

Leadership Communication Strategies for Establishing Social Harmony and Sustainable Development – Mr. Narendra Modi as a Case Study

Pradnya Chitrao*

SIMS, Pune, India; pradnyac@sims.edu or drpradnya.sims@gmail.com

Abstract

Leadership has been defined in different ways by different persons. Effective leadership today is seen as essential for running successfully a business as also ensuring the progress of a nation. The 21st C is witnessing a sea change in businesses and societies on account of rapid progress in information and technology. Business leaders need to restructure businesses to suit the changed scenario and tight budgets, learn to adapt to different cultures and work practices, and use technology constructively to ensure sustainable businesses. They have to communicate strategically the vision and motivate employees. National leaders or heads of nations have to do away with the 20th C practice of speaking from their political party's point of view, and speak from the nation's point of view. They must think in terms of how to solve their nation's problems and how to change, if necessary, the nation's mind set for implementation of the solutions. They must communicate persuasively and unite the nation as one team for achieving objectives and dreams. The paper reflects on Mr Narendra Modi's communication strategies as the new leader of India in his capacity as its Prime Minister and their suitability for leading India towards sustainable development.

Keywords: Communication Strategies, Effective Leadership, Nation's Viewpoint Versus Individual Political Party's Ideology

1. Introduction

Leadership has made or broken kingdoms since times immemorial. Leaders like Emperor Augustus and Chandragupta Maurya created and sustained impressive empires against all odds. In today's world, educational institutions across the globe are offering various leadership programs on account of the growing conviction that leaders are not just born but can also be created through a structured training and development process. The 21st C has now recognized that it is essential for business executives as well as heads of nations to cultivate leadership qualities especially good communication skills in order to positively influence and guide people towards constructive and sustainable development.

2. Literature Review/Background

Leadership has been defined differently by different people. Northouse¹⁰ has identified four components common in all definitions. According to these components, leadership is a process; it involves influence; it takes place in a group context, and it involves attainment of goals. It therefore follows that leadership may be defined as the interaction between the leader, the environment and the followers, and involves the formation of visions based on acquired situational knowledge and the unification of the followers for the attainment of the visions¹⁰.

The 21st C is characterized by radical technological advancement of telecommunication and of the internet resulting in accelerated globalization, deregulation, and

*Author for correspondence

a network and knowledge based society interconnected through online appliances. The changing environment calls for defining the new requirements of 21st C leaders. There are basically three types of influences on leaders in the 21st C. These are global trends, organizational trends, and follower trends. Global trends are all trends that emerge external to the organization or nation but still impact organizational or national developments as also followers and leaders alike. A case to the point here is the emergence of competition from low cost countries which in turn exerts price pressure on the established players from the developed world. Organizational or national trends are developments that influence the design of organizations or the polity of the nations and the way the way the latter react to these trends. Organizations or nations need to be flexible and be ready for the dynamic environment. Leaders will be judged not just on material success but also on their interactions with both internal as well as external stakeholders. Network structures need to be flattened for this purpose. Followers of the leader change as the situation around them changes. They are diverse in terms of culture, gender, and age. They become valuable to the company and leader over a period of time as they develop complex or company specific knowledge. Consequently they become mobile. The idea of life long employment or follower ship is no longer prevalent, and today's leaders face the challenge of knowledge management².

Leaders today need to develop traits that empower them in the performance of their duties. Power refers to the existence or acquiring of those qualities that get something done. Leaders today need to have the power of good comprehension. This involves proactively and quickly acquiring knowledge, assessing changes in the business/global environment, and identifying business/national trade and development opportunities.

Leaders must also acquire the power of personality traits that involves creating a vision for the employees or nation, having self-confidence, determination, and time and stress management skills. They must hone their people skills that involves having a high emotional quotient as also diversity fluency; they must be capable of identifying people's potential and also be good communicators. This power of people traits will enable the leaders to inspire their followers to achieve the goals and visions set before the latter¹⁹.

