

Learnings from Shri Adi Shankara's Life: A Management Perspective

Dr U V Somayajulu¹, Mr Nimal CN²

¹CEO & ED, Sigma Research and Consulting, Founder, Sri Rama Seva Samiti, Varanasi.

²Associate Professor, Adi Shankara Institute of Engineering and Technology, Kalady, Kerala.

Corresponding author: Nimal CN, G1C, Kalpaka Gardens, Pattath Road, Chalikkavattom, Vennala PO, Kochi. Kerala 682028, Email: nimal.mba@adishankara.ac.in,

Abstract

Religion, philosophy, science, and management cannot work in isolation in the long run. These need to be harmonized and synchronized for the success of a society. It is also needed to live, feel and practice a balanced and ideal life and is imperative for a successful and great leader. Shri Adi Shankara is one of the greatest philosophers the world has ever seen. He was not only a Tattva Jnani (man of wisdom), but also a great expert in managing worldly affairs. During the 8th century, a chaotic situation prevailed in the Hindu society of Bharata Desha (India) with its very existence in jeopardy and its values, culture, and traditions in peril, on the verge of vanishing. Shri Adi Shankara strode across the country debating with scholars and propounding his philosophy of Advaita (Non-duality) and unifying people of differing viewpoints. Without him, Hindu religion would not have been in subsistence. Keeping this in view, an attempt is made in this paper to discuss the management perspectives that emerge from the life, works, and teachings of Jagadguru Shri Adi Shankara Bhagavatpada. It looks at his leadership qualities and the effort he made at integrating India into one unified whole.

Keywords: Adi Shankara, Philosophy, Hinduism, Management Learnings

Introduction

Shri Adi Shankara was a great thinker and the noblest of Advaitik philosophers. He can be considered one of the most rigorous missionary leaders in our country (Ramachandran, 2011). He was an inspired champion of Hinduism, a great organiser, a far-sighted and visionary diplomat, a courageous hero with a certainty of his convictions, a tireless servant of his motherland, a selfless and unassuming ascetic who covered the length and breadth of the country in service of the Hindu society. He taught his countrymen to live up to the values, dignity, and glory of Bharat. He brought people of all ideologies together, bringing unity among squabbling factions and integrating the country. Shri Adi Shankara was not only a man of wisdom (Tattva Jnani), but was also a great expert in managing the worldly affairs. Jagadguru's special qualities of patience, getting along amicably with one and all, amicable resolution of conflicts, and fortitude in action project him as a brilliant leader among men (Shri Bharati Tirtha Swamiji, 2011).

The Context

In the eighth century AD, Bharata Desha (India) was in a chaotic state, with its very existence and its values, culture, and traditions in danger. The Vedic religion had fragmented into numerous disparate groups over the years. The Saivites, Vahishnavites, Sakthas, and Kapalikas were in conflict with one another. Animal sacrifices and other base means of showcasing various religious dispensations replaced virtuous rituals that were once displays of devotion and faith. Infuriated by these, some individuals totally broke away from it, which led to the spread of Buddhism and Jainism in India, where all the earlier religions practiced were based on the Vedic tenets. Nothing seemed to be able to stop this chain fission. In order to put the parts back together and make it into a coherent religion, a massive reform campaign was required. (Namboodiripad, 1988). It was into this cauldron Jagadguru Shri Adi Shankara was born. Without him Sanatana Dharma (the Eternal) would have paradoxically faced extinction.

Shri Adi Shankara

Shri Adi Shankara who was born in Kalady in 788 AD was the only child and sadly lost his father during child hood. A few years later, he persuaded his reluctant mother to give her approval to his accepting Sannyas. He then travelled to the Vindhya when he was hardly into his teens where he became the disciple of Govindabagavatpada who taught him the Advaita Siddhanta (Vidyaranya, 2011). From there he traversed throughout the different parts of India starting from Varanasi to the Himalayas and then further South to Kerala and Tamil Nadu. And wonder of wonders, during an age when communication and transportation was practically non-existent, he traversed the length and breadth of the country not once but twice, going through dense forests, crossing rivers, passing villages

and towns accepting the hospitality of the common man or sleeping in the wild. In between, he wrote profusely, including commentaries on the Dasopanishads and the Brahmasutra.

