

The Leadership Traits of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: A Thematic Literature Review

Sarthak Srivastava

Chief, Sustainable Livelihood Division, Royal Society for Protection of Nature, Thimphu, Bhutan

Abstract: *This study attempts to analyze the characteristics, circumstances, or behavior that made Gandhi a leader. Further, the study examined Gandhi's approach to leadership principles, sources of power and influences routinely used by Gandhi for his effective leadership, and Gandhi's leadership style for actions and interactions with followers. Data on such variables are collected by desk reviewing past case studies, journal articles, reports, and book on Gandhi by different researchers, authors, and writers to establish the evidences. The study concludes that Gandhi was a national leader, a freedom fighter, a visionary, and a socialist reformer. His achievement in his life was a miracle and he lived in the hearts of millions of Indians and was respected by people around the world. Gandhi's naturally charismatic leadership inspires millions even after 76 years after his death, and he was one leader who possesses all the 11Cs¹, such a leader is rare in this universe.*

Keywords: Gandhi's leadership principle and style, non - violence, and freedom of India

Characteristics, circumstances, or behavior that made Gandhi a leader

Great Indian leader Gandhi was chosen for this case study because of his unique philosophy of non - violence. Gandhi is regarded as 'Bapu'² by Indian and was officially honored in India as the 'father of the nation' due to his freedom movement, which gained momentum, and ultimately led to India's independence in 1947. Gandhi has been a role model and source of inspiration not only to common people like me but to 'successful political movement leaders of the 20th century from Martin Luther King to Lech Walesa, Cesar Chavez, and Nelson Mandela' (Acharya, 2019).

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, popularly knowns as Mahatma³ Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869 in Porbandar⁴, India. He was a non - violence freedom fighter and leader of the people of India. He was not only a political and ethical leader but also a religious leader. He is the founding father of the Indian nation, as he aided his nation to attain independence from British rule. The guiding principles of Gandhi were truth, non - violence, and individual and political self - policing.

'Gandhi was a man of good character' (Sharma, 2016), and he always believed in truth, honesty and non - violence, kept himself away from worldly desires, and walked a path of high morals. Gandhi was an icon of the world yet he lived a life of an ascetic. He is a man with very wise wisdom who knows well what is right and wrong and is very responsible for his actions. While Gandhi stood up for what he though was right and did not let anyone's opinions get in his way; he respected others and never gave up without a fight. He had a good judgement for India and how everyone should have independence, and he inspired much of India to fight for their

independence with non - violence and advised many boycotts. Gandhi did not give up on India's independence, and he always knew what was happening at all times and organized and lead many peaceful protests until the British government liberated India's independence in 1947.

Although Gandhi was born to a privileged Bania⁵ caste family, as a young boy he was a mediocre student, humble, honest, and extremely shy; and even described running home from school so that he would not have talk to anybody. He was never bullied when in India and while studying Law in England until he first encountered racism at Durban, the port of Natal in South Africa. The frequent mistreatment prompted Gandhi to begin campaigning for the civil rights of Indians in South Africa, and he eventually developed his concept of 'Satyagraha'⁶ and remained in South Africa fighting for human rights until 1914. With his return to India, Gandhi became a transformative figure and led the non - violence social movements for India's independence.

Gandhi's approach to leadership through two major leadership principles

Gandhi begin an INFJ⁷ Personality Type as per MBTI⁸, led Indians to independence with non - violence march; 'Gandhi was considered a born leader, which is consistent with the trait approach that state leaders are born with certain personality traits that make them great people (Northouse, 2016). Gandhi developed and refined the skills that he was born with, which made him an effective leader, and he led by example both in his private and public life.

Gandhi is considered one of the greatest leaders of 20th century, his great leadership can be attributed to different leadership approaches and theories. However, Gandhi

¹ Character, charisma, conscience, conviction, courage, communication, compassion, commitment, consistency, consideration & contribution.

² Father in Hindi dialect.

³ Great soul of India.

⁴ City in western Gujarat State in India.

