



# Unconditional leadership

As said by General Colin Powell, 'leadership' is the art of accomplishing more than what the science of management says is possible. If asked to picturise 'leadership', what would you see? How would it look? What would it wear and drive? What qualities would you find in it? What recognition would you associate with it? What name would you assign to it? From Gandhi to Obama what human qualities must we learn, imbibe and practise everyday to succeed as a leader? Read on...

Sanjeev Baitmangalkar

**T**he principles of leadership remain in spite of the domain, be it leading a nation, a family or an enterprise. Late Air Commodore K D Singh AVSM is one such person who walked every character quality of a leader and an excellent human being. Singh was the principal who in 1963 started and built the Sainik School at Bijapur after the two invasions. People

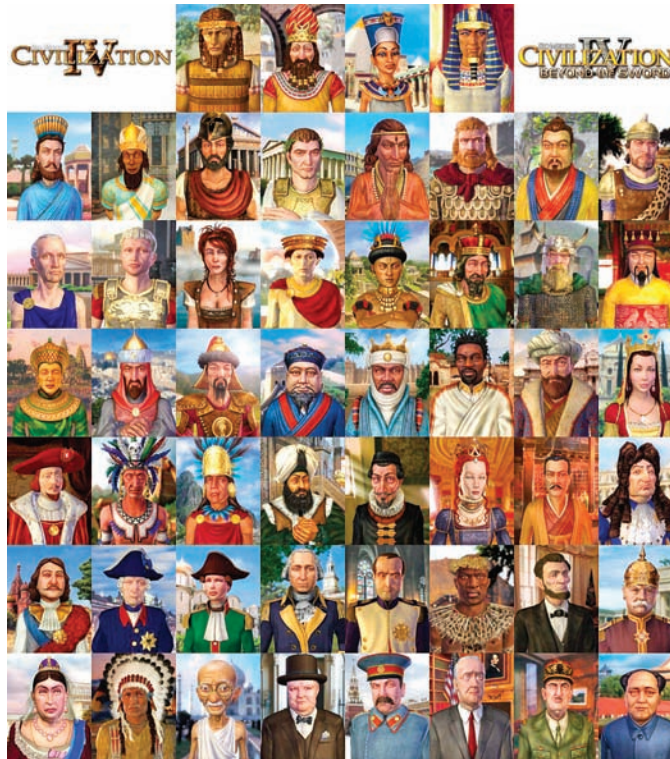
remember him with the highest reverence. What made him so distinguished & different? Here is what we can learn and imbibe.

## Character and charisma

Singh possessed strong character that laid the foundations for his excellence as a leader and a human being. We appeared for the National Defence Academy (NDA) entrance exam, but my number was not in the results announced. Everyone and I too thought that I had failed. I could do nothing but hang my head in shame.

Few months later, we appeared for the SSLC exam. Seeing my marks, I got a dressing down from my principal Singh saying, "I have seen your SSLC marks, and I think you have deliberately failed the NDA exam." I felt sad & ashamed and was hurt not by his words but that I had failed (at that time I thought so). When I joined the school we had just been attacked by Pakistan and China, and I had conjured all kinds of chivalrous dreams of how I would fight defending my motherland. So it was like I had to see my dreams blown away.

Six months later, I received a surprise letter from NDA that said "The principals of all Sainik Schools are authorized to send a certificate to an equivalent of passing 10<sup>th</sup> standard exam. Since your certificate has not reached us by the specified date, your result is being withheld and shall not be declared." I was disheartened. Why did it have to be like this? Why me?





I met the principal; ; he read the letter and said, "I am extremely sorry for this and all that I have said. I will take the superintendent to task. I am really and truly sorry." His words and manner wiped away my guilt feeling & sadness.

What distinguishes a true leader and an excellent human being is his ability to say "I am truly sorry" and mean it. His words of regret condoning my results and accepting me for who I was put me back on life's track and helped me make a second beginning. Since I hold him with such high reverence and respect, his acceptance was important to me. An unconditional leader, he did not fail me. I met him again after 32 years and I asked him, "Sir, do you remember ...?" He had a warm smile and said with admiration, "Yes ... I hear you have done well." His eyes told me he meant every bit of what he said - another characteristic leadership quality and of an excellent human being.

Building a Sainik School from the drawing boards was no small task. He had to deal with bureaucracy and sanctions. He must have had tremendous problems His actions demonstrated that he was willing to risk his success, sacrifice his time, spare no effort to solve the problems and build the institution, but not willing to compromise his integrity. And that takes character. How a leader deals with circumstances discloses his character. A crisis does not make character, but certainly reveals it.

"Adversity is a cross road that makes a person choose one of the two paths - character or compromise," writes John Maxwell. Every time you choose character, you become stronger even if the choice brings negative results. Development of one's character is at the heart of one's development, not just as a leader but also as a human being. Actions speak louder than words. Action is the real indicator of character. Your character determines who you are. Who you are determines what you see. What you see determines what you do. So a leader's character is synonymous with his actions. If his intentions and actions are working against one another, then looking at his character will tell you why.

