

Ethics for Enhancing Endurance

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Sustainability is all about endurance. It is the capacity to take charge of economical and ecological aspects in focusing on profits, people and planet. From a fundamental managerial point of view, people drive organizations. Their decisions and actions are crucial for sustainability. This article focuses on a delicate balance required for such an endeavor. That is being ethical and effective.

Ethics in Focus

The numerous stories we heard across the globe, including the Enron saga call for ethicality. It is not achieving short-term gains “either by hook or by crook” but something much deeper, grounded on solid principles. Ethics is difficult to define in a precise way. In a general sense, it is the code of moral principles and values that governs the behaviours of a person or a group with respect to what is right or what is wrong. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, says the golden rule of ethics.



Focusing more on business ethics, it is the capacity to reflect on values in the corporate decision making process, to determine how these values and decisions affect various stakeholder groups, and to establish how managers can use these observations in a day-to-day company management. A code of ethics is a formal statement that acts as a guide for making decisions and acting within an organization. Richard Daft, a well known management author speaks of a four-way test, which is globally advocated by Rotary International.

1. Is the decision truthful?
2. Is it fair to all concerned?
3. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?
4. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?

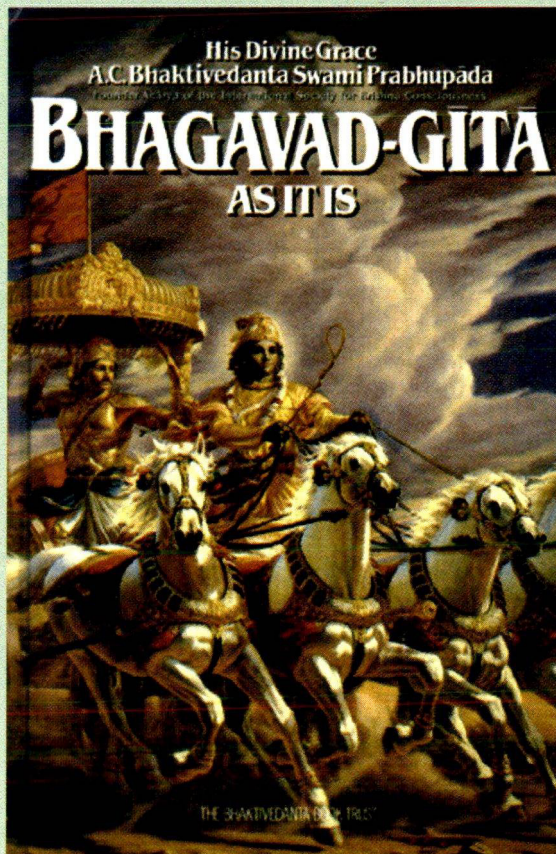
The answer should be “yes” to all above questions, in order the decision to be ethical. The reality of being ethical is that the response should always be “digital”. Either you are ethical or unethical, and there is no half way. The challenge in this respect is the engage employees whilst ensuring that they are guided to be ethical and effective.

In search for an enduring response to the dire need to be ethical and effective, the twin terms, Niskam Karma (NK) and Sakam Karma (SK) makes much sense. These terms were introduced to the management circles by Chakraborty, a management researcher from Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore (IIMB).

Nishkam Karma

Nishkam Karma (NK) is a term derived from the revered Hindu text, Bhagawad Gita. It literally means detached involvement. Performing work, accepted on the basis of agreed remuneration, with little calculation or comparison with others, or concern for additional personal recognition, gain or reward during or completion of the work. A verse in Bhagawad Gita enunciates the principle of NK as:

“Thou hast a right to action, but only to action, never to its fruits; let not the fruits of thy works be thy motive, neither let there be in thee any attachment in inactivity.”



Nishkam Karma can also be described as self-less or desire-less action, which is performed without any expectation of fruits or results. This is the central tenet of Karma Yoga path to Liberation, according to Hindu texts. Now it has now found place not just in business management, management studies but also in promoting better Business ethics as well. Its modern advocates press upon achieving success following the principles of Yoga, and stepping beyond personal goals and agendas while pursuing any action over greater good, which has become well known since it is the central message of the Bhagawad Gita.

In Indian philosophy, action or Karma has been divided into three categories, according to their intrinsic qualities or gunas. Here Nishkam Karma belongs to the first category, the Satvik (pure) or actions which add to calmness; the Sakam Karma (Self-centred action) comes in the second rājasika (aggression) and Akarma (in-action) comes under the third, tāmasika which correlates to darkness or inertia.

