Śukanāsopadeśa for Project Managers

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Abstract :

Stress is one of the most prevalent challenges in the corporate world today. Beyond the fear of job loss, factors such as intense competition, the pressure to climb the social ladder, and a mismatch between talent and required skills contribute significantly to workplace stress. Moreover, ineffective leadership exacerbates the issue, as incompetent supervisors fail to harness the potential of their teams. Regardless of the underlying causes, both positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (distress) are common workplace experiences. The ancient wisdoms embedded in Sanskrit literature, especially those texts in the form of subhaśitas and stories meant as ethical guidelines for kings, can be considered for modern leadership as well. This paper explores some of these snippets from Sanskrit literature to provide different perspectives for a project manager to deal with workplace dynamics and ethical leadership.

Introduction

The novel Kadambari by the renowned poet Bāṇa Bhaṭṭa features an interesting chapter on the coronation of Prince Chandrāpīḍa. In this chapter, the wise prime minister and royal guru, Śukanāsa, offers timeless counsel to the prince as he ascends to the throne. He cautions against the corrupting influence of power, even on the most virtuous rulers, and imparts invaluable guidance on the principles and qualities that define a noble and just king. It provides practical advice on identifying and removing incompetent or malicious individuals from the royal court while emphasizing the importance of staying grounded in the needs and well-being of the kingdom's citizens. There are other books, such as Pancatanra, Hitopadeśa, which were mainly instructions for princes, in the form of allegories and stories to help them become capable kings. The hidden messages in these stories were there to develop a moral compass for the king. On similar lines, as project managers wield certain power at work, these guidelines can be appropriate for them

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as well. As they say, "with power comes responsibility" and the subhashitanis meant for kings/ princes are applicable to them as well. As a disclaimer, this essay focuses only on the underlying human aspects in project management. The technical aspects from work-break-down structures to scheduling, earned value management are beyond the scope of this document. Each section below quotes verses depicting different situations faced by a PM with examples.

Dilemma of a project manager (PM)

न गणस्याग्रतो गच्छेत्सिद्धे कार्ये समं फलम्।
यदि कार्यविपत्तिः स्यान्मुखरस्तत्र हन्यते ।।[1]

na gaṇasyāgrato gacchetsiddhe kārye samaṃ phalam ।
yadi kāryavipattiḥ syānmukharastatra hanyate ।।

"One should never lead a team simply because success is shared equally among all, while the leader alone bears the responsibility for any failure."

Many team members often question the necessity of a project manager (PM), believing that since they are the ones doing the actual work, the PM merely acts as a messenger between leadership and the team. However, much of a PM's role operates behind the scenes—troubleshooting issues, coordinating with stakeholders, aligning resources, and making critical decisions with limited data.

The challenges don't just come from the team but also from the top. In 2006, Intel laid off 10,500 employees, primarily mid-level and project/program managers, as part of a cost-cutting measure to boost profitability. This highlights the precarious position of PMs, who often find themselves sandwiched between the aspirations of their team and the expectations of upper management. Balancing these demands while ensuring project success is what truly defines the role of an effective PM.

The importance of a PM

नाराजके जनपदे स्वकं भवति कस्यचित्।
मत्स्या इव जना नित्यं भक्षयन्ति परस्परम्।।[2]

nārājake janapade svakaṃ bhavati kasyacit।
matsyā iva janā nityaṃ bhakṣayanti parasparam।।

"In a country with no king, no one is responsible for any one. Like fish eating fish, people will eat each other."

The necessity of a project management role often comes into question, especially when everything appears to be running smoothly. However, it is precisely in such situations that the impact of a PM becomes evident—working behind the scenes to remove roadblocks, streamline coordination, and enable the team to perform effectively.

The verse previously mentioned, originally intended for a king or ruler, applies equally to a project manager. When multiple moving parts must align, having someone oversee planning and execution ensures that the engine keeps running efficiently. A well - functioning project often signals not the absence of management, but rather the presence of an effective, unobtrusive PM who ensures seamless progress.

