
The Danger of Being Alexander



By Venugopal Gupta , Founder, The Business Parables (INSEAD MBA '06J)

Leaders may find it tempting to wage ambitious crusades for personal reward, but eventually their troops can turn on them. Collaboration, often missed, can be a viable and sustainable alternative.

When Alexander the Great's father returned home after conquering an important new territory, he found his son unusually depressed. His son's worry: that his father would win everything and leave nothing for him to win.

Fuelled with passion, Alexander piled up victories from Europe into Asia, until, all of thirty-two years of age, Alexander stood at the doorstep of India, to see the culmination of a world dominion that stretched from West to the East.

At the camp, one day, Alexander's personal staff found a strange oily substance that was both transparent and odourless. Knowing their leader to be extremely superstitious, this news was promptly relayed to the court diviners. They reported that oil was given by gods as a reward for hard work and therefore the appearance of this substance at the camp was a good omen.

Check your enthusiasm

After receiving news from the diviners, Alexander's enthusiasm knew no bounds. He asked the army to prepare for war. While the army shouted valiant war cries, their spirit was worn out. They had run a long campaign before getting up to India and not had enough time to rest and repose. Worse, they had trouble acclimatising to the new weather and were perilously low on provisions.

During this time, the Indian king, Porus, arrived at the camp and spoke with Alexander.

'Please tell me the purpose of your campaign' asked Porus, 'if you wage the war for water and food, then we are obliged to fight as they are indispensable to us.'

'If, however, you come to fight for riches and possessions, as they are accounted in the eyes of the world, and you find me better provided in them, I am ready to share those with you. Else, if fortune has been more liberal to you, I have no objection to be obliged to you,' Porus offered a compromise.

While Alexander congratulated Porus on his wisdom, he said, 'No matter how obliging you are, you shall not have the better of me' he told Porus, asking him to prepare for war. To Alexander, agreeing to Porus was equal to capitulating before him.

Despite an army ten times as strong, Alexander only barely managed to win. While the victory reinforced Alexander's legendary invincibility, the army lost countless men and their will to fight. Their spirit was battered beyond repair.

A victorious Alexander wanted to move forward but his army revolted against him. He was forced to turn back. He made Porus a king under his empire and allowed him to govern not only his original kingdom but many more provinces.

Porus got more in his defeat than he could have obtained in victory while Alexander had to give up his aim of world dominion.

The costs of victory

Had Alexander collaborated with Porus, he could have avoided the war and its casualties, allowed more time for his army to rest and actually achieved

the mission for which he and his army travelled thousands of kilometres from Europe to Asia.

According to 'The Tragedy of Commons', an economic theory, individuals acting according to their self-interest, may behave contrary to the whole group's long-term best interests or 'the common good'.

This theory, when applied to conflicts, suggests that leaders may find it tempting to wage wars in order to satisfy some self-interest even though it brings costs to bear on the group. The reason is simple: while the costs of the conflict is shared by all, the rewards accrue generously to the leader.

Find the common ground

Conflicts are inevitable in the workplace or the marketplace. However, collaboration (evaluating complementary interests) or compromise (evaluating concessions) are two ways in which conflicts can be avoided. In that sense, conflicts could be good. They encourage introspection and deepen our understanding of our goals.

However, when neither collaboration nor compromise succeed, the only justifiable reason for leaders to participate in a conflict is protecting common good and not amassing personal glory.

In 1860, after becoming president, Abraham Lincoln put his life in danger many times as he persisted for a compromise with the rebellious Southern states to avert a civil war. In the end, civil war did happen, because, as Lincoln noted, 'One of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came'.

In the modern world, leadership is not a prerogative, it is an opportunity to serve.

During the Freedom Movement, Mahatma Gandhi implored senior Indian leaders to change their mind-set from 'ruling' to 'serving'. 'How can we blame the British rule?' he asked of them, 'if the same weakness resides in all of us.'

In one timeless verse from India, the 15th century mystic-poet-saint, Kabir, observes, 'Of what use is being big, if like the palm tree? It provides no shade to the weary traveller and even its fruits are too high to be picked.'

Venugopal Gupta is the founder of [***The Business Parables***](#). You can follow him on Twitter [***@venugopal_gupta***](#).

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About the author(s)

Venugopal Gupta Venu is a start-up specialist and runs a venture acceleration programme that helps early-stage start-ups build their ideas into sustainable businesses.