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The MSD effect

Is Dhoni following any management theory or are his successes all just a brilliant fluke?

It is said that leaders are born and not made. But, watching cricketer Mahendra Singh Dhoni's career, one wonders if it was only luck or if he was following a management path or theory? His qualities as a leader and manager have been dissected, debated and discussed by sports journalists and management gurus alike.

Is Dhoni a good leader because he possesses leadership traits and attributes or does he leverage these skills via major management theories to get the better out of himself and the team? In this article, I try to explore MSD's actions under the ambit of management theories like Emotional Intelligence, Collaborative Management Theory, and Situational Leadership.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to understand and manage your own emotions, and those of the people around you. For leaders, having emotional intelligence is essential for success. After all, who is more likely to succeed – a leader who shouts at his team when he's under stress, or a leader who stays in control and calmly assesses the situation?

According to American psychologist Daniel Goleman, there are five main elements of emotional intelligence: Self-awareness, Self-regulation, Motivation, Empathy and Social skills. The better you, as a leader, manage each of these areas, the higher your emotional intelligence.

Self-awareness: Is Dhoni self-aware? Extremely. You have to be aware of your strengths and weaknesses to catapult yourself from a small town to the team captain of the Indian cricket team. Dhoni's ability to insulate himself and his team from extraneous influences in order to focus on the game is one of his biggest strengths. MSD manages his emotions well, keeps his cards close to his chest. He knows, no matter what the situation, he can always choose how to react to it. When things get tough, all eyes turn to the leader. And if the leader is composed and calm, it lends a



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great strength and hope to the team. And it also gets the opposition jolted.

Self-regulation: "Leaders who regulate themselves effectively rarely verbally attack others, make rushed or emotional decisions, stereotype people, or compromise their values. Self-regulation is all about staying in control." This is the best way to sum up MSD. This element of

emotional intelligence, according to Goleman, also covers a leader's flexibility and commitment to personal accountability. Dhoni is unperturbed, equally calm in success and failure alike. Dhoni has often said that he doesn't believe in dwelling in the past, or living for the future. Rather, he gives the best he can in the present. He is adept at handling criticism and praise. He is accountable, accepts and owns up to the mistakes publicly – as a player and as a team.

Rarely has Dhoni lashed out on his team in public, a tactic which was far too common in the 90's era. Captains, coaches and even players used media as a communication tool to criticize each other. This self-regulation has lead Dhoni to be a well-respected captain, even by senior players like Dravid and Tendulkar.

Motivation

A self-motivated leader works consistently toward his goals has extremely high standards for work. Here, motivation comes from within and is more positive

when you compare it to extrinsic factors that affect your motivation. Dhoni's locus of control is very intrinsic. He is not blinded by the glamour and money. He plays the game for the love of the game. He competes with only himself and none other.

Empathy: Leaders with empathy have the ability to put themselves in someone else's situation. They help develop the people on their team, challenge others who are acting unfairly, give constructive feedback and listen to those who need it. Many still hold dear memories of watching Dhoni letting Ganguly captain the side for a little during his last Test match. Or when he took to the sides, as team India took Tendulkar on their shoulders during the World Cup 2011 victory lap. He is also sympathetic towards bad performances, and supports players through their ups and downs. In Dhoni's words "We should also believe in the ones who failed in the team. At crucial times, a team member who was not able to deliver might do miracles".

Social skills: Leaders who do well in the social skills element of emotional intelligence are great communicators. Leaders who have good social skills are also good at managing change and resolving conflicts diplomatically. They set an example with their own behavior. Since he became captain in 2007, Dhoni has used his networking and social skills to garner respect from his team members, seniors and juniors alike. He gives and gets respect.

Situational Leadership Theories

By looking at Hersey and Blanchard's leadership styles, you can see that situational leadership follows the same styles as the behavioral theories. Dhoni's management style, in general, follows this theory. During an India Australia One-Day match recently, bowler Ishant Sharma gave away 30 runs in an over at the fag end, virtually handing over the game to the opposition. Dhoni pointed out that at the international level, he doesn't believe in guiding the bowler at every stage. "Individuals will have to step up; you have to back your strengths. You can't spoon-feed bowlers at the international level. I think the last few overs were disappointing. It is an area of concern and it is getting worse."

MSD and Collaborative Leadership Theory

The term Collaborative Leadership describes an emerging body of theory and management practice, which is focused on the leadership skills and attributes needed to deliver results across functional and organizational boundaries. It starts, according to David Chrislip and Carl Larson, in Collaborative Leadership,



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from the premise that "...if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community".

Mohammed Azharuddin would always huddle with senior players during the drinks break and ask their advice on what to do next. Dhoni doesn't do that. When it comes to key strategic decisions, he is his own man, seldom seeking advice. And after losing a match, he doesn't need comforting.

It would appear like MSD would not be a great supporter of the collaborative leadership cause, as the turnaround time on field to make decisions is very short. Hence, any change in strategy by Dhoni is usually not done after concurrence with senior players. Here, Dhoni's ability to give and keep space comes into the forefront.

Dhoni, intentionally or unknowingly, uses many management theories and styles in his captaincy. He has a better working understanding of these theories than most managers would, which has made him the best captain of the best Indian cricket team. 🏏



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