

Evolution of Leadership styles in the Sri Lankan Public Sector

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Introduction

The ambiguities and contradictions exist between the principles and practices of management and leadership in Sri Lanka is essentially the consequence of not taking into account the Sri Lankan social cultural factors that influence the working of the Sri Lankan organizations. Leadership is considered to be one of the most important elements influencing organizational performance, and leadership is the focus of activity through which the goals and objectives of an organization are accomplished. A leader must have a significant effect on the behaviour, attitudes and the performance of his subordinates. The objective of this study is to analyse the influence of socio cultural factors on the existing leadership style in Sri Lankan public sector organisations. Firstly it is intended to state in brief the concepts of leadership style and qualities as prescribed by the modern management theorists. This will be followed by a discussion of the socio - cultural developments that has taken place in Sri Lanka which has a bearing on the existing leadership style. Then it is intended to explain how socio-cultural factors have influenced the management practices and leadership style in Sri Lankan public sector organizations. The study will be concluded with recommendations for improving style in the Sri Lankan social cultural context.

Concept

Leadership is defined as the relationship between two or more people in which one attempts to influence the other toward the accomplishment of goal or goals. The topic of leadership has fascinated people through ages. Even after much discussion and research a universally accepted definition on effective leadership could not be found. Social science researchers for years thought there must be some qualities shared by all leaders. But these have not been found to apply to all leaders in all situations. Keith Devis in his book 'Human relations at work' states as follows, "Leadership is the ability to persuade others to seek defined objectives. It is the human factor which binds a group together and motivates it toward goals". Management activities are defined as planning, organising, commanding, co-ordinating staffing and controlling. But it is the leader who triggers the power of motivation in people and guide them towards goals.

Types of Leadership

Western management theorists have spelt out four different type of leadership style followed by the managers in work situations. They are as follows:

1. Authoritarian style.
2. Consultative style.
3. Participative style.
4. Laissez faire style.

They further explain the qualities and outcome of these different types of leaderships in detail as indicated below.

Leadership	Primaty concern	Reliance on	Subordinate reaction	Outcome
Authoritarian	Task only	Supervision punishment	Fear frustration	Poor performance
Consultant	Motivation task	Resourcest leadership of people	Motivation satisfaction	Increased performance
Laissez faire	Neither task nor people	Past precedents & hunches	Indifferent uninterested	unreliable performance
Participatory	Motivation task and development of people	Organisation resources leadership & employee participation	Motivation participation & satisfaction	Increased performance high employee involvement

According to modern management theorists the participatory style is the most desirable which would bring high employee satisfaction, increased performance and problem solution. But contrary to what management theorists say there are cases where other styles of leaderships have brought in results. One has to bear in mind that these are western models and applying the same models to other societies can bring mixed results.

Historical Development: Pre-Colonial Period.

It is convenient for us to trace the historical development of Srilanka to identify the important socio-cultural aspects which are relevant to our study. In the precolonial period Kandyan Kingdom was under the rule of kings and the description of D'oyley the famous British writer gives a fair idea of the powers enjoyed by the King. The

power of the king is supreme and absolute. The ministers advise but cannot control his will. The king makes peace and war enacts ordinances and has the sole power of life and death. He some time exercises judicial authority in civil and criminal cases either in original jurisdiction or in appeal". It is evident that the power of the king was supreme and the aristocracy and the commoners were used to an authoritarian rule. There were some restricting factors. The king was guided by the customs and the religion. "The king defended the faith and the faith legitimised the king. Religious functionaries were expected to advice, support and help the king and invest the king with an aura of religious sanctity which made him more acceptable to the people". (L.S. Devarajah, The Kandyan Kingdom 1707 - 1760)

If we take into consideration the administrative system, the country was

ruled by an orderly hierachial system deriving authority from the king, operating through a provincial and district administrative structure, reaching down to the villages. The system was further supplemented by caste and regulated by customs, and rigidly enforced by the officers. Their authoritarian rule was accepted by the villagers. The kings derived their power from traditions and the social stratification based on castes strengthened their authority. Most of the kings had charisma to impose their will.

The authoritarian leadership and the acceptance of authority by inferiors reflects itself in the Sinhalese family structure also. In the ancient Sri Lanka the family was a strong unit and the father as the head of the family wielded powers over the members of his family. "In the Indian society the same period the father excercised absolute authority in dealing with the members of his family. He could pledge sell amputate and even kill any person under his potestas for an offence committed by him. Some vedio legends also show that the father could blind sell a guilty son by virtue of his authority"(Altekari, State and government in ancient India.) "But there is no doubt that this was not exactly the same in ceylon society particularly after the advent of Mahinda, for in a buddhist society the duties of members of every house hold were regulated according to the code of special ethics as laid down by Buddha. But we have instances to show that owing to poverty or fear the father exercised his powers to mortgage sell, discard or even kill his childern as he liked. The Sihlavattu speaks of a poor

man who sold his eldest son for a cow and lived happily afterwards. (Dialogue of Buddha 111 p .181) Tissa of Kalyani according to our sources didnt even consult his ministers in casting his only daughter Devi to the sea in expiation of sacrilege, the slaying of the chief monk of Kalyani. These references show us the extent to which a father could excercise his powers over the members of his family".

