

“Effective Executive Communication, the Bhagavad Gita Way”

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Abstract: Communication is the life blood of an organization. As free blood circulation is a must for the survival and growth of human body, so is free flow of communication a must for an organization. The Bhagavad Gita is literally translated as ‘Song Celestial’ and is essentially a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, the most important among the Pandava Princes. Gita forms part of the famous epic ‘Maha Bharata’ and it consists of 18 chapters and 700 stanzas. Gita is one of the basic books of Hinduism. In this paper an attempt is made to interpret a particular stanza of Gita as an infallible guide for effective communication. According to Gita, effective communication is that which contains the truth, which is beneficial to the listener, pleasant to hear and which is made only after self study. An executive who follows the guidelines provided by Gita for effective communication is sure to have good rapport with his bosses and subordinates and also will accomplish the objectives of his communication.

Key words: Austerity of speech, Base emotions, Bhagavad Gita, Communication, Self study.

I. Introduction

Communication is the life blood of an organization. As free blood circulation is a must for the survival and growth of human body, so is free flow of communication a must for an organization. Therefore every employee in an organization should know how to communicate. Especially today, the success of an executive is often judged in terms of his ability to communicate. Sometimes this ability to communicate assumes more importance than the domain knowledge of the individual. Therefore communication has become one of the most important constituents of soft skills and executives are often sponsored to attend training programmes where they learn the best and effective methods to communicate. The Bhagavad Gita which is literally translated as ‘Song Celestial’ in is essentially a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, the most important among the Pandava Princes. Gita forms part of the famous epic ‘Maha Bharata’ and it contains 18 chapters and 700 stanzas. In this paper an attempt is made to interpret a particular stanza of Gita (Chapt 17: Stanza 15) as an infallible guide for effective communication.

II. The Bhagavad Gita

As already stated, the Bhagavad Gita which is literally translated as ‘Song Celestial’ in English by Sir Edwin Arnold is a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, the most important among the Pandava Princes. Gita forms part of the famous epic ‘Maha Bharata’ believed to have been composed by Sage Veda Vyasa about five thousand years ago. Gita is one of the basic books of Sanathana Dharma, which is today known as Hinduism. After due deliberations, a war is declared between the Pandavas and their cousins the Kouravas. But when the war is about to begin Arjuna suddenly and most unexpectedly wants to withdraw from it. He advances quite a lot of arguments to stop the war and even goes to the extent of becoming a monk. Krishna now assumes the role of a ‘Guru’ and offers counseling to Arjuna. At the end, Arjuna declares that all his delusions or confusions have been dispelled and that he is now mentally prepared to fight the war against the Kourawas. The Gita consists of eighteen chapters and 700 stanzas. It is the firm conviction of the author that Gita is the greatest and the oldest book on personality development. Gita is verily a gold mine replete with hundreds of nuggets of gold which are not only value based but also absolutely pragmatic. Speaking about the relevance of Gita to the modern executives, Swami Bodhananda (1) categorically states “The Bhagavad Gita is important to the modern manager because the problems and situations he faces are similar to the ones which Arjuna faced”. Now let us move on to the relevant stanza and the message contained therein.

III. Austerity of Speech

First we will provide the transliteration of the stanza

*anudvega-karam vākyaṁ satyaṁ priya-hitam ca yat
svādhyāyābhyasanam caiva vān-mayaṁ tapa ucyate*

BG.Ch:17.Stanza, 15.

Literal Meaning: ‘Austerity of speech consists in speaking in a manner that will not agitate the minds of the listeners or enkindle the base emotions of the listener or his passion; the communication should be true, it must be beneficial to the listener and also pleasant. One should also engage in self study.’

Here austerity refers to refinement or excellence of communication. People are often distinguished in terms of their capacity to communicate. Power of expression is one of the primary requisites of a successful executive. Through this stanza, Lord Krishna is teaching Arjuna the fine art of communication. We should remember that Arjuna is a Prince and in the modern parlance he is comparable to a CEO. Therefore, whatever Krishna tells Arjuna is squarely applicable to the modern executives as well. Now as per the above stanza (Gita) the following are the essentials of a good communication.

1. It should not agitate the mind of the listener
2. It should not in any way enkindle the base emotions of the listener
3. It should be the truth
4. It should be beneficial to the listener
5. It should be pleasant to hear.
6. Such communications should be made only after through self study

If we would thoroughly analyze these essentials, we would be certainly convinced that these are the characteristics which would make the communication of the present day executives very effective. Now let us look at these attributes more closely and in some detail.

3. a. It should not agitate the mind of the listener and it should not in any way enkindle the base emotions of the listener

An executive should talk with poise and a composed mind. There should be no trace of agitation when the executive talks to his boss, subordinates, customers or any others. Nor should he agitate the mind of the listener. The other party to the communication should not feel hurt or humiliated by the words of the executive. “The function of communication is more than transmitting information. It also deals with emotions, which are very important in interpersonal relationships between superiors, subordinates and colleagues in organizations” (3). Many a time, an executive regrets for his words or the way he communicated his feelings to his subordinates. He should have an agenda in his mind when he talks for, his talk should not be aimless or unwarranted. While the executive’s communication should be natural and spontaneous, he should not appeal to the baser emotions of the listener. The executive should never commit the sin of provoking his subordinate or even his boss to commit an unpardonable act which may cause great loss or injury to the organization or any person either within the organization or outside.

But not infrequently a manager may have to chastise an undisciplined employee or a person who has committed a grave and costly blunder. Here the executive has to communicate his displeasure in a matter of fact and objective manner. The intention of the communication must be to reform or correct the erring employee.

