



# Intercultural Leadership: Lessons from Mahatma Gandhi

Douglas R. Heath<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article will posit that in the twenty-first century, leadership can no longer be defined by traditional Western standards, and that leadership which can successfully cross cultures needs to be developed. First, the definitions of culture and leadership will be examined, as well as the complexities involved in expanding the concept of leadership to include intercultural leadership. Then characteristics of effective leadership as proposed by a number of academics in the fields of leadership and intercultural and cross-cultural studies will be considered, including the concept of *connective leadership* (Lipman-Blumen, 1996, 1998). An example of intercultural leadership, and how it is developed, will be analyzed in the person of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Finally, it will be proposed that all of us are capable of developing as leaders.

## Introduction

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a common theme concerning globalization has been leadership (Adler, 2002; Dorfman, 2004; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). It seems self-evident

that “the need for leadership and its development is universal” (Hoppe, 1998, p. 339) and that “the success of any organization depends on effective leadership” (Dorfman, 2004, p. 266). However, the discussion of leadership has usually been dominated by Western (often North American) academics, where individuality and competition are often emphasized. Increasingly, the dominance of traditional Western concepts of leadership is becoming problematic, especially when transplanted into non-Western societies (Dorfman, 2004). And yet, with the myriad problems facing humanity, such as climate change, rapid population growth, the extreme gap between the world’s rich and poor, terrorism, and ethnic and regional conflicts, the issue of leadership is perhaps more important than ever.

## Culture and Leadership

Although the precise meanings of *culture* and *leadership* are still somewhat contentious, they are critical for this discussion. Hoppe (1998) says that culture can be “seen as a set of shared values, beliefs, and preferred actions among the members of a society” (p. 339). Culture helps define the

---

<sup>1</sup> Bunkyo University Chigasaki, Japan

common assumptions that a society has about leadership and leaders. As for leadership, Dorfman (2004) states that “there is no consensually agreed upon definition of leadership. Most definitions of leadership include the core concept of *influence* and influence for the purpose of achieving something important [emphasis in the original]” (p. 270). He also asks, “If the phenomenon of leadership is universal, and found in all societies, to what extent is leadership culturally contingent?” (p. 266). His conclusion is that culture and leadership are “inexorably intertwined.”

The concept of leadership exists in all societies (Dorfman, 2004), but research has shown that “the meaning and the importance of leadership vary across cultures” (p. 271). Therefore, defining effective leadership becomes infinitely more complex when expanding it to intercultural leadership. Although certain broad aspects of leadership are considered universal, such as personality, experience, and charisma, the issue becomes complicated because the meaning of such aspects of leadership is interpreted differently across cultures. Therefore, even if one is an experienced and successful leader in one cultural context, there is no guarantee of being a successful leader in another. “The important point about culture is that it shapes the values, attitudes, and behaviors of a social group” (p. 278). Since “values, attitudes, and behaviors” are core to assumptions of what leadership is, it comes as no surprise that different cultures have different attitudes about leadership.

Trying to define leadership in an intercultural or cross-cultural context brings up numerous questions. For example, how do *individualist* cultures and *collectivist* cultures expect their

leaders to behave? Dorfman (2004) notes that in collectivist cultures, leaders are often expected to be “supportive and paternalistic,” where as in individualist cultures, leaders are often expected to be “achievement-oriented and participative” (p. 282). He also demonstrates how culture-based values shape expectations of what makes a good leader. For example, “American folk wisdom [sees a leader as being] independent and forceful, whereas the image of a leader in a more collectivistic society such as Japan includes attributes of fairness and harmony” (p. 281). Although different societies often have distinct, even contrasting definitions of leadership, in addition to differing expectations of their leaders, the universality of the importance of leadership in organizing and conducting society is undeniable.

