



Leadership Analysis of the Mahābhārata War Generals

Colonel Prof Dr N N Murthy

International Quality, Environment & Management Expert, Director, Jagruthi Kiran Consultants, Nagpur
(Industrial, Management & HRD Consultants)

Limca Record Holder - 29 Degrees from 21 Universities, *Hon Kentucky Colonel Commissioned by the
Governor of Kentucky State, USA*

President, Swadeshi Academy of Sciences & Arts (SwASA), Post Doctorate Research Scholar, Manipur
International University, Imphal, Manipur

Email: saraswatiputhra@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The **Mahābhārata** offers a rich canvas for analysing leadership through the actions and decisions of its war generals during the Kurukshetra conflict. This study examines the leadership styles, strategic competencies, ethical orientations, and decision-making patterns of prominent general such as Bhīṣhma, Droṇa, Karṇa, and Ashwatthama. By interpreting their conduct through modern leadership theories—transformational, transactional, ethical, and situational leadership—the paper identifies key organizational and strategic lessons. The study reveals that leadership effectiveness in the epic is shaped not only by competence and valour but also by ethical clarity, adaptability, and alignment with a justified cause (dharma). The contrast between the Pandava and Kaurava commanders highlights the role of moral legitimacy and unity of purpose in determining organizational success. The findings contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship by linking classical Indian thought with contemporary leadership and management studies.



1. Introduction

The **Mahābhārata**, one of the greatest epics of ancient India, is not only a literary masterpiece, but also a profound treatise on human behaviour, ethics, and governance. The Kurukshetra War, central to the narrative, presents a complex interplay of leadership, strategy, and moral dilemmas. The war features a diverse array of generals, each embodying unique leadership styles and personal values.

Commanders such as Bhīṣhma, known for his integrity and commitment, Droṇa, representing duty-bound leadership, Karṇa, exemplifying loyalty and sacrifice, Ashwatthama offer valuable insights into leadership mental dynamics. Their decisions and actions during the war illustrate how leadership is influenced by personal ethics, organizational roles, and external pressures.

In contemporary management studies, leadership is understood as a multidimensional construct involving vision, adaptability, ethical grounding, and team alignment. This paper aims to analyse the leadership approaches of the Mahābhārata war generals through this modern lens, exploring how their successes and failures can inform present-day organizational practices.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with the **Mahābhārata** has expanded significantly across disciplines such as philosophy, management, psychology, and leadership studies. Traditional commentaries primarily focused on dharma and ethical dilemmas, while modern interpretations have begun to examine its relevance to organizational behaviour and leadership theory.

Research on characters like Bhīṣhma and Droṇa highlights the tension between **duty (Svadharmā)** and ethical responsibility. Their adherence to the Kaurava cause despite moral reservations has been interpreted as a limitation of rigid, role-bound leadership. Conversely, analyses of Karṇa focus on **loyalty and personal honour**, often framing him as a tragic leader whose decisions were shaped by gratitude and social exclusion.

Recent interdisciplinary works in management studies explore the Mahābhārata as a case study in **Strategic Leadership and Organizational Dynamics**, examining themes such as team cohesion, conflict management, and decision-making under uncertainty. However, there remains a gap in systematically comparing the leadership styles of multiple war generals within a unified analytical



framework. This paper seeks to address that gap by integrating classical insights with modern leadership theories.

3. Findings and Discussion

The leadership analysis of the Mahābhārata war generals demonstrates that effective leadership is a synthesis of **strategic competence, ethical integrity, and adaptability**. Figures such as Bhīṣhma and Droṇa illustrate the limitations of leadership constrained by rigid duty and divided loyalties, while Karṇa exemplifies the power and peril of unwavering loyalty. In contrast Ashwatthama has mental imbalance while doing his duty.

The comparative study reveals that **moral legitimacy, unity of purpose, and openness to wise counsel** are crucial determinants of leadership success. The failure of the Kaurava generals underscores how internal conflict, ego, and ethical compromise can weaken even the most powerful organizations.