⁵ Caste consisting of money lenders or merchants, dealers in grains or spices found chiefly in northern and western India.

⁶ Firmness in truth or non-violence resistance.

⁷ Introverted, intuitive, feeling and judging.

⁸ Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator.

through his leadership, throughout his life displayed more as a Transformational Leader and Servant Leader.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership increases follower's motivation and performance (Bass, 1996). The leader transforms and motivates followers by making them more aware of the importance of task outcomes, including them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization or team, and activating their higher order needs (Yukl, 2010).

Gandhi after returning to India from South Africa after 21 years, has become a transformative figure to the people of India. He demonstrated transformational leadership by influencing his followers with his non-violence protest and he instilled trust, loyalty, admiration, and respect amongst his followers. Gandhi also transformed his followers in a literal sense – changing their minds and hearts, enlarging his vision, and clarifying his purpose to make behavior congruent with his beliefs, principles, and values. In addition, Gandhi exhibited the four types of transformational leadership behavior of Bass (1966) – idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and inspirational motivation.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is primarily about helping people and fostering a relationship of trust and cooperation (Greenleaf, 1977). The servant leader is a servant first and must listen to followers; learn about their needs and aspirations, stand for what is good and right, oppose social injustice and inequality must respect and appreciate the weak and marginal members of the society, and also empower followers instead of using power to dominate them.

Gandhi expressed his concerns about the bill that was then before the House of a Legislature that sought to deprive Indians of their franchise during a farewell dinner on his return to India after the conclusion of the case for which he had gone to South Africa. Gandhi, before he knew it, had been chosen by the people to stay on and fight for their rights. Gandhi as a servant leader preached non-violence and dedicated his whole life to India's independence (Spears, 2010), and to the achievement of a better for the downtrodden. He empowered the Indian masses to march to the sea to make salt, and in doing so they demonstrated their capacity for self-governance and impressed upon history a very powerful persona. Gandhi served as an example and promoter by providing vision and inspiring hope and demonstrated the quintessential servant leadership behavior of Greenleaf (1977) – integrity, altruism, humility, empathy and healing, fairness and justice.

Source of power and influences routinely used by Gandhi for his effective leadership

Gandhi's *possession of power was more of a referent* kind according to the case study from 'movie Gandhi'⁹. He never saw himself as a powerful leader whereby he was convinced that people would follow his beliefs if they had a reason to do

so. Gandhi considered himself an eye-opener and thus would never force his opinion upon people, but waited until they were ready to see it themselves (Yukl, 2010). He never proclaimed himself a leader and claimed followers though millions followed him. Gandhi was a master strategist, yet he avoided the office.

Instrumental in the independence movement of India, Gandhi's influence extended beyond the borders of India to the rest of the world. Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence and use of non-violence to free India from the British inspired millions. Many assumed that Gandhi being a lawyer must have acquired deceitful and cunning tactics, but he never resorted to lying and prided himself in truthfulness, forgiveness, equality, faith, peace, and *used expert power*, which influenced millions. Gandhi was a man with extraordinary capacity who believed in action with ideas stemming from his rock-solid value system. He applied his values of 4Es¹⁰ to make his life great and motivate for positive changes in those who follow. Gandhi created the right impact with his activities and understood the human psyche, which helped him with his public relations and inspired contemporary time leaders in evolving their strategies and vision.

Gandhi has been a source of inspiration and role model for many generations and has earned high respect and admiration through his unconventional means to fight injustice: truth, non-violence, non-cooperation, and peaceful resistance. He led from the front to attain India's independence and influenced millions of followers to fight for the moral and greater good.

Gandhi was consistently inspired and influenced by giving speeches in public, persuading his followers to become an independent nation, and using positive feedback after something good happened. Gandhi weaved and sewed his own clothes and inspired others to stop using western clothes and used clothes made in India. He received a massive response from the people wherein thousands of them burnt their clothes. Gandhi stopped the civil war by fasting and empowered the Indian masses for Dandi - March¹¹, which helped in accomplishing India's independence from the British.

