

RAMBO??

I was invited by the Indian head of a multinational organization to conduct a series of leadership and team building programmes. After the preliminary niceties were shared, we got down to the business end of the meeting.

“Leadership and team building mean different things to different people” I began, “it encompasses a whole world view and a philosophical base”. The CEO looked very interested and a bit perplexed. “Can you tell me what you mean?” he asked. “One of the authors who comes close to the way we hold leadership in TAO is Daniel Goleman. His book “Primal Leadership” outlines many basic ideas very lucidly”. The CEO’s eyes lit up “Primal Leadership that’s right!” he said. “I want leaders to lead teams that will walk over bodies to accomplish their goals.”

I was more than just a little surprised. I thought that the days of the Rambo models of leadership were gone. “Let me try and understand what you mean” I began, “you want gladiators completely dedicated to the mission, willing to brook no opposition”. “Yes” he said. “Give me an example”. “Alexander” was the prompt one word reply.

“Alexander was the head of a tribe at a time when all tribes were racially homogenous, indoctrinated in the same ideology and completely trapped within their dependencies. We have evolved far beyond this. Teams are not only not homogenous often they are virtual, each one comes from not only varied backgrounds, but, even these are multifaceted. Lastly, each one has many options in the market”. The CEO was quiet for a few minutes. “The positives I see in Alexander era tribal heroism are dynamism, courage and a spirit of adventure. However, tribal cultures are extremely competitive, have linear and rigid world views, look for enemies and are predatory. A strong self centered “what in it for me?” is a dominant motivation and this can easily become envy. I can see that you are battling bureaucratic apathy and dysfunctional status seeking. May be what we need to search for is a strong purpose that attracts each member in a deeply meaningful way, a quality of interface characterized by mutuality and commitment and a fair degree of autonomy that lets each one contribute through an exercise of their competencies. The leader of today’s team need not be charismatic, but, he must touch each person’s heart and mind. The team cannot be bound by loyalty, but by the pursuit of a shared and elevating purpose”.

I recommended to the CEO that he watch two films – Rambo and Invictus after which we would have a discussion. The CEO heeded my advice, the next discussion focused on Nelson Mandela and Gandhiji. We spent a long time discussing intent, dreams and the human condition. Gurucharan Das’s book “The difficulty of being good” was an important part of the conversation. We decided that the CEO and I would have a few more conversations to decide what meaning of leadership and team building would be appropriate and requisite for his organisational context.