

Dhoni: From Pinch-Hitter to A Suave Captain

He led a young Indian team to victory in the inaugural T-20 Cricket Championship in September 2007. In December 2009, India became the top-ranked Test team in the world for the first time under his captaincy. The team still retains that spot. He captained Chennai Super Kings (CSK) - his **Indian Premier League** team - to victory in April 2010 and followed it up by lifting the Champions League Trophy for the same team in September. The mother of all victories came in early April this year: India won the ICC Cricket World Cup after 28 years.

Mahendra Singh Dhoni is the only captain in the world to have tasted success in all formats of the game, and that too in just four years. No wonder, batting legend Sachin Tendulkar calls the 29-year-old the best among the nine captains he has played under in his 21-year career. Australian great Greg Chappell calls Dhoni the best captain in the world today. Former Indian skipper Kapil Dev, who led the country to its first major cricketing triumph - the 1983 Prudential World Cup - has no qualms in accepting that Dhoni is a better captain.



The transformation of MSD, as he is often called, from a long-haired pinchhitter to a suave captain could not have been more dramatic. He burst into Indian cricket in 2004 as a small-town boy with a penchant for whacking the ball out of the ground with his trademark 'helicopter shot'. Captaincy came his way in September 2007 when he was appointed skipper for the Twenty20 World Cup championship. India won the tournament.

Soon after, he was given charge of the team in the other two formats of the game too - one day internationals and Test cricket. (Sure, there have been temporary stumbles, like the exit at the league stage in the 2010 T-20 world championship.) The manner in which he has gone about transforming a formerly 'also ran' team into the best in the world offers valuable lessons in management and leadership.

Keep it simple, silly

Unlike most other captains today, Dhoni does not believe in strategising excessively before a match. In fact, he seldom watches match videos or pores over statistics. Team meetings on match days are mostly standing sessions lasting no more than 10 minutes, say colleagues. "I like to keep things simple. Cricket is a simple sport and you complicate it by thinking too much. More you think, more complex it becomes," Captain Cool said at a press conference days after winning the ICC World Cup.

Dhoni employs sleep as an effective tool to beat pre-match tension. On the day of a big match, people close to him reveal, he wakes up just two hours before the match starts. Keeping it simple also helps him to remain calm in live wire situations. Former Australian wicketkeeper-batsman and Dhoni's idol Adam Gilchrist recently said the Indian skipper's biggest plus point was his ability to remain calm under pressure.

Venkat R. Krishnan, professor of Organisational Behaviour, Great Lakes Institute of Management, sees merit in Dhoni's methods. "Successful managers take decisions on the fly and abhor paralysis by analysis," he explains.

Dhoni's self confidence has rubbed off on his teammates. They have also started believing they can achieve greatness and this helped them to win the World Cup. MSD's ability to read the game and the weaknesses of his opponents, more than compensates for the lack of major prematch brainstorming. "He has always flummoxed rivals with his field placements, his use of bowlers or his frequent



changes in the batting order, which invariably turned the match in his team's favour. This is because he reads the game very well," says Ravi Shastri, commentator and former Indian skipper. For instance, when West Indian all-rounder Kieron Pollard walked in to bat for Mumbai Indians at the 2010 IPL finals, Dhoni was quick to place two fielders at extra cover. Pollard fell for his weakness - an uppish cover drive straight into the hands of one of them.

Also, instinct - more than a wellthought out strategy - predominantly drives Dhoni's decision making. It was in-stinct that prompted him to bring on an inexperienced Joginder Sharma to bowl the last over against Pakistan in the T-20 finals in 2007. Or more recently in IPL 4, when opponents Kolkata Knight Riders were cruising to victory chasing a modest CSK total of 153 runs, Dhoni overlooked the more experienced Scott Styris and handed the ball to Suresh Raina. In both the matches, the bowlers delivered and Dhoni's team won.

But there have been failures too. In the ICC World Cup, South Africa needed 13 runs to win from the last over in its Group B league match. Dhoni brought on pacer Ashish Nehra though he had the services of the more experienced off-spinner Harbhajan Singh. India lost the match. In this instance, it didn't click, but says Shastri, "Great captains go by instinct when it comes to big decisions and it works."

High on emotional IQ

According to Krishnan, the management professor, "Traditional intelligence alone does not deliver results, emotional intelligence produces better outcomes." And for now, emotional intelligence is something the Indian skipper seems to have plenty of. However, the success rate of such decisions will remain high only as long as Dhoni's emotional intelligence is good enough to size up issues, warns Krishnan.

Also, when it comes to owning up mistakes, Captain Cool has never had any problems. "A good leader takes bold decisions. But if they go wrong, Dhoni promptly admits his mistake," says Krishnamachari Srikanth, former Indian captain and chairman of the Indian selection committee. After beating Pakistan in the World Cup semi-final, Dhoni was quick to admit he read the pitch wrong and opted for an extra seamer instead of a spinner.

