerized sports lovers. On his giving up the captaincy in 2016, *The Indian Express* wrote:

With him, it was clear that someone was in control out there. His fielders felt it, his bowlers felt it, the opposition batsmen felt it and the fans too cottoned on to it. And the spooky calmness behind the stumps would surely have had a detrimental effect on the batsmen. It definitely had a beneficial effect on his team-mates, and also changed the way, we, the viewers, watched the Indians play.<sup>23</sup>

The aforesaid portrayal of Dhoni's achievements and leadership profile might give one the impression that he possessed all the leadership qualities in abundance. Unfortunately, that is not true. One of Dhoni's serious drawbacks is his communication skills, which most of us would recognize as an essential leadership trait. An intensely private person, his off-the-field communication was extremely poor. To the rest of the world he has always appeared inscrutable and unpredictable. He resigned from Test captaincy in the middle of a Test series abroad without any obvious provocation. He further shocked

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<sup>23</sup>Sriram Veera, 'MS Dhoni, former India ODI, T20I captain', *The Indian Express*, 5 January 2017



the cricketing fraternity by his sudden and unanticipated resignation as India's ODI captain. To add to this, he has also been mired in controversies involving professional ethics and financial integrity.

And yet, if the cricketing world looked at the leadership of Dhoni with awe and an entire generation of youngsters drew inspiration from him, it was simply because Dhoni focused on his strengths, which completely overshadowed his weaknesses. Starting out as a small-town boy with humble beginnings, he earned the position and respect he enjoys today. Then, his performance as a cricketer—both as a batsman and a wicketkeeper—has been superlative. As the leader of the Indian team, he has always delivered, often taking risks and leading from the front. Faced with an impending defeat in the 2011 World Cup, his decision to promote himself in the batting order—even after a mediocre run with the bat—over Yuvraj Singh, the Man of the Tournament, is the stuff legends are made of. The winning runs coming off his celebrated helicopter shot underscored the self-belief that is characteristic of Dhoni the leader.

The other great strength of Dhoni always on display is that he appears to be a team person. Not given to narcissism, which leaders usually fall prey to, Dhoni passed on whatever trophies he won to his teammates so they could savour the moment and be in the limelight while he moved to position himself behind the others.

Yet another noticeable strength of Dhoni was that he increased the 'cool quotient' of the game to an unparalleled level. With him in command, the team seemed to be less nervy, the bowlers didn't throw up their arms in frustration or look angry when there was a misfield or if a yorker ended up as a full toss and was hit for a six. It is as if his pervading calmness, darting eyes and the occasional wave of hand to set the fielding

cast a hypnotic spell on the team, which did his bidding.

If Dhoni was able to transform the Indian team as a world beater, winning the World No. 1 ranking in spite of his glaring weaknesses, it was all because he focused on his strengths and built upon them. He was conscious of the fact that it is always easier to swim with the current, i.e. work on strengths, than swim against it. It was true of Dhoni, and it is true of all leaders.

*Albert Einstein: The Energetic Leadership of an Eccentric Genius*

If we study the lives of leaders and geniuses with the expectation that they are fundamentally different from common men and women, we are in for a huge disappointment. Albert Einstein, the celebrated genius, has attained an iconic status as a scientist and a humanist. Acknowledged as Person of the Century by *Time* magazine and voted as the greatest physicist of all time by *Physics World*, Einstein mesmerized the world with his scientific theories and provided intellectual leadership to generations of human beings. His contributions to science were indeed path-breaking and revolutionary. His works were instrumental in recognizing cosmology as a branch of science, dealing with enormous ideas such as the origin of the universe, and studying exotic cosmic phenomena such as the Big Bang, black holes and gravitational waves.

No wonder that he was considered a mystic genius by his own generation and perceived to be drastically different from the rest of humanity in some fundamental manner. It was this larger-than-life persona of the iconic genius that led the pathologist Thomas Harvey, who conducted his autopsy, to preserve his brain for scientific experimentation later.

However, while Einstein's glorious scientific legacies stand on one side, his idiosyncrasies and weaknesses stare us blatantly in the face on the other, marking him as just like the rest of us. He was a deeply flawed individual, who was often

viewed as a philanderer, an absentee father, a plagiarist and even a fraud. The Princeton Press's *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein* tells the story of the man and his first wife, Mileva Maric, who was once his lover and intellectual companion. Einstein, who was 'crazy with desire' initially, later wrote in July 1914 to the mother of his two sons in a cold and calculated manner, laying down the conditions for continuing their marriage: 'A. You will see to it (1) that my clothes and linen are kept in order, (2) that I am served three regular meals a day in my room. B. You will renounce all personal relations with me, except when these are required to keep up social appearances.' And: 'You will expect no affection from me... You must leave my bedroom or study at once without protest when I ask you to.'

