



BECOMING “UNSTUCK”: LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM HINDU PHILOSOPHY

BY MANOJ PAWAR

The management of knowledge is increasingly understood as perhaps the most important aspect of a leader’s work. Observing, eliciting, listening, understanding, analyzing, interpreting, and setting the conditions that allow for the creation of new knowledge are all activities crucial to a leader’s success, especially those striving to follow the principles of organizational learning. Many cognitively understand this concept. However, the mastery and execution of knowledge management practices can be challenging amid the turbulence of daily organizational life.

Teams, too, face similar challenges. While team members often understand the need to gather for the purpose of creative dialogue, learning, and engagement, day-to-day demands often lead them to resort to counter-productive behaviors. For instance,

rather than getting together to expand our knowledge and understanding of an issue, we often turn meetings into a war zone, in which each participant tries to push his or her own agenda. In this context, managing knowledge within teams becomes a formidable task, indeed.

Maya provides a beautiful framework for surfacing common barriers to the effective flow of knowledge.

Nevertheless, the effective generation and flow of knowledge is so important that leaders must make a deliberate effort to understand and address the barriers that exist. One approach is based on an aspect of Vedanta philosophy. Called *maya*, this concept provides a beautiful framework for surfacing common barriers to the effective flow of knowledge within organizations. This article seeks to explore these hurdles, develop a shared understanding of *maya*, and spell out the implications of this framework for leaders. At the end of the article, a series of practices based on these concepts will contribute dramatically to leaders’ own effectiveness and that of the teams they lead.

Common Barriers in Managing Knowledge

Here’s a recurring scenario common in today’s organizations: A team meets so that members can make a critical decision. The gathering is carefully structured as a series of presentations, after which participants are given the opportunity to debate various plans of

action. Others may present differing opinions and concerns, but the role of individual team members is to convince their coworkers that their approach will have the greatest impact. After all, because they are “in the trenches,” the members of this team believe they have the most important knowledge for developing solutions. Team members hope that, through such debate, the prevailing view will lead to the most successful course of action over the long run.

In the end, though, collaborative problem solving and true learning become extremely difficult. According to the current thinking in organizational development, this all-too-common norm for teams may not lead to the most desirable results, because it creates a number of barriers to organizational learning:

- The unchecked assumption that an individual’s level of understanding reflects a singular “true” reality.
- The failure to understand that individuals may interpret the same event or observation differently and that perceptions of reality are dependent on the individual making the observation (“the observer”).
- The assumption that the most accurate understanding of the realities faced by an organization can be attained through debate and “winning over” those with opposing viewpoints.
- The assumption that the individual, the advocate, the orator, and the great debater possess supreme value through their ability to convince others to abandon their perceptions of reality.
- Finally, and perhaps most tragically, the underlying assumption that the most complete understanding of the complex problems facing organiza-

TEAM TIP

In today’s organizational climate, innovative leaders must seek new ideas, tools, and inspiration from a wide range of sources and disciplines. The next time you and your team are stuck, look to the following for insights:

- **Nature** (particularly the concept of biomimicry)
- **Sports** (biographies of successful athletes and coaches)
- **Spiritual Practices** (including meditation and prayer)
- **Science** (especially quantum physics and brain science)
- **The Arts** (for example, how creativity emerges through the artistic process or how a classical orchestra functions as a team)

tions today can be achieved through an analysis of the problems facing each of its individual parts, independent of the environment and relationships affecting those parts.

Given the prevalence of this scenario, it should come as no surprise that most organizations struggle to address complex problems that require creativity and an unrestricted flow of ideas.

Vedanta philosophy, central to Hindu thought, provides an elegant perspective for those who feel stuck in such dilemmas. An understanding of the concept of maya provides organizations with one way to grow beyond their current limitations in addressing complexity, fostering creativity, and increasing effectiveness. In the following sections, we seek to gain wisdom and insight from the idea of maya and use this understanding to enhance our effectiveness as leaders.

Vedanta Philosophy

First, some background describing the worldview inherent in the Vedanta philosophy is necessary. The core teachings of Vedanta revolve around three areas:

- The true nature of the universe
- The true nature of the individual
- The interrelationships that exist within the universe

According to this philosophy, *the true nature of the universe* is that all things, living and inanimate, are interconnected in some fashion. As quantum physicists have learned, each action has an effect on other aspects of the universe, and nothing is really separate from anything else. The belief that a particular event or outcome can result from the actions of one person, independent of all of the other factors in the universe, is a distinctly human flaw. Furthermore, energy is the true essence of material existence, not matter, and it is through this energy that all things are interconnected. This all-pervasive field of energy, referred to as Brahma, exists in all things.