In his mission to propagate Advaita, Shri Adi Shankara came across many personalities with different beliefs and practices that were not in line with his learnings. His negotiation skills and discussions paved the way for universal acceptance of his teachings and message. Although he convinced them of the superiority of the tenets of Advaita, he did not force the people he defeated in the debate to leave all their rituals and beliefs. Shri Adi Shankara also integrated all the worship practices – Shanmathas – to become Shanmata Sthapana Aacharya. These are the win – win approaches to be adopted by a successful leader. This can be understood from the fact that he lived just for 32 years and accomplished the most challenging tasks in this short span. The kind of debates he had with the scholars to make them accept the Advaita philosophy speaks volumes about his thinking ability, intelligence and his clarity of vision.

In this paper we look at Shri Adi Shankara as a leader and the learnings we can take from his life and teachings in a management perspective. Why leadership? Because it tends to cover most of the managerial qualities. A manager generally focuses on efficiency and effectiveness in utilising resources and implementing processes, while a leader focuses on inspiring and empowering people to work together towards a common goal. (Flint, 2023). A leader is a bigger perspective than manager. Management can even be called as a subset of leadership.

Leadership Qualities of Shri Adi Shankara

Leadership qualities consist of two parts, the Personality of the leader and his Skills and Competencies. So what kind of personality was Shri Adi Shankara?

Shri Adi Shankara the great Personality

We can notice many leadership qualities in Shri Adi Shankara such as ability to manage people, dedication to duty, respect for learning, intelligence, faith in one's own self and in the Supreme, and strong sense of purpose and vision that is relevant in our times, even after 1,200 years. The Mathas he set up in his lifetime continue to be the beacon lights of our society (Shri Bharati Tirtha Swami ji, 2011).

Collins (2001) developed the concept of Level 5 leadership. He summarised the Level 5 leader as visionary and nurturing leaders who make all efforts, but do not want the credit for the results. The leader not only wants the success to sustain over a longer period, but be able to transfer it to the next generation. This guarantees a long-lasting effect even after they have relinquished the field and ensures sustainability of the cause.

The specific qualities of level 5 leader include:

- Capability to transform organizations from good to great
- Prefer talking about organisation and contribution of other people but rarely about their role or achievement
- Fearless, at the same time, humble and modest
- Ability to handle differences, so as to arrive at synergy and harmony

We find all these qualities in Shri Adi Shankara. He was successful in setting up institutions and transforming them to centres of excellence. He always maintained a low profile with complete sacrifice of ego. He gave credit to his disciples and others for their contribution. He was always fearless while facing adverse situations. He also had the ability to handle any kind of differences and establish harmony.

Shri Adi Shankara is the embodiment of unique leadership qualities. He initiated and participated in philosophical discussions with scholars with different views to get them to accept his philosophy. He respected his opponents, engaged with them, rather than ignoring, and suppressing them. He ended up influencing all of them, and many became his disciples. In the process of arguments and discussions, he was able to identify the probable confusions in understanding Advaita (non-dualistic unity) and this understanding helped to make his later teachings and writings even more easy to grasp for all minds (Athreya, 2011)

Humility

Humility is hallmark of a leader. Shri Adi Shankara epitomised this great virtue of humility. In Varanasi, when his way was blocked while he was returning from the Ganga, he asked the person to move away. The person immediately asked Shri Adi Shankara whether he wants the body to move or the Atman? Shri Adi Shankara was reminded the truth about Atman (Soul) being part of Brahman (God). The great master instantly realising his folly and profundity of the statement bowed low to the person and composed five verses called Maneesha Panchakam. This indicates his humility (Krishnamurthy, 2011)

Empathy

Shri Adi Shankara demonstrated boundless compassion for his disciples. He blessed Giri with instant knowledge of all Shastras when others made fun of him. Eventually, he was known as Totakacharya upon getting Sanyas.

A leader has to have full authority over his disciples, but he should not be a dictator. Shri Adi Shankara demonstrated this again and again. He didn't stop Padmapada on a pilgrimage and when he lost his writings, Shri Adi Shankara retold the passages from memory (Shri Bharati Tirtha Swami, 2011).

