Irrelevance of popular team leadership models in school team-leadership context of Nepal: Complexity perspectives

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Abstract

This article explores the case for considering eastern undertakings of Karma doctrine (e.g., do work and let the fruit foster naturally) in educational leadership and management, particularly team leadership in 'larger size' school settings. School as social institution is a complex teamphenomenon with everyday challenges, and it is a leader to embrace rather than avoid formidable challenges. To this, making meaning from the narratives of any three school principals from larger size private schools of Kathmandu Valley, the paper accepts conflict and adversities as leaders' best opportunities for learning and growing; acknowledging the belief that the more one deals with everyday organizational problems and setbacks successfully, without being emotionally attached to its' pain and pleasure, the more one become a true leader under complex school settings. **Key words:** Team leadership, larger size schools, complex settings

Background

Almost over the last five decades now teams and team leadership have emerged as a central element in the functioning of organizations. Literature on the team leadership has been evolved with a growing recognition. Series of studies, for instance, show positive relations between team-based working and the quality of products and services offered by an organization (Gibson et al., 2007). However, review of related literature suggests that there is still some gap in leadership studies. Such popular model of team leadership (e.g., Hills, 2007 model) make universal claim to certain philosophical underpinnings (more linear and mechanical), styles, and approaches, and in doing so, team leadership is not adequately explored from indigenous perspectives.

As structuring work around teams has become a phenomenal to organizational life, organizations today have been using team-oriented work in one way or other (Hills, 2007; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1995). As scholars interested in leadership put it, team leadership focuses on satisfying team needs with the goal of enhancing team effectiveness and this focus has been observed in all types of employment context, both private and public. To this consideration, leadership scholars offer various models for team leadership. Many of them, however, narrowly (and/or linearly) reflect the underlying notion that teams, most often, invoke the input-processes-output (IPO) model, and in emphasizing it, the everyday chaos, and complexity a team leader encounters in an organization (particularly in school organization) are often less considered.

Further, team leadership in educational institutions is a policy priority in recent times throughout the world. Increased school autonomy and a greater focus on schooling and school results have made it essential to reconsider the role of school leaders. A consensus has developed that principals and other leaders are crucial to the effectiveness of schools (Leithwood et al., 2004). Furthermore, experiences worldwide show that educational institutions are better performed in team leadership as education outcome is an integrated effort of the team.

Many studies have explored school teams in Nepali schools but have failed to go beyond discussing team member roles and team functioning (e.g., Kafle, 2014; Pokheral, 2016; Subedi, 2015). While these studies also highlight the importance of leadership preparation for team members (specifically teachers), little attention has been given to how team leadership form, function, and sustain at school context. More specifically, the privately owned schools (and schools that run in trust modalities) in Nepal are seen more in need of team orientation, and the need of effective team leadership spirit at workplace (Pokheral, 2016).

To this reference, this article brings into light how such popular team leadership models (example, scientific models of team leadership) are irrelevant in complex school team leadership context of Nepal. In doing so, the paper examines few of the popular team leadership models, critically reflect upon their irrelevance to the schooling contexts characterized by chaos and complexity, and calls for indigenous team leadership model, inherited to uniquely formed Nepali culture, its norms and values, together with it's uniquely formed socio-political and economic dimensions.

For this, the article has proposed eastern perspectives to team leadership (for example, karma philosophy of work), stressing school team-leader as karma yogi, continuously engaged to leadership Karma, detached from pain and pleasure, against everyday organizational chaos and complexities.

Study Method

This paper is all about the meaning-making (findings) during my PhD study. Making close observation to the narratives of my participants (three school Principals from Kathmandu Valley), the reflective field-notes, my own school team-leadership experiences, literature review, and the expert views, I came with few ideas that represent uniquely formed team leadership experiences of 'larger size' private schools of Kathmandu Valley. In order to better understand team leadership process at school in Urban Nepal, as referred to literature review, my research questions focused on forming, functioning, and sustaining the school team leadership in larger size private schools of Kathmandu Valley. There, my research project asked the major question-*Within the context of a school leadership, how do school principals narrate their team leadership experiences?* This question was further explored through this sub-question- *How are the school principals' experiences on (1) forming (2) functioning, and (3) sustaining the team?*

Focused to this area of study, I reviewed related literature. It helped me to identify the gap (that leadership literature still lacks indigenous model of team leadership at school context, and most often such studies rely upon universal models, and in doing so, I identified the need to bring lived experiences of apparently larger size private schools of Kathmandu Valley. Following it, I came with the narratives of any three 'larger size' school principals within Kathmandu Valley through thematic chapter division under different headings as school team forming, school team functioning, and school team sustaining respectively.

