



Karna's Loyalty: Lessons for Modern Organisational Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Karna is an iconic hero of the Indian Saga Mahabharata, who embodies the clash of uncompromising individual devotion to the person and the inappropriateness of talent to the opportunity. This review paper critically explores the way in which the story of Karna sheds some light on the contemporary human resource (HR) dilemmas of decision-making, especially in situations where the loyalty of a highly talented person contradicts both the organizational fit and ethical alignment. Based on the review of peer-reviewed studies in talent management, organizational behavior and business ethics, we discuss two dual themes of loyalty, as well as talent misalignment. We present the relevance of matching the skills and values of the employees to the organizational roles, the outcome of misfit (reduced performance, turnover, and ethics), and the complicated issue of loyalty as a valuable resource and a liability. The methodology is an integrative review approach, which gathers the research on person-organization fit, commitment of employees, and talent management frameworks.

Keywords: Karna, Mahabharata, Dharma, Loyalty, Leadership, Ethics, Strategy, HR, Modern Human Resource Management, Decision Making, Talent Misalignment



Introduction

Karna is celebrated in the ancient Mahabharata as a very highly endowed warrior whose unwavering allegiance to his benefactor, Duryodhana, has made him stand on the wrong side of a great war. The life story of Karna shows a deep question: the great gift he had was too much out of the mission he was carrying, and his own personal fidelity would not allow him to bring himself to the mission again. This is an ancient story, which is a painful reflection of contemporary HR issues in companies where managers are frequently faced with the choice to make between people of very high talent whose values or loyalties do not necessarily vary with organizational objectives. Under the current competitive and morally aware business world, the issue of placement of talent is as important as it has ever been before [1]. It is also vital to make sure that the commitment or loyalty of an employee does not contribute to misplacement or ethical violations.

Literature Review

Loyalty Vs Strategic HR Decisions: In certain instances where HR decisions such as promotions, transfers, or terminations are to be done, managers are faced with a situation akin to the loyalty-versus-merit dilemma as experienced by Karna. Is it within the mandate of an employer to either promote the most loyal or the most skilled employee regardless of the fact that the latter may be less loyal or even tend to leave? It is not an insignificant question. To make sure that a decision is informed by merit and alignment with organizational strategy, and not by favouritism or inertia, HR must take a more evidence-based, strategic approach, what Boudreau and Ramstad (2005) term a talent decision science [16] [17]. Practically, there is a strike of balancing the interests: loyalty is appreciated though not at the cost of performance and ethics.

Ethical HR Leadership: It involves understanding that the allegiance of an individual, no matter how genuine, may be directing him or her to the dead-end of their career or even resulting in their ignorance of the wrongful acts. This awareness is related to the idea of the psychological contract - the unspoken two-way expectations between the employer and the employee. Unselfish employees such as Karna usually demand fairness and a chance to grow or even be utilized to their fullest. When the organization does not fulfill on that (as in retaining them in an inappropriate position or abusing their goodwill through performance penalties of additional work [18]), the psychological contract is violated and disappointment will ensue along with possible turnover.

Aithal and Shyam (2025): As a matter of fact, point to the example of Karna and emphasize that excessive dependence upon a high-performing employee (without any suitable rewarding or supporting measures) may lead to the development of resentment and trigger the desire of even the most loyal persons to quit [18] [19]. Moreover, loyalty may blind in succession planning; a manager may promote a boisterous, but skilled Arjuna instead of a faithful, but less energetic Karna thereby creating a negative impact on the competitiveness of the organization. It is the pitfalls of such bias in loyalty, sometimes known as the loyalty trap in business, whereby leaders are more than willing to adhere to those they know and trust than to introduce new talent to the company, at the cost of their performance and innovation, that has been pointed out by business scholars.

Altogether, the literature review suggests that to increase the organizational effectiveness, talent alignment (balancing the abilities and values of people with their job and the culture of the company) and ethical management of loyalty (to encourage a kind of loyalty serving institutional values, but not the opposite) are needed. It is with this discovery that we retain the story of Karna as a symbolic reference point that will help place us in context and add some meaning to the cold facts of HR theory and remind us of the human consequences behind these choices.