The true nature of the individual exists as energy that is part of a greater whole and not as individual minds or bodies. In fact, the Hindu greeting “Namaste” alludes to this

worldview, as its meaning can be translated to “I worship the divine within you.”

The interrelationships that exist among all individuals and among elements of the universe are integral to the true nature of the universe. According to the Vedanta worldview, no individual element can be truly understood independent from its surroundings.

A Definition of Maya

Maya is the illusion, based on our false perceptions, that the true nature of the universe is rooted in the material reality we observe through our senses rather than in energy. It refers to the misconception that events and observations are independent from one another and that the problems of the whole can be understood by analyzing the problems of the parts.

Within the world of Vedanta, maya implies that humans are vulnerable to the illusion that events and objects are not only real in a singular context but exist distinctly and independently from one another. In addition, maya leads humans to rely on ego and thus to see themselves as distinct and independent entities. As a result of this mindset, the teachings of Vedanta view human suffering and dysfunction as having their origins in maya.

How, exactly, is maya the cause of human suffering? For one thing, Hindus see it as the root of human attachment to objects and possessions that our senses perceive as real when, in fact, those objects are transitory. Second, individuals who fail to understand the interconnectedness of all end up acting in ways that promote personal gain at the expense of others and of the environment; foster competition and antagonism as opposed to collaboration and symbiotic growth; and steer others astray from a desire to seek true inquiry and dialogue. Finally, maya results in the illusion that there is, indeed, a single perspective or view that is “right.”

This mindset leads to the need to win, convince others, debate, and resort to violence.

Interestingly, a similar concept can be found in Christianity. Although most Christians may not see it in this context, Hindus interpret the story of Adam and Eve’s bite out of the apple in the Garden of Eden as a metaphor for human vulnerability and over-reliance on our senses. In this metaphor, the apple represents maya and thus the origins of human suffering. Similarly, many Hindus choose to see this event as one that leads humans to consider God to be a separate being that can be perceived by the human senses rather than as an all-pervasive field of energy in the universe, present in all things.



Banyan Tree—A symbol of interconnectedness

Maya and Quantum Mechanics

Beyond the spiritual and philosophical origins of maya, many Westerners find it helpful to understand more concrete examples of how the teachings of Vedanta may have validity. The fields of quantum mechanics and subatomic theory provide substantial support for the concept of maya. The following scientific principles, in particular, are helpful:

- The true nature of the universe is not matter but rather energy.
- The true nature of the subatomic world involves probabilities rather than certainties.
- Particles arise from energy.
- A particle’s formation and nature occurs when an attempt is made to observe it.
- Particles do not exist independent of other particles and especially of the observer.

This “new” physics has demonstrated clearly that there is no objective reality “out there,” independent of its relationship with and perception by observers. The field reveals that we cannot understand the whole merely by understanding its parts; we must consider the relationships and inter-

actions between the parts, the observer, and the rest of the universe. In this world, there truly are no independent things.

The interconnectedness of the universe can also be demonstrated from experiments involving subatomic particles. As an example, consider two paired particles with opposite spins (“spin” is one property of subatomic particles). Physicists have demonstrated that, when a pair of particles is separated by a great distance, they maintain their opposite spins. Even more compelling is the finding that when the spin of one of the separated particles is changed, the other particle somehow alters its spin so that it remains the opposite of its pair. In essence, their relationship and interconnectedness is maintained despite their physical separation.

David Bohm, the well-known physicist and philosopher, described how fragmentation—or focusing on the parts to the exclusion of the whole—results in a sort of “pathology of thought.” He understood that humans tend to divide things that, on a more fundamental level, are actually connected. This mindset has led to flawed thinking in the field of quantum physics and in our perception of the world in which we exist. By advocating for a change in how we view the world, Bohm led to breakthroughs in both physics and the field of dialogue.

Maya, too, refers to this fundamental flaw in human understanding and, as we shall see, in organizational thought. It reminds us of our fallibilities as leaders, as well as those of our organizations and communities. So how can we break free from this trap? Below, we’ll examine the power of dialogue and systems thinking for helping us see through the net of illusions cast by maya.

Perspectives from Dialogue

Leaders who want to achieve a true understanding of reality in the context of the challenges they face should turn to dialogue, not debate or discussion. Because individuals possess different interpretations of what they observe and because there is no reality independent of the observer, the ability to

elicit the mental models and perceptions of others is crucial. Dialogue offers a set of tools for surfacing the multiplicity of perspectives that add to a more complete picture of reality.