The new administrative system was characterized by the existence of a single structurally hierachical but functionally undifferentiated ruling elite. The chiefs continued to have quthoritarian control over the people of the village. In 1833 ceylon became a crown colony. Though colebroke reforms the country was unified and centralized under the direction of the British governor and his bureaucracy. In the provinces Government Agent was entrusted with the administrative responsibility. But the administration of the villages were continued to be performed by the village headmen who were appointed by the Government Agent. "The British administration in rural Sri Lanka at least until the 1930 s had been a system of indirect rule. Effective authority in rural areas was in the hands of native officials among the individuals who had property qualifications and social standing in their respective areas". (Warnapala, 1974) So these officials scaresely differed from the feudal overlords of the Kandyan Kingdom.

The authority of the government was represented in the village by the village headman. The village headman was responsible for law and order and was in charge of administrative, judicial and

police matters in his area close association with government officers enhanced the powers and authority of the village headman in his area. He could use his discretionary powers in several fields especially in channelling state benefits such as recommending villagers to state leaseholds and issuing permit to cultivate chenas. These powers encourages for himself and his relatives and demand for gratuities from the villagers for his services as broker between villages and government officials.

Sometime village headman had a participation approach toward villagers and harassed some of them and favour others especially with regard to the distribution of state lease holds. But no complaint was forthcoming since the higher authorities invariably attended to the complaints only through the headman.

It is relevant for us now focus attention on the leadership pattern followed by the government agent in the early colonial period. Prior to the Donoughmore reforms an integrated perfectural system of administration prevailed in the provinces and government agents were entrusted with decision making power. The powers and functions of the then government agents and the district officers of the then Indian administrative service makes an interesting comparison. "The District Officers of India naturally became the 'Maibaap' (mother, father) as much as the Government agent became almost akin to god almighty especially with outlying provinces to the peasantry and poor in Ceylon. The Government agent

enjoyed the pivotal position like the District Officer of India, performing a wide range of functions, an important difference however being that, the collector in India had more to do in regard to law and order during the early period of British rule specially in non regulation district. In both countries a common feature was that these District officers were paternalistic. They came from an elitist back ground and was alien to masses. Some of them earned the respect and devotion of their people. Standaratne speaks glowingly of R.H. Freeman as Champion of Wannai and of Steele who did much to improve the irrigation works of the Hambantota District" (Kamala Wickremasinghe 1988:92).

The Donoughmore reforms resulted in transfer of functions away from the govt. agents. Elected ministers were made responsible individually for the functioning of their department and those functions were handled by the respective heads of department. G.A was made a functionary of the minister and executive committee of home affairs. In spite of these developments. I.D.S Weerawardana states the entire period being one of increasing government activity in many fields. G.As too had a share of this increase. Their functions therefore although greatly reduced were still not in considerable. A noteworthy feature of this period is that a number of Srilankans gained entry to the civil service and were appointed as government agents.

In 1946 the chief headman system was replaced by the D.R.O system. The bureaucratic system under went a change and the composition of the Sri Lankans

in the upper strata of the administrative structure gradually increased. The traditional leadership in the villages, i.e. the headman system was abolished and the Grama Sevakas were appointed on educational qualifications.

Modern Leadership style in Sri Lanka.

It is appropriate for us to look into some of the aspects of modern management and leadership style as prevailing in the public sector institutions in Sri Lanka and to assess the influence of socio - cultural factors. It is proposed to divide this into two sections.

1. The leadership styles of the Government Agent / Divisional secretary.
2. The leadership style of the public sector officers in general.

Government agent is still recognised as the head of the district administrators and as the arm of the government in the district. He has both traditional and development functions to fulfill. The ancient values he has inherited from history brings an expectation that the government agent must be paternalistic and Authoritarian. Traditional values give priority to relationship. But there are acquired values which have been inherited from the British and from the Weberian bureaucratic model on which Sri Lankan government institutions were structured. The Weberian model insists on hierarchy, impersonal relationship, appointment by merit, authority delegation and division of functions. The leadership style adopted by the government agent is a fusion of both

these values. Also with political modernisation a number of new liberal ideas had crept and they have also influenced the leadership style of present day administrators.

