Shakespeare’s plays offer insights into dynamics of human relationships and provide enduring business models that are as relevant to the modern society as much as they were to the Elizabethan society. His plays hold examples of all the leadership skills like having and sharing a vision, managing conflict effectively, handling dissention, learning to take decisions in unstructured situations and holding the group together in seemingly hopeless situations. The lessons the bard of Avon held out for humanity are timeless and priceless and still very pertinent in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Management, Leadership. Decision making, communication, presentation skills

**INTRODUCTION**

Shakespeare’s universe is truly peopled by ‘God’s plenty’. His characters span all the strata of society and are drawn with such consummate skill that they have stood the test of time and still retain their relevance. The four centuries that have passed since their creation have changed the society totally but his works and the people in it still manage to have enduring significance and importance. The relevance of Shakespeare’s plays to modern management issues has been widely acknowledged. This is not as farfetched as it might seem at first glance. Though Shakespeare wasn’t writing about real people, (even when his characters were drawn from actual historical personages, he embellished their characters for dramatic impact) someone who knows so much about life and human nature should be able to teach us a thing or two about management and leadership. He has presented management models which still work perfectly in today’s corporate world. He wrote about the different issues that human beings faced since time immemorial, power, loyalty, courage, decision making, communication, leadership and myriad other issues that make up the score sheet of humanity. Using characters ranging from kings, dukes, courtiers, lords, beautiful women, regal gentlemen and court jesters, ‘mellifluous, honey-tongued Shakespeare’ created a world rich in detail and paying as much attention to minute details as had been achieved by none other. Having and sharing a vision, managing conflict effectively, handling dissention, learning to take decisions in unstructured situations and holding the group together in seemingly hopeless situations.

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1 Geoffrey Chaucer in The Prologue to the Canterbury tales

2 Francis Meres,1598, *Palladis Tamia: Wit’s Treasury*
situations are all challenges faced by his characters and modern day managers alike. The lessons the bard of Avon held out for humanity are timeless and priceless and still very pertinent in the twenty-first century.

Shakespeare provided insights into all aspects of behavior through the versatility of his characterization and offered lessons that transcend barriers of space and time. The leadership models alone can teach an aspiring manager how to be effective and also caution him on the pitfalls ahead. He shows again and again that authority alone does not grant one the right to lead. It the leader’s integrity is compromised, the whole organization can suffer. This is proved in the haunting tale of Macbeth. His vaulting ambition makes him commit a crime and from then on he is locked on a course of steady downward spiral. When ambition becomes obsession one wrong turn leads to another because he has “too little analysis”\(^3\). His leadership style is ambitious and arrogant and he disregards his failings and does little to correct them. How leadership failure affects organizations is a recurring theme in Shakespeare’s plays. In direct contrast to Macbeth’s leadership style is that of Malcolm. Malcolm has the good sense to know that all battles cannot be won and pick the ones important enough to merit fighting. While Macbeth slides down from being the respected, courageous and daring warrior to cold-blooded and callous usurper, from being ‘Bellona’s bridegroom’\(^4\) to ‘this dead butcher’\(^5\), Malcolm practices effective leadership in the form of long-term stewardship. Sir Richard Olivier, founder of Mythodrama, a workshop for training leaders says that, “Malcolm embodies the defining essentials of stewardship: moral authority, conscience, sacrifice and humility. By drawing others with their own values, motivations and visions, towards him, Malcolm becomes what chaos theorists call a strange attractor and a beacon for change.” Leaders today have to be stewards of their organizations, by translating Malcolm’s traits into present times as corporate social responsibility, ethical behavior and an understanding that they hold the power in trust for their clients, employees and public. Olivier feels that Shakespeare makes it clear to leaders that have a responsibility to assume stewardship. He says the message of Macbeth “indicates that those amongst us, who can, step forward, return to their particular Scotland, defeat its particular tyranny, and plant a new, more sustainable future.”

King Lear is a miniature study in the devolvement of power or rather how not to devolve power. It also emphasizes the need for the unity of command and proves how inefficient and impossible command by committee can be. A leader has to be able to listen actively irrespective of the fact whether the message is palatable or not. King Lear makes the mistake of confusing the content with the expression and paid dearly for it. The bard did not only use the main protagonist to impart his lessons. Even the minor characters are used to make a point. Cordelia in King Lear forgets one of the basic tenets of communication, to couch a message taking into account the intended receiver’s point of view. She is frank and direct while speaking to a father and King, who blindly believes in the verbal expressions of emotions like love, expects blind


\(^4\) Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 2, Page 3

\(^5\) Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 8, Page 4
obedience and is devastated and later vengeful when he perceives a lack of it.