Courage

Once Shri Adi Shankara travelling alone was accosted by a Kapalika who wanted the head of a saint for his rituals in order to attain a boon from Shri Shiva. Shri Adi Shankara immediately agreed saying that he will wait in a lonely place while his disciples were away so that the Kapalika could take off his head. But Padmapadacharya divined this intention and in a rage came and destroyed the Kapalkas. This shows the courage shown by Shri Adi Shankara (Vidyaranya, 2011)

Determination and Focus

Although Shri Adi Shankara was a great scholar and writer, he never wrote about himself or encouraged his disciples to do so. So much so that a lot of his biography is unclear and steeped in mystery even now. Whatever he taught and wrote was for the edification of his disciples and for promoting Advaita and unifying Bharata Varsha through its concepts. His determination and focus on his mission were very fierce.

Credibility and Integrity

Shri Adi Shankara promised his mother to visit her at her last moments of life and in spite of being a Sanyasi, he performed the last rites of his mother by breaking the rules due to reverence for his mother. This indicates the commitment to the assurances even in unfavourable conditions. We can find similar quality in Bhagawan Shri Rama, who never deviated from his words of assurance. Keeping your promises and being a person of your words enhance the credibility of the leader and deviations from this would affect the trust worthiness.

Discipline

Shri Adi Shankara's patience in dealing with people is another unique aspect that needs to be adopted by any leader. His visit to Mandana Mishra for scholarly debate and Ubhaya Bharati questioning him on matters opposed to his Sanyasa Ashrama were tests to his patience and determination. Another incident was about the Ugra Bhairava asking for Shri Adi Shankara's head for his Yajna. All the cases, highlight Shri Adi Shankara's ability in terms of understanding and patience (Shri Bharati Tirtha Swami, 2011)

Shri Adi Shankara: Skills and Competencies

Like mentioned earlier, leadership qualities include personality as well as skills and competencies. So what were his skills and competencies that made Shri Adi Shankara a great leader?

Communication

His communication abilities are legendary. The oral communication is clear from the way he organized Sanatana Dharma by bringing everyone to buy into the philosophy of Advaita. His numerous written works showcase his ability of written communication. His Sanskrit is easily understood and his prose as well as verse are beautiful and memorable. He not only wrote the Bhashyas (Commentaries) but also numerous verses singing the praise of different deities like Shiva Bhujangam and Subrahmanya Bhujangam for the delectation of his disciples.

Negotiation

He was a great negotiator, very good at debates as can be seen from the way he defeated great scholars across Bharat and brought them to his way of thinking. He convinced them to accept Advaita through just the force of his intelligence and logical thinking without lifting a hand in anger or force. This is illustrated in the case of his debate with Mandana Misra, who later became his disciple Sureswara and his wife Ubhaya Bharati (Vidyaranya, 2011).

Decision Making

Taking the right decision at a crucial time is a vital quality of a leader and we can see this at various stages of Shri Adi Shankara's life. At the age of 8 years, Shri Adi Shankara enacted a Leela in his life when he made his decision to become a Sanyasi which was a turning point. The episode of the crocodile catching Shankara's leg in Purna River, his request to his mother for permission to become a Sanyasi through which a new birth could be had without physical death and his subsequent departure from Kalady talk volumes about his decision making ability. (Swaminathan, 2012)

Team Management

Shri Adi Shankara solved admirably a misunderstanding that had crept among his own disciples. When Suresvara wanted to write a commentary on Sutra Bhashya, other disciples did not agree to it. Shri Adi Shankara asked Suresvara to elaborate on Bhashyas (commentary) on Taittiriya and Brahadaranya Upanishads and he reconciled all of them (Shri Bharati Tirtha Swami, 2011). We can also see clarity in roles, task assignment and responsibility as part of team management of Shri Adi Shankara.

Analytical Skills

His conceptual and logical thinking skills are in abundant display in his works as well as all the things he did in his life. His Bhashyas are the ultimate in analytical skills and insights. It is these insights that

make anyone a great leader. In the traditional manner, he puts forth both the Purva Paksha - opponents original and older viewpoint - and Uttara Paksha - the new hypothesis - when he makes his logical conclusions. Only after a perfect understanding of the opponents viewpoint does a really learned scholar rebut them (Malhotra, 2011). Shri Adi Shankara analyses things from all directions before coming to a conclusion which is both rational and commonsensical.