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1   Śārṅgadharapaddhati

2   Ramayana - Ayodhya Kanda

Having a 360º view

क्वार्थाः क्व शब्दाः क्व रसाः क्व भावाः क्व व्यङ्गयभेदाः क्व च वाक्यरीतिः।
कियत्सु दृष्टिः कविना न देया किमस्ति राज्ञामियतीह चिन्ता।।[3]

kvārthāḥ kva śabdāḥ kva rasāḥ kva bhāvāḥ kva vyaṅgayabhedāḥ kva ca vākyarītiḥ।
kiyatsu dṛṣṭiḥ kavinā na deyā kimasti rājñāmiyatīha cintā ॥

"A poet must carefully choose words, considering their meanings, expressions, underlying emotions, various forms of satire, and the structure of sentences—even within a single line. Does a king ever face such complexities?"

The above verse applies to both a poet and a PM. A project manager must have a 360º perspective on the entire project. Deciding what to delegate, whom to delegate to, and how to ensure each team member has the necessary resources requires a deep understanding of the work's complexity and the capabilities of each team member in their respective roles.

Building emotional intelligence

उदीरितोऽर्थःपशुनापि गृह्यते हयाश्च नागाश्च वहन्ति देशिताः।
अनुक्तमप्यूहति पण्डितो जनःपरेङ्गितज्ञानफला हि बुद्धयः ।।[4]

udīrito'rthaḥ paśunāpi gṛhyate hayāśca nāgāśca vahanti deśitāḥ ।
anuktamapyūhati paṇḍito janaḥpareṅgita jñānaphalā hi buddhayaḥ ॥

It is easy to understand the spoken words, but understanding the untold feelings is the key to building emotional intelligence. This comes with active listening, being genuinely interested in people around you, not just focusing on work outputs.

Reading between the lines

निमित्तेभ्यः प्रवर्तन्ते सर्व एव स्वभूतये।
अभिप्रायानुरोधोऽपि स्वार्थस्यैव प्रसिद्धये ।।[5]

nimittebhyaḥ pravartante sarva eva svabhūtaye।
abhiprāyānurodho'pi svārthasyaiva prasiddha ye ॥

"For some reason or other all act for their own benefit. If following a wish of others, it is also to fulfill one's own interest or to gain popularity."

As explained in the previous quote, a PM needs to know the pulse of the team. A project being a unique endeavour normally does not have all the required data for decision making in the beginning and hence depends on various assumptions. It is equally important to know about the assumptions made about team members as well. So the above verse from Vakyapadiyam (3.7.124) is applicable here, which says, each has his/ her own motives at work. It is easy to drive a project when the PM knows what motivates the team. The convergence of talent, aspiration and work can lead to the best results, and understanding one's aspirations and the inherent capabilities, one can reach this niche area in productivity.

Walking the talk

यथा चित्तं तथा वाचो यथा वाचस्तथा क्रिया।
चित्ते वाचि क्रियायां च साधुनामेकरूपता।।
yathā cittaṃ tathā vāco yathā vācastathā kriyā।
citte vāci kriyāyāṃ ca sādhunāmekarūpatā।

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3   Śivalīlārṇavaḥ

4   Hitopadeśa

5   Vakyapadiyam

"Thoughts should be reflected in speech, and speech should be reflected in actions. A person whose mind, words, and actions are in harmony is a true sadhu."

This principle applies to all leaders —they earn respect when their words align with their actions. Orders are followed when leaders demonstrate integrity and instill confidence that they genuinely support their team. The same holds true at home; children are more likely to listen to parents who practice what they preach. For instance, if parents constantly use mobile phones but restrict their children from doing the same, their authority weakens, making it a losing battle.

Proper mapping of the roles is the name of the game

यस्य नास्ति स्वयं प्रज्ञा शास्त्रं तस्य करोति किम् ?
लोचनाभ्यां विहीनस्य दर्पणः किं करिष्यति।।[6]

yasya nāsti svayaṃ prajñā śāstraṃ tasya karoti kim?

locanābhyāṃ vihīnasya darpaṇaḥ kiṃ kariṣyati।

"A wealth of information is meaningless to someone lacking the will to use it—just as a mirror holds no value for a blind person."

If a project manager has a say in the team composition, they have to pick the members with the right attitudes. It is often simpler to train individuals in technology than to alter their attitude. Many companies prioritize behavioral interviews during hiring, often favoring candidates with a positive attitude over those with higher exam scores. This is because

exam scores may not accurately represent critical problem-solving abilities required in projects.