### **Connective Leadership**

According to Lipman-Blumen (1998), “Without effective leadership, all organizations eventually founder” (p. 49). In fact, one could easily argue that without effective leadership, nearly all complex human endeavors eventually fail. Lipman-Blumen discusses the deficiencies of traditional Western concepts of leadership, and why new approaches to leadership must be considered in our era. The author states:

We are caught in the escalating tensions of a new historical period—the Connective Era. In this emerging epoch, nations, communities, and organizations of every size and shape are being squeezed into a tight, global jigsaw puzzle. Decisions that business and political leaders make in one part of this far-flung system now reverberate throughout the global community. (p. 49)

Lipman-Blumen (1998) offers the concept of *connective leadership* as a replacement for traditional Western forms of leadership based on “authoritarian, competitive, individualistic leadership styles” (p. 50). The idea of connective leadership offers a potential basis for intercultural leadership, leadership that can smoothly cross cultures and adapt to ever changing environments.

Based on connective leadership, Lipman-Blumen (1996) describes different forms of leadership in terms of the *Connective Leadership Model*. The purpose of the model is to help “us to analyze leadership and specific leaders in terms of their underlying behavior preferences, called *achieving styles* [emphasis in the original]” (p. 113). An achieving style can be described as how an individual prefers to go about accomplishing a task. Through the use of the model, we are able to analyze various leaders’ leadership strengths and weaknesses, as well as our own, and make suggestions for leadership development.

The Connective Leadership Model (Lipman-Blumen, 1996) is divided into three sets – direct, relational, and instrumental, with each set containing three achieving styles. The *direct set* expresses individualism, the *relational set* expresses interdependence, and the *instrumental set* balances the sometimes “contradictory forces. . . represented by the direct and relational sets” (p. 119). The direct set includes the *intrinsic* (excels), the *competitive* (outperforms), and the *power* (takes charge) achieving styles. The relational set includes the *collaborative* (joins forces), the *contributory* (helps), and the *vicarious* (mentors) achieving styles. Finally, the instrumental set includes the *personal* (persuades), *social* (networks), and *entrusting* (empowers) achieving styles. When

trying to accomplish tasks, all of us use our own unique combination of preferred achieving styles, preferences for which were developed mostly in our youth. However, “most people develop a rather narrow repertoire of achieving styles” (p. 114), whereas great leaders, like Gandhi, are able to use all nine achieving styles according to which one is appropriate for a given situation. The ability to use all achieving styles is the core to connective leadership.

The concept of connective leadership is also put forth by Preskill and Brookfield (2009), who are also highly critical of traditional Western concepts of leadership. They argue that “the images of leadership – indeed, the very words *leader* and *leadership* – have been culturally framed to equate effective leadership with authoritarian control imposed by those at the apex of a hierarchy [emphasis in the original]” (p. 2). Leaders are seen as being superior to and disconnected from their followers. “According to this view, leaders are highly directive people who relay commands to their subordinates, expecting them to be carried out with dispatch and efficiency” (p. 2). They propose a form of connective leadership based on “forming and sustaining relationships that lead to results in the common interest” (p. 4).

The issue of defining new ways of leadership in our era of globalization continues to be discussed by academics across many disciplines, such as business, communication, intercultural and cross-cultural studies, but one thing most academics will agree upon is that Mohandas K. Gandhi left us a remarkable example of leadership performed at its highest ideal. Using previously described concepts of leadership (Hoppe, 1998; Lipman-Blumen, 1998; Dorfman, 2004; Preskill and Brookfield, 2009), our

attention will now turn to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, referred to by millions around the world as the Mahatma, “the great-souled one.”

### **Mahatma Gandhi: Learning, Tolerance, & Curiosity**

When choosing Mohandas K. Gandhi, one of the greatest figures of the twentieth century, for this article, I was confronted by an overabundance of information. For my research, I watched a number of documentaries and movies, and read numerous articles. However, much of the following analysis is based on the book *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Gandhi, 1957). After all, I am convinced that nobody understood his motives or deepest inner feelings better than he did. He writes: “I am not writing the autobiography to please critics. Writing it is itself one of the experiments with truth” (p. 280). All of Gandhi’s actions were based on the desire to learn the truth and behave according to it, and from this he developed his immense skills as a leader. Of the many factors that enabled him to become a great leader, three seem to stand out: a lifetime commitment to *learning*, *developing tolerance*, and an abundance of *curiosity*.