Leadership Style of Adi Shankara

The leadership style of Shri Adi Shankara was unique and is still relevant in modern context. In our scriptures, Acharya is used instead of Shikshak. While Sikshak is a person who just teaches a subject, Acharya is one who sets an example himself and one who practices what he preaches. While the latter imparts domain knowledge, the former gives his disciple a more rounded personality. This was Shri Adi Shankara's way of teaching (Someswarananda, 2012). This indicates the need for preaching and practice to be going hand in hand. A leader is expected to practice whatever he or she preaches. We can see this in the Ramayana, from the life of Bhgawan Shri Ram, which makes him unique.

Shri Adi Shankara was a transformational leader (Bass & Riggio, 2006) who encouraged his disciples to carve out their own path. There are numerous instances of his situational leadership (Blanchard & Hersey, 1969) like when he asked Padmapadacharya to cross the river or when he stood by his disciple Giri who was later known as Totakacharya (Vidyaranya, 2011). He set objectives, the main one being the promotion of Advaita, showed his disciples the way and then let them achieve the goals. This kind of path goal leadership (House & Mitchell, 1997) where he let the students innovate shows his democratic nature also.

Contribution of Shri Adi Shankara

Shri Adi Shankara is one of the most influencing philosophers and religious leaders in the history of Bharat as well as Sanatana Dharma. He was a religious reformer and formulator and codifier of Advaita Vedanta philosophy based on the Upanishads (Pathak 2016). He was the most influential teacher of Advaita school of Vedanta who continued the Upanishadic tradition. His commentaries on the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahmasutras define parameters of Advaita thought.

Unifying Ability of Shri Adi Shankara

As per Kumar (2005) the most significant contribution of Shri Adi Shankara that enriched the spiritual life of common man was the establishment of pilgrimage sites and seats of learning in the four directions and his visionary social networking.

Shri Adi Shankara channelized and established the rituals and systems of worship at many Hindu temples. He took the right steps to strengthen the power and positive energy of the temples. Several

reforms were also introduced by him in the interest of society. These initiatives helped in transformation and unification of society.

Mission of Shri Adi Shankara

Shri Adi Shankara believed that his mission of integrating the different sects of Sanatana Dharma couldn't be accomplished by an individual and can't be sustained without institutions of great discipline and perfect organisation. Towards this end, he established Mathas (monasteries) and (re)opened temples and revived practices and set up systems. His biggest contribution was in establishing institutions of education. He also prescribed certain religious codes (Swamy Chinmayananda, 1998).

Amnaya Peethas, Acharyas, Maths and Veda Allocation

Shri Adi Shankara established four Mathas in the four corners of Bharat as an integrating force as well as centres of learning as indicated below:

Direction	Mathas	Acharya	Veda
North	Jyothir	Sri Totakacharya	Atharvaved
South	Sringeri	Sri Sureshwaracharya	Yajurved
East	Govardhan	Sri Padmapadacharya	Rigved
West	Dwaraka	Sri Hasthamalakacharya	Samaved

Shri Adi Shankara placed his four main disciples as the head of these institutions and prescribed that each be the centre of learning for one of the four Vedas. With this he ensured that his teachings would reach the four corners of the land and continue well beyond his life time. He also ensured that Sanatana Dharma would continue to eternity with its Vaidik base and traditions being passed on from one generation to the other.

These Amnaya Peethas continue to function today and their heads – Shri Shankaracharyas - in honor of their founder, are revered as Jagadgurus, or teachers of world. The main goal of establishing these Peethas / Mathas was to establish a regulatory system and keep “knowledge in circulation”. Shri Adi Shankara framed a governing constitution for the Mathas, Shruti Sar Samuddharanam, which governs operations of the Mathas and provide guidelines. This indicates the vision Shri Adi Shankara had and the road map he prescribed and put in place as part of his mission.