In contemporary contexts, the Mahābhārata continues to offer timeless lessons for leaders and organizations. It reinforces the idea that leadership is not merely about authority or capability, but about aligning actions with ethical principles and the greater good. Thus, the epic remains a valuable resource for understanding the complexities of leadership in both ancient and modern settings.

4. Leadership Analysis of Key War Generals

The Bhīṣhma, Dronacharya, Karna and Ashwatthama generals of the battle field found in the Mahabharata series give very useful insights into the conduct of middle and top leaders. Their business conducts give an idea of how the strength of governance, emotional stability, location of talent and ethical base affect the organizational culture during crisis.

- **Bhīṣhma:** The leadership of Bhīṣhma was both authoritative, but he was obligatory which brought stability, discipline and loyalty in the army. But he was so steadfast in his promise that it made him rigid, so that he could not ask questions to unethical authority or go with the times. His case demonstrates that too much rule-orientation and unquestioning obedience may effectively freeze the decision-making process and cause failure in an organization.
- **Dronacharya:** Dronacharya was a performance-based and skill-based leader who was good at talent management and discipline. However, he was emotionally prejudiced against Arjuna, and this created resentment, inequality and disengagement. His leadership demonstrates that being obsessed with



performance without being fair and being emotionally intelligent is harmful to the morale of the team and the stability of the succession.



Bhishma



Dronacharya



Karna



Ashwatthama

Figure: The Battlefield Generals of the *Mahābhārata War*

- **Karna:** Karna is high-potential talent in a poor environment. And even with supernatural talent, his insecurity and his loyalty with gratitude made him blind. Lack of fit between his talent and



organization culture resulted in compromised decisions. The moral of the story: talent should be nurtured in healthy, conducive environments in order to prevent poor performance and emotional dilemma.

- **Ashwatthama:** Ashwatthama failed to lead because of his failure to deal with stress, emotional pressure and mental agony. The tragedy caused him to act irrationally and unethically, since he became broken when Drona died. This shows that leaders who work under great pressure require mental health care, stress management, and emotional stability.



Figure: The Battlefield of the *Mahābhārata War*

- **Comparative Analysis of War Generals**



The group leadership practices by the war generals reveal different strategies, ethics, and team work. These leadership styles, strengths, weaknesses, and lessons to the organization are synthesized in the following table.

Table: Comparative Leadership Analysis of Key War Generals

General	Leadership Style	Strengths	Weaknesses	Organizational Lesson
Bhishma	Duty-bound, authoritarian stability	Governance consistency, discipline, loyalty	Ethical rigidity, inability to adapt, blind loyalty	Rules and loyalty must not override adaptability and moral reasoning
Dronacharya	Task-oriented, performance-focused	High skill development, goal-driven discipline	Emotional bias, favouritism, team resentment	Performance excellence must be balanced with fairness and emotional intelligence
Karna	Charismatic but misaligned leadership	High potential, loyalty, courage	Identity conflict, emotional insecurity, poor judgment	Misplacing talent and ignoring emotional needs leads to organizational underperformance
Ashwatthama	Emotion-driven, reactive leadership	Fierce commitment, battlefield capability	Burnout, emotional breakdown, unethical action	Mental health management is critical for ethical and stable leadership

According to Table, all the four generals had good leadership qualities, but they failed because of certain emotional and ethical deficiencies. The inflexibility of Bhishma, favouritism of Drona, false loyalty of Karna, and the emotional breakdown of Ashwatthama all show that an unbalanced leadership style, be it too rule-oriented, biased, insecure or purely emotional, will ultimately affect the performance of the organization negatively. On the whole, Table shows that successful leadership should be flexible, fair, emotionally intelligent, and make ethical decisions.