Lipman-Blumen (1996) writes, “True, some people, like Gandhi, seem to have a talent, even a genius for leadership” (p. 115). Gandhi would have disagreed. He would have said that his leadership skills were not a product of genius, but of painstaking and conscientious years of personal development. The argument about the origins of leadership is an old one. When I was training to be an infantry officer in the U.S. army in the late ’80s and early ’90s, there was a debate as to whether leaders are born or made. Although this argument continues unabated, Gandhi appears to be an

example of a self-made leader. “Initially shy about speaking in public, Mohandas Gandhi laboriously taught himself to communicate his vision of an independent India through electrifying words and symbols” (pp. 115-116). Although he had intrinsic qualities like intelligence, energy, and immense curiosity that helped him develop as a leader, it was his persistence and effort that turned him into the great leader that he became.

Gandhi’s commitment to learning is recognizable in his devotion to discovering truth, and training himself (and others) to live by it. “Truth became my sole objective” (Gandhi, 1957, p. 34). This coincided with his lifelong quest for *self-purification*, which in turn was rooted in his strong ethical, moral, and spiritual convictions. In his autobiography, Gandhi (1957) regularly clarifies his faith in a divine power that he often refers to as “God” or as “Truth.” He states: “My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth” (p. 503), and concludes with, “God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart” (p. 504). In order to see God, one must first partake in self-purification. This devotion to learning, discovering truth, and self-purification gave Gandhi the internal strength necessary for the numerous social and political actions that he led, such as demanding better treatment for Indians living in British-ruled South Africa, protesting the treatment of untouchables in his native India, and finally leading millions of Indians in demanding self-rule for India from the British Empire. (Alexander, 1984; Gandhi, 1957)

All of these actions were aimed at *purifying* the world around him, but arguably, they were secondary in comparison to the purification that he spent a lifetime developing internally, and that is

why he scores especially high on Lipman-Blumen's (1996) intrinsic achieving style. According to the author, "intrinsic types are guided by a strict, internal standard of excellence against which they measure themselves" (p. 120), which describes Gandhi perfectly. Through his vast life experiences, and his deep commitment to his own "experiments with truth," Gandhi developed into a classic *connective leader* who could "interpret the relevant situational cues" in nearly any given situation, in order to successfully "utilize the broadest range of achieving styles" (p. 134).

Gandhi also exemplified an extraordinary level of toleration. Although he was a practicing Hindu, he explains that he had many experiences in his youth that "combined to inculcate in me a toleration for all faiths" (Gandhi, 1957, p. 33). Throughout his life, Gandhi embraced followers of all faiths, and studied about those faiths in depth. His high level of toleration enabled him to develop friendships with others of extremely different cultural, educational, economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The value of his tolerance and curiosity can be seen in the 1890s, where a young Gandhi, recently trained as an English barrister, became the de facto leader of Indian workers and immigrants demanding civil rights in British-ruled South Africa (Alexander, 1984).

The Indian community in South Africa, made up of "Muslim merchants and their Hindu and Parsi clerks from Bombay, semi-slave indentured labourers from Madras, and Natal-born Indian Christians," reflected the ethnic and religious diversity of India proper (Alexander, 1984, p. 7). Gandhi's immense skills as a connective leader, including his tolerance and curiosity, enabled him to unify this economically, ethnically, linguistically,

and religiously diversified group. Concerning Gandhi's leadership during this period, the Englishman and close friend of Gandhi, Horace Alexander, writes that "with his characteristic selfless devotion, inexhaustible energy, and equal regard for every sort of human being, in a surprisingly short time, [Gandhi] did in fact weld these groups into a single unit with a strong sense of common purpose" (p. 9).