Methodology (Review Approach)

The research has employed an integrative literature review research design in order to locate and critically evaluate pertinent scholarship in the various fields, such as human resource management, organizational behavior, and business ethics. With the help of such keywords as talent management, person organization fit, misfit, loyalty, organizational commitment, ethical decision-making, nepotism and employee performance, a systematic search of scholarly databases (Ex: ABI/INFORM, PsycINFO, Google Scholar) was carried out. There was no one time frame in search but preference



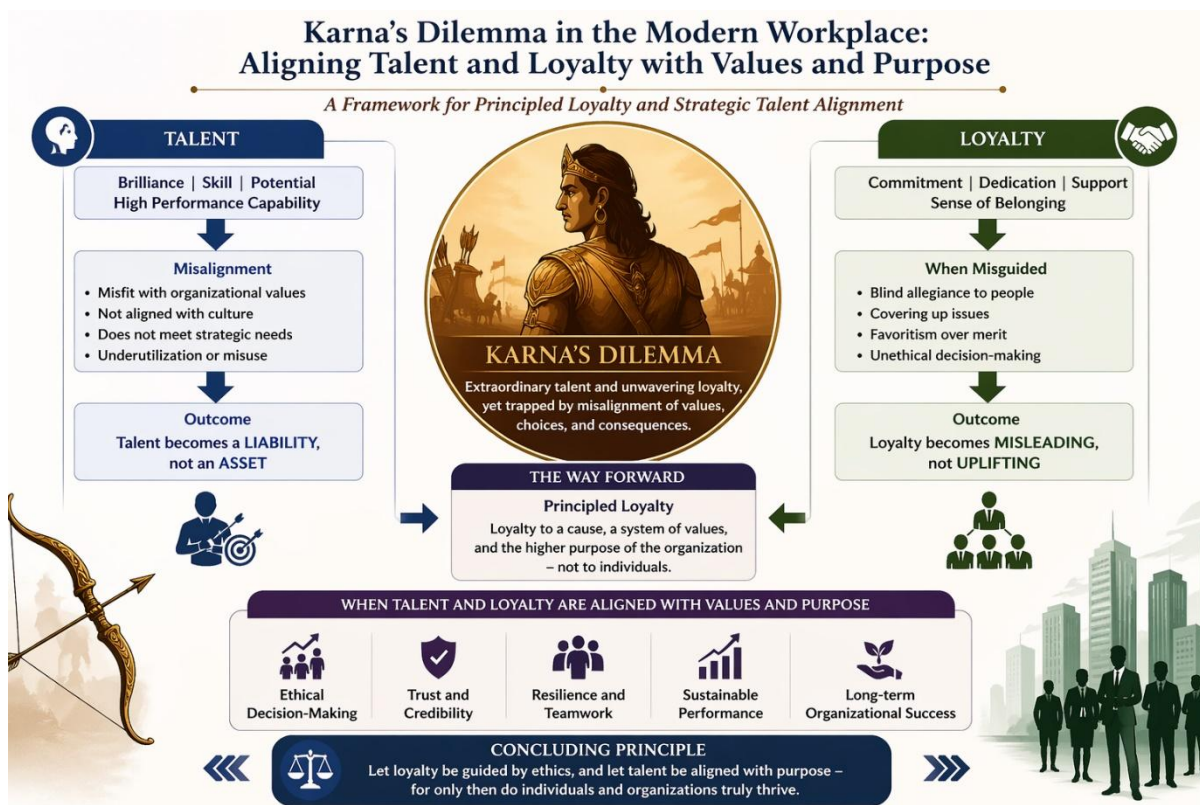
was sought in the current research (that is, about the past ten years) to retrieve the most recent findings (Ex: The post-2015 misfit turn in research observed by De Cooman et al., 2019 [20]).