Through coding and categorizing of the field narratives, I came with few sub-themes under each major theme as forming, functioning, and sustaining of school team leadership. Each theme and sub theme was of higher significance to draw contextual meaning on team leadership experiences of school team leaders of the study area. However, to bring it here the details of study findings is beyond the scope of this paper. To this, present paper discusses how popular team leadership models (celebrating reductionist worldviews) are irrelevant to the uniquely formed school team-leadership contexts of Nepal. It also discusses how Eastern orientation to Karma doctrine best explains leaders' role in relatively complex school-team leadership contexts. Here, first, I reflect upon some of the events, which I and my participants experienced as school principal of larger size schools in Kathmandu Valley. Thereafter, I make evidence-based meanings out of those lived experiences.

Vignette 1: Unexpected shock

Something very unfortunate happened to me and my school. On February 21, 2016 one of the microbuses on its route to drop school children from school where I serve as the Principal crushed two people killing both of them and then bumped into another vehicle at Maharajgunj of Kathmandu. Its brakes had failed. The vehicle had ten students inside at the moment of the incident. Fortunately, all those inside the vehicle came out unharmed. The two people killed in the accident were medical doctors with MD in Dermatology from a Teaching Hospital. The news was a massive shock to all of us.

After inspection from the authorities, it was found that the microbus had been running for more than 27 years and was in bad condition prior to the accident. The driver was found to have a horrible record. He had been penalized 22 times and had already killed one individual before this accident. Although the driver was caught, the company owner and all the related people had escaped. My institution had outsourced for vehicles from other companies and the school had no say on the vehicle.

Three days after the incident, when I was in Rajbiraj, I received a phone call at 10 pm from the DSP Office of Kathmandu. I was called there immediately. Five days after the accident, on February 26, the police held me in custody for a whole night – my first experience of the kind. More was to come. Since the people who ran the travel company had disappeared, they wanted me to be their scapegoat – a proof that their 'investigation' was going on. They expected me to stay there for at least 15-20 days until the investigation was over.

In the next afternoon, they prepared me to appear at the district court. I was handcuffed together with other convicts and was put in the back of a truck with crudely welded iron rod seats. I asked them if this humiliation was really necessary for someone who had come of his own accord. I was in tears. "We caught him" was the opener with which the police introduced me in the court (implying that I had tried to escape). I could only wonder what 'caught' in their dictionary meant.

The judge reviewed the case. After watching the injustice being done, he immediately ordered the police to set me free and arrest the vehicle owner instead. The tears that rolled down my eyes this time were of various emotions: relief, rage, and sadness.

Meanwhile, right from the day I was held in custody, my team of around fifteen trusted people of my organization had been making great efforts to free me. By the second day, I and the school were cleared of all the charges. However, for us, this was not only a question of who got cleared and who got convicted. The two doctors who died in the accident and their bereaved families were of great concern to us. The incident personally and professionally touched all the members of my team. It touched me more in the way that I was in the leadership position.

Reflection

After establishing a school, it starts to function. However, the school is functioning well doesn't mean the school team is free of challenges. For example, in above case, the challenge we faced were beyond our imagination. As a school principal and a team leader, it might be my weakness of not recognizing possible accident on time. How did it happen that a driver with such poor history came to drive our school bus? Why we were not noticed on time that the bus was not in good condition? What actually is the professional boundary of a school principal?

Conventionally accepted team leadership models explain leadership practices and values displayed by leaders, coordinating certain group of people who are working jointly to achieve particular goal or objective. The values of team leadership are thus integrated to the governance, authority, and effective interaction with accepted integrity.

However, one can question- how acceptable are these reductionist models for school leadership and management, which are characterized not by linear approaches but by chaos and complexities, which are often unpredictable?

