Who Do I Follow?

Sivaprasad Padisetty (November 2015)

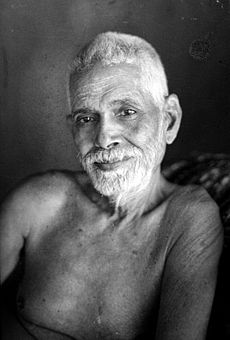
*As I mentor leaders and leaders of leaders, I often get asked: Who do I follow? What inspires me? What drives me to make major career decisions? Personally, I am not comfortable in sharing this as it contradicts the very person I want to be. Following a mentoring conversation last week, I decided to push myself to open up and share for the benefit of others. If I can convince one leader of embracing this approach, this blog has served its purpose!*

For most of us, our first instinct is to pick a role model who has a successful career, often in the same industry. It is not uncommon to gravitate towards leaders such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Elon Musk. I learnt a lot from Bill Gates by observing and analyzing his visionary thinking. There are several examples of his thought leadership, where he articulated the future which others couldn’t see. Given his technical background, he even charts concrete plans to get there. Often, it even took several years before others realized what Gates saw. Similarly, Steve Jobs starts his thought process from user experience and was detail-oriented with an uncompromising attitude for perfection. His corporate dictatorship created a brutal and unforgiving workplace with a ruthless culture. His style defies all modern leadership principles, and yet Apple was very successful under his leadership. Probably nobody else could have had such a massive impact in advancing Apple. George Soros is known for his risk taking, well known for his currency trading, more specifically for [shorting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_%28finance%29) the UK pound (currency). When he sensed that UK pound was going to crash, he betted big, really big, by going short on 10 billion dollar worth of UK pound. If his prediction were wrong, he would have lost a fortune. In that event alone, he made one billion dollar profit! This would not have happened if he did not take this huge risk. His massive trade acted as a catalyst for the currency’s collapse; the British government was not able to hold the price artificially high, and gave in to market forces. Finally, Elon Musk is a great leader for his unparalleled boldness and tenacity. He does not believe in impossibility, often challenging common “norms”. Otherwise, neither the commercial SpaceX nor Tesla would have happened.

Every leader has something to teach us whether it is Gates’ thought leadership, Jobs’ meticulous attention to details, Soros’ risk taking, or Musk’s challenges of the status quo. The list goes on. In fact, if we look carefully with curiosity, we would learn from every person. My kids taught me a bunch of lessons. Nobody is below the bar, we can learn from everyone. This is why, I view every mentee relationship as an opportunity to learn.

Each one of the leaders discussed above differ in their leadership style dramatically, yet all of them are very successful. These varied approaches demonstrate that no one particular style is right or wrong. Often leaders use multiple styles based on the situation (with one being natural and dominant). We can think of these techniques as different tools in the toolbox. We should be open to invoke the appropriate tool based on the situation’s demands. While I admire many of these leaders and learn from them, I don’t equate them to what my heart desires. This craving is beyond money and fame and is a personal core value.

Over the years, I heard many leadership stories, but the one that touched my heart the most is from Dr. Abdul Kalam, ex-president of India. “As the program Director, Dr. Kalam was challenged to launch India’s first satellite into orbit. He and his team worked hard and only to realize that the launch failed, the satellite plunged into Bay of Bengal. The Next day, Dr. Kalam’s boss Prof. Satish Dhawan attended the press meet to answer critical questions. He took the ownership of the failure and did not let his team down. Next year, after the successful launch, Prof. Dhawan asked Dr. Kalam to address the press but kept himself out of the limelight.” Every time, I think about this, it touches me. Leaders should own the failures and give the success to the team. Over the years, I was fortunate to report to many good managers and work closely with many industry leaders, learnt a lot from them which shaped my leadership style. I want to call out one of my managers, Craig Zhou, who is similar to Prof. Dhawan, a selfless leader. He truly cared for me and put me ahead of his own career advancement.



Along the lines of Prof. Dhawan, deep in my heart, [Sri Ramana Maharshi](http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org/) inspires me because of his genuine selflessness. At age 17, he left home and reached Thiruvannamalai Mountain, where he spent the rest of his life. He touched money for the last time when he reached there. He always cared for the people around him before himself. A good example is how he treated his followers. As they walked through the hilly path barefoot, his disciple encountered a thorn in his leg. Ramana Maharshi stopped, gently took it out and nurtured him. On the other hand, when he stepped on a thorn, he merely rubbed his feet to the ground and moved on. His feet was filled with black scars from the thorn pokes. While he was hard on himself, he was very gentle to his devotees. If you dig back in history, you can find many people like Sri Ramana (in other religions). I felt a connection to him as he lived in the recent times and I visited and walked through the places where he lived. Sri Ramana is my hero, I am gravitated to be selfless like him, every day I aspire to get better. Looking back, certainly I made progress, but still a long way to go. I felt good when I decided to take up a new job to create space for my team’s growth. I don’t think I would have done that a decade ago.

The value of selflessness should not conflict with performance management. That is an entirely different topic for another day. Also, don’t confuse selflessness with “servant leadership”. Selflessness is a core value that can encompass different styles including servant leadership. I strongly believe that leaders are drifted to their position by helping their team to succeed. Being aggressive does not conflict with selflessness. In other words, leaders are tough in their own ways, yet selfless. By truly keeping the team’s success and organizational goals ahead of personal gain, one can face the team with dignity. It feels good at heart.

Explore & Enjoy!

/Siva