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Leadership - What's it?

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Looking around the world one finds that there is an acute shortage. While there are shortages of all kinds, one that impacts society most is the absence of leaders. We can speak repeatedly of societal transformation but what really causes change to happen is because of the leaders who point the way to the future.

In an era where democracy continues to be the desired goal for most societies, it is also appalling to know that democracy does not throw up the best leaders. In fact the election process in the United States indicates that candidate with the deepest pockets is more likely to win than the person who is more competent. While Barack Obama is already a beacon of hope to all parts of the world, particularly as his story fuels the dreams of all outsiders, it is interesting to note that one of the reasons for his victory was his substantial campaign fund. Estimates indicate that he spent over \$650 million on his road to the White House, and some do argue that the reason for his final success was that he outspent the McCain campaign by a substantial margin.

Totalitarian states throttle the voice of people whereas democracies are supposed to reflect the will of the people. Which begs an interesting question - does democracy guarantee the best leaders? Lee Iacocca, the colorful American business icon, wrote a book, 'Where have all the leaders gone?' and his lament was that the leadership pipeline in America had dried up. According to Iacocca, leaders are made in times of crisis, but one may well wonder, looking at the quality of present day leaders in young democracies, whether it is the will of the people to be led by corrupt, two-timing, immoral law breakers who have been elected by the power of the financial muscle, and in some cases, by physical intimidation?

Contrast this with earlier times when leaders were known for their sterling character and charismatic appeal, besides their deep knowledge of history that enabled them to see issues in perspective. If you view leadership from a wider perspective than just the political arena, it would be interesting to note that the paucity of leadership is not limited to the political field alone. The Roman Catholic Church is doing its best to find answers for their failure to take steps against their clergy when complaints had been received against priests who had been reported for molesting those whom they were supposed to guide. Take another field, sports. Sporting leaders today are known for their ability to attract sponsorship and in turn are rolling in dollars. Sadly, these icons of youngsters have become notorious for their misdemeanors off the field and for their foul language and tantrums on the field. With performance enhancing drugs a standard fixture in the sporting world, parents are worried whether these sporting heroes are worthwhile examples for their young children.

Warren Bennis, doyen of leadership research, mentions in his learned writing that credibility is at a premium these days. Looking at current trends, he goes on to add that with spin doctors holding sway, 'Public Relations has become bigger business than Business itself'. The business world is full of charlatans who masquerade as leaders and the events of the recent past are proof enough, if any was needed, that morality is missing in the so-called leaders. The consequence: the whole world had to pay the price because of the greed that drove corporate leaders in the financial sector.

The other sorry part of leaders in today's world is the venality and corruption that is taken for granted about those in senior positions. Sadly, this is very true of those in leadership position in emerging markets and new economies. Many leaders in these nations are notorious for collecting a percentage from every investment that flows into the country, either for themselves or for their political party. This malaise is particularly prevalent in countries in Africa and Asia where inflow of funds gets regulated by the political class, mouthing platitudes on behalf of the under privileged. This behavior is treated as normal by the masses who astonishingly tend to accept this and instead rate political leaders on a scale of most corrupt to least corrupt!.

Are we to think that leaders in the past were not corrupt and were squeaky clean? That's difficult to say. One of the most charismatic presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy, was known to be in a number of affairs with women, as is being revealed now. Similarly, sexual favors have been commonly treated as perquisites of office for leaders in most parts of the world. But all this was in a time when transparency in society was limited and there were many barriers which made it easy to hide the truth from the common people.

However, in today's world where face-book, twitter, you tube, and round-the-clock news channels are intrusive, nothing can be hidden. Consequently, every action of any leader is under scrutiny, 24/7. Surprisingly, this does not seem to have deterred leaders from walking the path of self ruin. This makes you believe that a necessary leadership trait is a thick Teflon skin to ward away criticism, complaints and the ability to shamelessly carry on irrespective of consequences! Makes you wonder - doesn't it - that we still teach youngsters that we must admire leaders?