

Lessons of Strategic Management From Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

Strategic management refers to the formulation, implementation, evaluation, and control of strategies to maintain a competitive advantage. The concept of strategic management is not new; but, as old as Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita: the two Holy Scriptures which have lots of religious value in people's eyes. The epic Mahabharata makes a distinction between dharma and adharma, right and wrong, morality and immorality, and goodness and badness with the main eccentrics of Kaurvas (represented evil) and Pandavas (symbolized for goodness). The worth mentioning point is: whenever there is a war between dharma and adharma, the victory of dharma is certain. This truth is inherent in Pandavas victory over Kaurvas. However, the path of victory for dharma is not so easy. To beat evil practices of adharma, the supporters of dharma ought to have made some strategies as was done from Pandavas side by Lord Shri Krishna for the establishment of dharma on Earth. With this backdrop, the present paper takes into consideration Shri Krishna's strategies in Mahabharata, lessons of dharma in Bhagavad Gita, and correlates them with present strategic management concepts. It is obtained that what is understood today as the process of strategic management is actually been told and operated by Lord Shri Krishna in Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita.

Keywords: Strategy, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Dharma, Adharma

Introduction

Strategic management has been proved as a great mantra of winning over the competitors in today's business scenario. This mantra has drawn its roots from Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita which are the most ancient religious scriptures not meant for a particular person, creed or nation, but are intended for the whole humanity. These scriptures talk about dharma, ethical and moral principles of life, and are a true icons that have potential to play a significant role in the alleviation of miseries and distresses in all the fields of human life. Indeed, Mahabharata is about a battle between Dharma (Pandavas) and Adharma (Kaurvas). In this battle when Arjuna lost his self confidence, Lord Shri Krishna preached him and set his mind towards his vision. Later, the whole story about Kaurvas and Pandavas was documented, and the book is entitled "Mahabharata". The lessons of Lord Shri Krishna to Arjuna which were actually a part of Mahabharta were separately integrated in the form of a book named "Bhagavad Gita or Gita". These two manuscripts are a discourse of immense spiritual value and provide best courses of actions that can be adopted for success in life or to beat the competition of all kinds with a peaceful and stress free mind.

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It is well known that Pandavas won the battle of Mahabharata, and defeated the enemy who was even stronger than them if considered from viewpoint of material resources [Kaurvas had eleven Akshouhini army while Pandavas had seven Akshouhini army (later explained)]. When the enemy behind them was stronger, naturally the victory of Pandavas was the game of confidence, wisdom, patience, and rationality. Appropriate and indispensable strategies were formed from their side that lead them towards success. The greatest manager and unbeatable strategy maker from their side was Lord Shri Krishna who guided them at each step by doing strategic planning, and motivated them to realize that planning into actions. Various incidences in Mahabharata and the teachings of Bhagavad Gita imply that Shri Krishna was a great strategic thinker and action taker. In no doubt, Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita educate about dharma, humanity, ethics, and morality. But if taken from other perspective, these scriptures instruct about a way of how human beings can manage their lives towards success. Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita provide various management lessons and also about development of strategies to handle uncertain situations as per the need of the time.

Keeping this backdrop, an attempt is made in this paper to connect certain evidences from Mahabharata and the knowledge of Bhagavad Gita with the conceptualizations of today's strategic management, the business world speaks of. It has been shown that success of Pandavas came as they followed strategic management process in the leadership of Shri Krishna. Besides, the teachings of Bhagavad Gita helped them a lot in each stage. These teachings will always remain startling and valuable for the humanity. Most of the discourse in this paper is arranged based on the analysis of versions of Mahabharata (Ganguly, 2003) and Bhagavad Gita (A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1998).

Also, while exploring the related literature, a significant gap aroused because number of authors have attempted to identify lessons of general management from Bhagavad Gita (Mahadevan, 2008; Bhattathiri, 2010; Narendran, 2010; Singh, 2012; Bharadwaj, 2013; Kumar, 2015; Mohan, 2015; Nanda, 2016; Mukherjee, 2017; Nathani, 2017); but, few initiatives have been found for a direct comparison of business/management strategies with knowledge inherent in these epics (Gupta and Singh, 2019). So, this paper adds to the literature by viewing the incidences from a strategic manager perspective, and aims to draw a match between process of Strategic Management and happenings of Mahabharata. Next section provides a fleeting look to the two epics that are Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita.

Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita: A Brief Look

The story of Mahabharata revolves around two branches of a family: The Pandavas and Kaurvas; who fought in Kurukshetra for the kingdom of Hastinapura. The whole story of that time was narrated with one lakh verses compiled in eighteen sections in a manuscript entitled as "Mahabharata". These eighteen sections are: "*Aadi Parva, Sabha Parva, Ban Parva, Virat Parva, Udyog Parva, Bhishma Parva, Drona Parva, Karna Parva, Shalya Parva, Saupatik Parva, Stri Parva, Shanti Parva, Anushasan Parva, Ashwamedhik Parva, Ashramvasik Parva, Musal Parva, Mahaprasthanik Parva, Swargaarohan Parva*". Most of the sections turn toward the war between Kaurvas and Pandavas. For the war, Kaurvas had eleven Akshouhini army, and Pandavas had seven Akshouhini army where one Akshouhini implies 21870 chariots, 21870 elephants, 65610 horses and 109350 foot soldiers (Ratio of 1:1:3:5). The war lasted for eighteen days and Kaurvas lost all their warriors one by one. At last, Pandavas won the battle and the kingdom of Hastinapura.

Bhagavad Gita was fabricated in a narrative framework from the conversation between Arjuna and Lord Shri Krishna. When the war is to begin, Arjuna was filled up with doubts thinking that he had to fight with his own relatives, friends, and esteemed teachers. Responding to Arjuna's confusion and moral dilemma, Shri Krishna elaborated on a variety of philosophical concepts to awaken him for his responsibilities as a warrior, and established dharma by his appeal to kshatriya dharma of Arjuna as a prince. The teachings of the Lord were exposed only to Arjuna and Sanjaya (Dhritarashtra's advisor and charioteer) who was able to sense and perceive all the events of the battlefield. Accordingly, holy Bhagavad Gita in the form of a manuscript forms the content of the recollection of Sanjaya about the wordings of the Lord. The Bhagavad Gita presents a synthesis of the concept of dharma, theistic bhakti, yogic ideals of moksha (through jnana, bhakti, karma and raja yoga), and Samkhya philosophy by its seven hundred verses written in eighteen chapters or Adhyayas. The eighteen chapters are as: "Visada Yoga, Sankhya Yoga, Karma yog, Jnana Yoga, Karma-Vairagya Yoga, Abyasa Yoga, Paramahamsa Vigyaana Yoga, Aksara-Parabrahman Yoga, Raja-Vidya-Raja-Guhya Yoga, Vibhuti-Vistara Yoga, Visvarupta-Darsana Yoga, Bhakti Yog, Ksetra-Ksetrajna Vibhga Yoga, Gunatraya-Vibhaga Yoga, Purusottama Yoga, Daivasura-Sampad-Vibhaga Yoga, Sraddhataya-Vibhaga Yoga, and Moksha-updesha Yoga". The happenings at the time of Mahabharata and Lord Krishna's messages in the form of Bhagavad Gita are inherent in the eighteen chapters of the two scriptures each (table 1). Now, the meaning and concept of strategic management are defined for a clear understanding of what it stands for.