Gandhi once said 'I must follow the people, for I am their leader' (Nalamalapu, 2004). Likewise, Gandhi was a leader that brought one of the world's most powerful nations to its knees by using *referent and expert powers* as his method for change. He maintained consistency throughout his life by sticking to non-violence and peace, which helped in achieving the great thing – India's independence in 1947.

Gandhi's leadership style for actions and interactions with followers

Gandhi's leadership styles were extremely complex, but he was confident at all times. Additionally, Gandhi was a complex man, believing in simple things and leading a simple life, but strongly believed in and practiced the values of truth,

Ahmedabad to the village of Dandi in the state's coastal area to protest against the steep tax the British levied on salt.

⁹ Movie based on the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

¹⁰ Envision, enable, empower and energize.

¹¹ 24-day non-violent march led by Mahatma Gandhi on March 12, 1930, to embark a historic Salt March from Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat's

non - violence, unity, equality, justice and honesty. He was an outstanding charismatic leader in India who led a revolution to end British colonialism. However, 'Gandhi's leadership style is more centered on the ethical, transformative, servant, spiritual, and soft leadership theories' (Bischoff Anna Lena, 2010).

Gandhi as an ethical leader molded ethical behavior in the Indian community by not violating the basic laws and telling the truth to the followers, which enabled him to motivate and influence Indians to recognize their rights and the need for revolution. Gandhi, on the other hand, as a servant leader was ready to suffer for what he believed in and he was not influenced by titles or wealth and money but lived in humility, which can be attested by the simple loom - weaved clothes he wore. He did not discriminate against any caste in society and he worked with low castes who were discriminated against by fellow Indians. Gandhi was largely involved in humanitarian work; indeed, most of his money obtained from his work as a lawyer was used in assisting needy people in the society (Polelle, 2007).

Gandhi as a transformational leader single - handedly raised the motivation and morality of his followers during the Indian revolution (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2010). He maintained humility at all times, remain committed, kept his promises, and sought to satisfy the needs of his followers first, which enable him to motivate and rally the people of India to revolt against the British colonialist. And Gandhi as a spiritual leader believed and advocated for peaceful coexistence of Hindus and Muslims and all levels of castes in the community. Further, he believed that his enemies should be treated honorably irrespective of their behaviors, which enhanced a unified nation.

Gandhi with more concern for his people was a people/relationship - oriented leader who substantiated 11Cs was a great soft leader (Rao M. S., 2012). He was a great example of a character who practiced while he preached and connected with the common people with his charisma. Gandhi was always clear with his conscience and he was symbol of sacrifice and convection to his followers. He was a great example of a courageous leader with his values, and was a great communicator who never compromised his principle. Gandhi was a compassionate leader who empathized with the people of all religions and respected them, and committed to truth, non - violence and peace. He maintained consistency throughout his life by sticking to non - violence and peace, and was an empathetic leader who always cared for and considered others. Gandhi enlightened the world with the knowledge that all religions share common beliefs of truth and non - violence is his major contribution to mankind where he became their mentor and a role model.

Overall lessons from Gandhi's leadership

Gandhi was a national leader, a freedom fighter, a visionary and a socialist reformer. His achievement in his life was a miracle and he lived in the hearts of millions of Indians and was respected by people around the world. Gandhi influenced the world through his soft leadership including five Nobel Laureates – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi and Barack Obama (Rao, 2012).

Gandhi taught the world countless lessons about life, leadership and much more, following are the inspiring life - changing lessons of Gandhi's leadership from this case study:

