

# Lessons from Mahatma Gandhi for Today's School Principals: An Instructional Model

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents Mahatma Gandhi's leadership styles, ethical principles, and practices that school principals and those aspiring to become school administrators should learn and apply in their schools. The model intends to reinforce the principals' understanding the value of applying some of Gandhi's leadership styles in Kenyan schools. This theoretical research was based on the existing literature on Gandhi's leadership in India and principals' leadership including their principles and practices in Kenya. The study found that good leadership in this technologically changing world needs a principal who is innovative, supportive, knowledgeable, people-oriented and skilled in matters related to curriculum implementation. It was further found that good principals initiate, empower, and create good relationships with faculty and other school community members in order to transform their schools.

**Key words:** Mahatma Gandhi, educational leadership, principals, instructional model

## INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi lived a simple lifestyle and yet was recognized as one of the greatest leaders in the twentieth century. He opened a new dimension of thinking about leadership styles and their impact on institutions, people and other resources. He psychologically, mentally, physically and economically transformed India and Indian people. His leadership inspired Indians to be creative and development conscious that have made them become self-reliant.

The purpose of this article is to examine the extent to which school principals in Kenya can transform their schools if they apply Gandhi's leadership styles and principles in their schools. The model is intended to increase the understanding of the importance of isolated leadership styles in school functions including school's physical development and academic performance. Famous world leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, worn impressive praises for their good leadership because they had included some of the Gandhi's leadership styles and principles when dealing with their followers. They inspired their followers to uphold on principles of trust, love and care for others. If political leaders who applied Gandhi's leadership styles, principles and practices succeeded, then school principals may also be successful in their work when they learn and apply Gandhi's leadership styles and principles.

## **MAHATMA GANDHI'S LEADERSHIP STYLE**

Although Gandhi applied his leadership style accord to the prevailing situations, servant leadership was significant among other styles. He literary served his followers with tea (Nair, 1994) causing his followers ask among themselves why he was serving them and yet they were supposed to serve him. To effectively serve the followers, the leader clearly understands the reasons why he or she should serve them and other needs that need the leader's support. A leader acts as a researcher who collects data to support the research questions. The leader in the same way collects resources that are likely to meet the diversified needs of the followers. According to Greenleaf (1982), the purpose of a leader serving his or her followers or workers is to be closely visible and to develop good/follower relationships that encourage and inspire them to be committed to their duties in order to achieve the set goals or objectives. When a leader is closer to the followers, he or she learns their strength and weaknesses. Nair (1994) said that when a leader is within the limits of the followers, he or she gets an opportunity to communicate to them his mission for the future and gets a true picture of their feelings.

Other than applying servant leadership style to serve people or followers, Gandhi improved the lives of Indians by prioritizing the needs to be attended to though the application of various leadership styles that included transformation, transaction, leader/people oriented, and management by wandering about (MBWA). Gandhi may not have known that he was using leadership styles that would exemplify him as a great leader whose leadership yielded and still produces impressive results when political or leaders of any organization carefully apply them. Since schools are organizations, principals should identify and learn how each of those leadership styles is applied and the expected results.

## **LEADERSHIP STYLE AND THE ROLE OF TODAY'S PRINCIPALS**

Principals' roles have become complex and demanding. They have become the overall overseers of their schools while pursuing lifelong learning in order to grasp the current leadership theories that would help them change the working climate in their schools. Their lifelong learning would also equip and acquaint them with knowledge and skills that are needed to motivate faculty for effective implementation of curriculum. Depending on the prevailing situations in their schools, they have been seen as agents of change as they apply various leadership styles. Matthews and Crow (2003) noted that principals are expected to focus on teaching and learning, and to facilitate the learning community in their schools, while at the same time pursuing further programs of studies in order to acquire more knowledge and skills. Matthews and Crow categorized principals as partners in collaborative inquiry around teaching and learning as they supervise teachers and staff. Leading and supervising teachers who are knowledgeable and skilled in their areas needs a principal who is able to translate the researched information into teaching objectives. Stolp and Smith (1994) pointed out that a leader, as a designer, should continue learning and trying new strategies that make emerging phenomenon possible. Such a leader in my view, should foster staff development and conduct workshops or seminars in his or her area of specialization. It is during these workshops or seminars that principals communicate or model important values including love, truth, and honesty to their faculty, non-faculty members and students.

Mitchell and Cunningham (1990) regarded principals as keys to schools' improvement; they are expected to meet the challenges that face their schools. They are expected to make schedules, communicate with parents, inspire personnel, observe classes, monitor and

supervise the implementation of curriculum, and also articulate the instructional goals. As professionals, principals are expected to be conversant with both the psychology of learning and administrative skills in order to effectively monitor and supervise teachers' implementation of curriculum. These aspects relate to Gandhi as a good communicator whose commitment was to empower and improve the conditions and the standards of every Indian.