If we analyse the position of the Government agent and the authority he presently enjoys it can be seen that there has been a progressive change from authoritarianism to participatory leadership. Especially after 1956 the bureaucracy has become more representative of society and the creation of the S.L.A.S has changed the elitist nature of the Government Agents.

The Government Agent today works in an environment which is widely varied and complex and sometimes nebulous. The addition of political dimension with administration in the seventies has also made the Government Agent environment one which is beset with stress and strain. His position is made more difficult due to the demands arising from rapidly changing Socio-economic needs. The intensity and magnitude of these demands meant that the Government Agent has to be equipped with a range of skills. He should be a planner a policy analyst a plan implementor an entrepreneur and be more innovative forward looking and flexible to relate to the needs of the environment. On the whole even in the present set up a development of a District depends on the leadership qualities of the Government Agent.

Earlier the Government Agents power was derived from both the traditions and the legality of his position and perhaps his charisma. Now he has to depend more on legality and his charisma. Government Agent's preminent

position in the district is still accepted. The tradition of having an officer in charge of the district as representative of the king / Govt still exists in the minds of the common people. But the authoritarian and paternalistic leadership has given way to an indigenous leadership approach which is more participatory. Sinha (1980) describes the leadership style of modern Indian administrators and Managers as nurturant task leadership style. They care for their subordinates and show affection and take personal interest in the well being of their followers. Unlike an authoritarian leader who is essentially self oriented the nurturant task leader is primarily concerned with his subordinates and the performance. The leadership style adopted by the present Government Agents is almost akin to the leadership mentioned above. The Present Government Agent are expected to be 'committed' in their task and also with the number of development projects they have to implement they are pressurised to be task oriented.

Most of the Government Agent now make use of a participatory consultative approach to manage their affairs. The authoritarian leadership and the high power distance are very seldom seen in the Kacheri administration. Various reasons can be attributed to this change of leadership style. Ceylonization of the S.L.A.S and recruitment of S.L.A.S officers from non elitist back ground is one of the factors that changed the attitudes of the Government Agents. The political developments and the politicization of the bureaucracy strengthened this trend. The

implementation of the major development programmes by successive governments required the Government Agent to coordinate activities with politicians, government officers, NGO and the public and to give effective leadership to the development effort. Unlike the colonial government Agents are bound to go to the people and give leadership and assistance. All these have contributed to the evolving of a participatory leadership.

The absolute authority enjoyed by the government Agents have now diminished. He shares power with politicians and the officers. In some instances he is expected to take orders from the District Minister. In many of his decisions he has to consult the local politicians. so we can say that a participatory leadership has evolved in this process/ Due to political supervision, and economic - social necessities/ He has to be vigilant in expediting the development programmes. So he has to combine participatory approach with task orientedness.

Now we will look into the other public sector organizations and the leadership style adhered to by the Head of Government Institutions. Here also as observed in the case of the Government Agent some of the traditional values and acquired values continue to have influence. But at the same time there has been a gradual change from the authoritarian to participatory leadership style.

If we look into the traditional influences, Srilankan public sector managers are supposed to be authoritarian in their dealings with subordinates and followers. Jai B.P. Sinha in his article a

model of effective leadership style in India, gives 3 specific expectations of subordinates in Indian management setting.

1. A preference for personalised over a contractual relationship with a leader.
2. A tendency to depend on a leader for guidance direction and support.
3. A willingness to accept the superior status of the leader i.e. preference to work in a superior subordinate rather than a peer relationship.

The above characteristics existed and continue to exist in the Sri Lankan public institutions. These expectations of subordinates are reciprocated by authoritarian pattern of leadership. This has led to centralised powers in the superior. While the superior officers are resentful of delegating authority to subordinates they don't want to accept responsibilities. Relationship plays an important part in the public sector. Officers like to maintain their status. Managers are more relationship oriented than task oriented. The traditional father-child relationship has been translated in to management practices where authority of the superior is accepted without question. The uncritical deference to authority is also a reflection of the traditional value of respect for age. Managers readiness to consult subordinates may be seen as demonstrating ignorance of weakness. In some instances the superior himself take decisions not because of lack of confidence in his subordinates but because of the desire to help the subordinate. He also has the fear of

losing superiority over the subordinate if he delegates power.

Our traditional family system developed dependence rather than independence. Our system promoted acceptance of the status quo than under taking challenges. So in the management setting the Sri Lankan public sector managers try to maintain status quo and avoid risks and uncertainties.

As far as the planning process is concerned the concentration of powers in the superior office make it difficult to prepare an effective plan. The monitoring of the plans are also effected by the same reason. unless officers at the periphery are delegated with powers and a participatory system of management is evolved successful planning or plan implementation cannot be done.

