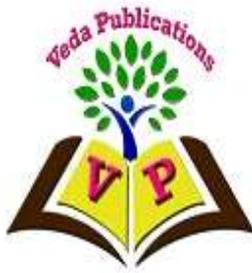


**Special Issue:**

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**LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE TIMES OF CRISIS/
PANDEMIC**

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In the present article I am going to discuss Leadership and Responsibility during the Pandemic: with special reference to Sonu Sood.

Leader is essentially someone who takes responsibility and ownership, moves ahead for the cause he feels for. His reactions are different from those around him, he doesn't keep silent when he sees things happening in front of him. He defies the times. He may create a movement with his actions. He has an awareness of the plight of people. He doesn't just see, he acts, he takes initiative. He owns the situation, he feels the problem like his own. The one who does so is the true leader.

On many levels the pandemic made us confront a frightening situation, brought us to face with a disease we knew very little of. We were confronted by an unknown enemy, a mystery disease. A pandemic of the measure we are witnessing now, needs many heroes to stand up for the society. Not surprisingly though none emerged from the most expected quarters like our politicians, or even the corporate houses. No one was moved enough with the vision of hundreds and thousands of labourers who had travelled several states away from home in search of work. Most of them were daily wagers working on construction sites, factories etc. Their home were either the construction sites or roads. Sudden declaration of the lockdown meant they would have no money from tomorrow, and also no home, as the construction work had to be stopped, and sites to be locked. No work means, no wage. Suddenly these people felt they have no place of their own, no shelter, no home, in the big cities, where they worked. They were scared. And in fear and desperate times, you want to run to the comfort of your home, your own village. That's what they all did. They left for their homes.

These are citizens who ostensibly do not exist, nobody thought about them when the lockdown was declared. Suddenly men after men, families after families started to be seen on roads walking on our highways with their belongings, initially in the hope of catching a bus or a train. To be told there are no buses and trains, no mode of travel and transportation.

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Who are these people? Why are they on roads? Where have they come from? Where are they going?

TV anchors started asking these questions. We were all witnessing this occurrence. Some of us felt helpless, and also sorry for them. Many of us were angry at their level of illiteracy and lack of awareness to not understand what a lockdown meant.

Our government was taken by surprise as well. They had completely overlooked their existence. No one gave a thought to the migrant workers who work in the cities, away from their homes, building our homes.

One man amongst us was shaken to his core, he knew "he had to do something about it" "A popular villain of the Indian cinema world could see that their need was much more than mere food packets, and bottles of water. He could put himself in their shoes and feel the sense of plight and misery, of all these men and women, old and young, hundreds and thousands of them.

This man, Sonu Sood says he found his "karma on the streets of Mumbaiwhen I personally went to distribute truckloads of food packets, and other essentials to migrant workers".

He says he could connect to memory of his childhood, "Our door was always open and the dining table always had more than just one nuclear family around it. Hospitality, sharing your roti with others, is an organic Punjabi trait. There is a tradition in most of our homes to welcome people to our table.....The more people we feed, the better we sleep". He is a celebrity and could have sat in his ivory tower, and could have food packets delivered by remote control. But then he would have never witnessed for himself the trauma of the migrant workers and how inadequate the mere food packets were for them. He felt their "despair".

People from all "castes, regions" were there. Sood felt their vacant eyes were asking him, "Do you really think that by handing out these packets you have done enough.?" He felt, he says in his book "conscience rubbing my eyes and waking up."

"I reinvented myself during the lockdown when I met these millions of migrants". The images of people "walking to their children without any means were very disturbing and I thought I need to come out and help them. That's why I did what I did and I am thankful to God that he guided me right". (Showbiz. 22-03-2021. Noida Times. TOI).

These are the words of Sonu , who turned out to be the surprise Messiah, in the times of pandemic.

Responsibility is a mindset, that says ..."I am the person who is going to make this happen". It could rise from your belief, or may rise from a social force that binds you to do this.

1000s of migrant workers were stuck at various parts of our country with no help from anyone. We've all read various news-pieces about migrant workers in this lockdown that brought tears to our eyes. But this one man Sonu Sood, he actually came forward and arranged 100s of buses and sent migrants to their home states. It all started when Sonu Sood sponsored a total of 10 buses full of migrant workers with meal kits from Maharashtra to Karnataka.