Organizations and nations in the 21st C cannot avoid external dynamism, and the only way to successfully sustain and develop in the global environment is to remain flexible and agile¹⁸. Leaders must therefore be the change

agents for their nation or organization. Knowledge and vision thus are very important in leadership. In fact, critical thinking has been identified as one of the primary requirements of successful leadership in the 21st C. It enables leaders at every level to understand the impact of their decisions on the business/nation as a whole and ensures both alignment with organizational/national goals and accountability.

Yet it is becoming evident that many current leaders lack the above mentioned qualities. This competency gap needs to be bridged as the 21st C has put an end to business as usual and created a new normal that involves a restructuring of the economic order. In today's dynamic landscape, organizations and nations need to do things differently if they expect better results than the 20th C. For this, those at the helm of organizations or nations need to have a different mind-set.

In the past, leaders made mistakes due to overconfidence in their own knowledge and abilities. Today, they must recognize and actively work towards expanding their knowledge and abilities. Earlier, they neglected the health of the economy, society and environment. Today, they need to succeed by acting in the interests of the greater good. Previous leaders just accepted that the work force is getting diverse and the economy is becoming global. Today and in the near future, leaders must respect and make positive use of diversity¹¹. Rather than seek to preserve as in the past the status quo, leaders must rework core assumptions whilst responding to new threats and opportunities. While earlier they motivated people through rational arguments and incentives, today they need to motivate people through strong relationships based on mutual trust. Earlier, they sacrificed long term goals to get short term results. Now they need to take decisions that will bring in long term success.

Leadership is, in part, getting work done through others. For this one must engage people in team efforts, overcome difficulties through a wide support network, and inspire trust and loyalty both within and outside the organization/nation through strategic communication¹⁵.

3. Narendra Modi the Controversial Leader of India

India, the largest democracy of the world, voted into power a new government with Mr Narendra Modi as its Prime Minister. The electorate voted for him on the basis

of his reputation as an efficient administrator, committed to the economic development of Gujarat of which he was Chief Minister for more than twelve years in a row. He was an outsider to the Delhi government establishment and, therefore, is the first Prime Minister of India to catapult directly from state level politics into the nation's most important political office. He won the April 2014 elections as the undisputed BJP candidate for Prime Ministership. BJP has always been projected as a party with sectarian roots. In fact this year, the electorate voted for most of the BJP and Shiv Sena candidates to power purely on the word that Mr Modi would be made the Prime Minister if the alliance got a majority.

Mr Modi graduated to the BJP from the Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ("National Volunteer Society"), which he joined young. In 2002, as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, he was charged by critics as not just failing to stop but actively encouraging the riots that took place in which many people belonging to one community were killed. Investigations and court cases were initiated against him, but he was absolved of blame very recently for lack of evidence of his culpability. A number of his closest associates are die hard Hindu nationalists. Mr Modi also ran for a second Parliamentary seat from Varanasi, a Hindu holy city.

Yet, he was elected to power by the Indian citizens to revive the deteriorating economy of the country and not to encourage sectarian religious sentiments. Under his leadership Gujarat, comprising of 5 percent of India's population, today accounts for 16 percent of industrial output and 22 percent of exports. BJP, under Mr Modi's leadership has promised to relax restrictive government regulations. India's future depends now on Mr. Modi's ability to transcend his sectarian roots and govern on behalf of all Indians. Promotion of sectarian violence is bound to deter foreign investment, and this will prove to be politically costly. The Indian voters are hungry for quick improvement of the nation's economy, and will not tolerate the negative impact that communal violence will have on the economy.

4. Mr. Modi's Strategic Communication of a People's Servant Image

Immediately after he thundered into a victory, Mr. Modi, made clear his intentions of not side lining minorities.

"The age of divisive politics has ended; from today onwards, the politics of uniting people will begin - We want more strength for the well-being of the country - I see a glorious and prosperous India." He catapulted to the highest position namely the prime minister's office, not because of his famed pro-Hindu leanings, but because of his promise of less government and more governance. After he was named his party's candidate, he flew 300,000 k.m., and addressed 457 rallies in a very professional campaign style and covered a very large portion of the national electoral base through personal mass contact. In turn, the voters brave all kinds of discomfort for a record 66 percent turnout on election-day and voted his political party into power with a land slide margin. He is seen as an answer to the growing unemployment problems of economic stagnation, inflation and growing unemployment.