Building a team

अमन्त्रमक्षरं नास्ति नास्ति मूलनमौषधम्।
अयोग्यः पुरुषो नास्ति योजकस्तत्र दुर्लभः।।[7]

"There is no letter that cannot be used as a mantra; there is no root without some medicinal value, and there is no person who is absolutely useless. A yojaka i.e. a person who can identify their utility and put them to proper use, is, however, always rare."

In an ideal world, a project would have resources with skills perfectly aligned to the defined work. However, teams often include a mix of experienced professionals from different domains and newcomers to the field. It is the Project Manager's responsibility to harness the strengths of each individual and align them with the project's needs. Even when a PM cannot assemble their ideal team, effective mentoring, along with a keen understanding of each team member's strengths and weaknesses, enables them to guide the team toward success.

Identifying talent

अनभिज्ञो गुणानां यो न भृत्यैरनुगम्यते।
धनाढ्योऽपि कुलीनोऽपि क्रमायातोऽपि भूपतिः।।[8]

anabhijño guṇānāṃ yo na bhṛtyairanugamyate।
dhanāḍhyo'pi kulīno'pi kramāyāto'pi bhūpatiḥ।

"If the qualities of a worker are not understood, however qualified the king (leader) is, rich or a descendant from a powerful family, they will not get the required

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6   Hitopadeśa

7   Hitopadeśa

8   Mahāsubhāṣitasaṃgraha

service."

Resources are assigned to a project, and as a Project Manager, one may not initially know each team member well enough to understand their individual strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, people may exhibit different behaviors depending on their roles and circumstances. Situational leadership requires a PM to actively engage with the team, gaining insight into their strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. By doing so, the PM can adapt their leadership style to bring out the best in each team member and guide them effectively toward project success.

Acknowledging others' contributions is not easy

नागुणी गुणिनं वेत्ति गुणी गुणिषु मत्सरी।
गुणी च गुणरागी च विरल: सरलो जन:।।[9]

nāguṇī guṇinaṃ vetti guṇī guṇiṣu matsarī।
guṇī ca guṇarāgī ca virala: saralo jana:।

"A person without talent fails to recognize a talented individual. A talented person feels jealous of others with talent. Rare is the one who is both talented and takes joy in the success of fellow talented individuals."

The verse from Subhashitaratna bhandagaram aptly captures common workplace dynamics and this philosophy resonates strongly in professional settings, where managers must navigate the delicate balance between reality and self-perception. Each team member often believes their contribution was the key driver of a project's success.

In sports, such as cricket, performance metrics are clear—top run-scorers or wicket-takers are recognized with the "Player of the Match" award, even though victory is a collective effort. In contrast, workplace contributions are less quantifiable. While managers may have a fair sense of individual impact, convincing the entire team of this assessment is a challenge.

To avoid conflicts, organizations discourage employees from sharing appraisal results. Yet, a common workplace phenomenon persists: individuals tend to overestimate their own contributions while undervaluing the efforts of others. This disparity in perception can create friction, making fair recognition a complex task for any manager.

Self-appraisal conundrum

स्तोतार: के भविष्यन्ति मूर्खस्य जगतीतले।
न स्तौति चेत्स्वयं च स्वं कदा तस्यास्तु निर्वृति:।।[10]

stotāraḥ ke bhaviṣyanti mūrkhasya jagatītale।
na stauti cetsvayaṃ ca svaṃ kadā tasyāstu nirvṛtiḥ।।

"There is no one to praise a foolish person, so it is natural for fools to resort to praising themselves. How else can they find satisfaction?"

The above verse suggests that self-praise is a mark of foolishness. However, in the corporate world, speaking up for oneself is often necessary. When clear-cut deliverables are assigned and tracked, the work largely speaks for itself. But in areas where contributions are less quantifiable, dynamics shift—some work diligently in the background, while others talk

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9   Subhashitaratnabhandagaram

10   Kalividambanam

their way up the ladder without substantial effort.

A Project Manager's role extends beyond just ensuring task completion. They must also distinguish between genuine contributors and those who seek the spotlight without adding real value. Recognizing and rewarding true effort while filtering out mere self-promotion is key to fostering a fair and productive work environment.

