

# Decision making dilemmas in life<sup>1</sup>

B Mahadevan<sup>2</sup>

There is a widespread perception that ancient Indian wisdom is outdated, irrelevant and unscientific. An average well educated Indian firmly believes that serious perusal of ancient Indian wisdom will only promote blind thinking, irrational approach to addressing issues that one faces and a fatalistic attitude to life. Therefore it is hardly surprising that modern day experts in the fields of Management, Technology or Medicine talk low of ancient Indian wisdom. To add fuel to the fire, experts and policy makers in the field of education have time and again mounted a spirited defence to this position and have been opposing any effort to bring this into curriculum in any manner. On account of these, the younger minds have been kept away from the treasure of knowledge contained in texts such as Bhagavad Gita.

Facing difficult decision making situations in one's life is not an ivory tower idea. Every one of us faces this in our life from time to time. When we face difficult decision making situations, we seem to collapse like a pack of cards and try to run away from the situation. In some cases, we hide behind some other issue and avoid taking decisions. These issues were beautifully brought out in chapter 1 of Bhagavad Gita by analyzing the character called Arjuna. How can one brand such treasured knowledge as irrelevant to today's situation?

Senior leaders in organizations and elderly members in families and social circles face difficult decision making situations. How does one react under such situations, what dilemma does one go through and how to get out of such dilemmas are valuable knowledge. Let us turn our attention towards Bhagavad Gita and see what help we can get on these issues.

## Avoiding tough decisions

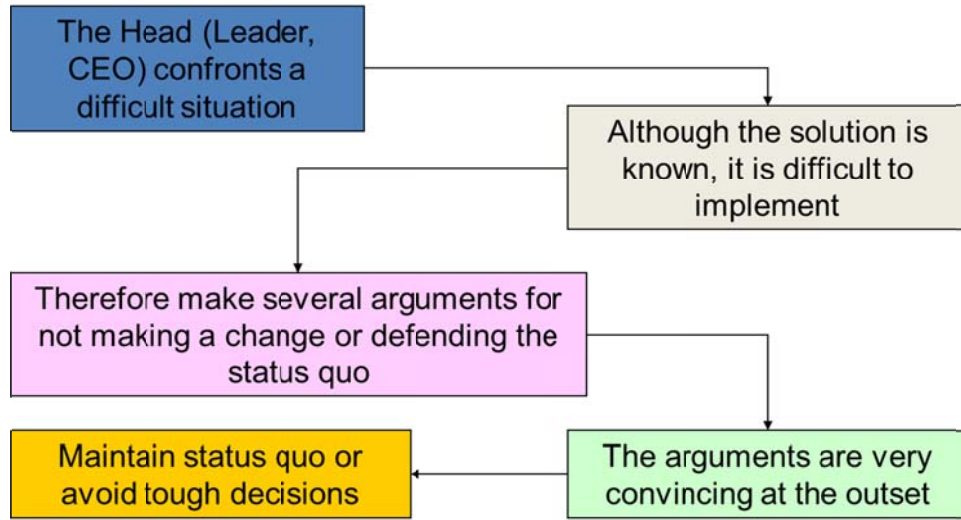
If we look at Arjuna's behavior at the start of the war, there is a behavioural pattern we see with respect to his reaction. This is the main subject matter for discussion in chapter 1 of Bhagavad Gita. When leaders face tough decisions, there is a method by which they avoid taking these decisions (see figure below for details). Many a times they indeed know that there is a solution to the problem on hand. However, they realize that implementing the decision is not at all easy. In the case of Arjuna, the solution was to defeat the *Kauravas* by killing all the leaders in the battlefield. However, it was not going to be easy for him (especially when his *Guru* and other elders were on the *Kaurava* side). Once this is the reality, the leaders begin to defend the status quo or advance arguments as to why we should not take the decision that we set forth with. In chapter 1 of Gita we find that Arjuna made several arguments which appeared very convincing. Therefore there was a strong case for not fighting the war.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mahadevan, B. (2013). "Decision Making Dilemmas in Life", *Sadguru's Blessings*, Vol. 10 (11), July, 2013, pp. 19 – 20.