As far as his moral fibre went, the great scientist was no different from a common man. He is reported to have cheated on his first wife and had an affair with his cousin, Elsa Einstein, whom he married later but cheated on as well. He didn't have a normal relationship with his children, whom he often ignored during their childhood.

Many also wonder if Maric, Einstein's first wife, who too was a Physics student, had made substantial contributions to Einstein's theories but was denied any credit for it. The US TV documentary *Einstein's Wife*, which came out in 2003, only added substance to this theory. In fact, the accusations go beyond the denial of credit to Maric and on to whether Einstein stole the work of other physicists. In an article published in the digital magazine *Aeon*, on 22 July 2014, Matthew Francis, a science writer and speaker specializing in Physics, Astronomy and the Culture of Science, makes an assessment:

He was also justifiably modest about his mathematical ability. He relied on others, including his first wife Mileva

and his good friend, the physicist Michele Besso, to help him work out thorny problems. Today they would receive co-author credits on Einstein's papers, but that wasn't the practice at the time.<sup>24</sup>

John Stachel, director of the Center for Einstein Studies at Boston University and editor of *The Collected Papers*, sums it up well: 'Too much of an idol was made of Einstein... He's not an idol—he's a human, and that's much more interesting.'<sup>25</sup>

Why is it, then, that in spite of his eccentricities and weaknesses, Einstein is viewed as a genius with a larger-than-life persona? The answer is not far to seek. It is all due to Einstein's strengths and his circumstances that made him a celebrity, way above some of his equally talented contemporaries, such as Niels Bohr, Marie Curie, Werner Heisenberg and Erwin Schrödinger. Einstein was able to convey powerful messages with extreme simplicity. The equation derived from his theory of special relativity, expressed in the simple-looking formula  $E = mc^2$ , caught the imagination of people, even though they may not have been able to understand it.

Further, Einstein had a much louder amplifier than most of his contemporaries. He became the poster boy of American liberalism once he migrated from Nazi Germany to the US. It was also a time when the mass media—radio and newspapers—arrived on the scene and carried his anti-racism and humanism messages to the public. Einstein's wit and unique coif were also factors that portrayed him as a rare kind of genius.

The recognition of Einstein as a superhuman cognitive celebrity and the poster boy of genius, in spite of being a flawed human being, tells us the strengths story. When the

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<sup>24</sup>Mathew Francis, 'Cognitive Celebrity', *Aeon*, 22 July 2014

<sup>25</sup>Tarun Mittal, 'Albert Einstein: the great scientist who was a flawed human being', *YourStory.com*, 14 March 2017

message of the leader is powerful and his vision of the future compelling, and he is able to communicate that to his audience, his weaknesses take a back seat in the minds of his followers. It was no different for Einstein.

*Steve Jobs: An Arrogant Maverick Who Changed the World*

In recent times, if there has been one person who has transformed the way we live and think, it is Steve Jobs. You don't need to be an Apple fan to appreciate that he was the genius who created a unique connect, an emotional attachment, between man and his machine. Innovations such as the iPhone, the iPad, the iPod, the MacBook, the iMac and the iTunes Store tell a saga of entrepreneurial excellence. Nearly a billion iPhones have been sold around the world, with each new version being lapped up by fans who do not mind waiting in queues overnight to buy one. The insurmountable global appeal of his products is testimony to the creative genius of the man who is now ranked with all-time greats such as Henry Ford and Walt Disney.

However, even after his death, the question keeps surfacing, 'Does Steve Jobs deserve to be admired? Could he be a role model for leaders?' In the documentary *Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine*, released in September 2015, celebrated filmmaker Alex Gibney paints Jobs as 'ruthless, deceitful and cruel'. Writing for *The New York Times*, Andrew Ross Sorkin says, 'Mr Gibney goes through a laundry list of Jobs's sins: backdated stock options, factory conditions in China and secret agreements with Silicon Valley rivals to prevent employee-poaching.'<sup>26</sup>

Gibney is not alone in an adverse assessment of Jobs's leadership. Even Jobs's foremost admirers have admitted that

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<sup>26</sup>Andrew Ross Sorkin, 'Decoding Steve Jobs, in Life and on Film', *The New York Times*, 7 September 2015

he was a complicated leader—a brilliant innovator with a keen eye on each and every aspect of his product, but, at the same time, an insufferable maniac who could drive his colleagues to tears. In a *Harvard Business Review* article titled ‘Was Steve Jobs a Role Model for Leaders?’, authors Darren Overfield and Rob Kaiser conclude, ‘According to our data, Jobs should be regarded as a statistical outlier and a managerial anomaly rather than as a model of leadership worth imitating.’<sup>27</sup>

A maverick he was, no doubt, but that did not prevent Jobs from becoming an outstanding leader who transformed an entire generation and set uncompromising benchmarks for competitors. A few decades on, history will forget his idiosyncrasies but remember him for his contribution to the development of human society.