In particular, four specific dialogue skills, as defined by William Isaacs, can assist those who seek to generate a shared understanding of the true essence of any given situation: listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing.

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Listening

In our over-stimulated lives, we seldom notice the ways in which we listen. Listening is more than hearing, as it involves not only the perception of words, but also the attachment of meaning to those words. The meaning that we attach is often biased by our projection of our own biases, assumptions, interpretations, inferences, and history—our mental models. In fact, failing to objectively examine our own interpretations while listening can distort our perceptions of reality.

Maya, as an illusion, refers to this distortion of reality and makes true listening ever-so critical to enhancing our own understanding of reality. Given this fallibility, we must understand the mental models within which we operate and learn how to circumvent the automatic projection of these models on the things we hear.

The mastery of inner silence through meditation can dramatically enhance the ability to listen. Vedanta philosophy states that the true essence of reality can only be experienced in “the space that exists between thoughts.” It is in this space that true mental silence exists and in which mental models disappear. The same principle can be applied to the skill of listening. The greater the degree of inner silence that we are able to achieve, the more effective our listening skills become.

Respecting

When we listen with the goal of understanding others, we are able to achieve greater levels of mutual respect than when we try to push our own agendas. Such listening is made more imperative by, but also facilitated through, the understanding that we are interconnected with and do not exist separate from others. Through mutual respect and listening, we learn about the thinking of others and, more importantly, about our own thinking. In the words of William Isaacs, we can see that “I am in the world, and the world is in me.” Likewise, our ability to say “That, too, is in me” is an extremely useful tool for building respect and understanding with one another. By making efforts to control our tendency to fall for the illusions of maya and separateness, we can build a practice of respectful listening.

Suspending

Suspending involves sharing and putting aside our own mental models. In essence, by suspending, we are making visible our own perspectives of reality. In so doing, we put forth the possibility that our own perspective may be flawed, that certainty may be in question. As we both suspend and seek to understand the perspectives of others, we must inquire effectively from a place of genuine curiosity. In addition, true inquiry involves being aware that our own perspective may be flawed. The key in the act of suspending involves both surfacing and exploring the relationship between separate interpretations of reality.

Voicing

Often, because of the “pathologies of thought” that are so prevalent in our society, we learn to fear expressing our own interpretation of reality. Taking the leap requires the courage to share a view that may differ from that of others. To combat these fears, we must cultivate the skill of self-awareness, along with that of trusting our own thinking as a valid glimpse of reality.

Understanding that every element of the universe arises from the same underlying energy and reality can help

us develop trust in our own voices. By becoming aware that only different perspectives of “the truth” exist, we can muster the courage necessary to effectively voice our opinions. The concept of maya provides us with an awareness of our own vulnerability to forgetting that we are in touch with this reality.

Perspectives from Systems Thinking

Just as dialogue provides us with tools to cultivate perspectives that contribute to a more complete understanding of reality, so does systems thinking. By offering tools that lead us to examine the interrelationships and dynamics that exist among elements of our world, systems thinking creates a framework for moving beyond the limitations that maya imposes on our thinking.

Fragmentation

Our tendency to see things as separate parts—whether they are processes, departments, positions, or individuals—can severely limit our ability to understand the myriad of systems within which we exist and participate. Leaders in organizations that succumb to maya may ultimately find that they deal with unintended consequences, “fixes that fail,” and processes that deplete rather than renew and invigorate.

Taking time for both reflection and dialogue at meetings and in groups permits teams to explore critical questions such as, “How might this impact other departments with which we interact?” and “How will this approach help to renew the environment and the partners with which we operate?” Eliciting, through generative dialogue, the full nature of interconnectedness is a powerful experience for a team and has the potential to create new perspectives and revolutionary approaches. Such regular dialogue is essential for groups as they evolve beyond the limitations of maya and is a critical competency for leaders to develop.

Even more enlightening is dialogue that elicits connections and relationships to enhance an understanding of the whole. Effective dialogue must be based on the premise that there is

not one true perspective of reality, independent of the observer, and that many voices must be engaged to expand our understanding of the whole. In the end, greater insight into the connections and relationships between processes and structures leads to a greater level of group intelligence and more effective and fulfilling work.

Flow

Individuals and organizations tend to view assets—human, financial, or intellectual—as their own. In reality, however, when we cease to exist, the things we have in our possession will “flow” elsewhere. In essence, assets flow through the universe and pass through us (or our organizations) temporarily, so that we can utilize them to enhance the greater well-being and harmony of that with which we are interconnected: our partners, our environment, our customers, and our owners.