While working as a South Asia Customer Solutions Manager at Intel Corporation, a colleague from Japan once shared an interesting cultural challenge during a meeting. He found it difficult to get his team members to share their accomplishments because, in Japanese culture, speaking about one's own achievements is considered taboo. As a result, he had to personally keep track of each team member's awards and recognitions.

At the time, we were exploring ways to systematically track performance and encourage team members to update internal platforms with their accomplishments. However, for his team, this approach was ineffective. Instead, the Japanese manager took on the responsibility of updating their achievements himself, ensuring that their contributions were recognized while respecting cultural sensitivities.

Identifying spotlight chasers

घटं भिन्द्यात् पटं छिन्द्यात् कुर्याद् रासभरोहणम्।
येन केन प्रकारेण मनुष्यः प्रसिद्धो भवेत्।।[11]
ghaṭaṃ bhindyāt paṭaṃ chindyāt kuryād rāsabharohaṇam।

yena kena prakāreṇa manuṣyaḥ prasiddho bhavet।

"Whether by breaking a pot, tearing clothes, or riding a horse, a person seeks fame by any means."

The success of project managers depends not only on their ability to understand their team's capabilities but also on their own subject matter expertise. Without this, they may struggle to differentiate between genuine contributors and those who merely seek recognition without substantial effort.

A project manager should have a solid grasp of the domain they oversee, enabling them to separate substance from superficiality. This knowledge allows them to recognize true merit, ensure fair recognition, and maintain the integrity of the project's success.

Avoiding favouritism

त्वां स रक्षति यत्लेन मां स द्वेष्टि निरन्तरम्।
तवैव दोषो नैवात्र मम दोषोऽस्ति कश्चन।।
tvāṃ sa rakṣati yatnena māṃ sa dveṣṭi nirantaram।

tavaiva doṣo naivātra mama doṣo'sti kaścana।।

"He saves you with effort and resents me always. Maybe it is not your fault, but the fault may be mine".

Managers naturally tend to gravitate toward high performers or those who maintain a peaceful presence in the team. While high achievers rightfully deserve recognition, excessive attention from the manager may create a perception of favoritism among other team members.

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11   Sarngadhara-Paddhati

A good manager, however, balances their focus—not just on top performers but also on those who need guidance. Providing support to struggling team members can enhance overall team performance, foster a sense of inclusivity, and strengthen collaboration. After all, true leadership lies in uplifting the entire team, not just celebrating those who can already deliver on their own.

No use lighting a lit room

वृथा वृष्टिः समुद्रेषु, वृथा तृप्तस्य भोजनम्।
वृथा दानं समर्थस्य, वृथा दीपो दिवापि च।।[12]

vṛthā vṛṣṭiḥ samudreṣu, vṛthā tṛptasya bhojanam।
vṛthā dānaṃ samarthasya, vṛthā dīpo divāpi ca।।

"Rain on the seas, food to the satiated, charity to the capables and a light during the day, all are useless."

Similar to the wisdom in the earlier verse, a project manager should prioritize supporting those who need guidance rather than focusing solely on individuals who are already delivering strong results. Excessive proximity to high performers can create a perception of favoritism, even if unintentional.

This perception can be detrimental—not only does it breed resentment among other team members, but it also diminishes the true contributions of the high performer. Their success may be wrongly attributed to managerial bias rather than their actual merit. A balanced approach, where the manager provides support where it is needed most while

ensuring fair recognition, fosters a healthier and more motivated team.

Familiarity breeds contempt

अतिपरिचयादवज्ञा संततगमनादनादरो भवति।
मलये भिल्लपुरन्ध्री चन्दनतरुकाष्ठमिन्धनं कुरुते।।[13]

atiparicayādavajñā saṃtatagamanādanādaro bhavati।
malaye bhillapurandhrī candanatarukāṣṭhamin dhanaṃ kurute।।

"Excessive familiarity breeds contempt, and frequent visits invite disrespect—much like a Bhilla woman in Malaya (forest of sandalwood trees) using precious sandalwood as firewood."

While driving on Indian roads, one often sees signs on trucks saying, "Keep Distance." Similarly, a project manager must strike the right balance in their relationship with the team—neither too distant nor overly familiar.