He tied up with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and began offering meals to over 45,000 migrant labourers every day in Andheri, Jogeshwari, Juhu and Bandra to help those displaced by COVID-19.

In his book "I Am No Messiah" , he says "Something that stuck me, and is stuck in my mind even now , was the vast sea of humanity before me. Innumerable people on the highway, below bridges, on the sidewalks, social distancing a distant dream". It awakened his conscience , he felt an "inner turmoil " , that bothered him, then he decided to "go down an untried, fulfilling path- the road less traveled."

In his book he says "I subjected myself to my own version of a SWOT – self assessment- strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats". He knew the world outside was in a chaotic situation, and that he had to do



something about it. He knew he “had to do something about it”. He needed to go out there and be a front line worker. Sood says he was sure that he was “unafraid of facing the unknown, confident about overcoming hurdles and taking them head – on”.

We all know Leadership involves having an overall attitude of responsibility. A responsible attitude manifests itself in behaviour. A responsible behaviour is tenuous and nuanced, at the same time it is important and palpable. The responsible leader exhibits this behaviour in multiple directions. It encompasses an overall set of values and attitudes. As Sood writes in his book “I had a conversation with my conscience.”

The leader feels an innate connection with the work he is doing, for the people he is doing. As Sood says “What drove me out when I could have sat home feeling virtuous? The answer to that was an inexplicable restlessness inside me.” The leader feels pride when the people succeed and is obviously pained during challenging periods. The bond that develops between the leader and people is strong. However, leader's personal goals are always subordinated to group goals.

Leaders manifest the quality of responsible behaviour through a willingness to take charge and not to shrink from decisions. It could mean giving up being “one of the group” and instead accepting the role of the leader. The only capability required for leadership are the foresight to see what must be done, the fortitude to do it, and compassion and resilience to act for the good of all. Wisdom, courage, compassion give an essential humane quality and provide a great insight into what is required to act responsibly.

Responsible behaviour includes doing things for which there is no immediate reward; but it is for people's best interests. Nowhere does the attitude of the responsible leader manifest itself more clearly than in the use of resources around him. The responsible leader uses resources with even greater care than if they were their own. Sonu Sood writes in *I Am No Messiah*, “People knew me, they recognised my face, and my name could open doors. I had the distinct advantage of being able to stand beside a stranger in need and give him the reassuring comfort that I was watching out for him.”

If a leader demonstrates responsibility, he will get authority. Authority is bestowed if the leader exhibits responsible behaviour. Eisenhower once said, “The supreme quality of leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office.” Honesty and integrity are two important ingredients which make a good leader. How can you expect your followers to be honest when you lack these qualities yourself? Leaders succeed when they stick to their values and core beliefs and without ethics, this will not be possible.

In “*I Am No Messiah*”, he says “Something that stuck me, and is stuck in my mind even now in my mind, was the vast sea of humanity before me. Innumerable people on the highway, below bridges, on the sidewalks, social distancing a distant dream.”

We all saw these pictures on our Television screens in the comfort of our homes. Some of us even empathised with their plight. Some blamed the government for the hurried announcement of the lockdown. A couple of conscientious societies cooked meals for them.

Sonu Sood also started by giving truckloads of food, water, and other basic essentials for nearly 50000 people. Some migrants requested him to give food for ten days, as they would be going by foot to Karnataka from Mumbai.” And it was then that the reality of their ordeal hit me”, he writes in his book.

He could empathise, and could feel the plight of these migrants, thousands of kilometres away from their homes, stuck in a hopeless situation with their families, with no shelter, no food, no support from any agency, ready to walk all these miles barefoot, with little children in their arms. At this point, he took the initiative and asked some of them to hold on for two days.



The leader in him told him that what he was doing till now is not enough, and was definitely not the solution to this real, huge problem right in front of us on our highways. Just giving away food packets might make you feel you have done your bit. But is that enough?

A Leader should develop empathy with the people . Unfortunately, most leaders follow a dictatorial style and neglect empathy altogether. Due to this, they fail to make a closer connection with their followers. Understanding the problems of your followers and feeling their pain is the first step to become an effective leader. Even that is not enough until you work hard and provide your followers with the suitable solution to their problems.

When the going gets tough, the tough gets going. Is clearly what happened next. You might have heard this adage many times, but did you know that great leaders also follow this rule. They are resilient and have a positive attitude. Irrespective of how difficult the circumstances might be, you will find them rallying their followers. While most people are busy in complaining about the problems, great leaders always focus on solutions, not the problems.