His spectacular victory is seen as the result of a massive and carefully choreographed multi-dimensional effort. For this victory, he had to bypass a hostile main stream media and reach out to the masses directly through social media. Post victory also he is using the same social media to win friends and followers all over the world. His tweets to Heads of States or to the people of Japan in Japanese are now the new norm of diplomacy. Barely hundred days after becoming the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Modi won recognition as the second most followed politician on Twitter after U.S. President Mr. Barack Obama. His election victory Tweet "India has won" in both Hindi and English is also the most retweeted tweet from India. Diplomats, policy makers, journalists, and corporate all consider it necessary to follow him on Twitter primarily because it is the Prime Minister's lead communication tool. Before Mr. Modi came into power, both politicians and media persons manipulated each other for their own interests. Media proprietors utilized their employees as contact persons to secure revenues in the form of government advertisements. Mr. Modi has utilized social media, a very cheap and transparent medium to communicate with the Indian masses as also with the world.

Mr. Modi's interaction with children on teacher's day on 5th September was reminiscent of Mr. Nehru's rapport with children. It was very different from the deadpan speeches of Mr. Manmohan Singh. Mr. Modi told India's children that the country's 1.2 billion citizens need to take responsibility for solving national problems. He advised them that they also should contribute by "doing smaller things to help the country". He urged them to make the country a cleaner place to live by making cleanliness a

national agenda. He told them how he realized on his Japan trip that the education system there promoted character building and egalitarianism. He also urged them to alleviate the electricity shortage problem by saving electricity in their own house. He thus enthused every individual in the goal of nation building, and said that it should become a national movement.

He told the children that he was a task master and not a head master. This was a timely response to the criticism that he was acting like a head master in his government. He urged the imparting of requisite skills for reaping the country's rich demographic dividends. At the same time, he appeared before an auditorium full of neatly dressed school children and also TV cameras that projected him before many more audiences as a childlike person sharing stories of crashing into weddings and playing pranks as a child. Many of the students in higher secondary classes, who heard him speak and interact, will be voters by the next general election and the younger children are likely to carry memories of the interaction all their lives. He presented himself as a jovial leader who cares for the young generation. He thus came across as a great communicator who engages with his audience directly and seeks to involve them in a larger goal.

In his first Independence speech as Prime Minister of India, Mr. Modi very astutely described himself as "first servant of people". The 15th August speech was given without looking at his notes, and this gave the effect of the words coming from his heart. It is a classic example of brand positioning that is based on an understanding of what the targeted audience finds relevant and convincing it that the solutions being offered are superior to all other alternatives. This is done by harnessing the power of polarities. The 68th Independence Day speech of Mr. Modi does this. To give an example, whilst discussing the need to eradicate poverty, Mr. Modi tackled the huge scope and complexity of the problem by contrasting the difficulty of eradicating poverty with the greater difficulties associated with freeing India from the clutches of the powerful British Empire. Mr. Modi argued in his speech that if we could free India without the power of a government or weapons or any resources, then surely we can overcome poverty. He thus convinced his audience that this difficult goal is achievable by comparing it with a far more difficult goal that has already been achieved. This principle was used again and again in the speech. To give another example from the speech, Mr. Modi talked about the need for India to unite in order to progress rather

than holding on to the stereotypes of government versus opposition.

He also exhorted the people to not consider what the country has done for them but to think about what they can do for the country. In this way, he used the inherent tension between two opposites to forge a new synthesis. The speech is reminiscent of U.S. President John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech in 1961 when he famously told Americans: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." In fact Mr. Modi has announced several policies like building public toilets, Swachh Bharat, bank accounts for the poor under Jan Dhan Yojna, digital education, etc., that clearly communicate his message that building India starts at the bottom and not at the top and that it is the responsibility of every citizen of India.

