

LEADERSHIP styles in a pipe-dream

-Asok Kumar G.

Some are born leaders, some acquire leadership, some have leadership thrust upon them. Some, like me, have bit of all-the-three. In my 28 years in IAS so far, I have taken leadership roles successfully many times- sometimes developing and seizing the initiatives on my own and sometimes forced to takeover by virtue of the posts I held. Some like the one (a) [to construct 1.5lakh ISLs\(Individual- Sanitary-Latrines\) in 2002](#), or (b) [to put an end to some barbaric practices of Pothurajus and the disgusting Jogini system prevailing for over 700 years](#), or (c) [to eliminate child labour by enrolling all 5-14 age-group children in a Tehsil in schools and retaining the no-drop-out status for 17-years now](#) etc are examples of personal initiatives, whereas taking steps (a)to conduct elections; or (b)[to start 119 Residential schools on a single day in a period of 120 days](#);or (c)to [help an airline survive a crisis](#) etc are examples of leadership rolesthrust upon me by virtue of posts held. Living up to a CM's strong belief in you to deliver results, is a mix of both.

It started with a phone-call from the then Andhra-Pradesh Chief-Minister (AP,CM), Dr.Y.S.Rajasekara Reddy, in early-March-2008. That he had great faith in me to deliver quality, timely results was known in corridors-of-power. Under him, I had worked as (a)VC,HUDA*(He posted me to this coveted post, to succeed an officer 11-years my senior, is unusual in a stiff-hierarchical bureaucracy) where we conceptualized and started work on the Outer-Ring-Road of Hyderabad- the most modern 162-km-10-lane road planned in India then,in 2004; (b)Collector of his own district,Kadapa, specifically entrusted to fast-track its development “*to repay his debt to the people who had been electing him for the last 35 years*” (in his own words); and (c) as a chosen [warrior to take-on the debilitating AIDS](#) problem which had reaching epidemic proportions in AP.

In that phone-call he wanted me “*to provide daily drinking-water in Hyderabad, as elections are scheduled within a year*” and hence was posting me as MD,WB (Managing-Director, Water-Board). Hyderabad-city areas have been getting treated-piped-drinking-water supply only [for 2 hours once in 2-or-3 days](#), since early 1980s. To grasp the implication of “providing daily drinking-water in Hyderabad,” I talked to incumbent MD,WB who didn't know about CM's plans. Talked to CE*,WB, who told that “Daily Water Supply(DWS) was provided last in 1984. Since-then Hyderabad has grown 4-times in area; 8-times in population and there is no possibility to provide DWS.” Other senior engineers of WB were also equally certain about its improbability. Providing drinking water daily appeared a pipe-dream to many. I met CM and told him so. He said smilingly,“*You have a magic-wand, you will do it.*”In a couple of occasions earlier also he had used this *very sentence* to motivate me take up challenging tasks. I felt lost and elated at the same-time! Next-day, my posting orders came. On 31st-March-2008, I took-over as MD,Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board(HMWSSB) or Water-Board(WB), in-short.

As the task entrusted was time-critical, I called a meeting the very next day with all Engineers-CE/SEs/EEs/DEs/AE*s in WB. Discussed about the possible geographic extent, population that can be considered for DWS. As-is-where-is condition of water availability, augmentation of existing resources, alternative sources; status of storage/distribution reservoirs, existing trunk/distribution pipe network; requirement of additional network, staff; their training and finances etc were assessed. Constraints imposed by water availability; storage/distribution infrastructure, man-power and time were clearly identified and tabulated. Funds, was my least concern, as I knew that Government will provide it. But the elephant in the room was the “firm belief of the impracticality of DWS concept” itself.