I came across a text titled, “summer showers in Brindavan” which further upholds the virtues of NK. “Man can be described as a conglomeration of thoughts and ideas. Every little thought becomes an integral part of his life. The quality of feelings one has, determines his future. Therefore, he must install sacred ideas in his heart. The fostering of pure thoughts will promote the spirit of selfless service in our hearts. Nishkama karma uproots the bestiality in man and confers divinity on him. Selfless service is a more exalted means of spiritual progress than such other ways as meditation, bhajan and yoga. This is so because when we undertake meditation, japa, or yoga, we do so for our own benefit and not for the good of others. These are aimed at subjugating one’s individual desires and securing happiness for oneself. What we should aspire for is the attainment of the good of others without any desire for personal gain.”

Sakam Karma as the Opposite

The opposite of NK is termed as Sakam Karma (SK) meaning attached involvement. As Chakraborty elaborates, it means performing work, accepted on the basis of agreed remuneration, with anxious comparative calculation vis-à-vis others, for additional personal recognition, gain or reward during or on completion of the work.

Commenting on the Indian Scenario, he states the following:

“The 1980s have been often described as the “greedy decade”. A similar phenomenon began in India in 1990s, initiated by the stock-exchange-banking mega scam. Several highly ranked chairmen and CEOs of companies, chief justices, vice chancellors, chairmen of State Public Service Commissions, senior bureaucrats and other important public figures came under a cloud, having been involved in unethical practices”

It by no way means one has to leave the worldly affairs in becoming an ascetic. As Sri Aurobindo aptly pointed out, “action done with NK is not only the highest, but the wisest, the most potent and efficient even for the affairs of the world”. A desirable scenario would be to see the engaged employees becoming detached, yet continuing to be involved. A simple example could be, a bank manager devoting himself/herself for the achievement of the given objectives, in a whole-hearted manner, without thinking of what one would get in return. The opposite of this will be another manager working hard on a personal agenda, aspiring to get the next promotion early.

Comparing NK and SK

The differences between NK and SK can be shown as in the table given below. As it clearly depicts, what we see is a comparison between “green” vs. “greed”.

TABLE . NK and SK Compared

Niskam Karma (Detached Involvement)	Sakam Karma (Attached Involvement)
Psychological energy conservation	Psychological burnout
Perfection is the aim	Success is the aim
Socio-economically appropriate	Socio-economically questionable
Work-commitment	Reward-commitment
Enhances ethicality	Reduces ethicality
Mind enrichment	Job enrichment
Liberating	Binding

Source: Chakraborty (2006: 124)

Detachedness reduces greed and increases your tendency to be “green”. It means having a greater consciousness towards the nature. It conserves your psychological energy by reducing backbiting, undercutting, tale-carrying and other negative behaviours prevalent in a typical workplace. As perfection is the aim, managers can gear themselves for continuous improvement rather than narrowly focusing on winning always in any manner.

There is a French saying that you should know when to leave a party. I have seen many managers struggle to give up their authority and associated perks. Seeing your successor taking your job to a

greater height is somewhat difficult to some of us. Training the ones with potential, developing one's successor or sharing one's experiential knowledge with youngsters are the actions some are reluctant to do. They all boil down to attachment.



The acid test here is the ability to “detached” yet getting involved. The much published statement by former US president John F Kennedy goes as “ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do to the country”. Such an approach is very much relevant to a wide variety of institutions, in order to build employees who are ethical and effective.

Way Forward

Being effective is essentially about achieving results. Developing plans and implementing them are essential parts in this regard. Enhancing ethicality is increasingly becoming essential, in a “greedy world”. Detached involvement in demonstrating the desire to preserve our planet, as people who make profits is the dire need. East and west alike, quest towards sustainability should be supported by enhanced ethicality. All of us can play a role here in being more conscious of our words and deeds.

About the Author

Dr. Ajantha Dharmasiri is a Senior Faculty of the Postgraduate Institute of Management (PIM). He is an adjunct professor in International HRM at Price College of Business, Oklahoma, USA. He has over two decades of private and public sector experience including multinationals. He is a Chartered Electrical Engineer and a member of the Chartered Institute of Management, UK. He engages in consultancies in more than ten countries, and also an independent director of a development bank. Having a PhD and an MBA from PIM and a B.Sc. in Engineering from University of Moratuwa, he is a Commonwealth AMDISA Doctoral Fellow and a Fulbright Postdoctoral Fellow as well.