3. b. It should be the truth

Whatever is communicated must be the truth. Truth is a great human value propagated by all religions and spiritual leaders from time immemorial. ‘In telling a lie, a lot of energy is wasted and this waste is avoidable if one adopts the policy of truthfulness in his expression’ (2). The executive should always speak the truth. He must be aware of the fact that he is always watched by his subordinates and the Gita has declared elsewhere that the juniors or the common people always take the seniors or men in high places as their role model and whatever is done by the great people are taken as the standard by the ordinary people. Therefore if the subordinates find that their executives are in the habit of uttering lies, the former will just emulate the latter and routinely utter lies.

Further, the executive will lose his credibility if is accustomed to utter lies. Not only that, the whole organization will be looked down upon by its customers and other stake holders. For, in an ethical organization, the significant people always talk the truth. It is not only ethical to speak the truth but also wise and pragmatic. A person, especially when he is holding a key position will never be respected or accepted if his communication is embellished with a lie, howsoever handsome or attractive it is.

3. c. It should be beneficial to the listener.

We listen to something only when it is relevant to us, useful to us and important to us. It is human nature to always enquire ‘What is there for me in this transaction’ or ‘How am I benefited by this’. Employees of organizations are no exceptions to this. Effectiveness of a communication depends upon both the speaker and the listener. When the executive is self centered in his communication, the subordinates do not attach much importance to his words. On the contrary, when the executive puts his words in such a way that the employee feels motivated to listen to it because he sees something useful or beneficial in the particular piece of communication, the communication becomes very effective and it would also achieve its purpose. The

executive must have empathy, capacity to understand his subordinates and imagination to communicate in a way that is appealing to them. But at the same time the communicator should not mince his words or compromise with the contents or objectives of the message. This is therefore an art, the art of communicating a message in the way the listener likes it and eagerly listens to it. Lord Krishna, Jesus Christ, Bhagawan Buddha and Ramakrishna Paramahansa had mastered this art and they were excellent communicators.

3. d. It should be pleasant to hear.

The executive may not have the choice in the matter of messages that he has to pass on to his subordinates or bosses. But the selection of words is definitely his choice. “Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba always emphasizes on speaking the truth and speaking it politely and pleasantly.” (4) He says, “If you cannot oblige, you can at least speak obligingly.” Thiruvalluvar the great Tamil poet in his immortal ‘Tirukkural’ (“Couplets”) beautifully compares harsh words to an unripe fruit. He says,

“To use unpleasant or harsh words, when kind words are there,
Is like picking up a bitter unripe fruit when the sweet ripe fruit is very much there”

When we use harsh or unpleasant words it will annoy and hurt the listener. On the contrary when we employ sweet and pleasant words, they comfort and please the listener. Communication is the greatest tool in the armour of the executive that helps him establish excellent interpersonal relationship. It may not be an exaggeration here to state that sweet and soothing words are often listened to with great care and executives who use such words are always popular and effective among their subordinates. And as a subordinate, the executive himself expects his boss to talk to him in the pleasantest language possible. In marketing and industrial relations the executives concerned should always make it a point to employ pleasant words and avoid bitter or harsh words. They should always bear in mind the fact that once words have been uttered they can never be taken back.

3. e. Such communications should be made only after through self study.

Gita being a spiritual text the traditional interpretation here is that we should study the Vedas. But when we interpret the stanza as a guide for executive communication, self study should be understood to mean the study of books and materials pertaining to one’s own field. Domain knowledge is a must for any executive. And this knowledge is acquired only after proper study. More than four hundred years ago the great English writer Francis Bacon said ‘Knowledge is power’. But the statement is still valid today. Knowledge should precede communication and words uttered without knowledge will be shallow and waste. Knowledge follows thorough study and words flow fluently, coherently and in an attractive manner from a knowledgeable person. Further when person makes it a habit to speak only after due deliberations and a thorough study of the relevant subject, his words are respectfully listened to and often complied with. And such words never go waste. It may not be irrelevant here to mention that this particular focus on self study is equally applicable to the teachers also. There is also another significance attached to this rule. As a student of management we are told that one of the key functions of an executive or manager is to guide his subordinates and give him necessary instructions for the proper performance of his duties. Now, to guide or instruct the subordinates, the boss should have adequate knowledge which is possible only after thorough study of the matter on hand.

IV. The Gita way of effective communication

What we have seen above are the guidelines offered by Gita for effective communication. The management texts which are mostly authored by westerners do not mention about any of the things Gita prescribes for effective communication. The reason is obvious. Gita is a product of Indian ethos, whereas all the traditional management books reflect the western values. In most of the training and development programmes offered to the executives the trainers just blindly adopt the materials prepared by American authors and which are sometimes irrelevant to the Indian executives and Indian Management scenario. It is high time that we incorporated into our executive development programmes, management principles and concepts which are value based and advocated by Indian culture and spirituality from time immemorial.

V. Conclusion

Communication is vital for every organization and it is often compared to the blood circulation in the human body. Bhagavad Gita which is known as the Song of the Divine forms part of the famous Indian ethics ‘Maha Bharata’ and it consists of eighteen chapters and 700 stanzas. The Gita contains quite a lot of executive wisdom and in this paper an attempt is made to interpret one particular stanza of Gita which contains clear and effective guidelines for executive communication. According to Gita, effective communication is that which contains the truth, which is beneficial to the listener, pleasant to hear and which is made only after self study. The management texts which have been mostly written by western authors do not mention about any of the

things Gita prescribes for effective communication. In our country most of the training and development programmes offered to the executives are based on the training modules prepared by the westerners or adaption of their writings. Our managements would do well to incorporate into our executive development programmes, management principles and concepts which are value based and advocated by Indian culture and spirituality.

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