Leadership, in general, is the function more than a role, and can refer to both the process of leading and to those entities that do the leading under given circumstances. Generally, the role of the team leader becomes crucial in team leadership model, as the leader is one who facilitates the processes, the tasks, the working relationships, and the goals, priorities, needs, and achievements of the whole team. Because, teams provide diversity in knowledge, attitudes, skills and experience, the leaders' integration makes it possible to offer rapid, flexible and innovative responses to problems and challenges, promoting performance and improving the satisfaction of those making up the team (Salas & Wildman, 2009). Therefore, the linear models of team leadership, stressing input, process, and output phenomenon are in question for not recognizing everyday complex and chaotic organizational situations, particularly at school.

Most of the definitions emphasize that leadership is individuals' purposeful efforts to influence tasks, strategies, people, groups and cultures towards the achievement of objectives and goals (Yukl, 1998). From these understandings, team leadership refers to the relationship through which one person influences the behavior of other people. As the notion puts it, Leaders must not only be able to define departmental, unit or organizational missions, but they must also be able to coordinate the activities of others and motivate them to meet mission requirements (Peter & Liz, 2000). Additionally, effective leadership must circumvent or resolve issues impeding progress towards accomplishing organizational goals. However, these are mere stable, simple cause-and-effect models of school team-leadership. In actual field, leaders and managers face continuous challenges in education, and their responsiveness to the external environments of schools are constantly required.

It stresses the idea that with respect to understanding effective team leadership in organizational settings, the nature of the problems at hands and their associated performance demands has remarkable set of implications. My participants shared many incidents they encountered at school, which holds school leadership as complex social phenomenon. To this, I bring other lived experiences as experienced by participant.

Vignette 2: Leadership Chaos

There are many incidents and problems I have faced in my 31 years career. I remember an incident. One day a computer science teacher asked me to give him time after his last period for his medical appointment. So I provided him that time and a gate pass. And then I got busy with my official works. Later I found that the same teacher had jumped from the top of the main building from our school and tried to commit a suicide. When I rushed to that place, I found his body in a horrible condition; the bones had come out from different parts of the body and blood was everywhere. Immediately, I ordered the staffs to bring the stretcher and a vehicle to rush him to the hospital. I called Dr.Yadav (name changed) of Patan Hospital or B&B hospital. He suggested taking him to the B&B hospital after knowing his condition. So I called at B&B, informing about the accident and asked them to be ready. Luckily, he survived though now he is in the wheelchair. During this

incident, the school paid all the cost for the treatment. But, we had to deal with the accusation of his parents, wife and other family relatives for his attempt of suicide. The leader remembered yet another experience and shared-

About 5 years ago in another incident, a girl was ready to jump from the top floor of our main building which is a five-storeyed building. The girl's sister had graduated from our own college and her brother was studying in our school. We tried to convince her not to take such a devastating step while being cautious what if in case she jumps. We set the crash mat on the ground. After 45 minutes of conversation, she finally accepted not to take such a step. After then we put grills every edge of the top floor and put a lock on the entrance door to the top floor.

It seemed that leader had a lot to share. I was just hearing him and encouraging him to come with more experience. He looked outside the window for a minute, and again came with another incident he had experienced.

In another recent incident, 1 year ago, I was again out of the valley at Ghalegaun with a group of student. Exactly on the day after Shree Panchami, one of our students committed a suicide in his own house. Again, I was unknown about that incident. Then suddenly a call came from Ratopati when I was at Besisahar, asking me 'What do you want to say about the suicide committed by the student expelled by you?' How am I supposed to know what a student does at his home? The event even had not occurred during the school days. There was holiday for Shree Panchami and I was at Ghalegaun during the time that incident took place. But the Ratopati wrote that 'the principal expelled the student after knowing about his love affair, which forged a path for suicide'.

I hadn't even expelled that student. Then the police, child right committee, and many other committees started to approach me about almost every day and take my interview or interrogate me. I had gone to the hospital to see him as soon as I returned from Lamjung and I was also present during his post-mortem. I was with his parents during those times. If I was involved in any way to the suicide of that kid, of course, his parent would have in worst case beaten me or I would not been able to show my sorry face to them. But that was not the condition. Anyway, the police accused that the school committee has somehow direct or indirect involvement in the suicide of that boy. In a big institution like ours, due to the large number of students, teachers, staffs, sometimes we are made accountable for things for which we are not responsible.