A broad knowledge base about the system and the school community will assist the principal in his or her supervision by-walking-around as Kouzes and Posner (1991) call such supervision as Management by Wandering About (MBWA). This type of supervision enhances visibility and accessibility to employees as well as developing good relationships between workers and management. Although MBWA creates good relationships, it leaves a vacuum for other people assume that the principal wanders around because some teachers do not teach. Nair (1994) explains that Gandhi spent a year travelling around India and Burma where he learned that Indians had lost their self-esteem which may have been caused by lack of direction and communication. People or workers lose self-esteem when they fail to succeed in their plans or fail to fulfill their needs. Gandhi might have been informed of what might have been happening in India and Burma that made people to lose self-esteem. His personal appearance in those areas made people feel there was somebody who was listening and ready to take care of their problems.

### **PRINCIPALS AS COMMUNICATORS OF VISION**

Some of the most important aspects of leadership are listening and communication. Effective principals listen and communicate their views and workable visions to their faculty members, non-teaching staff, students, and outside world. Nair (1994) applauded Gandhi's leadership style as one that sought to understand the needs of the people he served. Nair (1994) advised leaders to get personally involved by speaking and listening to the people, and also by observing and sharing their experiences.

Gandhi's leadership emanated from the people themselves. He had first to understand the psychology of his people. His interactions with the Indian people became a milestone in the change of his own lifestyle in order to be closer to them. He changed from Western to Indian dress and then to a loin cloth (Nair, 1994). Indians had their way of dressing even before Gandhi became their leader. They had their own attire although western way of dressing had permeated in some Indian tribes. Gandhi, who had negative attitude toward importation of western cloths to India, organized the boycott of those cloths manufactured in Europe. He advised his people to join him in spinning Indian loins. Although Gandhi's inspiration to develop and improve Indian cloth factory was seen as a move toward industrialization, it may not be used by school principals to change the images of schools.

Effective principals have open-door leadership that welcomes anyone with complaints or ideas that would help them change their schools' images and performance. Most school communities and parents are concerned with their children's performance on standardized tests and want their schools to be effectively managed. These needs can be met when the principal and his or her faculty members have an established vision. A vision is the deepest expression of what an organization wants to achieve. It is a declaration of a desired future, which creates the conditions for having an aligned team and is also seen as an expression of hope for a bright future. An effective principal encourages and supports his or her faculty to participate in the development of their school, academically, physically, and morally. When teachers feel they are part of the school, they become committed to curriculum implementation that brings about the required academic standards. Principals create good

relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching, and the more they communicate goals and expectations about quality teaching and learning for each student, the more effective they are likely to lead their schools towards improved students' performance (Hughes, 1994; Kiwi Leadership for Principals, 2008).

Gandhi developed a vision that led to the attainment of India's independence in 1947. His vision was "a free, united India." A free, united India could not be attained without people risking their lives. He prepared his people to be ready for whatever consequences would be inflicted on them by the British government which was the colonial power in India at that time. He inspired them to be courageous and to refuse to submit to unjust laws, to refuse to retreat, and not to retaliate when subjected to violence by law-enforcement personnel (Nair, 1994). Every school in Kenya, developed a vision, mission, and motto, and installed them at the gate for every person to read the future expectations of the school. If the creation of these symbols of great expectations came as a result of the Kenyan Ministry of Education's policy, the outcome has not been significantly realized. The physical appearance and academic performance remained as they were before the establishment of vision, mission, and motto. Nobody has followed to investigate why some schools have not been improved according to what their visions and missions stipulate. The cause may be the principals' leadership styles that are not focused on improvement.

Hughes (1994) stated that creating a vision of greatness helps an organization define what it has to offer that would make a difference. A vision helps to build an organization that expresses values, beliefs, commitment, and creates good relationships between the leader and employees. A vision or an image directs the principal and school community where the school is heading and the kind of school that the community desires to have in the future. The principal who is a practitioner in the twenty-first century, supports the faculty and the school community in achieving the stated goals. Stolp and Smith (1994) observed that the role of a principal is to facilitate reforms, at the same time reflecting on how those changes affect staff and students. The developed vision in any organization is maintained when there is a philosophy that focuses on the future. Each school in Kenya developed a philosophy which may lead it to higher achievement. The question is: Who develops a school's philosophy? The development of a philosophy should be collaborative venture where the principal, faculty members, some community members, and even some students meet and develop an acceptable philosophy.