There were also classic background works (such as the commitment model by Allen and Meyer in 1990 and the theory of ASA by Schneider in 1987) as a context to the theory. We searched peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books or book chapters; practitioner materials (such as consulting reports or blogs) were mostly filtered out, although they could be used to provide an initial conceptual framing. Particular consideration was given to the studies that directly correlated or compared the problem of loyalty and alignment - such as studies of the effect of loyalty on ethical performance, or whether misfit may be condoned or even promoted by individual loyalty.

Results and Synthesis

The literature that has been reviewed narrows down to a few main themes that are applicable to the relationship between loyalty and talent misalignment. They are: (1) the delicate significance of matching employee strength and worthiness with organizational requirements (as well as the consequences when such matching is incomplete or missing), (2) the subtle role of the notions of loyalty and devotion in shaping the behavior of the employees and HR choice, and (3) the consequences of the various combinations of high/low talent and high/low matching. The findings synthesis is presented below, and studies summarized in the Table.

Picture: Karna's Dilemma with Loyalty in Modern Workplace (Authors concept, AI Drawn)



The Bright and Dark Sides of Loyalty: The concept of loyalty came out of the literature as a two-sided theory, which validated our original assumption of the ambivalence of loyalty. On the one hand, there are the loyal employees who are rich in the affective and normative commitment, and who have a positive impact on organizations. They will be less prone to leaving and, in many cases, will exceed the scope of their job and, in personal commitment, will do more than what is required. (Ex: A meta-analysis by Meyer et al., 2002, confirmed the existence of strong negative correlations between commitment and turnover) Loyalty may create an atmosphere of trust and permanence; long serving loyal employees may end up being sources of knowledge and mentors. This is in line with the traditional perspective that the main HR objective should be to create employee loyalty which can be done by treating them fairly, providing them with development and growth, as well as creating the sense of belonging. However, it is demonstrated that loyalty has its dark side.



A shocking example Kundro and Nurmohamed (2021) give in their analysis of organizational cover-ups is that the employees who evaluated the peer who covered up the wrongdoing of another employee more leniently compared to employees who covered up their own wrongdoing, as the former are perceived to have done it out of loyalty to others [13]. This meant that loyal rule-breakers were less punished which served as a wake-up call to organizations that accountability could be watered down by the virtue of loyalty. Group loyalty has also been observed to occasionally overrule ethics, in behavioral experiments an appeal to loyalty (loyalty to a group or leader in particular) may lead to more compliance with an unethical demand [23] [24]. These results are consistent with actual corporate scandals in which employees were quiet or obedient due to their loyalty to a leader or a team, the diversion of loyalty to team leaders demonstrating the inhibition of whistleblowing and corrective ethical action. On the dark side of loyalty in the context of talent misalignment, we may find an employee working in an unsuitable position quite some time longer than is good simply because he or she feels obliged to a supervisor or a group of colleagues.

Although persistence is a good quality, it can bring stagnation to the career of the person and less than ideal outcomes to the company. Even a loyal-but-misfit worker would turn disengaged or even bitter in his or her heart (loyalty turned sour) when he or she thinks that his/her loyalty is being exploited, a situation not dissimilar to the latent emotional unhappiness of Karna when commitments and the actual state of things were not matched.

The other one is those biases based on managerial loyalty: Managers may reward loyalty with promotions or employment renewal regardless of performance problems, also known as the loyalty trap in management. This is the case in family businesses as reported by Arasli and Tumer (2008) in their study on nepotism, although it can happen in any organisation, where subjective allegiance is appreciated over objective abilities. The result of such practices as they have found is a reduction of trust and growing cynicism among other employees who have witnessed favoritism [14] [15]. Therefore, loyalty may unwillingly create disengagement amongst the larger workforce when it is seen as inequitable.

Table: Summary of Key Studies on Talent Alignment and Loyalty

Study (Year)	Focus	Key Findings/Insights
Arasli & Tumer (2008)	Nepotism/Favoritism in HR	Studied nepotism in the banking industry and found it adversely affected employees' attitudes. Perceptions of favoritism (loyalty-based HR decisions) increased job stress and decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Underscored that prioritizing loyalty over merit (misalignment in meritocracy) damages morale and can push away competent talent [14] [15].
Kundro & Nurmohamed (2021)	Loyalty & Unethical Behavior	Examined organizational cover-ups and found that employees viewed covering up a colleague's wrongdoing (a relational cover-up) as an act of loyalty, punishing it less severely than other transgressions [13] [5]. Revealed loyalty's double-edged nature: it can excuse unethical acts and create biases in accountability, thus loyalty must be managed carefully to not undermine ethics.