### Learning leadership

Preskill and Brookfield (2009) also recognize Gandhi's immense leadership skills, especially in terms of passive resistance, of meeting "every act of violence with a peaceful response" (p. 129). In *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009), the authors propose *nine learning leadership skills* that foster leadership development. For our discussion, these skills are valuable for deeper considerations of leadership as well as highlighting Gandhi's leadership abilities. The nine learning leadership skills are: learning to be open to the contributions of others, learning critical reflection, learning to support the growth of others, learning collective leadership, learning to analyze experience, learning to question, learning democracy, learning to sustain hope in the face of struggle, and learning to create community. As one of the truly great leaders of the twentieth century, Gandhi practiced all nine learning leadership skills to an impressive degree of proficiency. For this analysis, Gandhi's *learning to analyze experience* will be considered.

Preskill and Brookfield (2009) examine a number of respected leaders, such as Nelson Mandela, Septima Clark, and Cesar Chavez, all of

whom the authors claim were highly proficient in the leadership skill called *learning to analyze experience* (p. 110). The difficulty involved in developing this skill occurs “when its practice leads us to challenge old assumptions and then to reconfigure accepted practices” (p. 16). Simply put, admitting one is wrong can be uncomfortable and difficult. This is not only an important leadership skill, but an important life survival skill. Much of Gandhi’s “experiments with truth” included enthusiastically learning from his own mistakes, and over time, fine-tuning his thoughts, actions, and behavior. Gandhi (1957) explains that one who is devoted to truth “must always hold himself open to correction, and whenever he discovers himself to be wrong must confess it at all costs and atone for it” (p. 350). In so doing, Gandhi gained the respect, trust, and admiration of friends and enemies alike (Hall, 1930) and, in the process, developed a high degree of confidence in himself and his ideas.

As previously noted, Gandhi’s immense *curiosity* was a crucial component of his commitment to learning and developing tolerance, and to his development into an extremely capable leader. Even in his childhood, Gandhi had an insatiable appetite for learning and trying new things. This allowed him to develop a deep understanding of himself, his culture, and the numerous differing others around him. Hoppe (1998) explains that “leadership development touches on the deepest layers of human existence – its values, beliefs, hopes, and fears” (p. 378). Without experiences outside of one’s own limited cultural environment, and critically analyzing those experiences, it is difficult to develop a deep understanding of the “values, beliefs, hopes, and fears” of others, which is so essential to effective

leadership. This is the core of learning leadership, and it is precisely what Gandhi did.

As a child in India, Gandhi was not remembered as having been exceptionally good in school (“Men of mark”, 1938), but he was always curious. For example, in high school he often debated with a friend over the propriety of eating meat (Gandhi, 1957). Gandhi and his family were strict vegetarians, but his friend said that eating meat would make Gandhi stronger and, furthermore, that it was the prevalence of the vegetarian diet in India that made Indians smaller and weaker than the “meat-eating” English (p. 21). At first, Gandhi was partly swayed by his friend’s argument. “It began to grow on me that meat-eating was good, that it would make me strong and daring, and that if the whole country took to meat-eating, the English could be overcome” (p. 21). After having consumed meat a couple of times, and becoming sick in the process, Gandhi returned to his vegetarian ways, convinced more than ever that eating meat was wrong. Not only was Gandhi willing and eager to try new things, but he quickly learned from those experiments and actively applied that new knowledge.

Hoppe (1998) asserts that “the challenge of cross-cultural leadership development calls for a deep understanding of both the similarities and the differences, and in the process, an openness to learning” (p. 378). Examples of Gandhi’s curiosity and openness to learning can also be found while he was studying law in England. “The young Hindu was anxious to take his place in the social world, so he began to take lessons in French, elocution, dancing and the violin” (“Men of mark”, 1938). He eventually concentrated mainly on his legal studies, but still found time to study other diverse subjects

like Latin, chemistry, and especially “dietetic studies” (Gandhi, 1957, p. 48).

Through his curiosity, tolerance, and desire to learn, Gandhi strove to build mutual understanding between people of his own culture and between people of differing cultures. For example, he never missed an opportunity to discuss religion, especially with experts of faiths other than his own. In the process, he developed deep and committed friendships with not only other Hindus, but believers of other faiths. Hoppe (1998) explains that “the term *cross-cultural* refers to comparisons among societies – in fact, among mainstreams of societies. However, this is not to deny the existence of multitudes of cultures *within* a society [emphasis in the original]” (p. 338). Not only did Gandhi build bridges of communication and understanding between India and the outside world, but also within India and its vast collection of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups.