As stated earlier Sri Lankan managers in their leadership style combine authoritarianism and maintenance of status quo. In modern management innovation and management of changes are important functions expected of a leader. In the public sector there seemed to be a negative attitude towards innovations. Innovations and new ideas are thought to be something relevant and possible only in western societies and private sectors. The experience of introducing reforms in the public sector has not been encouraging. The first serious attempt to review the entire problem of administration and development was made in 1996 by the committee on administrative reforms (Known as the Rajendra Committee). This was followed by the appointment of task force on administrative reforms consisting of local as well as U.N. Officials. Yet the

basic approach to reforms remained as before and whatever changes were introduced from time to time were adhoc and piece meal.

The behavioural syndrome of the Sri Lankan manager does not allow for collective effort in organization. Prof. G. Nanayakkara after conducting a study on group processes at the Bank of Ceylon states that individualism as an important behavioural characteristics. He concludes that individualism presides over collectivity and it promotes centralisation and importance of hierarchy.

We have discussed the general leadership characteristics observed in the Sri Lankan public sector. These are characteristics which has been brought about by the social and cultural influences. There has been strong criticism of public service attitudes, and the continued authoritarian reactive leadership style adopted by Sri Lankan public sector managers. There has been complaints that public sector managers have not adopted them self to changes in the Political and Economic fields and are not responding effectively to public needs. When ever a major programme of government failed the bureaucrat became the scape goat and has been condemned. It is interesting to read what Mr. Susil Siriwardene who himself is a bureaucrat says about the government officers. "They are not used to trusting the people, trusting the poor. Their perception of the role of the people in society is different. Their approach to the problems of the people is not a democratic, participatory approach, but a top down one. Therefore they have a hostile attitude towards Janasaviya. I see

this conflict between elite and Janasaviya as a conflict between old thinking and new thinking we have to bring about a change in these old attitudes in this old perception because an awaring and enlightened bureaucracy is the need of the hour. The struggle against the old attitudes and approaches is an important aspect of our struggle against old thinking in our attempt to create a new thinking".

The criticism levelled against the leadership of public sector officers though very much exaggerated contains some truth. But the present day bureaucrat is under pressure from a political environment. fought with many crisis situations and at the sametime facing frustrations within the service itself. Their functions have tremendously increased but their prestige has suffered. Though they are said to be unparticipatory and authoritarian their powers have dwindled and they have to work under several political masters both at the district and the centre. The present administrators have come from the non elitist background and they have been the favorite targets of politicians and some of the super bureaucrats who belong to the elitist group. When things go wrong they are blamed. It must be said that having come from the rural areas the present administrators understand the feelings and the problems of the common people better than the past administrators. But there is some truth in the allegation that the attitude of the administrators need to be changed. Some of the administrator though they have come from the rural back ground tries to imitate the colonial administrators. They try to be aloof from

the people and want to maintain their positions. They become status oriented and neglect development activities. By continuing to be authoritative and non committed they become targets of criticism.

Recommendations.

The leadership style adopted by Sri Lankan managers is gradually changing from authoritarian to participatory. "Although Sri Lanka too share some socio - cultural and historical characteristic similar to those of India one cannot consider authoritarian assertive superior as a dominant form in the existing authority relations except in the case of traditional type of management found largely in the plantation sector (S Ranasinghe - Review). In the public sector the recent changes have created a leadership style which is more participatory and more responsive to public needs. For example during the height of terrorist violence and calamities it is the bureaucracy that toiled to make life normal for the public. Some of the major development programmes of the successive governments would not have been completed without the active support and commitment from the bureaucrats.

The western management that was introduced in ceylon was not accepted in the same form. It was adopted with changes which were necessary according to socio cultural values prevailing at that time and according to political necessity. There is a wide gap between cultural values of our country and the values underlying the western management principle. Ours is a caring society which

believes in looking after parents elders and helping associates. Weber's bureaucratic principles reflect the impersonal relationship which exist in the western countries. Western countries are now frantically trying to find ways of strengthening family ties and develop relationship with others to make life meaningful. So in this context it is ridiculous for us to go and look for solutions from western management methods which are outdated and will not be applicable to us.

The main function of the administrators is to fulfil the needs and aspirations of the common people. In this task they have to get closer to the people and know their problems. They must encourage people to participate in the decision making process. A participatory leadership approach with appropriate management techniques will help development efforts. We must identify the beneficial aspects of our social cultural values and blend them with the modern management techniques to serve our people effectively and efficiently. An indigenous management system so evolved will be relevant to our environment and will strengthen development administration. At present Assistant Government Agent are renamed as Divisional Secretaries

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