Akhadas – Structure

Shri Adi Shankara established Akhadas known as Daasnami to protect the Sanatana Dharma. The Akhadas have two streams (branches) viz., Shaiv and Vaishnav, with 8 divisions and 52 sub divisions. Head of each Akhada is known as Mahant. The central body above Akhadas is Shri Panch and head of Shri Panch is called Mahamandaleshwar (head of all 52 Mahants). Above all Mahamandaleshwars, region wise there are heads i.e Shri Shankaracharyas. These structures and institutions established several decades back are still functional and actively involved in the tasks assigned to them. This indicates the long-term vision and sustainability plan envisaged and implemented by Shri Adi Shankara.

As per the systems put in place for all the Sanyasis from the lineage of Shankaracharya, they are expected to have the below mentioned qualities:

- Expertise over ancient spiritual practices
- Are devoted to protection of Sanatana Dharma
- Attained peak of spiritualism

Shri Adi Shankara established norms and systems to have Namboodris from Kerala for Pooja at Badrinath, Priests from Karnataka for Sri Pashupatinath Nepal, and Priests from Maharashtra for Ramesvaram. This indicates broad mindedness, in matters of national interest (Shri Bharati Tirtha Swami ji, 2011). This also gives us evidence for the efforts made by Shri Adi Shankara towards national integration.

Influence of Life and Teachings of Shri Adi Shankara

A brief remembrance of Shri Adi Shankara's life and teachings makes us conscious of the great force of divinity working in us in every moment of life (Krishnamurthy, 2011)

Let us discuss the influence of the life and teachings of Shri Adi Shankara. Shri Adi Shankara is a source of inspiration to the modern business leaders. They can understand how leaders can be better thinkers and organisers, task oriented, but humane, intuitive and disciplined and simple but with immense influence. They also can learn how to lead and be led.

The aforesaid qualities are expected from any leader or person who wants to succeed. Thinking ability of a leader with vision and target setting makes him/her successful. Simplicity is expected from a leader and Shri Adi Shankara is personification of simplicity as he lived the life of a saint. The leader should have the capability to influence the team and followers and we find this in Shri Adi Shankara abundantly. The leader should lead from the front. Discipline is an important leadership skill. The thinking ability of Shri Adi Shankara is evident from his work and writings.

Conclusion and Takeaways

Shri Adi Shankara was an inspired champion of Sanatan Hindu Vaidik dharma and one of the most vigorous missionaries in our country. Shri Adi Shankara was also a great organiser, and a far-sighted diplomat with vision besides being a courageous person. He was also a tireless servant of the motherland and society which indicates his social responsibility. Shri Adi Shankara was selfless and unassuming. He covered the length and breadth of the country to serve the motherland and taught his countrymen to live up to dignity and glory of Bharat.

According to Viveka Choodamani, a teacher is one who is; well-versed in scriptures, pure, unaffected by desires, has perfect knowledge of the Supreme and continuously abides in the Supreme. The teacher has to be as calm as fire that has burnt up its fuel, a spontaneous ocean of mercy that needs no cause for its expression and an intimate friend to all good people who surrender to him. We find these qualities in Shri Adi Shankara and any teacher or leader should have these qualities.

The leadership qualities one can absorb and adapt from Jagadguru Shri Adi Shankara can be summarized below:

- Goal setting: Shri Adi Shankara had the goal of reviving the Vaidika Sanatana Dharma and he stuck to it with great focus throughout his life
- Empowering self: Shri Adi Shankara got knowledge for self through service to Guru. Domain knowledge and managerial skills are a must for any leader.
- Gaining credibility: Shri Adi Shankara gained credibility not by his lectures but by action. His integrity and commitment brought him the trust of the people.
- Social need/responsibility: Problem solving, welfare of society /human beings. For instance, Shri Adi Shankara recited the Kanakadhara Stotra instantly to help the poor woman to move out of poverty. This also shows the compassion he had towards fellow human beings
- Communication: Knowledge dissemination for Shri Adi Shankara was audience specific - he addressed the needs of people categorised as low, medium and higher levels based on grasping capacity and needs. Stotras, Prakarana Granthas, Viveka Choodamani, commentary/ Bhashya to Prasthan Trayam- Upanishads, Bhagavadgita, and Brahmasutra were meant for these three types of audiences.
- Demonstration: Shri Adi Shankara kept on giving direction to the people throughout his life through his own actions.