Excessive closeness can erode authority and objectivity, while being too aloof may lead to disengagement and a lack of trust. Just as familiarity can breed contempt, over-involvement can blur professional boundaries and shift focus away from work. A manager's role is to foster mutual respect, maintain objectivity, and ensure both productivity and team cohesion.

Transparency and confidentiality

यदि नामास्य कायस्य यदन्तस्तद्बहिर्भवेत्।
दण्डमादाय लोकोऽयं शुनः काकांश्च वारयेत्।।[14]

yadināmāsyakāyasyayadantastadbahirbhavet।
daṇḍamādāya loko'yaṃ śunaḥ kākāṃśca vārayet।।

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12 Chanakyaniti

13 Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāram

14 Dhwanyaloka

"If a human body was transparent, the people had to use a stick to shoo away the dogs and crows. Meaning, what is inside, should be inside."

While transparency is a cornerstone of a healthy workplace, not all information can or should be shared openly. Certain details, such as trade secrets or strategic plans, must be disclosed on a need-to-know basis.

Much like how parents selectively share information to protect their children, a project manager must balance openness with discretion. Providing relevant details without overwhelming the team ensures clarity while avoiding unnecessary distractions.

Project managers often face the challenge of deciding how much to share. Striking the right balance fosters trust, maintains focus, and safeguards sensitive information. Moreover, understanding these nuances offers valuable insights into team dynamics and individual behaviors, ultimately contributing to a more cohesive and efficient work environment.

Exercising judicious power

को लाभो गुणिसङ्गमः किमसुखं प्राज्ञेतरैः सङ्गतिः
का हानिः समयच्युतिर्निपुणता का धर्मतत्त्वे रतिः ।
कः शूरो विजितेन्द्रियः प्रियतमा कानुव्रता किं धनं
विद्या किं सुखमप्रवासगमनं राज्यं किमाज्ञाफलम् ।।[15]

vākyako lābho guṇisaṅgamaḥ kimasukhaṃ prājñetaraiḥ saṅgatiḥ

kā hāniḥ samayacyutirnipuṇatā kā dharmatattve ratiḥ.

kaḥ śūro vijitendriyaḥ priyatamā kānuvratā kiṃ dhanaṃ

vidyā kiṃ sukhamapravāsagamanaṃ rājyaṃ kimājñāphalam.

"What is the gain? The company of the wise!

What is the pain? The company of fools!

What is the harm? Wasting one's time!

What is the skill? Immersing in ethics!

Who is brave? Conquer of one's senses!

Who is the most beloved? A virtuous wife!

What is wealth? Knowledge!

What is happiness? Not having to travel for sustenance!

What is power? Where the orders of the ruler are obeyed!"

To conclude, a PM is successful when the team listens to her/ him. Normally PMs do not wield absolute power, as they are not functional heads. The true test of a PM is the ability to get work done without due stress. It is only possible, when the PMs know their strengths and weaknesses of the team members, their skill-sets and their aspirations. Transforming the project goal to individual team members' goals is an art that a good PM develops over a period of time.

Conclusion

Much like the world Ayn Rand envisioned in The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged, an ideal workplace would thrive if everyone performed their roles with honesty and integrity. However, reality presents conflicting situations where strong teams can still falter without effective leadership. While AI has simplified aspects of project management, such as data collection, the human elements—strategic thinking, leadership, and interpersonal skills—remain

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15   Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāram

essential. A project manager must balance technical expertise with emotional intelligence, blending art and science to bring out the best in their team. Since employees often leave bad managers rather than organizations, a PM with strong human skills is a valuable asset. Ultimately, success in project management lies in mastering both the technical and the human aspects of leadership. This essay is an attempt to provide some pointers towards effective leadership.

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Listen to the Exhortation of the Dawn! Look to this Day! For it is Life, the very Life of Life. In its brief course lie all the Verities and Realities of your Existence. The Bliss of Growth, Glory of Action, The Splendour of Beauty; For Yesterday is but a Dream, And To-morrow is only a Vision; But To-day well lived makes Every Yesterday a Dream of Happiness, And every Tomorrow a Vision of Hope. Look well therefore to this Day! Such is the Salutation of the Dawn!"

- KALIDASA