Table 1. Chapters of Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita

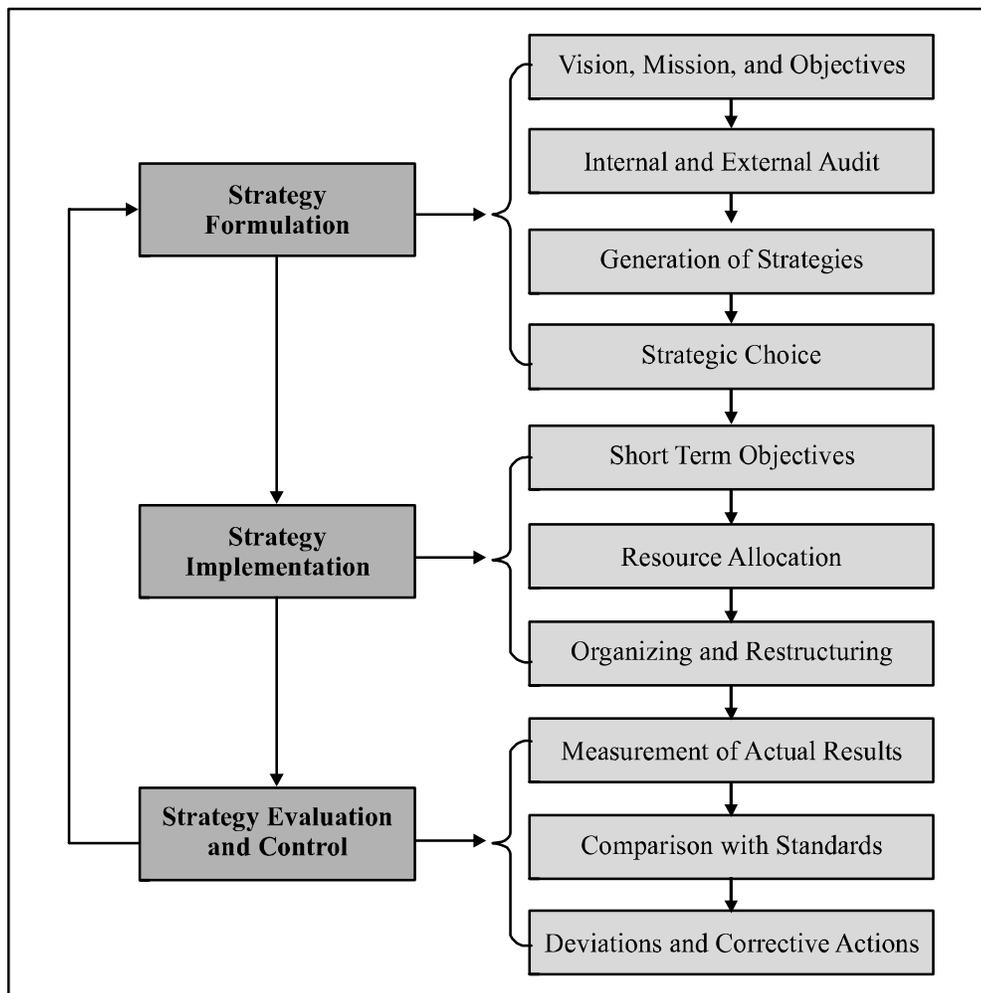
Chapters	Mahabharata	Bhagavad Gita
Chapter 1	Aadi Parva	Visada Yoga
Chapter 2	Sabha Parva	Sankhya
Chapter 3	Ban Parva	Karma
Chapter 4	Virat Parva	Jnana Yoga
Chapter 5	Udyog Parva	Karma-Vairagya
Chapter 6	Bhishma Parva	Abyasa
Chapter 7	Drona Parva	Paramahamsa Vijnana
Chapter 8	Karna Parva	Aksara Parabrahman
Chapter 9	Shalya Parva	Raja-Vidya-Raja-Guhya
Chapter 10	Sauptik Parva	Vibhuti-Vistara
Chapter 11	Stri Parva	Visvarupta-Darsana
Chapter 12	Shanti Parva	Bhakti
Chapter 13	Anushasan Parva	Ksetra-Ksetrajna Vibhga
Chapter 14	Ashwamedhik Parva	Gunatraya-Vibhaga
Chapter 15	Ashramvasik Parva	Purusottama
Chapter 16	Musal Parva	Daivasura-Sampad-Vibhaga
Chapter 17	Mahaprasthanik Parva	Sraddhataya-Vibhaga
Chapter 18	Swargaarohan Parva	Moksha Updesha Yoga

Source: A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1998) and Ganguly (2003)

Strategic Management: Meaning and Concept

Strategic management is the art and science of strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and strategy evaluation and control of strategic decisions to maintain a competitive advantage. The strategic decisions are the outcome of rational and logical planning which are about ‘strategy formulation’. The formed strategies are termed as ‘intended strategies’. On the other hand, strategies are also made to take actions spontaneously or to practise the intended strategies: here the reference is about ‘realized strategies’ which are the aspects of ‘strategy implementation and control’. Accordingly, the main points of strategic management are formulating, implementing, evaluating and controlling the strategic decisions. These tasks complement each other and are also viewed as a process with certain sub contents that helps to proceed in the decisions as are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Process of Strategic Management



Source: Compiled by Authors from David (2003) and Pearce et al. (2012)

The next discussion presented in the paper explains about the conceptualizations of Strategic Management by aligning it with what is intrinsic in the chapters of Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita. Not all but certain events from Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita are considered while establishing this relationship.

Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, and Strategic Management

As mentioned above, strategic management starts with strategy formulation specifically by forming a vision. The critical question comes to every strategic manager's mind is how to form this vision and convert that into results. The answer to this fundamental question is found in the story of Mahabharata and the holy Bhagavad Gita. Keeping a manager's eye, various incidences in Mahabharata and teachings of Bhagavad Gita are viewed in correspondence with the basic concepts of strategic management. Excellent examples of strategic management can be found from the side of the winning team, the Pandavas.

Strategy Formulation

Strategy formulation is about developing a vision and mission, identifying external opportunities and threats, determining internal strengths and weaknesses, generate alternate strategies, and choosing particular strategies to pursue. These concepts of strategic formulation are all discussed in the holy Bhagavad Gita. Various conceptualizations under strategy formulation are here compared with Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita and contents are presented.

- **Vision, Mission, and Objectives:** The dictionary meaning of word vision defines it as seeing something in imagination, so vision is a dream. Mission, on the other hand is an act of sending forth. Strategic management says about establishing of vision and mission before proceeding in the acts. Then vision and mission set the objectives, goals, targets or by whatever name they are being called. Good strategic management obtains that the objectives should be clear, integrated and one for the whole organization.

- ⇒ Aligning with this, it can be said that the vision of dharma was clear to the Pandavas, and they all had only one goal. Contrary to it, the objectives of all the great generals of Kaurvas, including Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Shalya, etc. were different and they were fighting individual fights.

- ⇒ Bhagavad Gita too directs to develop the visionary perspective in the work everybody does. It tells us to develop a sense of larger vision for the common good.

- **Internal cum External Audit:** Internal analysis is the process of reviewing strengths and weaknesses of oneself, and external analysis is an analysis of outside opportunities and threats. Strategic management stresses on matching internal and external environmental analysis so that strengths can be maximized to capture the external opportunities and weaknesses can be minimized in order to avoid threats. This analysis is necessary so that inevitable actions can be taken beforehand. Shri Krishna in Bhagavad Gita also said 'do an audit of your enemy (challenges) and you should know him very well'. Shri Krishna and Pandavas were aware of this point, they audited both internal and external situations and undertook necessary actions beforehand to turn their weaknesses into strengths, and minimize the potential threats and challenging situations. Here are certain instances.

- ⇒ Arjuna set out on a mission to acquire Divyastras. Bhima met Lord Hanumana and got a blessing of enriched strength. Yudhishtira acquired teachings from various saints, and also learnt the game of Dice from Gandharva Chitrasena after which he became undefeatable in this game.

- ⇒ Pandavas worked to gather more allies so that they could gain more support. They established various relationships through marriages. They knew how to inspire, how to take benefits from faltering enemies, and whenever needed, they acquired guidance from others.
- ⇒ Shri Krishna according to his strategy stopped the Pandavas from infighting on multiple occasions to overcome this kind of weakness.
- ⇒ Lord Krishna empowered Pandavas by his strategies of taking Kvacha and Kundals of Karna, and accusing Duryodhna when he was going nude before his mother to take her blessings. There is an incidence of Barbrik which was shaped by Shri Krishna to avoid any difficult position in future.
- ⇒ When the war is to begin, Arjuna requested Krishna to bring him between the two armies so that he can see the enemies, his warriors and powers.

All these incidences point toward environmental analysis by Pandavas, and correspondent actions taken from their side.

- **Strategies Generation and Choice:** When it comes to strategies and tactics Lord Shri Krishna has been the supreme manager of Pandavas. There are various instances of generation and selection of best of the strategies by the Pandavas in the leadership of Shri Krishna as summarized here.