<sup>2</sup> B Mahadevan is a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

In today's management, we face such situations very often. When the decision is hard to implement, the senior management team uses the best of its intellectual capability to invent new reasons for not going forward. Some will say the technology is not proven and therefore we can ill-afford the experimentation given the competitive scenario. Some others will say it is expensive. Another person may even do a detailed numerical analysis to show why it is prudent to maintain the status quo. An average leader will succumb to these mounting arguments and perhaps will go with the majority feeling. However, Lord Krishna did not agree with Arjuna and felt otherwise. Leaders in high performing organizations will also have to behave similar to what Lord Krishna did. Avoiding tough decisions is not characteristic of a great leader. Elders in families and social circles face similar situations and the choice is between avoiding taking decisions and actually taking these tough decisions.



*A method to avoid taking tough decisions*

### **The route to bad decisions**

The first step to rectify this is to know what drives us to make compromises in our decisions. This is exactly what Lord Krishna points to Arjuna. First Lord Krishna wondered why Arjuna was stuck like this with confusions (विषमे समुपस्थितम्). He clarified to Arjuna that the long term effect of his attitude (of avoiding war) will not be befitting his role as a Kshatriya (अनार्यजुष्टम्), will not give him any benefits (अस्वर्ग्यम्), nor earn him fame (अकीर्तिकरम्).

कुतस्त्वा कश्मलमिदं विषमे समुपस्थितम् ।

अनार्यजुष्टमस्वर्ग्यं अकीर्तिकरमर्जुन ॥ 2.2.

*kutastva kashmalamidam vishame samupasthitam  
anaaryajushtam aswargyam akeertikaram Arjuna*

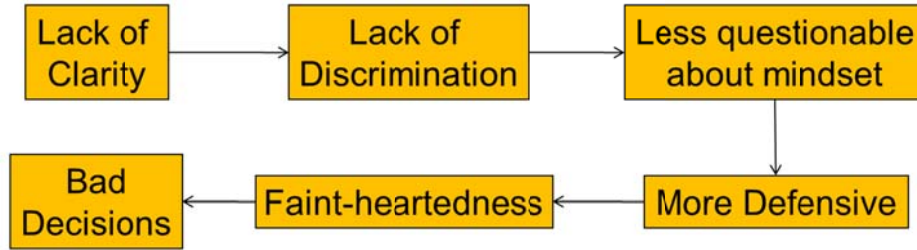
He reminds him that his behavior is not befitting his own nature (नैतत्त्वय्युपपद्यते). He urges Arjuna to give up faint-heartedness (हृदयदौर्बल्यं त्यक्त्वोत्तिष्ठ) and get back to his own nature of responding to the unfolding situation.

क्लैब्यं मा स्म गमः पार्थ नैतत्त्वय्युपपद्यते ।

क्षुद्रं हृदयदौर्बल्यं त्यक्त्वोत्तिष्ठ परंतप ॥ 2.3.

*klaibyam maa sma gama Partha Naitat-tvai-yupapadyate  
kshudram hrudaya-daurbalyam tyaktva uttishtha Parantapa*

The observations made by Lord Krishna made are indeed very insightful. It would be very valuable for today's leaders to ponder on these. They together provide a generic framework to explain why leaders avoid taking tough decisions (see figure below for details). The problem starts when people who are supposed to take decisions develop lack of clarity about the issue that they need to deal with. They also have lack of role clarity. Arjuna must know that he is a *kshatriya*, the father/mother must know his/her role in the family and the teacher must know his/her role. This lack of clarity will very quickly develop into lack of discrimination. Therefore the separation between what is right and what is wrong will be gone. Once they reach such a stage, they will not question their own assumptions behind the decisions that they are contemplating. Eventually this will lead them to bad decisions.



*The route to taking bad decisions*

## Value of Counseling

People of wisdom and expertise, with an understanding of broader set of issues and with a long term outlook are able to foresee these issues. More importantly, they are also endowed with unique capabilities to shake the decision maker out of lethargy. In this manner they redeem them from the trap and guide them towards good decision making. Lord Krishna was a shining example in Mahabharata. The entire Gita teachings make special appeal from this perspective.

In modern day parlance such people are called consultants. Lord Krishna is undoubtedly a master consultant and his consulting skills are fully exposed in the remaining 17 chapters of the Gita. If we read Gita with this perspective and sense of understanding, he will guide us towards better decision making in our lives. This will lead to a peaceful and contented life, for which we all seem to be struggling day in and day out.