As assembly elections were scheduled in May-2009, I calculated 12-months execution-period and 2-months stabilization-period, till I was called upon a dais in an official-public meeting in April-2008 by CM and asked to indicate a probable date in 2008 for starting DWS! I squirmed, protested but CM insisted. The farthest politically relevant date (for the Congress-party) I could think on the dais was 14th-November, birthday of Nehru, our first Prime-Minister and Congress-party icon. I mumbled “Will try to do it by 14th-November”. CM, pointing at me, announced that he will get DWS to Hyderabad on 14th-November. To a cheering crowd he asked what should we do, if it is not done? Smilingly, he himself came with a naughty answer, “We will cut his salary”, which was endorsed by the crowd with whistles and cheers! My target date just moved 5 months ahead.



YSR*'s management style was to give stiff targets to officers he trusts, give them full freedom for its execution with a direction to get back to him only if there is something very crucial to be resolved, takes full responsibility for his decisions and stands by the officers. He had god's gift to identify who-is-good-at-what and to pick the right persons for the right job. He was large-hearted to appreciate and give due credit to others. (He had named a new village/settlement in his constituency as “Asok-Nagar” after me, as a token of appreciation of my work in Kadapa). Though CM was WB's Chairman, I was reporting to Principal-Secretary, Municipal Administration and Urban Development dept in the government. He also believed in the principle of “the-least interference, if the going was good”. With such seniors reposing faith in me, my problem now was to motivate and carry my sub-ordinates along to accomplish a mission which most of them believed to be impractical and with the advanced target date- just impossible!

The additional works for DWS were also to be carried-out by the existing staff of Operations & Maintenance(O&M) division, who were already burdened with the supply of treated-drinking water to the city, which was divided into zones,

each zone getting water once in 2-or-3 days. They also had to attend to sewerage issues in the city. Taking-up DWS works was like repairing an engine, when it is running! Since drinking water is a basic need and that too made available on alternate days, any disruption for repairs brought hostile reactions from a belligerent press, people and elected representatives-MLAs/MPs. I had to take them on-board before starting any DWS work.

The first step was to establish link and credibility with the people. I started a live-dial-in TV program “Dial your MD”, every alternate Saturdays. I heard water and sewerage related problems from public. Where-ever possible, the issues raised were immediately addressed. I also organized regular meetings with the RWA* office-bearers of apartment complexes, gated-communities etc and used these meetings to talk to them about the feasibility of DWS; to apprise them about issues like shortage of water, infrastructure, manpower etc faced by WB in achieving DWS and to give advices to save water; keep sewage lines choke-free and not to dispose sanitary-pads, waste etc through it. This helped public to appreciate the problems WB faced and win their confidence/co-operation.



Next important issue to address was augmenting the water supply. Luckily, my predecessor, who was MD for 3 years, had been pushing the Krishna-Phase-2 project to bring 180MGD* water from Krishna-river 110-kms away to augment city water-supply. Pipelines had been laid, but when I took-charge many critical jobs were still incomplete. Building-on these works in progress, to push the Project-Division(PD) for its quick completion, I scheduled fixed-time meetings on every Mondays and Thursdays with PD-officials; reviewed the works-status and set completion-target-dates. Inter-departmental issues like delay in transformers supply, charging of lines to energize motors/pumps, procurement of materials for water treatment filter-beds, road cutting permission etc which were affecting the works-progress were sorted-out promptly. Finally, Krishna-Phase-2 project was completed and inaugurated jointly by P.Chidambaram, Union Finance Minister, Jaipal Reddy, Union Urban-Development Minister and YSR,CM on 19th-July-2008, providing additional 180-MGD water to Hyderabad-- the first step for DWS. Later, obtained cabinet's approval for a project to tap additional 180-MGD water from Godavari-river, 200kms north at an estimated cost of Rs-3725Cr, to avoid total dependence on a single source- Krishna-river 100kms south. (Work on Godavari-project started in November-2008, and finally inaugurated on 24/Nov/2015.)