### **Does It Pay to Be a Jerk?**

On the other end of the morality and virtuosity spectrum is the question: Does it pay to be a jerk? Fed on the Manichaeic principles of morality as well as our religious convictions, we have always been made to think that leaders have to be honest, virtuous, kind and merciful. They must have complete harmony of thought, speech and action as envisaged in the Indian philosophy of *manasa-vaacha-karmana*—harmony of thought, speech and action—akin to Rotary International’s Four Way Test, which, too, implores that our thoughts, words and actions be truthful and fair, promote goodwill and be beneficial to all.

However, this has not put an end to the good guy-bad guy debate. While the Bible says ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth’, and Dale Carnegie advises us to ‘begin with

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<sup>27</sup>Darren Overfield and Rob Kaiser, ‘Was Steve Jobs a Role Model for Leaders?’, *Harvard Business Review*, 1 October 2012

praise and honest appreciation', there is always the apprehension that 'nice guys finish last'. Some recent books, such as *The Power of Nice* by Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval and *The Upside of Your Dark Side* by Todd Kashdan and Robert Biswas-Diener, have taken this debate further. In an article written on the 500th anniversary of the writing of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the authors John T. Scott and Robert Zaretsky summarize the crux of Machiavelli's teachings:

Yet Machiavelli teaches that in a world where so many are not good, you must learn to be able to not be good. The virtues taught in our secular and religious schools are incompatible with the virtues one must practice to safeguard those same institutions. The power of the lion and the cleverness of the fox: These are the qualities a leader must harness to preserve the republic.<sup>28</sup>

Leaving aside the academic debate, what do we see on the operational landscape? Kissing up and kicking down may not be a great human virtue, but in the corporate world, many have successfully adopted this route to reach the top of the leadership ladder. On the global scene, the Western Bloc sees shades of Machiavelli in the leadership style of Russian President Vladimir Putin, with the Western media calling him 'Czar Putin'. To the world he appears to be a ruthless autocrat and his forcible annexation of Crimea has shown that he hardly cares for world opinion where Russian interests are involved.

Says Ilya Matveev, a researcher and lecturer based in St Petersburg, Russia,

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<sup>28</sup>John T. Scott and Robert Zaretsky, 'Why Machiavelli Still Matters', *The New York Times*, 9 December 2013

Putin's style of governance has always assumed, on the one hand, the elimination of independent players and, on the other, the encouragement of competition between dependent players. Here, Putin acts as a referee between them, making his role irreplaceable.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the fact that a lot of negativity surrounds Putin's leadership style, he has been rated as the sixth most admired person in the world in an annual global survey conducted by pollster YouGov. Putin's global popularity is neither sudden nor accidental—he has been riding the popularity wave for quite a few years now.

While the role of virtuosity in leadership has always been accepted and acclaimed, some amount of empirical data exists on the other side of the spectrum, which suggests that certain not-so-desirable qualities could also contribute to leadership success. Attributes such as a deliberate display of power, narcissism, self-promotion or the act of manoeuvring one's success through lies and fabrications have also been seen to contribute to leadership success.

In a brilliant article in *The Atlantic*, 'Why It Pays to Be a Jerk', Jerry Useem argues that 'a touch of jerkiness could be helpful'.<sup>30</sup> He analyses research findings of Wharton professor Adam Grant's book, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*. He also discusses the research conducted by Professor Donald Hambrick of Penn State on narcissist CEOs. Interestingly, in the respective studies, both the narcissist CEOs and Grant's 'givers' formed a U-shaped distribution, clustering near both extremes of the success spectrum.

Useem quotes Hambrick as suggesting that 'there is such

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<sup>29</sup>Ilya Matveev, 'The big game: Ulyukaev, Sechin and Russia's neopatrimonial privatisation', *Opendemocracy.net*, 21 November 2016

<sup>30</sup>Jerry Useem, 'Why It Pays to Be a Jerk', *The Atlantic*, June 2015



a thing as a useful narcissist'. Unlike average CEOs, narcissist CEOs, being gamblers, are more prone to making high-profile acquisitions, some of which will obviously work out. 'To the extent that innovation and risk-taking are in short supply in the corporate world, narcissists are the ones who are going to step up to the plate,' Useem quotes Hambrick in *The Atlantic* article.

However, the interesting part is that the contribution of the not-so-desirable traits has been ignored by leadership experts, confirming that people only see what they are motivated to see and believe.