- *Mission:* As a leader, Gandhi's biggest mission was serving others (Barnabas & Clifford, 2012), and this has able him to attract millions of followers who trusted and believed in him. Having your mission in first stage will make you a good leader with true followers.
- *Persistence:* Gandhi as a leader was insulted, jailed and beaten many times, but he defeated the world's mightiest army primarily due to his extraordinary persistence and articulation of his vision. If one wishes to become a good leader, determination and persistence hold the key to success.
- *Honesty:* Gandhi being a true leader was always honest with actions and thoughts, and believed true success lies in honesty. Likewise, being honest with his or her action is the Golden Rule for the achievement of any leader.
- *Non - violence:* Gandhi's doctrine of non - violence pledge and thoughts was able to mobilize millions of Indians who followed him, which lead to Indian's independence. True leaders must always adopt non - violence to achieve their goals.
- *Leadership by example:* Gandhi practiced what he preached by dressing like the poorest Indian and having the barest of minimum personal passions though he was an icon of the world. As a leader, it is very important that one must lead by example to the most possible extent.
- *Thought and action:* Gandhi believed that both thoughts and actions have to be in harmony whereby he controlled emotions and sentiments and tolerated anger and negative thoughts during his life. To become a great leader, any leader will have to purify thoughts, control emotions and sentiments, and tolerate anger and negative thoughts.
- *Strategize and influence:* As a leader, Gandhi was wonderful strategist and showman with remarkable public relationship networks and the right relationship with the press. As a leader in the modern - day, one can follow all these qualities of Gandhi and strategize accordingly to materialize one's vision.

Gandhi's naturally charismatic leadership inspires millions even after 76 years after his death, and I felt it is highly unlikely to witness another Gandhi in our lifetime, who dedicated his life to promoting truth and believed truth and fasting as his strongest strength and political weapon to the world. The great Gandhi was one leader who possess all the 11Cs and such a leader is rare, and few men have ever had as much of an effort in our world as Gandhi, which needs more research.

References

- [1] Acharya, N. (2019). Mahatma Gandhi at 150: Lessons On Leadership. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nishacharya/2019/10/02/mahatma-gandhi-at-150-lessons-on-leadership/?sh=77dbc105d7c1>.
- [2] Barnabas, A., & Clifford, P. S. (2012). Mahatma Gandhi - An Indian Model of Servant Leadership. *International Journal of Leadership Studies, Vol.7 Iss.2, 2012, ISSN 1554 - 3145, C 2012 School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship, Regent University, pp.133 - 150.*

- [3] Bass, B. M. (1996). A New Paradigm of Leadership: An Inquiry into Transformational Leadership. *U. S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Science*, pp.1 - 225.
- [4] Bischoff Anna Lena. (2010). *Business economics - Business Management, Corporate Governance (ISBN 9783640755066)*. Munich: GRIN Publishing.
- [5] Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, N. J: Paulist Press.
- [6] Nalamalapu, A. (2004). *Leaders Can Learn Much from Gandhi*. Center for Creative Leadership.
- [7] Northouse, P. G. (2016). Leadership: Theory and Practice. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, pp.91 - 94.
- [8] Polelle, M. R. (2007). *Leadership: Fifty Great Leaders and the Worlds They Made (ISBN - 10: 0313348146/ISBN - 13: 978 - 0313348143, pp.160 pages)*. Westport, CT: ABC - CLIO: Greenwood.
- [9] Rao, M. S. (2012). Soft Leadership: Make others feel more important, ISSN: 1087 - 8149. *Leader to Leader, SPRING 2012, Hesselbein & Company*.
- [10] Sharma., A. (2016). Top 10 Qualities of Mahatma Gandhi and how to incorporate them in your life. <https://www.linkedin.com/plus/top-10-qualities-mahat-gandhi-how-incorporate-them-your-alok-sharma>.
- [11] Shriberg, Arthur & Shriberg, David. (2010). *Practicing Leadership Principles and Applications 4th Edition (ASIN: 047008698X/ISBN - 10: 047008698x/ISBN - 13: 978 - 0470086988, pp.320 pages)*. Wiley.
- [12] Spears, L. C. (2010). Character and Servent Leadership: Ten Characteristics of Effective, Caring Leaders. *Journal of Virtues & Leadership, Vol.1 Iss.1, C 2010 School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship, Regent University*, pp.25 - 30.
- [13] Yukl, G. A. (2010). *Leadership in Organizations (7th ed. ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, N. J: Prentice Hall.