Next step was to motivate WB-staff. Realizing that delayed promotions was a major discontentment among lower staff; I initiated departmental processes for their promotions. Sri.Yellaswamy, who was overlooked for ad-hoc-promotion as SE twice earlier was given promotion when the next opportunity arose. He and “his group were sulking at the alleged cast-bias” against a “Scheduled-Caste(SC)-person” by the earlier “Reddy-MD” in denying his promotion. His promotion, after me over-ruling some objections raised in the file by HR Division, swung many critical staff-groups in WB to resolve to work hard for “our new MD”. WB has a bottom-heavy staff structure, with large no.of SC/BC community people. Since many lower cadre staff of the sewerage section had to go inside drains for blockage-clearing etc, their health-levels were poor. Targeting them and their families, I started free monthly health camps. Over 2000 people were administered Hepatitis-B vaccine. During my field-visits, I made-it-a-point to meet and talk to sewerage staff/ line-men/meter-readers etc who were “considered very low-grade” in the official hierarchy. I issued a circular that every 3rd-Saturdays of the month, all staff, right from General-Managers(EEs) down to sewerage-cleaners, should have tea together in the office premises at 3 PM. The expenses for erecting small tents and tea/biscuits were permitted to be met from the board funds. This initiative costed little, but yielded high social returns.

Though technical upper-echelons officers harboured doubts, cutting-edge staff-the linemen, pump-operators- etc were now determined to get “(my)Our” mission accomplished. Implementation/success of DWS hinged on them, as they were the ones to monitor-closely water-levels in reservoirs and operate appropriate valves to ensure water-supply to whole area under their jurisdiction. So far, they had to flip the valves only once a day to cover either Side A or B in a zone. With DWS, they will have to wait till reservoir is filled, release water to elevated areas first and then at suitable water-levels operate valves to divert water to lower areas. This required close monitoring of levels and multiple operations of valves, thereby increasing their work manifold. To capitalize on their newly-found-zeal, we started capacity-building trainings for them. I attended all the ending/last sessions of these trainings to give training certificates to motivate them. Many have their photos receiving these certificates kept framed in their drawing rooms now also!

Social-engineering over, but real-engineering problems persisted. Engineers estimated that 40-50kms of new last-mile-distribution-network has to be developed for DWS, requiring pipes of various diameters, valves to regulate supply, local storage reservoirs and pumps to transfer water among them. As GoI was pushing water supply schemes aggressively, pipes were in short-supply. I called a meeting of with companies manufacturing them. They expressed their inability to provide our required quantity of DI pipes in short-time, but offered to give CI pipes-an alternative- from stocks available. I constituted a committee with technical experts from Board, Public Health dept, GHMC* as members to examine its technical suitability. On its recommendations, short-tenders were called and with the approval of the Government, orders were placed for the supply of CI pipes for

DWS, stipulating strict delivery timelines and penalty clauses for any delay. A special cell constituted monitored its delivery and quality compliances.

Division-wise action plans were prepared, estimates made, approvals taken. When tenders were called, contractors registered with board formed a cartel, demanding double the normal rates due to “exigency of work” and refused to participate in tenders with old rates. They remained stubborn even after many rounds of talks with them for two weeks. They thought that since I was hard-pressed for time and only the contractors registered with board could participate in WB’s O&M tenders, I would succumb. However, sensing support from public and lower-staff, I withdrew recognition of WB Contractors Association; took-over their rooms within WB’s various office premises and opened up DWS-scheme contracts to all technically-capable contractors in AP. This broke-up the cartel. Participation of more contractors increased the competition and reduced our costs.

When these works were to be started, traffic-police, GHMC authorities and press raised hue-and-cry about digging of roads to lay pipelines. Cable-operators, telephone companies, electricity board etc claimed that their wires/cables were getting disturbed. They were “suitably-assisted” by the disgraced WB-contractors’ association. I requested Principal-Secretary for help. He called several meetings with them and sorted out the issues. Occasional references to DWS by CM in his meetings with officials also helped. South-Central-Railways, which always waited for approvals from Railway-Board whenever permission to cross their tracks was sought, posed the maximum-challenge!