And so, he further says in his book “ The corollary to the first thought was that newfound wisdom had to translate into action.” He decided “he was going to stick his neck out and go the whole hog”, once the decision was made, that he was going to put “wheels under the feet of the people who wanted to go home”. He saw that people who had been left to fend for themselves in the pandemic and peak of Indian summer, had lost all hope that someone cared enough to help them reach home.They were not in a state to expect any help from anywhere. Sonu requested them to trust him. At this point he writes “Questions that whirred in my head: How could we allow those who helped build our homes to not reach their homes? How could we turn away unaffected from their trauma as if it had little to do with us?”

As a leader, it becomes your job to take responsibility. Just as you realise there is a problem that is affecting people, it needs to be solved. A leader chooses to own the issue without blaming anyone, take the responsibility. Instead of spreading blame, spread accountability. By taking share, you will inspire others to hold themselves .Sonu was leaving no stone unturned to ensure that all migrants reach their home.

Trust is very important in leadership.If you are not able to influence people positively to get things done, solve problems and advance people, they will not trust you. There is a clear and direct relationship between the level of trust in the people and your purpose. This applies even more in times of crisis or upheaval. The more challenging the situation, and the higher the stakes, the more urgent it is that you behave in a trustworthy way. You have to be extremely tough- minded on the issue. That should be non- negotiable. You will have to ask critical questions about the situation. But remember this is stressful time and emotions are heightened.In such times people don't trust easily, they feel there is not much they can rely on, they find it difficult to put faith in people.

So, it is imperative and crucial that the leader behaves with integrity while taking decisions. Leader has to present himself like a tenacious and persistently reliable individual. A leader owns the issue, holds himself accountable, makes a plan to fix it and execute the plan.

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If you are unsure about your own decisions and qualities, then your people will never follow you. As a leader, you have to be oozing with confidence, show some swagger and assertiveness to gain the respect of those you



want to help. This does not mean that you should be overconfident, but you should at least reflect the degree of confidence required to ensure that your followers trust you as a leader.

People look up to you and if you want them to give their all, you will have to be passionate about it too. When everybody sees you getting your hands dirty, they will also give their best shot. It will also help you to gain the respect of your subordinates and infuse new energy in your team members, which helps them to perform better. If they feel that you are not fully committed or lack passion, then it would be an uphill task for the leader to motivate his followers to achieve the goal.

Decisions taken by leaders have a profound impact on masses. A leader should think long and hard before taking a decision but once the decision is taken, stand by it. Although, most leaders take decisions on their own, but it is highly recommended that you consult other people involved before taking a decision. After all, they are the ones who will benefit or suffer from your decisions.

When it comes to accountability, you need to follow the approach highlighted by Arnold H Glasgow when he said, "A good leader takes little more than his share of the blame and little less than his share of the credit." Make sure that every one of your subordinates is accountable for what they are doing. If they do well, give them a pat on the back but if they struggle, make them realise their mistakes and work together to improve. Holding them accountable for their actions will create a sense of responsibility among your subordinates and they will go about the business more seriously.

What separates a leader from a follower? Steve Jobs answers this question, "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower." In order to get ahead in today's fast-paced world, a leader must be creative and innovative at the same time. Creative thinking and constant innovation is what makes you and your team stand out from the crowd. Think out of the box to come up with unique ideas and turn those ideas and goals into reality.

A leader will have to walk the talk for people to follow him. If there is inconsistency in what a leader says versus what he/she does, psychologists call this cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance describes the anxiety that one feels when there is a discrepancy between beliefs and behaviours.

Sonu Sood, was able to deliver on all of the above accounts. People could trust him. They could see sense of his commitment and integrity to their purpose. To date, the actor has sent millions of migrants back home—on buses and trains—and even helped with the international evacuations of students and Indians stranded overseas. He believes this is the best role he has played so far. "I believe I came to the city just to play this role. The kind of change that I could bring in the lives of these people is unreal," says Sood, who has come out with a book—I Am No Messiah—that gives an insight into the noble work he did during the pandemic. He's even launched the Pravasi Rojgar app to ensure grey- and blue-collar workers get jobs. Such was the popularity and promptness of his deeds that he was inundated with calls/messages and requests on social media throughout the day. At times, he offered help even when he was not tagged. For instance, he gifted a tractor to a farmer family in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh, after a video of two girls tilling the farm went viral on the internet. Such acts won him praise even from politicians, including Telugu Desam Party leader N Chandrababu Naidu.