The Independence Day speech appeals to the needs, wants, and aspirations of Indians, 50% of whom are less than 30 years' of age. It promotes a Vision of Made in India consisting of three sub themes namely, Clean India, Skilled India, and Digital India. Mr. Modi thus has understood clearly that for a leader, the legacy mind-set should be clearly surrounded by goal sets or value systems that will sustain beyond him. Many leaders do not think of the legacy that they will leave behind for the organization or the nation that they serve. To leave a sustainable legacy, a leader has to be aware of what he believes in and what he stands for as also what he represents as a leader for a healthier nation or organization. He must then translate his identity and set of values into a guiding framework that others can expect from him and accordingly measure his performance. Having done this, he should trust his judgements and take calculated risks in pushing conventional wisdom and challenging the status quo. A leader must learn to serve better the people he leads and to work for their advancement. He must realize that his own advancement is through service unto the people he leads. Only then can he set the performance standards for himself and for others. Accountability for the advancement and success of others is a key factor that will ultimately define his significance as a leader.

Mr. Modi projects himself as a strongman who feels the pulse of the masses; his symbolic paeans to the cult of the original 'iron man' of Indian politics, Sardar Patel, are well-planned manoeuvres to stand out. He utilizes slick marketing campaigns and public relations advertisements for expanding his persona into a larger-than-life-size superhero of Indian politics and thereby ensures that the

Modi chant reverberates like a household hymn. At the same time, post victory, in the Central Hall of Parliament, he projected himself as a humble and a humane person. He knelt with folded hands and then saluted the steps of Parliament with his forehead. He was the epitome of respect and reverence. He spoke deferentially to party seniors and behaved like a disciplined organization man. He spoke according to the demands of time and space, and showed respect for the institutions and processes of democracy²⁰. He used humour as well as emotions at the same time. Whilst referring to a comment of L. K. Advani, he showed his humane side by breaking down. When elected the party's Prime Minister, he fought back tears and humbly called his mother. The fire and iron man during the election campaign suddenly seemed to have become very soft and emotional.

Mr. Modi also happens to be the first Prime Minister to write or speak about his first month in office as a landmark; his blog is clearly a result of his strong affinity to social media and his desire to keep a direct line of communication with his millions of followers. He is aware that people expect a lot from his government after years of disappointment and therefore communicates directly with them in order to stay popular whilst taking the time required understanding and changing the structural flaws in the country. A successful political communicator changes his message according to the platform, and Modi also did the same by conveying that he would report to the country directly. "We are going to see a new kind of PM, who will depend on one-on-one communication with citizens, in the western presidential mould." (Dilip Cherian)

5. Narendra Modi's Communication of a Secular Attitude

Mr. Modi has, right since he was nominated as the BJP candidate for the post of Prime Minister, sought to establish a secular pro-nation image¹⁶. In a book, 'The Idea of One Religion' by J. S. Thakur and G. D. Singh published recently by a small publisher (Bhopal based Mausam Publishers), Mr. Modi has written a foreword that exemplifies this effort of creating such an image. Here he states that "Whatever the religion, we are all children of God - immortal spirits." The book focuses on Swami Vivekananda's discourses. Mr. Modi further states that "A

man may not have entered a temple or a mosque, or a synagogue or a church or a gurudwara, nor performed any religious ceremony, but if he---is---lifted above the vanities of the world", he may be called "a holy man, a saint or whatever you wish." He also declares that "any attempt to bring all humanity to one method of thinking in spiritual matters has been a failure and will always be a failure." "Our worship needs to be unbounded and free".

In his thanks giving speech in Gujarat immediately after his landslide victory, Mr. Modi first of all addressed concerns regarding his pro-Hindu leanings as also the side-lining of minorities. He assured revival of economic growth to the burgeoning middle class alarmed by dwindling purchasing power and job opportunities as the economy slumped to sub-five percent growth in the last two years. He has promised to unblock stalled investments in power, road and rail projects. He made clear that tax and labour market reforms along with a gradual opening up to foreign investment would be adopted in order to create the ten million jobs that India needs every year to absorb young people joining the work force.