"After winning the match, it was not necessary for him to say that. But he owned up," says Srikanth. Another attribute Dhoni seems to have oodles of is self-belief. "Self-belief is his

greatest asset and enables him to lead from the front," says Kapil Dev. He gives the example of Dhoni's decision to come in to bat at number five, ahead of the in-form Yuvraj Singh, in the World Cup finals. Dhoni was not exactly in the best of form.

The highest he had scored in the previous 21 innings was 38 runs. He still walked in and created history with an unbeaten 91-run innings, which also won him the man-of-the-match award. "A good leader does not sit and wait for an opportunity. You need to knock on opportunity's door and grab it. That is what Dhoni did," adds Kapil Dev. Krishnan attributes this to the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy which is considered to be a miracle in the domain of human behaviour. "If you think you can do wonders, you will do wonders," he explains.

Evidently, this trait has also rubbed off onto his teammates. They too have begun to believe they can achieve greatness and this helped them to fight back and win the World Cup, adds Krishnan. No wonder, teammates adore the man. Dhoni's room is always open for his teammates and they spend most evenings together discussing movies, bikes, planes - not necessarily cricket.

On the ground too, rather than impose his own views, the skipper allows teammates the space to perform, say insiders. Once he was asked why he never shouts at his players on the field. "What is the dressing room for," Dhoni replied without batting an eyelid. However, teammates say they have rarely seen him losing his cool even in the dressing room. The skipper, though, does convey his displeasure in his own subtle way when players fail to deliver.

On April 6, at a dinner hosted by the CSK team management prior to the start of the current IPL season, Dhoni surprised everyone by walking over to a table that security guards were at and having dinner with them. Success, those present there said, has had little impact on the Ranchi boy. And more importantly, it has not dampened his insatiable hunger for more. Recently, asked what next, Dhoni's answer was: "I don't mind repeating it all over again."

Dhoni proves the difference between instinct and luck: Harsha and Anita Bhogle

Midway through the World Cup there were references to Dhoni's luck - that India could win it because he was lucky. Isn't it interesting that the best leaders in the world tend to be lucky? Or is it because they have an ability to read a situation quickly and back the right person? Dhoni's success is proof of the difference between instinct and luck. Dhoni's instincts stay sharp because he is calm, and a calm opponent is the most dangerous opponent. When things start going wrong, everyone looks towards the leader. If he is chewing his nails or stomping around, it means the situation is getting to him. When the leader is calm, the team believes there is still hope.

Ian Chappell once told us the first principle of leadership: congratulate in public and criticise in private. The world can celebrate your success but being berated in public is humiliating. Except for one occasion when he urged his teammates not to play for the crowds

but for the team, Dhoni has hardly ever lashed out at his team. He must have done it within the dressing room at times, but by doing it that way he showed respect for his teammates, strengthened the bond. He seems very secure in his job and has a way of respecting seniority. He did that with Anil Kumble and with Sourav Ganguly, and made himself invisible when Sachin Tendulkar was having his moment immediately after India won the World Cup. It was Dhoni's and India's Cup, but he let it be Tendulkar's moment.

And he is not afraid of admitting his mistakes. No leader gets it right 10 out of 10, but insecure leaders try to cover up mistakes. Honesty is an essential attribute of a leader.

Dhoni is at once dignified and candid, grounded but with high aspirations: Prof E.S. Srinivas (Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Leadership, Innovation and Change at the Indian School of Business)

Intuitive decision-making is based on identifying organised patterns and underlying structures in our experience. To take such decisions, the leader should have a strong sense of assurance and confidence, and needs to communicate that confidence by not being shaky or projecting insecurity.

Charismatic leaders are not necessarily very bright or great advisors. Dhoni seems to have a simple and clear view of cricket. While acknowledging the uncertainty involved - "on my day I will succeed", he does not worry too much about it.

Though it may be too early to evaluate Dhoni as a leader, he has shown traces of a transformational leader, flashes of charisma and indicators of a Level-5 leadership. Transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend their self-interest for the team. Dhoni demonstrated this many times by sacrificing his record for team performance. These leaders communicate high expectations and express important issues simply (playing for the country and not for the crowd or gallery). Charismatic leaders are willing to take personal risks to achieve their vision, exhibit behaviours that are out of the ordinary.

Dhoni's unconventional behaviour - batting style in the initial years and leading style in later years as captain - reflects this tendency. As a Level-5 leader, Dhoni blends personal humility and strong professional will, takes responsibility for failures and gives credit to others for successes. Dhoni is at once dignified and candid, grounded but with high aspirations, cool but determined.

He demonstrates equanimity by being graceful under pressure and his body language exudes confidence even when the situation is not going well for the team.