Sood believes the prayers of people he has helped gave him the strength to carry out this monumental task. "The feeling of gratitude that I could see in their eyes was priceless. I felt this is my job," he says. "This is the best ever feeling in real life." However, he believes, his humanitarian work will continue to be his larger goal in life. "I can't stop at this. It's growing every day," he says.

The coronavirus pandemic posed the largest test political leadership, the world had ever witnessed. Every leader on the planet was facing the same potential threat. Every leader reacted differently, in his or her own style. And every leader has been judged by the results.



“German Chancellor Angela Merkel turned to science. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro rejects it. U.S. President Donald Trump’s daily briefings are a circus like spectacle, while Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi holds no regular briefings at all, even as he locks down 1.3 billion people.” (The Atlantic)

Jacinda Ardern, the 39-year-old prime minister of New Zealand, crafted a passage of her own. Her leadership style was one of empathy in this time of crisis. Her messages were clear, consistent, sobering and soothing. Her approach didn’t resonate with her people on an emotional level. It also worked remarkably well.

People felt that Arden “doesn’t preach at them; she’s standing with them,” Helen Clark, New Zealand’s prime minister from 1999 to 2008 said. “There’s a high level of trust and confidence in her because of that empathy.”

One of Arden’s innovations was frequent Facebook Live Chats that manage to be both informal and informative. During a session conducted in late March, just as New Zealand prepared to go on lockdown, she appeared in a well-worn sweatshirt at her home (she had just put her little daughter to bed, she explained) to offer guidance “as we all prepare to hunker down”. People needed to stay local, because what if they drove off to some remote destination and their car broke down? She said she knows as a parent that it’s really hard to avoid playgrounds, but the virus can live on surfaces for 72 hours. She connected with her people.

She expected the lockdown to last for some time, she also said that the cases may rise steeply even as New Zealanders began to hole up in their homes. Because of how the coronavirus behaves, “we won’t see the positive benefits of all of the effort you are about to put in for self-isolation ... for at least 10 days. So don’t be disheartened,” she said.

Ardern’s style was interesting and unusual — a world leader in comfy clothes just casually chatting with millions of people! Her approach was paired with policies that have produced real, world-leading results.

Since March 2020, New Zealand has been unique in picketing out a national goal of not just flattening the curve of coronavirus cases, as most other countries have aimed to do, but also eliminating the virus altogether. The health system has not been overloaded.

Ardern’s government also took decisive action right away. New Zealand imposed a national lockdown much earlier in its outbreak than other countries did in theirs, and stopped travellers from China in early February, before New Zealand had registered a single case of the virus. It closed its borders to all nonresidents in mid-March, when it had only a handful of cases.

Part of the reason for New Zealand’s success lies in its small size and isolated location (the country is home to around 5 million people—a population roughly equivalent to that of South Carolina). More importantly, though, New Zealand reacted swiftly after confirming its first case on February 28. The country opted for an ambitious strategy designed to stamp out the virus rather than mitigate its effects, says Ingrid Katz, the associate faculty director of the Harvard Global Health Institute. New Zealand ramped up widespread diagnostic testing early, created a meticulous nationwide contact tracing system, called for a strict stay-at-home order, and closed its borders while the number of confirmed cases was still very low, Katz notes. As a result, it managed to avoid the explosive epidemics seen in other parts of the world. “I say to all New Zealanders: the government will do all it can to protect you. Now I’m asking you to do everything you can to protect all of us. Kiwis – go home.”

In times of crisis perhaps it is a common and all too familiar response that we look to be saved by a hero: someone who would make inclusive decisions. A leader requires to have wisdom, courage, compassion, and humour. Responsibility and leadership is not just a person, it is leadership action. A crisis doesn’t require a hero, it requires action.



So Responsible Leadership is actually responsible action. Need of the hour is effective leadership. It is not heroes that we should yearn for it is action that we need. Such leadership must come from everywhere, "We cannot wait for great leadership to emerge for they are on short supply. We must light our own fires in darkness." Our guide to responsible leadership can only be our own selves, what it that we notice about the situation is, what is it we notice about ourselves and those around us, in the moment of the decision to act. Responsible leadership is acting with integrity in the moment of choice.

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