India is yet to see whether Mr. Modi really will accelerate economic growth, unify a highly divided society, and initiate a more active foreign policy and national security strategy. As of now his communication strategy has raised hopes of him being a transformational leader rather than a transactional one³. A transactional leader is one who maintains the status quo by stoking the self-interests of followers and motivating them with rewards and punishments. But a transformational leader can encourage an entire nation to transcend self-interests and to sacrifice for a greater and nobler cause.

6. Narendra Modi's use of Social Media to Access and Be Accessed by the Common Man

The moment Mr. Modi won, he did not go in for a public speech but immediately tweeted on Twitter both in Hindi as well as English that "India has won!" and that "We are approaching good days!" It was a communication of a few well-chosen words that the whole world saw in a matter of seconds⁴. He thus changed the rules. In fact, right since the start of his election campaigning, he accustomed the voters to a new type of communication. He started in July 2013, a digital campaign called "Mission 272+". It referred to the number of seats BJP needed for a majority in

Parliament. It later on became an Android App wherein BJP supporters could enrol themselves as voters in a BJP database and also enlist others via mobile phone. During the entire campaign, Mr. Modi made his Facebook and Twitter pages the basis of his communication with the Indian population. In fact Mr. Andy Stone of Face book policy communication has admitted that “Modi continues to have the fastest growing page (for the last day, week and month) of any politician or elected official worldwide” (source: Zeenews India). Mr. Modi’s official website is one of the most organised political web properties. He has a dedicated digital media team that constantly updates content in his diverse digital network⁹.

Mr. Modi, at the end of April, tweeted a selfie with an inked finger as proof of his having voted, and invited people to share their selfies using the hashtag #SelfieWithModi. Consequently many people, both young as well as old, posted such selfies that were included on his webpage as part of the giant mosaic of the leader in order to motivate people to vote. Mr. Modi in fact made use of many innovative visual effects to gain votes⁷. In addition to mosaics, he also used a very new technology never used before by politicians namely, 3D holograms. With this technology, he held hundred different rallies at the same time just standing in his studio in his Gandhinagar studio and thus reached fourteen million extra voters¹⁴. After his victory and its accompanying famous tweet, a Victory Wall was created to showcase the supporters’ good wishes and passion through SMS, Tweet or Facebook marked with the hashtag #CongratsNaMo. Mr. Modi thus used digital technology to beat the Congress Party. Rahul Gandhi does not have a similar Twitter or a Facebook account and so could not create the same empathy that Mr. Modi created with his supporters¹⁷.

The study conducted by IRIS Knowledge Foundation (IKF) and Internet and Mobile Association of India (2013) had predicted that the fortunes of at least 150 constituencies in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections would be determined by Facebook users thus making them the newest vote bank capable of shaping Indian politics. Also, Twitter which is the second most popular social media site has about 18 million users in India. Social media has taken political messaging away from the mass media model and brought it to a peer-to-peer, public discourse level. There is now no need for the people to take appointments or wait for the political leaders to talk. Mr. Modi has effectively used social media to disseminate information and to remain in touch with the youth and to involve it in the democratic

process¹³. It is thus evident that politicians will either have to adopt social media for communicating with their audiences or be resigned to losing rapport with them.

7. Use of Soft Power to Hard Sell Strategic Messages in International Interactions

Mr. Modi began his five day visit to Japan dressed in white (the colour of meditation and renunciation in Buddhist and Hindu tradition) at the famed Toji temple in the ancient capital of Kyoto to reiterate Japan’s cultural and religious links with India. He posed with tourists, played taiko drums, playfully held a boy’s ears, and reminded the Japanese Prime Minister, Mr. Shinzo Abe that the ever present lotus image next to Buddha images was his party’s symbol. This is how he set the stage for strategic dialogue on the region’s security and economic co-operation. He promised Japan’s business community a red carpet and not red tape. He invited the Japanese to visit and explore India and to be India’s ambassadors. He addressed them deliberately in Hindi even though he is quite comfortable speaking in English thereby showing freedom from slavery to the colonial legacy and to increase the youth’s confidence and willingness to learn and use the language. He spent time with school girls in a manner reminiscent of President Obama’s interaction with students in Mumbai during his visit to India. His efforts indicate a desire for an image makeover from his so far tough and unyielding leader profile¹².