Gandhi's philosophy of charkha simplified Indian life and focused on traditional activities rather than western development (Nair, 1994). Gandhi's commitment was to improve the lives of Indians and to instill courage, while at the same time, discouraging them from retaliating to British violence. At times, principals develop contradicting philosophies, visions, and missions that cause friction in their schools. Such contradictions occur when a principal assumes the responsibility of developing guiding factors, including school rules. The purpose of developing a philosophy, vision, and mission in my view is to cause change, and also to direct the achievement of that change. Stolp and Smith (1995) observed that a principal alone may not cause change in his or her school, because cultural transformation is a collaborative activity. As a transformational leader (Burns, 1987; Tichy and De Vanna, 1990), the principal must engage others, both inside and outside the school, if he or she is to effect any meaningful changes in school culture that would encourage faculty and staff to be committed to producing good results. Goldring and Rallis (1993) postulated that leaders who often take risks are goal oriented and are likely to stress accomplishment mastery and high achievement.

## **PRINCIPALS AS COLLABORATORS**

Attaining recognition of high achievement comes with teamwork. Hughes (1994) stated that a key leadership function is helping faculty, staff, students, and community realize that the school belongs to them, and that it is their school, and what happens in that school is their responsibility. A good principal listens and accommodates faculty and non-teaching staff constructive ideas which may be used to solve a problem, improve the existing school facilities or raise school's academic standards. Some principals at times, use power-based approach to reinforce their decisions to their employees. School administrators should learn from Gandhi's leadership that effective principals use their authority and power to persuade and influence their students, faculty members and other stakeholders to realize that they are all accountable for the achievement of the stated school objectives or the goals they developed. Every participant in an organization or institution of learning has the potential of performing well if there is encouragement from the leader. Hughes (1994) observed that a principal who is task or achievement-oriented sets goals that are challenging yet attainable, and encourages goal attainment by expressing confidence in subordinates' abilities to reach those goals individually or collaboratively.

Fischer (1983) indicated that Gandhi became a revolutionist and a collaborationist as he returned to India in 1915. He craved for his country a cultural regeneration and spiritual renaissance that could rejuvenate Indian people to become revolutionary in order to drive the British regime out of India. Twenty first-century principals should be seen as revolutionists as they transform various images of their schools including academic performance, physical facilities, changing attitudes from negative to positive toward teaching, learning, and serving processes.

## **PRINCIPALS AS ROLE MODELS**

Gandhi exhibited lifelong learning. He read many books concerning philosophy, law, religion, and social psychology. He combined reading and visiting Indian villages in order to observe the conditions under which his people were living. According to Nair (1994), Gandhi developed an educational program that would be used in maintaining good sanitation and public health. He assisted the villagers to be innovative by developing village industries that dealt with the spinning of cloth. To demonstrate what he wanted his people to do, he concentrated on spinning and weaving, at the same time encouraging the rest of India to support the cause of the villagers by wearing only hand woven handspun cloth. To show solidarity with villagers, he spun daily and wore only hand woven handspun cloth. His role model of commitment permeated deeply into Indian society and shaped their values and beliefs. They were being prepared to become self-reliant after independence.

Marsh's findings as edited by Fullan (2000) said that the role of the school principal is to develop a strong culture at the school that includes a safe and orderly work environment, and that they should involve their students in order to improve teaching and learning. Marsh (as cited in Fullan, 2000) explained that principals should develop a strong staff collaboration and cohesive relationship among their staff members and student body. When cohesive relationship exists and exhibited by employees in an organization in my view, creates a feeling of oneness, harmony, and ownership. These aspects create good working environment that encourages the attainment of the organizational goals.

Gandhi was a mediator who worked for unity in his people. Spear (1989) stated that Gandhi was a hyphen connecting the middle classes and the upper class people. The foundation of his influence was based on truth. Truth and openness are important factors in leadership. School principals should be open minded and speak the truth to their school communities in order to avoid conflicts. According to (Roe & Drake, 1980) principals should have the ability to serve as coordinators, mediators, and arbitrators in their schools. Gandhi rarely discriminated against people because of their ethnic groups, socioeconomic or political status. He used humanity as a weapon to unite people of all classes.

A school principal should be seen as a symbol of unity in his or her school in order to develop the school and improve the school academic performance. He or she is seen as an engineer and the pilot of the school. Working as a pilot and as an engineer, the principal should initiate, organize the development and performance processes in the school. The principal is the manager, an administrator and the supervisor of all the school functions despite delegation of duties to faculty and non-teaching staff. He or she should ensure that physical facilities and other resources are available and appropriate for effective teaching and learning that are based on commitment and love for work.