### Courage and persistence

Singh was a charismatic leader. Within the practice of leadership, charisma is thought to be the quality that, though often considered metaphysical, represents the hallmark of

inspirational leadership. If leadership has something to do with inspiring a cadre of followers to do things not only in their own interest but also for the greater good, then we certainly need individuals who have a special talent to recruit others to work together towards a common cause. Often, such individuals have heroic qualities because they persist in spite of the odds against them. They possess characteristics, such as courage & persistence, to face & prevail against those who would resist their noble efforts.

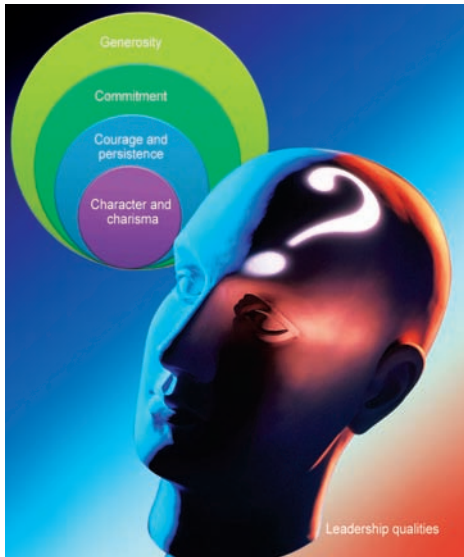
### Commitment

Singh was a leader high on commitment. He brought two Presidents Dr Zakir Hussain and V V Giri to visit the institution besides other ministers and military brass. Col B G V Kumar (Retd) recalls that when his conduct and behaviour were unbecoming of his responsibilities, the principal promptly removed from his position of school captain - a clear demonstration that discipline and good behaviour are above rank.

A good leader looks for the best in his men and recognises true potential. In spite of his demotion, Kumar was still picked to represent the school at the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, the adventure camp at Pahalgam and the mountaineering course at Darjeeling. For a leader, it is important to recognise competence and nurture it. It was a matter of time before Singh let Kumar wear the flaps of the school captain again, knowing that he had learnt his lessons. With his actions, Singh not only punished bad behaviour but also stood tall helping build back one's confidence and moral.



K D Singh with his team (sitting in the middle of the front row)



The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire. Individual commitment to a group effort is what makes a team, company, society work and civilization work. Although his talent created the potential for greatness, he could not have influenced people without his commitment. The will to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full potential... these are the keys that will unlock the door to personal excellence. To Singh, it was all this and much more, because everyone else was depending on him. He was truly committed; his commitment inspired others and attracted people. He showed that he had conviction. Followers believe in the leader only if the leader believes in the cause. People will buy into the leader first, then his/her vision.

### Generosity

David Swartz, a professor and author, writes, "The size of a man is not determined by his rank, designation or recognition, it's neither the house he lives in nor the amount of money he has or makes, but by the size of his thinking." To this, I would like to add that the size of the man is also determined by the size of his heart. Singh was a magnanimous, empathetic and a generous leader. Col Ashok R Patil (Retd) calls him the 'Lion-hearted K D Singh' because:

Patil's family could not support his school fees. He lived on borrowed support and kindness of fellow students. One day when the term ended and the boys were going home for vacation, Patil went to the principal and asked if there were any menial jobs that he could do around the school to pay for his fees and expenses at the school. Singh asked, "Isn't your presence with your mother at such moments in life a greater

need than your request for work?" For Patil it seemed like the end of his world where all hopes were lost. Then he said, "Go son, all your requirements will be taken care of and you will not be asked for any payments till you graduate and are capable of repaying." Ashok paid his dues when he was selected to the Indian Military Academy and was eligible for a loan.

You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you. Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." Leadership is more about the heart and less about the head. Generosity is not the sum given, but the manner in which it is bestowed. With this act, not only did Singh seal the future of Patil in the safe cusp of his hands but also taught him an unforgettable lesson in generosity, thus rekindling faith, trust and hope in the hearts of Patil's entire family. Like Mother Teresa once said, "We cannot do great things on this Earth, only small things with great love."

People remember great leaders in many ways. Gen Kamath remembers him for his melodious voice singing *bhajans*, and Commander Vinod Joseph (Retd), marine trainer who works out of London and Singapore, calls him 'a man of wisdom' and says, "There is a saying in Africa that when a wise man passes away, his library burns. In other words, all the wisdom that was part of the person vanished as the candle blew away in the wind."

As a student of leadership, I try to study various persons in leadership positions. From the vast many, Singh stands out as picture perfect as a leader; surely, there are others and it is for one to learn the character qualities from such leaders, imbibe and live by them so that it can enrich the organisation & lives that we lead. **MMT**



Sanjeev Baitmangalkar is the CEO of Stratmann Consulting. He has expertise in lean manufacturing and has successfully transformed discrete companies to lean, BPR, turnarounds, supply chain management, industrial marketing, machine tools and product development. He imparts training in areas of finance and leadership while working with overseas and Indian clients. He is an invited speaker on the subject of strategy & management and an external faculty on strategic management at B-schools. He can be contacted at [scdesk@gmail.com](mailto:scdesk@gmail.com)