Mr. Modi in fact has made it clear that he will drive India’s foreign policy⁶. He extended invites to all the SAARC nations for his swearing in ceremony. He visited Nepal immediately after becoming Prime Minister, something which no Indian Prime Minister had done for the last seventeen years. All this reinforced the primacy of neighbours in India’s foreign policy. Nepal immediately endorsed India’s visit and Sri Lanka freed all the Indian fishermen from jail. Nearly all the SAARC nations assured that they won’t allow their land to be used for activities against India.

Mr. Modi, in keeping with his foreign policy, immediately accepted President Obama’s invitation to visit America. His address to Indians settled in U.S. at Madison Square Garden in New York City clearly reflected India’s growing power in the minds of Americans. His speech pleased audiences with humorous comparisons like how

it cost only Rs 7 per kilometre to send a space ship to Mars while it cost Rs 10 per kilometre to travel in an Auto Rickshaw in Ahmedabad. He appealed to the rich NRI/PIO audience to give back rich returns to the country that nurtured their talents. He assured them that India was the only country in the world to have the three strengths of democracy, demographic dividends, and demand. Dressed in a saffron jacket, he spoke extempore in Hindi, and his speech was relayed and translated by more than a dozen networks all over the world. When someone shouted "God bless you!" in the middle of his speech, he promptly responded that if he had the blessings of 1.25 billion people, he felt that God indeed had blessed him. His speech and the welcome that he received sharply etched in the Americans' mind India's growing power and profile⁸.

8. Conclusion

Mr. Modi thus, like Mr. Obama, the President of America during his first election campaigning in 2008, himself directly communicates with his supporters. He uses a language that is understood by everyone. Through the use of selfies, he made himself famous and recognizable all over the world. He successfully positioned himself through an understanding of what his audience found relevant and what their requirements were. He also positioned his solutions as superior to those of his opponents. For this he used the power of polarities; he highlighted his stance by simply contrasting it with its opposite and used the inherent tension between them to create a new synthesis. India as a nation at this junction wants action from the politicians who will be in charge. Mr. Modi has positioned himself as one who is diffusing government paralysis. He has positioned himself as an outsider to the political elite and a public servant answerable to the nation. He clearly communicates to the nation that nation building is not the responsibility of just the government but of every citizen in a democracy.

Mr. Modi has understood before any other Indian politician the importance of digital technology in winning the trust of their consumers or followers and to assure them that he is with them all the time. He communicates with his audience on a minute to minute basis with the help of the latest technology. He extends his faith in people by making their participation central to all major government initiatives like eradicating poverty through Jan Dhan Yojana, Swachh Bharat, Save the Girl Child

Campaign and many more. He believes in empowering the weak so that they can write their own destiny with pride and self-respect. He seeks to change the government system from Political Interference to Political Intervention. He has empowered not just government officers but the nation as a whole by making decision-making Decentralised, Participatory and Transparent. By running a policy driven government he wishes to do away with discretion; he thus seeks to empower bureaucratic decision making while minimizing the scope for corruption. He further reinforces through technology, with e-Governance initiatives insuring Easy, Effective and Efficient governance.

At the international level, Mr. Modi has made very clear from the start that India would like to have cordial relations with its neighbours and partner with them for mutual benefit. At Madison Square Garden in US, he created a larger than life image of himself on a level similar to that of President Obama, and thus indirectly communicated the power and reach of the Indian diaspora. He has thus presented through all his foreign interactions the successful face of India's rising aggressive capitalism.

Overall, Mr. Modi has created an image of transparency, efficiency, and modernization of himself and extended the same to India.

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