Frequency and intensity of my review meetings and field-visits increased, as works picked-up. SCADA system was set-up at a cost of Rs-9.9Cr to monitor real-time water-levels in reservoirs and chlorine-levels in water from a control-centre. Since the Krishna-Phase-2 work was over, Project-Division was pressed to complete the construction of reservoirs in various parts of Hyderabad. 14 new reservoirs came-up by October, increasing local-storage capacity enormously.

RWA meetings and dial-in programs were useful to keep public informed about the work-progress. Trials were done, wherever possible. Inaugurations of these works kept Councillors happy. We arranged regular press-tours to work-spots to show-case work-progress. Still, on 8th-Nov-2008, one headline of ToI ran “Daily Water Supply- a pipe-dream, 6 days to go- crucial works held-up,” referring to one works stuck-up with railways. I still kept faith that the “*magic-wand*” will work.

We had to take a call-on the inauguration of DWS on 14th-November. Met CM; apprised him about the progress of work and the hurdle posed by Railways. He promised to talk to the Railway-Minister. I asked him about the inauguration, as ministers, MPs etc have to be intimated in advance. An ever-optimistic CM said “Go ahead with the program. Hope everything will be alright. If issues persist, we can postpone it.”

On 11th-November morning we got permission from railways for crossing its tracks at Oliphant Bridge, Secunderabad. Project-Division employed extra men and machines to complete the vital link to Maredmali reservoir. This 100-mts link was completed at 9-PM on 13th-November! Krishna-Phase-2 water pumped through this link filled Maredpalli reservoir by 7-AM, on 14th-November for a Just-in-Time finish.

At 11AM on 14th-November-2008, in the presence of Jaipal Reddy, Union Minister for UD, state ministers, MPs and MLAs, CM inaugurated the Daily (365days) Drinking Water Supply to the core-areas of Hyderabad city, restarting it after a gap of 24-years.



Under DWS scheme, Water-Board gave 2-hours of treated-piped-drinking-water daily to 3.6-lakh connections, (out of a total of 4.4-lakh connections), with 328 Million Gallons water. WB had **completed** 479 O&M-works worth Rs-75Cr, Ring-Main-II costing Rs-81.2-Cr, SCADA costing Rs-9.9-Cr & 14 reservoirs to accomplish this mission-impossible in 8 months! Later, we expanded DWS to cover 4-lakh connections and maintained it till summer of 2010.

CM publicly acknowledged the positive impact of DWS in his party's sweeping victory in the seats in Hyderabad area in Assembly elections held in May-2009.

Learning: Many styles of leadership were on seen here. The style of CM and Principal-Secretary was referred to earlier. With their confidence in me, I could transform the negative mind-set of senior-level officers in WB; break-up contractors' cartel and fight the black-mailers in press. A big factor in this project's success was the turn-around of the lower-level-cutting-edge-staff who took ownership of it. It cemented my faith in the following leadership principles: team-work and community-participation as essential ingredients for the success of any governmental schemes; Take the stake holders along; they will stand with you in times of trouble; Fear not to take decisions, if intentions are good; Lead from the front, take quick, bold-decisions and implement them without fear. Even if only a few people are with you to start with, genuine stake-holders will join along if the intensions are right. People appreciate sincerity and simplicity, though *it is very complex to be simple and simple to be complex*. Identify, encourage, give freedom and show trust in subordinates. Do not over-monitor, yet do not give an impression of under-monitoring. Keeping higher ups informed will help in getting their support at critical junctures.



*-Acronyms:

AE -Assistant Engineer

BC -Backward Classes

CE -Chief Engineer

DWS -Daily Water Supply

EE -Executive Engineer

GHMC-Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation

MGD -Million Gallons Daily

RWA -Resident Welfare Association

SCADA - Supervisory Control And Data Acquisition

SE -Superintendent Engineer

VC,HUDA- Vice Chairman, Hyderabad Urban Development Authority

WB -Water Board-(HMWSSB)

YSR -Y.S.Rajasekara-Reddy