"Furthermore, there are also a lot of problems regarding residential school or hostel I have to face." He added-

One night at around 12 o'clock I received a call as a hostel student had run away from the hostel. Then at that late night, I had to look at his data to find his permanent address and his parent's contact number. It is immoral to wake up the driver at that time. So, I had to drive to his parent's house in that late night in search of that student.

Reflection

Reflecting upon such and many other similar incidents as narrated by my participants, I come to ask many questions to myself- Is it easy to orient all team members of various background and interest to commonly built school mission? What would be the role of leader leading the team? Which leadership approach/ style s/he needs to exhibit?

As I have observed it, leadership is an elusive concept (Gray, 2012); and therefore, it is difficult to come with single and straightforward definition of leadership. How I understand my leadership position at one context, most often doesn't remain same in another context. It might be the reason that there are many definitions offered by different leadership writers and practitioners

differently. Possibly, it is because the leadership experiences, and the ways to understand it vary from one context to the other; one time to another; one location to another.

Most often the key leadership ideas revolve around few common concepts as vision, ideas, and direction. Such ideas accept leadership as something that inspires people to directed goals than with doing day-to-day administrative works. It is a function of knowing the self, having a vision that is well communicated, building trust among colleagues, and taking effective action to realize one's own leadership potential.

Nevertheless, though the basics of leadership may go same in all organizational contexts, the degree of complexities may vary from one to another. It is, therefore, necessary to come with different understandings of leadership at different organizational context like schools, hospitals, industries, and multi-national companies to name the few. However, my initial review of literature in this area suggests that in spite of few initiations, school leadership is not adequately discussed in academic world. To the positive side, slowly, the area is holding the attention of educationists and research scholar.

In constantly changing social environment, expectation of linear order and predictability of school leadership may not go meaningful. In this regard, traditional leadership approaches, styles, and metaphors (e.g., leader as great man, leader as servant, and leader as avatar) may not diagnose everyday complexities a school principal as a team leader most often encounters.

To this reference, I bring yet another narrative that represent complex situations, which I faced as a school principal and a team leader.

Vignette 3: Media threats

Having worked for more than a decade with renowned educational institutions of Kathmandu, I always had this strong desire and conviction to lead and run an exemplary educational institution in Nepal. I would share my ideas with my friends and colleagues. I was even invited by number of organizations to work with them. But not a single offer turned out to be convincing. After a year or so I was very much clear that I could start a school on my own. It was in 2005, I happened to meet four likeminded individuals from different walks of life. After couple of meetings, we were all set to go ahead, and this is how a concept of new educational institutions conceived on me, and thus, conceived in my team.

All of my team members were full of enthusiasm and each member was aware that we were starting from zero. It was a tough time for all of us. We all had the bitter reality of competing with the existing institutions. I always had this firm belief that branding was the most important thing for my organization. My team members always trusted me. Within a month or so people started to notice us. By the time we were almost done with the official paper works. We were on the field with a catchy name and appealing advertisements.

We did not know how important it was, but we did it.

People visiting the school were convinced with the state of art infrastructures. I was lucky enough to get support from the best set of resource persons in town. We had the best faculties of that time. Everything was moving well. Only left was the visit from the Ministry of Education for the approval. We had applied a month earlier and actually were waiting for the inspection. Things started to turn late. It was quite worrying. My team even visited University Grant Commission for the inquiry. We were deliberately waiting for the inspection visit from the Ministry.

Then there came the media threat.

The very next day of my visit to University Grant Commission, one of my team members came rushing in my office. He was carrying a major national weekly's copy and looked worried.

Without any delay he showed me the news where my institution was mentioned as illegally operating.

How came the idea that we were illegal? It was the first time I came to know that establishing a privately owned school and run it in competitive market was not that much easy. We were to be ready to face any unforeseen circumstances at any moment.

It was a major blow to us. When everything was moving well the news was a nightmare. The situation was discouraging to all of us and was equally disheartening.

My team members were near to give up. All the enthusiasm we had earlier inclined down dramatically. "No matter what happens you have to move ahead", I would console my team members to act strong.

We had no other way than to face the reality. The news was misleading. And therefore, first, it was important for all of us to clear the misunderstanding. Without any delay we had to meet the editor. After getting the appointment we visited the editor's office. The meeting started with a heated discussion. We were angry and frustrated. It was clearly visible in every team member's face. We were not happy with the kind of news published. Nothing was true. After an hour of discussion we were able to convince our position. We showed all our documents and process we had followed.