5. Discussion

This study was aimed at analyzing leadership, succession, and team dynamics using the narrative structure of Mahabharata, especially, the competition between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The discussion incorporates the thematic results in the existing organizational behaviour theories to bring out the relevance of old stories in the modern management environments.

a. Leadership Dynamics in High-Stake Environments

The review proved that leadership behaviour has a major impact on the organizational outcomes, which reflect the already accepted theories, including transformational and ethical leadership theory. This attribute of ethical and consultative leadership created trust, credibility, and shared spirits, all of which are related to good performance in the modern leadership. Conversely, the dysfunctional leadership style of Duryodhana is characterized by egotistical and autocratic decision-making, which leads to the disintegration of an organisation and low morale.

The role of Krishna supports the value of advisory leadership and mentorship. His impact is similar to strategic consultancy and executive coaching in the modern organisation, demonstrating how advisory functions can offset the lack of leadership and promote team cohesion. Therefore, the epic demonstrates a multi-layered approach of leadership model in which ethics, consultation, and strategic advisory support, come out as accepted driving forces of organizational performance and sustainability.

b. Succession Planning as a Strategic Imperative

The leadership pipeline struggle between Kauravas and Pandavas emphasizes the outcome of non-specific pipelines, favoritism and lack of mentoring, which are quite modern to any organization today. The modern development of succession planning literature is based on the concept of transparency, the organized development of talents, and equal opportunities; the Mahabharata also does not miss explaining that ambiguous succession is not only discontinuous to the line of succession, but also may cause structural disintegration.

Preference of Dhritarashtra to Duryodhana and failure to offer systematic mentorship to all heirs are sure signs of the organizations within which prejudice, informal organization and lack of developmental channels undermine the confidence of the institutes. These results verify that the succession planning



should be standardized, objective and skill based to ensure that the organization remains stable in the long term.

c. Team Dynamics and Organizational Cohesion

The difference between Pandava and Kaurava team behaviour supports the existing theoretical background of team cohesion, psychological safety, and mutual problem-solving. The Pandavas were high-performing teams, and they demonstrated the following features: open communication, mutual respect, and a single mission, which brought about strategic agility and stable performance. Their achievement explains the value of trust and joint leadership roles in making teams resilient.

On the other hand, the disintegrated structure, in-fighting, and secretive hierarchical nature of the Kauravas is consistent with empirical data that the lack of trust and poor communication within a team results in the inability to adapt, innovate, and maintain the performance in a stressful situation. These results highlight the need to foster inclusive channels of communication, common interests, and conflict resolving mechanisms by organizations.

d. Leadership Failures and Psychological Dimensions

Leadership practices of Bhishma, Dronacharya, Karna and Ashwatthama bring more understanding to the leadership weaknesses. Their inefficiency such as being ethically resistant, favouring, identity conflict, emotional breakdown reflects psychologically and emotionally difficult situations that a leader has to endure in a high-stress situation in the present world. The results of the study reveal that even the most talented or loyal people are not capable of being good leaders when emotional intelligence, flexibility, or moral principles are undermined.

This justifies the necessity of leadership development programs, including those related to emotional regulation, bias awareness and ethical decision making as well as stress management. In particular, the Ashwatthama failure highlights the urgency of the introduction of mental health issues in the organizational leadership strategies.

6. Conclusion

This study gives a conclusion that the leadership dynamics, the inefficient succession, and the conflicting behavior of the teams as depicted in the Mahabharata offer powerful and associated lessons to the modern organizational practice. It is found that ethical, emotionally intelligent, and consultative



leadership, which had been the cases with the Pandavas and their teachers, bring about trust, cohesiveness, and long-term success, and authoritarian, prejudiced, and egoistic leadership that the Kauravas exhibited bring about war, instability, and failure of the organization.

Absence of succession planning and favouritism in Kuru kingdom also explains problems that are evident in business worlds where people cannot have a clear picture of the leadership process. Also, it is found in the analysis of how cohesive teams based on communication and purpose tenets also get a lot compared to units filled with competition and lack of effective coordination. This paper proves the necessity that organizational wisdom be turned into an epic wisdom to ensure long term organization resilience, efficacy and harmony by providing ethical leadership, strategic advisory support, humane judgment, and systematic succession planning.

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