- ⇒ When Arjuna and Duryodhana both arrived to meet Shri Krishna for assistance before the battle, Arjuna asks for Krishna as charioteer, and Duryodhana selected Krishna's large army. Duryodhana got all the hardware and software (Krishna's army), but Arjuna ended up getting the man (Lord Shri Krishna) who could smash any software or hardware.
- ⇒ According to Kaurvas strategy, they had a one-man leadership hierarchy. On the other hand, Pandavas had seven different generals directing the operations for one of each Akshouhini army. They made seven different commanders and these commanders were commanded by the commander in chief. Dhrishtadyumna was elected as commander in chief, Arjuna was the supreme commander, and Shri Krishna was their counsellor.
- ⇒ Shikhandi was put in front of Arjuna while fighting Bhishma knowing that Bhishma would not fight Shikhandi.
- ⇒ Shri Krishna constructed the strategies to eliminate Drona. He was aware of Drona's weakness that was his son Ashwathama. He convinced Yudhishtira to utter a half truth, 'Ashwathama Hatha Kunjara', which translated to 'Ashwathama the Elephant has been killed'. Yudhishtira having the reputation of being the most truthful, Drona took his words and thought his son had been killed. Then, Dhrishtadyumna from the Pandavas side got an opportunity to kill Drona.
- ⇒ Ghatotkacha was encountered with Karna to get rid of his celestial Shakti Indrastra that had been reserved for Arjuna by Karna.
- ⇒ Shri Krishna used the eclipse of the sun to draw Jayadratha out so that Arjuna could kill him and fulfil his vow.
- ⇒ He was Shri Krishna who gesture Bhima to hit Duryodhana on thighs to end him up.

The main strategies from Pandavas side as defined above were favourably implemented by them and the results are known to everybody. Actually, implementation is a difficult task as to do something (implementation) is always typical than to say you are to do it (formulation), since it entails a number of tasks. Shri Krishna provided many graceful manners for implementing the strategies. This aspect is handled next.

Strategy Implementation

Strategy implementation is a translation of strategic thought into strategic action. To implement the strategies, the application of basic management is inevitable and sometimes restructuring is necessary. Shri Krishna acted as a great manager, he told basic concepts for effective management to Pandavas and their army; he organized them, performed staffing and directing functions, and taught various management lessons by the way of holy Bhagavad Gita for effective (doing the right things) and efficient (doing things right) management. The following lessons from Shri Krishna by the way of Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita are inevitable for successful implementation of strategies.

- **Self Transcendence:** Shri Krishna propounded the theory of self transcendence in Bhagavad Gita. It involves renouncing egoism, putting others before oneself, emphasising team work, dignity, co-operation, harmony, trust, and sacrificing lower needs for the higher for the accomplishment of goals and achieving the strategies made.
- **Work Culture:** Shri Krishna elaborates on two types of work cultures “Daivi Sampat” or “Asuri Sampat”. Daivi Sampat means Daivi work culture which involves fearlessness, purity, self-control, sacrifice, straightforwardness, self-denial, calmness, absence of fault finding, absence of greed, gentleness, modesty, absence of envy and pride. Asuri sampat or Asuri work culture means demonic work culture and involves egoism, delusion, personal desires, improper performance, and work not oriented towards service. He advocated the Daivi culture for Dharma and goodness for all.
- **Change and Innovation:** Change is the law of universe. God taught about the adoption of changes by the way of a simple example that ‘body discards old clothes and wear new one’.
- **Resource Allocation:** The main part of management is to utilize scarce resources in an optimum manner to succeed in some venture. Before the war of Mahabharata, Duryodhana selected Shri Krishna’s large army while Arjuna selected the wisdom of the Lord. Actually, the Lord was supreme in allocating the resources to the two parties, and Pandavas fully utilized their valuable human resource Shri Krishna.
- **Right People at the Right Places:** The making of seven different commanders and deputation of these commanders at different places is the sign of a good management practice of right people at right place.
- **Departmentation, Decentralization, and Delegation:** Kaurvas had a centralized leadership and only one head of the large army. While Pandavas used seven divisions and seven commanders for each division which is an example of divisionalization. They delegated authority to make decisions to all the commanders, and they all shared the responsibility. Younger Pandavas (Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha) and even the women (Kunti and Dropadi) were brought into light for decision making.