Here I share another lived experience as well

It was the first day of the session in the college section of my institution. Every student was oriented and instructed what to do and what not to do. All the students and parents were made clear about the code of conduct both verbally and in written. After the morning assembly, I saw three students with colored hair, improper uniform and was not even carrying their study materials. I called three of them in my office. First, I tried to learn about their attire and the colleges policies about the dress and outlook. I even tried convincing them why the personality matters. They were sent home next day. I asked their parents to come and meet me the next day. Next day, I was expecting the parents and students to come with the positive changes. To my surprise, they came with arguments. I was not in a position to accept all these. I cancelled their admissions, refunded their fees and even the cost of the uniform was reimbursed.

Next day, a news came in a very less known weekly of Kathmandu calling me a demon principal.

Reflection

Do popular team leadership models understand school team leadership, considered to such complexities?

Let me introduce basics of such conventionally understood models of team leadership.

Popular Team Leadership Models

Literature suggests that among various models for team leadership, many reflect the underlying notion that team exist in larger systematic contexts of people and organizational structure. Most often they popularize the input-process-output model, which grounds the model to a practical activity more likely to satisfy a task-oriented and mission-focused culture.

Despite growing recognition of the team leadership models in the recent years, the review of such models seems to be scant. Some traditional leadership theories are not sufficient for the study of leading teams as these theories focus on the relationship between the leader and an individual subordinate (Bass, 1985) and rarely consider the team. Furthermore, team leadership theory and research do take the properties of teams into account and explore how leaders influence team functioning. But, questions remain as to how leadership operates within teams (Kozlowski & Bell,

2003; Hackman & Walton, 1986; Marks, Rittman, & Zaccaro, 2001; Salas, Burke, & Stagl, 2004). In such a context, there are some other popular models to explain the team leadership theories.

Recent undertakings

Activity model of team leadership, to begin with, focuses on the human behavior that individuals are engaged in some activity and through this engagement, certain individuals are able to influence others. Developed by Printy (2008), this theory says that the inherent power of individual is in influencing people. According to this theory, one is able to study the activity and those engaged in it to understand how meaning is constructed, learning is undertaken, or leadership influence is practiced. This assumption demands that the everyday activity of the leaders and follower behavior are the areas to examine to see to it to examine the spontaneous flow of team leadership.

New science model of team leadership, on the other, postulates the importance of every individual and focuses on collectivity and synergy generation. The theory argues that traditional leadership models are ineffective in complex and dynamic social systems in this century (Wheatley, 2006). The hierarchical structures of modern organizations and contemporary models of leadership tend to reflect a mechanical Newtonian perspective. Wheatley (2006) further argues that the turbulence of global society and culture is forcing organizations to realize that the models and habits developed for a stable environment may not work in a dynamic world. This means that organizations and their members must continuously adapt with or co-evolve by interacting with the environment. Where the Newtonian perspective attempts to understand the system by isolating its parts, the new science takes a holistic perspective that attempts to understand the system by seeing the relationships within the networks.

Participative model of team leadership, which is too near to new science model of team leadership, postulate that people can perform as leaders if they are recognized at the time of decision-making. A participative leader seeks to involve the concerned members in the process of decision making and other people in the process. During the past 20 to 30 years, there has been a major shift towards participative decision-making (PDM) in schools (Bush & Heystek, 2003). These authors have called for greater participation in decision-making as a progressive way of making schools more democratic and more efficient.

This shows that the growth of team leadership model is in progressive line- growing from scientific cause-effect model to new science humanist model, inclined to participatory model. There is growing consensus that particular model for a context (the reductionist approach) can't be generalized to larger contexts. One team leadership model, relevant in one context, therefore, may be irrelevant in another context.

Nepali Indigenous team leadership model

Nepali indigenous team leadership model is largely influenced by Hindu and Buddhist philosophical orientations. It has also been culturally embedded in many ethnic communities in their own communal meanings. For example, the opening chapter of Bhagavad Gita presents the powerful imagery of the battlefield (Roka, 2011), where the armies from both side are working in team to face the opponents. Moreover, the hesitation of Arjuna at the time of complexity, and the counseling of Krishna to act at any cost have oriented Nepali indigenous culture in a way that leaders should embrace rather than avoid formidable challenges because facing challenges bring out the leaders' greatest strength. Great team leaders usually perform well in times of great conflict and adversity.

