

LEADING BY HALO

*India Inc can learn from
the Rajnikant persona:
Create leaders who create
followers*

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Witnessing the resurgence of charismatic leadership in the Rajnikant persona, the debate about the methods and madness of management by charisma has once again surfaced. Frenzied mobs crazy with their adulation for the leader, who is the star and the centre of their universe. A hysteria that gripped Indians and non-Indians across the globe and created history. The legend of the Rajnikant persona lives in the undeniable reality of millions of lesser mortals who would go to the edge of the cliff in their quest for his glimpse.

Legends are written in boardrooms across the world about charismatic leaders building corporate empires, turning around ailing companies, managing miraculous change. These are the leaders that are omnipotent mystical heroes who are value driven. Whether it was Jack Welch, or JRD Tata, Donald Trump or Dhirubhai Ambani, Kenneth Lay or Harshad Mehta, John F Kennedy or Jawaharlal Nehru, Adolf Hitler or Osama Bin Laden, all used their persona to move followers into action much like the flute of the Pied Piper: The same is true of the Rajnikant effect.

Today as India is on the brink of an economic revolution that is going to escalate exponentially into the global world, there is a crisis of leadership that will drive the change needed.

Eavesdropping on canteen gossip in neighbouring offices reveals a lack of faith in management and leadership. Management processes that are only about planning, controlling, directing, create bosses that are control freaks and suppress individual impulses, creating crises of talent retention that are the nightmare of the HR Manager. The need of the hour is for the saviour who will redeem the masses and restore faith in the system. We need to create a leader who creates followers.

The authenticity

The most striking feature about the Rajnikant phenomenon is the absolute ease with which the actor presents himself without the image. The distinction between the personality and the persona diminishes as the fan following relate to the real person behind the makeup and special effects first, and then witness the magic of his creations. Enduring leadership needs to be absolutely authentic if it has to work. All image and no reality is not a mirage that fools some people some of the time but not all the people all the time. The magic of Rajnikant has endured over the years and like the most intoxicating wines, gets better with age.

The image

The image is not something that happened. Carefully crafted product development built the stuff this star is made of. Painstaking efforts into perfecting the finer aspects of what the followers want creates a product that not only meets and exceeds customer expectations but leads to customer delight and customer exultation. Branding strategy has been highly focused perhaps leading to excessive stereotyping of the kind of roles he plays. It is said that many a times Rajnikant was offered roles in films that were more arty and substantive. Such were the opportunities to break the stereotypes and experiment. He declined these offers and stayed with his core competencies. The image created gave him a core identity that was consistent and his fans knew what to expect of him, and kept coming back for more.

What the followers need

There is a constant finger on the pulse of the customer. That the fans in South India are different from

the North was always known. A north Indian might have dismissed what Rajnikant does as ridiculous and frivolous and lacking the fine subtleties of acting and theatrics. But below the Narmada river, Rajnikant was a god that executed miracles with ease and surprised even his own audiences. Rajnikant kept his ear to the ground and connected with his audiences at grassroots creating the earthy magic that he did.

Tricks of the trade

All managers have their stock of trivia and tricks of the trade. The cigarette nonchalantly swallowed with a swagger and then regurgitated with an equal amount of flair, the overstated style of the white suit with white shoes, the changing wigs, sleight-of-hand, smart dialogues, the flamboyant scarf... and so many more. As Rajnikant matured, so did the exaggeration of his gestures. Innovativeness is needed to keep abreast of what clicks with the times.

The ethics debate

Leadership is a double-edged sword that can lead to blind fanaticism in the service of megalomaniacs and dangerous values, or to heroic self-sacrifice in the service of a beneficial cause. So charismatic leaders need to be aware of their commitment to doing what is right. Thankfully, today, media is a great watchdog that makes transparent all that unethical managers are doing in the name of charisma and leadership.

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IMAGING:HEMAL SHETHA