Hamlet, one of the most famous, the most analyzed plays of Shakespeare portrays the dangers of indecisiveness in a leader which leads to the lack of a coherent plan. It is a powerful play which explores the decision making process thoroughly, including from a psychoanalytic angle. When information critical to making a rational decision is unavailable, when the penalty for the wrong decision is unimaginably horrendous but the decision cannot be postponed the challenge can prove too much for certain personality types. The play is a study of decision making under conditions of uncertainty. It looks at the kind of person needed to pull it off. The play also looks at how revenge or rather being obsessed by revenge can wreak havoc on not just the one doing it but all those connected to him.

Julius Caesar embodies the power of communication, how it can be used and misused by leaders. Anthony’s famous funeral speech is a forceful example of the power of the word. Anthony pulls out all stops and uses all the tricks of the trade in wooing his audience. Modern day managers could learn a thing or two about delivering high impact business presentations from Anthony. His emotional plea to the crowd is aimed at stirring guilt and compassion in them.

He is very aware of the fickle mindedness of the mob and manipulates them like a veteran. He utilizes the possibilities of visual impact by suddenly exhibiting the blood spattered robe of Caesar drawing particular attention to the rents left by the attackers, calling on their mute testimony. He is at his ironic best when he keeps repeating like a litany “for Brutus is an honorable man” and then keeps offering example after example to prove just how wrong this popular perception is (a modern day parallel to this is the hold Hitler was said to have on his audience. An English journalist who once went to hear ‘that absurd Hitler’ speak out of curiosity reported that she was shocked and horrified to find that she was screaming with the rest of the audience condemning Jews. Apparently he had somehow inherited Anthony’s power to sway the crowd, even a hostile one to his purposes). A simple and straightforward warrior like Brutus is no match for him. In his speech he is matter of fact and reticent and expects the mob to be aware of the dangers of autocracy and evaluate his actions logically, unemotionally and impartially. He feels that his cause is powerful enough to garner him the support of the public and fails to take into account the effect of personal charisma on a mob. This is actually where Brutus makes his major mistake. By ignoring the power of rhetoric, by naively believing that actions will always speak louder than words he forgets how words can be manipulated to mean different things. He forgets that the meaning of the message is not in the words, but in the mind of the listener and these mistakes proves to be very costly for him and his fellow conspirators. Brutus also fails significantly in correctly judging the political climate and underestimates his opponent, Mark Anthony, leading to his downfall. His inability to influence the audience and to sell his ideas stems from his lack o persuasive skills.

Still, the play is not only about communication, it outlines many of the issues that are faced by people even today. It deals with corruption in high places, choosing between personal feelings of friendship and loyalty and what is good for the

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6 Julius Ceasar, Act 3, Scene 2, Page 4
country (read organization) at large and most importantly it examines the qualities that characterize an effective leader. The way Brutus struggles to reach a decision, to resolve the conflict in his mind about what to do about Caesar is a good example for leaders to follow. He decides to subjugate his personal feelings of friendship and do what is best for his country and people. Instead of worrying about what is best for him he decides that the needs of the many outweigh the need of the few, or the one. He resolves the conflict by thinking about what is best for the people who has a stake in the issue and are likely to be affected by the outcome “Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more”. Why then, did this decision lead to such tragic consequences? Perhaps Shakespeare is trying to show us that decisions based on poor concept formation and false premises can never be right. Brutus’ co-conspirators persuade him to join them by showing him forged letters. Any decision based on forged evidence has to be flawed.