- Empowering people: All the efforts of Shri Adi Shankara were aimed at empowering the people in general and his disciples in particular.
- Sustainability: His withdrawal plan ensured the sustainability of his teachings and organization. The architecture that he put in place for the continued growth and survival of Sanatana Dharma was very successful.

References

- Athreya, M. B. (2011). Sankara's Virtues in Spiritual Management in Ramachandran, T. R. (Ed.), Sankara, The Universal Teacher, Sri Sharda Peetham, Sringeri
- Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji (2011). Sankara, the Brilliant Leader in Ramachandran, T. R. (Ed.), Sankara, The Universal Teacher, Sri Sharda Peetham, Sringeri
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). Transformational leadership (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617095>
- Blanchard K H, Hersey P (1969), Situational Leadership, Management of Organizational Behavior – Utilizing Human Resources, Prentice Hall, New Jersey.
- Chinmayananda, S. (1998). Sankara – The Missionary, Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust
- Collins, Jim (2001), Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve, Harvard Business Review, 79, 67-76
- Flint, Jacob (2023), What is the key difference between a manager and a leader, Salford Professional Development, retrieved on July 20, 2023 from <https://www.salford.ac.uk/spd/what-key-difference-between-manager-and-leader>
- House, R. J., & Mitchell, T. R. (1997). Path-goal theory of leadership. In R. P. Vecchio (Ed.), Leadership: Understanding the dynamics of power and influence in organizations (pp. 259–273). University of Notre Dame Press. (Reprinted from Journal of Contemporary Business, 4(3), Aut 1974, pp. 81–97)
- Kinkhabwala B A. Gor, Ravi (2018) Jagadguru Adi Shankaracharya- A Source of Learning Leadership Traits and Skills for Sustainable Management Practices, Purusharta · Vol.XI, No. 1; March - August, 2018
- Krishnamurthy, R. (2011). Adi Sankara: A Beacon Light to Managers, in Ramachandran, T. R. (Ed.), Sankara, The Universal Teacher. Sri Sharda Peetham, Sringeri
- Kumar N. (2005), Life of Shankaracharya: The Adventures of a Poet Philosopher <http://www.kheper.net/topics/Vedanta/Shankaracharya.html>

- Malhotra, Rajiv (2011). Being different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism, Harper Collins Publishers, New Delhi. ISBN 9789350291900. OCLC 769101673. ISBN 9350291908
- Namboodiripad, N. C. (1988), The Preceptor: Adi Shankara Bhagavatpada, Sri Sharada Peetham, Sringeri
- Pathak, S. (2016). Adi Shankaracharya: Contributions and influences on Sanatana Dharma and Indian culture <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303408886>
- Ramachandran, T. R. (2011). Sankara, The Universal Teacher Eds. Sri Sharda Peetham, Sringeri
- Someswarananda, Swami (2012). Leadership Style: Hints from Adi Sankara. In Ramachandran, T. R. (Ed.), Ancient Wisdom for Modern Management. Sri Sharda Peetham, Sringeri.
- Surhone, LM, Timpledon MT, Marseken, SF, (2010), Padmapadacharya, Betascript Publishing, ISBN 9786132060662
- Swaminathan, K. (2012). Management Ideas from Adi Sankara. In Ramachandran, T. R. (Ed.), Ancient Wisdom for Modern Management. Sri Sharda Peetham, Sringeri
- Swaminathan, K. (2011). Sankara Lives Today, in Ramachandran, T. R. (Ed.), Sankara, The Universal Teacher, Sri Sharda Peetham, Sringeri
- Vidyaranya (2011), Sri Shankara Digvijayam, An Concise English Translation, Issued on the Auspicious Occasion of the Prathishtha Kumbhabhishekam of Sri Adi Shankaracharya Bhagavatpada Temple, Sringeri Sarada Peetham, Sringeri.
- Yogananda, Paramhansa (1946). Autobiography of a Yogi - Chap 24: I Become a Monk of the Swami Order - pg 218 retrieved on 30.7.2023 from <https://www.crystalclarity.com/pages/autobiography-chapter-24-i-become-a-monk-of-the-swami-order>