Clearly, it is difficult to find a better example of a highly capable intercultural leader than Mohandas K. Gandhi. Obviously, there are reasons why the day after Gandhi was assassinated the *New York Times* was able to write the following: “Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Hindu reformer and nationalist leader, was looked upon as a saint by millions of his followers, who bestowed upon him the admiring appellation of ‘Mahatma,’ literally ‘the great-souled one’” (“Mohandas K. Gandhi:”, 1948).

### Cultural intelligence

Gandhi’s ability to accurately use multiple achieving styles (Lipman-Blumen, 1996) and learning leadership skills (Preskill and Brookfield, 2009) gives us a valuable example of highly effective connective leadership. Such ability is

similar to what Offerman and Phan (2002) describe as *cultural intelligence*, “the ability to successfully function in environments where individuals have experienced different [cultural] programming” (p. 188). Learning intercultural leadership includes developing “the ability to function effectively in a diverse context where the assumptions, values, and traditions of one’s upbringing are not uniformly shared with those with whom one needs to work” (p. 188). As for Gandhi, he seemed not only capable of functioning effectively across cultures, but to relish it. For him, it was an opportunity to purify himself and the world around him.

### Conclusion

The authors cited in this article would most likely agree that in our world, which is becoming globalized and interdependent at an exponential rate, everyone needs to be capable of being a competent leader and follower. Although it is unrealistic to expect the majority of us to develop the leadership skills of someone like Mohandas K. Gandhi, it is possible for each of us to develop and improve our own skills. According to Lipman-Blumen (1996), “leadership behavior *can* be changed and most people can learn to act in ways that will make them more effective . . . leaders [emphasis in the original]” (p. 115). However, such change requires a desire to learn and the courage to make mistakes. Offerman and Phan (2002) state, “we believe that culturally intelligent leadership can be developed. . . . What is required from the student is a willingness to learn and a willingness to make mistakes and correct them” (p. 208). Gandhi’s desire to learn, his tolerance, and his curiosity, as well as his courage to make mistakes and learn from them, are worthy examples for all



who would desire to develop and grow as leaders and as intercultural leaders.

## References

- Adler, N. J. (2002). *International dimensions of organizational behavior*. (4th ed.). Cincinnati, OH: South Western / Thomson Learning.
- Alexander, H. G. (1984). *Gandhi through Western eyes*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers.
- Dorfman, P. W. (2004). International and cross-cultural leadership research. In B.J. Punnet & O. Shenkar (Eds.), *Handbook for international management research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 265-355). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1957). *An autobiography: The story of my experiments with truth*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (reprinted, with new foreword, 1993)
- Hall, J. W. (1930, January 19). *Nom de guerre*, Upton Close. Gandhi: The Prophet Who Sways India. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/specials/india/300119gandhi-profile.html>
- Hoppe, M. H. (1998). Cross-cultural issues in leadership development. In C. D. McCauley, R. S. Moxley, & E. Van Velsor (Eds.), *The center for creative leadership: Handbook of leadership development* (pp. 336-378). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lipman-Blumen, J. (1996). *The connective edge: Leading in an interdependent world* (pp.112-139). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lipman-Blumen, J. (1998). Connective leadership: What business needs to learn from academe. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 30(1), 49-53.
- Men of mark in the world today (1938, September 3). *Auckland Star*. Retrieved from <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=AS19380903.1.52&e=-----10-AS-1---0Mohandas+Gandhi-->
- Mohandas K. Gandhi: The Indian leader at home and abroad. (1948, January 31). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/specials/india/480131obit-gandhi.html>
- Offerman, L. R., & Phan L. U. (2002). Culturally intelligent leadership for a diverse world. In R. E. Riggio, S. E. Murphy, & F. J. Pirozzolo (Eds.), *Multiple intelligences and leadership* (pp. 187-214). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Preskill, S., & Brookfield, S. D. (2009). *Learning as a way of leading: Lessons from the struggle for social justice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.