Shakespeare’s history plays or ‘chronicles’ successfully explain history’s lessons about wielding power profitably. The human motif that runs through the political analysis deals with that most difficult task that a leader faces, that of managing people. He uses these plays to provide exercises in the acquisition, handling and loss of power that are incomparable and unparalleled. Three distinct types of executives were described by the founder of Dairy Mart Charles Nirenberg. “Managers get people to do things. Leaders, on the other hand, get people to want to do things. The boss inspires fear. The leader inspires enthusiasm. The boss makes work drudgery. The leader makes work a game. The boss says “go”. The leader says, “Let’s go!” Shakespeare portrays all three types in his plays. Richard II is a ‘manger’ who expects compliance and obedience because of his position rather than his influence. For him situational authority is more important than personal charisma. Shakespeare levels his lethal wit at those who depends on position to obtain respect by making the mad King Lear remark on seeing a beggar fleeing from a dog, “There thou might'st behold the great image of authority: a dog’s obeyed in office’. Richard II turns out to be a whimsical, capricious manger that abuses the powers vested in him by resorting to threats and nepotism rewards and punishes depending solely on his whims and encourages cliques and groups by cultivating cronies. He fails dismally as a king and is forced to step down. Richard III is a megalomaniac, a cripple who projects his moral shortcomings in his physical deformity. He is described as a “deep dissembler” who can “kiss whom he thought to kill”. He inspires fear in his followers and uses his extraordinary tactical ability to get what he wants without balancing it with a well developed sense of principles. He has an eye for dramatic impact and plays to the gallery unashamedly. (Sir Ian McKellen, the noted actor portrayed Richard III to be a Nazi. In a chilling reminder of life imitating art Hitler once boasted that he is the best actor in Europe.) Richard III represents the boss, manipulative, highly intelligent, unscrupulous, and eloquently expressive. This type of bosses is never forgiven by history and no matter how high flying or initially successful, sooner or later they bite the dust without exception. Shakespeare tells us that the leader who treats the trappings of power as the

\[7\] Julius Ceasar, Act 3, Scene 2
\[8\] King Lear, Act 4, Scene, 6, Page 7
end and not as the means to an end is doomed. His ability to serve his company, his employees and his customers will be severely limited. Shakespeare’s Henry V is the perfect example of the leader persona. He succeeds in sharing his vision with his followers and inspiring him (the reason for his unlikely victory at Agincourt in the face of daunting odds), he is principled and has integrity, he is innovative and takes calculated risks, allows his subordinates the freedom to act, and never fails to recognize and concede their contribution to the common goal. He seems to have been modeled on all the most talked about studies of leadership done in the twenty first century, though Shakespeare created him nearly four centuries before. In short he embodies many of the leadership qualities that modern management theorists like Kouzes, Posner, Covey and O’Toole considers to be essential for successful corporate executives.

It is not just men who hold leadership positions in Shakespeare’s universe. When it comes to women in power, Shakespeare furnishes us with lively examples. Take the case of Rosalind in As you like it and Ophelia in Hamlet. Rosalind succeeds in every task she sets herself, though her life is fraught with risks. Whereas Ophelia is an obedient daughter, gives up her beau because her father demands it, let him insult her without protest and finally ends up in a flowing river, which is the symbol of the unconscious mind. When Rosalind finds herself banished from the dukedom she doesn’t waste her time with lamentations and sets herself to do the best she can. She provides herself with money in the form of jewels, teams up with her best friend who is also her cousin and starts the journey dressed as a man. Though the object of her journey is to find her father, when she reaches the Forest of Arden she does not abandon her disguise or seek out her father. She buys a cottage, some sheep and sets up house. She finds herself able to withstand the bows and arrows that a fickle fortune flings at her because of her level headedness and practical approach. She obviously would make an excellent CEO. Her ability to cope with problems of varying magnitude is what sets her apart from the rest. Her disguise helps her teach the young man she is in love with how she would like to be wooed. Her counterpart in Hamlet throws her life away being a puppet in the hands of the men in her life.

Shakespeare succeeds brilliantly in analyzing the different styles of leadership as well as the issues faced by leaders. It is astonishing to notice that there is an uncanny similarity in problems faced by kings and dukes of Elizabethan era and modern business leaders. His characters depict the power games played in the echelons of the corporate world, talk about how power is won and lost. He emphasizes the impact of presentation and shows how leadership requires the ability to communicate effectively. Through King Lear and Othello he illustrates the dangers of misplaced trust which has a parallel in the fall of John Sculley of Apple Computer. He shows through the Chronicles which has more than one usurper how order and hierarchy is the base of harmony. Henry IV explores the inherent conflict in leading an already cohesive group and the pitfalls awaiting the leader who is charged with making the hierarchy work.

Hamlet, a study in decision making, depicts the inherent danger of having an indecisive leader. If a leader can not function under stress and take decisions after proper consideration of all available information he is not going to be
effective. Here, indeed, is infinite diversity in infinite combinations that still stands strong and relevant after the passage of four centuries. The Bard of Avon certainly has woven into his myriad characters and the innumerable situations they face a whole course in management lessons and leadership skills.

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