In the context of Vedanta philosophy, the resources in our possession at any particular moment are available to us for the purpose of fulfilling our mission. But when we fall prey to maya, we fail to experience this interconnectedness as it relates to our true mission and purpose. Individuals and organizations that hoard resources in a miserly fashion are at risk for failing to accomplish their true mission and intent.

Resources for Leaders

In order to master the skills necessary to function beyond the limitations and vulnerabilities described by maya, leaders can adopt a number of practices:

1. **Meditate.** Time for daily reflection is essential for effective leaders to bring about a greater awareness of their own “center,” their interconnectedness with all that surrounds them, and their own limitations in seeing only a glimpse of reality. Such reflection, though humbling, also instills a sense of calm. Indeed, avoiding the illusion of maya is difficult, and daily reflection can help us to develop this practice.

To that end, devote time each day

for silence. Inevitably, when beginning, you will notice thoughts entering your mind. Observe the internal dialogue, label it with what you feel, and release it to return to experience the silence.

This observation will uncover aspects of your own mental models that influence thought. To overcome the illusion of maya, it is imperative to develop the ability to master silence and to realize that the essence of true reality is in the space between thoughts, not in the actual thoughts.



The symbol for Om, representing all existence

2. **Become Aware of Ego.** Ego, defined as a perception that we are solely responsible for our own success, that our perceptions of reality are indeed the most accurate representations of reality, and that our identity is based in the greatness of our own accomplishments, is a tragic human vulnerability. Leaders must become aware of this flaw in themselves and in those they lead. More importantly, they must foster the conditions that make it safe for individuals to relinquish their attachment to an identity based in ego.

3. **Engage Others in Dialogue.**

Leaders must reflect upon and engage others in dialogue around maya and how it may exist in your own views and perceptions. Explore how opportunities may be missed and dysfunctions created through this vulnerability. In asking questions such as, “How do we create fragmentation in our organization?” leaders trigger others to reveal aspects of their mental models and create a more complete view of the situation.

4. **Understand the Interconnectedness of All Things.** Encourage those whom you lead to reflect each day on your interconnectedness and on “That, too, is in me” in the context of thinking about the behaviors and perceptions of others in your organizations and communities. Understand how processes and objects do not exist independent of their surrounding, and explore the relationships that exist between processes and objects, in the context of systems thinking. Work

with others to surface these unseen connections.

5. Examine the Relationship That You and Your Organization Have with the External Environment. How do your actions affect the world around you? What systems exist that you have not yet explored or surfaced? In order to be sustainable and healthy, organizations must renew and invigorate their surroundings and environment, not deplete them.

6. Realize That Assets Are Not to Be Hoarded, but Rather to Be Used to Fulfill Your Purpose in Life. Organizations and individuals must realize that assets are part of the universal flow of resources and that, when these resources flow through you or your organization, they do so for the purpose of fulfilling a mission. Hoarding such resources is based on maya, the illusion that it is truly possible to “own” things.

By comprehending maya as a source of limitation and mastering the true nature of existence, we can begin to successfully manage knowledge in

our organizations and support individuals in becoming thoughtful and fulfilled contributors. Likewise, by developing a more complete shared understanding of maya among members of their organizations, as well as within themselves, leaders will develop the skills necessary to excel in the turbulent environments that we face now

and that we shall surely face in the future. ■

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NEXT STEPS

- In a study group, read the article and then discuss (a) how maya shows up in your organization and how it interferes with learning and collaborative problem solving; (b) what actions, if any, your organization has taken to overcome the barriers to learning that maya represents and how successful those efforts have been; and (c) what first steps you could take individually and collectively to reveal a more complete view of your organization's reality and, in turn, enhance the effective flow of knowledge.
- As mentioned in the article, listening is a key, yet often overlooked, skill for overcoming the barriers to the effective flow of knowledge in an organization. With a learning partner, commit to listening to others more attentively for a week. You may want to record your experiences in a learning journal so you can share them. Some guidelines for effective listening include maintaining eye contact, forming a mental picture of what the speaker is saying, asking questions only to ensure understanding of what has been said, and paying attention to nonverbal cues.
- Pay close attention to meeting design. Too often, meetings become a battleground, where participants assault each other with prepackaged diatribes, rather than forums for the honest and open exchanged of ideas. Experiment with practices such as beginning with a check-in or moment of silence, establishing ground rules so that participants feel comfortable speaking openly, using a talking stick, and noticing what voices are missing and including their point of view.

—J.M.