



Book Review: Harsh Verma's (2006) *The Avatar Way of Leadership*

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Much of the literature on leadership tends to rely on examples drawn from the European and North American experience, as well as from its mythology. In *The Avatar Way of Leadership*, Harsh Verma (2006) has attempted to reach specifically Indian readers using uniquely Indian examples, especially the wisdom contained in Indian folklore. Westerners who conduct business with Indians and scholars hoping to avoid ethnocentrism have much to learn from this book.

Barry Cooper (2001) described an exemplary book review as “an account of the context of the problem addressed in the work, an account of its contents, assumptions, and the logic of its argument, and only then an evaluation” (p. 2). This model lends itself nicely to a review of Harsh Verma's (2006) book on leadership titled *The Avatar Way of Leadership*.

Much of the literature on leadership tends to rely on the same stock of examples, commonly drawn from the European and North American experience. Writers frequently have cited real world leaders in the West, whether from business, politics, or the military, in order to give concrete illustrations of what works. It is an understandable attempt to give the reader a point of reference from what might already be familiar.

When Garry Wills wrote a series of leadership vignettes in 1994 titled *Certain Trumpets*, he chose individuals such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Ross Perot, and Martin Luther King, Jr., all figures in Western history. When Barbara Kellerman (2004) decided 10 years later to describe *Bad Leadership*, she drew from the same history to write about Al Dunlap and Bill Clinton.

Authors also have drawn from mythology peculiar to the West. The culture provides a reservoir of poetry, religion, and legend—narratives told to children and subsequently alluded to in ordinary conversation. The bookstores even contain guides on leadership based on Antigone, Santa Claus, and Wizard of Oz. Then, there are the figures who straddle two worlds, like King David and George Washington, who were actual persons yet have reached mythic proportions in the public imagination.

For many of the same reasons, leadership studies will recount important events in Western history, especially its wars and its voyages of discovery as well as dramatic business

news on the order of the Enron scandal. These occasions provide a context for leadership. Despite a shrinking globe, however, these contexts do not always apply to other cultures. References to iconic moments lose their power when readers in foreign lands have little or no familiarity with our narratives. In the same manner, readers in the West possess little interest in the contexts and cultures of other peoples.

A special niche has emerged for applying Eastern thought to leadership. Books now explain *The Tao of Leadership* (Heider, 1985), *Zen Lessons* (Cleary, 1989), and *The Art of War for Executives* (Krause, 1995). They proposed to introduce the West to these relatively unfamiliar perspectives. Again, the target audience would be Western readers.

Harsh Verma (2006) had a different mission. Through his book, he attempted to reach specifically Indian readers using uniquely Indian examples of leadership. He expressed concern that as his native land tends toward westernization, it will neglect its own heritage, especially the wisdom contained in Indian folklore such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These are epics of significance to India equivalent to the Old and New Testaments here or to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. After centuries of being passed down orally, these tales were eventually interwoven in verse and obtained status as sacred texts. Verma explained that these sources influenced Indian leadership as recently as the late 19th century, and he argued that they continue to resonate.

Harsh Verma studied social work and human resource development before teaching management at a college in India. Since that time, he has worked in the field of education and social development. Familiar to members of the International Leadership Association, Verma was the keynote speaker at the Crossroads seminar at George Washington University in September 2004. Today, he works in his native India.

It is only because of historical circumstances that readers in the West get to read his work in English so that we overhear what he is saying directly to his compatriots, something most of us cannot do in other Asian languages. Verma (2006) set out to depict a uniquely Indian context, rich in sacred texts, history, and contemporary events, even though he clearly understands that his audience will include Westerners.

Two groups of Western readers should investigate this context seriously. First, those who work increasingly with Indian partners and customers are advised to understand and appreciate their collaborators. Just as we might expect those from other countries to respect our values and beliefs when they come here, so also when we go there (and an increasing number of Westerners are going there), we owe a similar courtesy. But, it is more than that; it is more than observing a courtesy. It facilitates understanding, making business and politics easier to conduct with this increasingly powerful ally. The second group who should investigate Indian perspectives on leadership should be scholars hoping to avoid ethnocentrism in their work by taking the opportunity to step outside their own tradition.

Verma (2006) organized the book around three cultural figures known as Rama, Krishna, and Draupadi who serve as archetypes for three kinds of leadership. After briefly telling their stories, Verma broke out their distinctive characters, relationships, and strategies. In doing so, he also identified a variety of recent leaders along the way who exemplify these archetypes, illustrating how the avatars are still at work in Indian society. Their stories are often more compelling as they depict struggles that correspond to struggles the world over for profitability, peace, and justice.

Scholars in the West acquainted with the work of Carl Jung and James Hillman will recognize the descent of a deity to the earth in an incarnate form. Others would profit from

reading Verma's (2006) opening chapter in which he made the case for what he referred to as an Indian model of leadership based on these avatars. In his opinion, India will become a global power only by confidently embracing what he called its indigenous knowledge.

Just as Indian readers might become bewildered by the intricate story line of the American Civil War or the lives of the first Hebrew kings, trying to keep straight the sequence of events and the many roles people played, so too will Western readers sometimes lose orientation in this book. Verma (2006) assumed a greater knowledge of the texts than most of us possess. This is why he helpfully attached as an appendix three brief synopses of the biographies of Rama, Krishna, and Draupadi. Still, occasional passages will puzzle most readers who simply have no reason to know how Indian society works. In one sense, that experience reminds the Western reader how frustrating our treatment of leadership must be to others.

Verma (2006) acknowledged his is not the first Indian approach to studying leadership. He identified and distinguished three other approaches before explaining his own. *The Avatar Way of Leadership* takes seriously the "moderating influence of culture" (p. 2). In fact, Verma was shrewd to rely on venerable tradition while criticizing prevailing practices that he would like to see changed. He believes there is a "latent demand for change" (p. 101) awaiting leadership to challenge the status quo in India. His narratives indicate that tradition has always experienced renewal. It is not a stale or stagnant heritage so that reactionary trends can actually appear as betrayals of the vital spirit embodied in his three avatars.

As it turns out, Verma (2006) advocated for changes that would be characterized in the West as progressive or liberal, without repudiating capitalism or calling for political revolution. In other words, he offered a reformer's vision within the framework of ancient archetypes. Yet, this subtle agenda is not the centerpiece of the book. Verma also alluded to a growing animus of Indian-Americans against their cultural identity, a tendency that contributes to the marginalization of their heritage abroad. Such a trend clearly disturbs Verma, who prefers adapting to the present without disavowing the past.

In subsequent work, Verma would be advised to incorporate more of the findings from the West, though not because he would be expected to defer in any sense to an authority. It is just that in the course of stating implications for leadership in this book, he (2006) made numerous bare assertions that actually correlate to findings in the literature, findings that are not bound by culture. Many if not most of the lessons in his book would be applicable to the West. It does not serve his purpose to reinvent the wheel if adequate studies already exist. Furthermore, rather than working in isolation from the larger community of scholars, he can help to blend his voice and his perspective to an emerging conversation that spans the globe. To do that effectively, he will want to indicate more explicitly where his work fits in the larger project of understanding leadership.

Clearly, the people of India deserve to be represented in these conversations. If this work is any indication, one of their voices should be Harsh Verma's.

About the Author

Nathan Harter, Ph.D. was promoted to full professor in 2008 after serving 19 years in southeastern Indiana teaching nontraditional aged students in Purdue University's Department of Organizational Leadership. His 2006 book on leadership titled *Clearings in the Forest* was issued by the Purdue University Press.

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