Eastern society, for the most part, seeks divine endowments among leaders. In this regard, non-violence, truth, freedom from anger, renunciation, tranquility, aversion to fault finding, compassion to living beings, freedom from covetousness, gentleness, modesty and steadiness (Radhakrishnan, 1980) are few indigenous leadership traits, which most of the eastern communities celebrates.

Nepali society has some uniquely formed team cultures, which have persistently shaped team leadership practices in today's organization. For example, the rural culture of 'Parma' is to share one another labor, whenever group work is needed. Likewise, the 'Guthi' system has still oriented the trust model of organizational team leadership model. 'Gaun Panchayat', the government structuring during monarchy, itself was largely based on team culture. Other recently growing team popularity (e.g., the rise of cooperatives) and community participation in development/ conservation activities (e.g., community forest program) have shaped Nepali team culture.

The discourse in the literatures of leadership especially the team leadership is being focused increasingly on investigating an acceptable theory and model for institutions of different natures for the societies of different countries. The discourse has become very important concern for the developing and the least developed countries like Nepal as they have experiences deficit on leadership models which is far from the theoretical relevance.

Meaning-making

Questioning popular models of team leadership begins from historical treatment of the conceptual turn from the Newtonian view of organizations to the complexity influenced views. Hills (2007) model, scientific model, and bureaucratic model, for example, is based on linearity and predictability of leadership activities in organizational settings. Today's schooling context, however, is not that much linear and predictable. To this reference, the irrelevance of popular team leadership models, particularly Hills model of team leadership in school context can be explained from the following conceptual components from Vedic doctrine rooted in eastern society:

- 1. School as complex social institution characterized by chaos
- 2. School team leader as karma yogi, engaged to action through chaos

School as complex social institution

Considering complexity in educational leadership and management demands considerably new model of school team leadership. It is an avenue worth exploring in educational leadership and management. This touches many aspects of team leadership and management, particularly the view of change that is facilitated in open, non-linear, far-from-stable environments (Falconer, 2007). Doing so, it emphasizes the importance of studying the unpredictability of the future, the sensitivity of the system to initial conditions that cannot operationalized, and which have a non-linear nature.

Here, complexity is best regarded as a metaphor (Murray, 2003), a metaphorical device (Burnes, 2005), a lens (Fitzgerald & van Eijnatten, 2002) or an analogy (Sundarasaradula et al., 2005), which questions black-and-white explanations of team leadership. Further, it looks for new possibilities within complexities, within chaos.

School team leader as Karma yogi

Leaders and managers face continuous and ubiquitous change in education, in which closer links with, and responsiveness to, the external environments of schools are constantly being required. Therefore, as Hill's model suggested, knowledge and decision making are not necessarily centrally located in a command and control centre (for example, the head teacher's or principal's office). Rather, they circulate throughout the system. Therefore, rendering communication and collaboration in school setting is vital. School leader as resilient team-player, though work through complexity and chaos, are expected not to get weakened by pain and pleasure.

School leadership and management are, at heart, deontological, valuative, humanistic and moral enterprises (Fullan, 2005). Under such circumstances, ethics and choices of school team leaders not only abound but are intertwined. Therefore, as Karma yogi, schools leaders are to rise above pain and pleasure, focusing on the leadership actions and responsibilities, not on potential rewards associated with the position.

Conclusion

In short, this paper suggests that school team leadership emerges through interactions, networking, connectivity and relationships, as these enhance operational effectiveness. School team-leadership from this perspective is, therefore, adaptive, participative and enabling (Schreiber & Carley, 2006). There is no linear cause-effect relation in leading school-team. Rather, organizational management involves continuously changing and interacting structures, yielding a more fluid interaction-based change. Under such circumstances, popular team leadership models (example, Hills model) are not necessarily relevant in describing complex nature of school leadership. It makes call for contextually relevant indigenous model. In Nepali context, Vedic orientation to Chaos (Vabasagar), and team leader (Karma Yogi) as resilient being engaged to action through chaos, may work effective.

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