Discussion

Finding a Balance Between Merit and Loyalty - Toward Ethical Talent Management: One of our most salient findings is the role of meritocracy put into perspective by humanity. Loyalty is a highly humane virtue - it creates social capital and trust. However, according to research, excessive focus on loyalty may cause biases and blind spots [5]. A talent management system that is ethical would thus compensate loyalty in a manner that does not affect the fairness and performance standards. Ex: an organisation can have a transparent promotion criterion that takes loyalty/tenure as one of factors, but does not take the objective performance measures. This will avoid the perception (or reality) of favouritism, which was demonstrated by Arasli and Tumer (2008) to undermine organisational commitment among employees [14].

Picture: Ancient Indian War Scene with Horses, Elephants

Source: Lexica



Practical HR aspects such as 360-degree feedback and peer evaluation can assist in making sure that no single managerial judgment of loyalty to an employee is used as the basis of making decisions. Moreover, transferring high-potential staff members to different teams may eliminate the possibility of too much insular loyalty that may clash with organizational loyalty, and create loyalty to the mission of the organization itself. The two-sided aspect of the concept of loyalty, as Kundro and Nurmohamed (2021) point out - where loyalty to a group can justify misconduct [13] - implies that HR and leaders themselves must then strive to foster the development of the ethical climate in which loyalty to any person or group can be viewed as loyalty to shared values and principles.

Stated differently: the message will be: the organization appreciates your dedication, yet, being truly dedicated means, being willing to adhere to our ethical values and reporting when something is not right. The reframing of this kind can cause loyalty to become a potentially damaging bias to be a positive cause of integrity and alignment. In addition, ethical decision-making training modules can include the situation involving conflicts of loyalty (Ex: When an employee learns of a rule violation by a friend) so that the staff can be trained to resolve such situations professionally, instead of resorting to the cover-ups [13].

Karna had several conflicts of fidelity (friend versus moral duty) in the Mahabharata, and employees today can endure similar dilemmas (superior versus code of conduct) as well. It is important to promote a free culture where employees feel free to raise issues without the fear that they are betraying the team they are in. This is reflected in the whistle blowing



literature that tends to make the two mutually exclusive; firms with high ethical cultures are able to balance the two by arguing that safeguarding the integrity of the company is a way of being loyal.

Conclusion

The story of Karna with its abundance of the talent, loyalty, gratitude, and tragedy is not just a far-off myth, but a reflection of the modern workplace one in which we continue to face the same set of difficulties in the way we are dealing with people. The present review aimed at discussing the loyalty of Karna and the dilemma of talent misalignment, and in the course of a critical review of literature, This Author came up with conclusions that could be interpreted as a unification of the ancient wisdom with the modern management science. The general theme is obvious: talent, regardless of how brilliant it is, may turn into the liability, but not the asset, in case it does not correspond to the values, culture, and strategic needs of the organisation. And vice versa, loyalty, no however well-intended, may misguide people and organizations in case it is not pegged on ethical and organisational commitment.

Equally, we discovered that loyalty and commitment is a two-sided thing. Loyalty in equal measure leads to a good working environment, which instills resilience and friendship. A lot of successful organizations have high employee loyalty that is based on shared values and trust. Nevertheless, we also pointed out situations in which loyalty has gone awry - in reference to employees covering up issues or executives employing loyalists instead of highly qualified employees [13] [14]. These situations underscore the fact that loyalty is not to be blind. The practice conclusion is that organizations need to instill a culture of principled loyalty, wherein employees are motivated to become committed and take the best interests of the company (including ethical behavior and meritocratic decision-making). Simply put, one must be loyal to a cause and a system of values, rather than to other people irrespective of their goodness or badness.

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