- Work Commitment and Detachment from Fruits: Management need those who practise what they preach. The warriors of Pandavas were influenced and made fully committed for the cause. Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha are the best examples of their commitments. For full commitment to work, Bhagavad Gita tells about detachment of fruits of actions with the slogan of 'Nishkama Karma'. God says do the Karma without considering happiness or distress, loss or gain, victory or defeat.

- Group Goals vs Individual Goals: Shri Krishna elaborated that group goals should be given priority over individual goals. Pandavas had a team with one goal, but Kaurvas only had a group. Pandavas were committed wholeheartedly and were willing to do anything to achieve the common goal even if it meant laying aside personal agendas.

The secrets of successful strategy implementation were known to Pandavas because the key that can turn any lock was with them in the form of Lord Shri Krishna. What the Lord told them, Pandavas completed, and accomplished their goals. Now, next part is about strategy evaluation and control which is a test for: whether the strategies have brought out the intended results. If not, what are the causes and what may be the next possible solutions.

Strategy Evaluation and Control

Strategic control is the process of determining what is being achieved so that corrective course of action can be taken in order that performance is on the path of progress; thus control encompasses evaluation. Hence, process of controlling is about measurement of actual performance, comparison of actual performance with desired; in case the negative deviations are found it is about taking corrective actions. The victory of Pandavas highlights that on the criterion of evaluation, certainly all their strategies provided them desired results. However, to control the disheartening situations the war caused, Lord Krishna again suggested many corrective actions to Pandavas for the welfare of whole nation. The organization of Ashwamedha Yagna for harmony and peace is one of the best examples. In Bhagavad Gita, for all the humanity, Shri Krishna sets the path of dharma and ethics for evaluation and controlling of actions. Some important points are gathered.

- The Results of Actions: God says every action produces results; good actions obviously produce good, and bad actions nothing but evil. 'No doer of good ever ends in misery'. Therefore people should evaluate their actions for dharma and ethics.

- Causes of Results: Shri Krishna uttered that while evaluating, never consider yourself to be the cause of results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty.

- Not to Regret: Lord Krishna too said 'whatever happened, happened for the good; whatever is happening, happening for the good; whatever will happen, will also happen for the good only'. You need not have any regrets for the past. You need not worry for the future.

- God Avatar for Dharma: For controlling the situations, God avatar to protect the dharma is also talked in Bhagavad Gita.

Moreover, to favour justice, dharma, and goodness, both defensive as well as offensive policies were formed by Lord Krishna and practiced by Pandavas under his supervision to beat their enemy. These policies and strategies have provided the basis for the concepts and fundamentals of strategic management.

Conclusion

In nutshell, the paper associated Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita with strategic management. Since, Strategic Management calls for taking strategic advantage over competitors, it is obtained that Lord Shri Krishna was the great strategist from Pandavas side who knew how to take an advantage over enemy. Overall, it can be understood that Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita guide people in every field, be it business war or life as a battlefield. Everybody should work with wisdom, rationality, and by making appropriate strategies for living a decent life. It is not the case that strategies were not made from Kaurvas side; but, they made their strategies for deceit and adharma. While, Lord Krishna told in Bhagavad Gita that only those strategies reap fruits which are directed towards dharma, truth, morality and ethics. If human beings work by keeping Lord's slogans in mind, the situations will automatically become favourable for them. Subsequently, there will be less need for controlling the actions and repeating the strategic process. A strategic manager can find the solutions of business problems in Bhagavad Gita. Mahabharata tells us what should not be done and Bhagavad Gita teaches about what should be the actions. So, these two scriptures also helps in enhancing Spiritual Quotient of strategic manager which is a must in present era for taking strategic decisions. It is a welcome sign that with the novel concepts of being ethical, moral, and socially responsible, the concepts of strategic management is changing. Business world should also work veraciously by being both emotionally and spiritually intelligent.

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