Gandhi's satyagrah policy of non-violence was based on love, truth, trust, commitment, and loyalty. This was maintained during the struggle for independence because of his good leadership that instilled and encouraged patience and persistence in Indian people. Bennis (1989) indicated that leaders are persistent and that failure is viewed as an opportunity to learn. Not all leaders accept failure as an opportunity to learn and change from negative to positive. However, many leaders, including some principals, realize their mistakes and recover from them. Gandhi had that quality of persistence. He continued wearing handspun clothes in order to demonstrate that handspun cloths were as good as imported cloths. He boycotted foreign cloths and influenced his people to follow his style of wearing. He was a role model that changed the Indian cultural attire up to this century. Principals can change the dress culture of schools or communities if they exhibit neatness in their dress. Lane and Walberg (1987) stated that neatness is an aspect which schools are to maintain, and that teachers are pressured to conform to a defined norm of personal appearance and institutional image. Mitchell and Cunningham (1990) explained that if schools operate under the norms of a strong professional culture, with teachers and principals operating in an interdependent but connected relationship, a re-conceptualized leadership is to be applied in schools. Principals lead by working cooperatively with teachers and other stakeholders to build a safe and innovative culture. Communities regard school principals as engineers that keep the schools' machinery working through symbolic facilitation and political strategies. Cunningham and Gresso (1993) wrote that culture building requires that school leaders give attention to the informal, subtle, and symbolic aspects of school life which shape the beliefs and actions of each employee within the system. The task of leadership, according to Cunningham and Gresso, is to create and support a culture that fosters an attitude of effectiveness in everything that is done within the school. Creating and maintaining such a culture involves every member of the school community. Kiwi Leadership for Principals (2008) said that principals, who focus the school culture on enhancing learning and teaching, create a culture in which teamwork is expected and valued, and in which teachers are empowered to take on appropriate leadership roles. Principals initiate teamwork especially curriculum implementation of complex topics that need different specialties in order to achieve the stated objectives.



## DISCUSSION

Successful leaders are students of other leaders or the people they lead. Gandhi displayed different styles of leadership and executed personal principles that school principals should learn and apply in schools. One major aspect that Gandhi excelled in social life was the changing of morals and instilling spiritual beliefs in people. He changed people's habitual behaviors and energized the feeling of self-esteem and self-reliance. This is the first lesson that principals should learn from Gandhi's leadership that it is not only changing the outlook of their institutions, but also changing the behaviors that focus on maintaining good discipline in teachers, students, and non-teaching staff. Discipline and academic performance relate to each other. Schools that achieve high performance in Kenya National Examination ensure that high standard of discipline is maintained.

The second lesson that school principals should learn from Gandhi is respect. Discipline in a school is realized and felt when everyone including principal and parents show and exercise maximum respect to each other. Poor discipline in schools is strengthened when stakeholders do not play their roles of modeling including guiding and counseling. The third lesson which principals should learn from Gandhi is trust. Trust is an important component of good relationship that flourishes when individuals respect and trust each other. In a school where these two principles are practiced, there is a pleasant working environment that act as a motivator which attracts experts in different areas to want to join the institution. Principals who are development conscious seek and retain teachers, students, and non-teaching staff who demonstrate high respect before others.

The forth lesson that principals should learn from Gandhi is truth. Corporation and collaboration in any organization exist when telling the truth becomes everyone's obligation. Schools that observe truth and respect as a policy may not have conflict problems. When members of an organization trust each other and tell the truth all times, they create harmony and conducive working environment. The fifth lesson that principals should learn from Gandhi is serving rather than being served. When principals look for relevant teaching materials and avail them to teachers and students, they are serving them. When a principal serves teachers, students, non-teaching staff and parents, he or she encourages the feeling of ownership and empowered to perform their respective duties with care.

The sixth lesson that principals should learn from Gandhi is creating unity in their schools. School principals are pillars of unity and oneness in their schools. In a school where teachers work as a team, there is commitment that focuses on observable development and higher academic achievement. Working as a united team provides no room for gossiping, and laziness but encourages trust and commitment to achieve the institutional objectives and goals. The seventh lesson that school principals should learn from Mahatma Gandhi is persistence. Discipline is one area that needs school administrators' persistence in stressing on parade or whenever they address students on matters that concern learning. They should learn to manage conflicts as Gandhi managed the conflict between touchable and untouchable. The eighth lesson that school principals should learn from Gandhi is innovation of special skills which they may demonstrate to others during seminars or workshops. Gandhi demonstrated to his people how to make cloths by spinning. The ninth lesson that principals should learn from Gandhi is becoming lifelong learners. Gandhi used to read books even those that were not within his specialty not only for leisure, but for the purposes of acquiring new knowledge and wisdom. Fewer principals than teachers in Kenya are returning to college after their first degrees. They should continue learning in order to be conversant with the emerging information technology.

The tenth lesson that principals should learn from Gandhi is listening. Since principals are leaders who serve people from different economic and social status, they should develop good listening skills that help them incorporate the meaning of messages from teachers, students, non-teaching staff, and parents.

The eleventh lesson that principals should learn from Gandhi is communication skills. Principals should have good communication skills that influence and persuade those around them to respond to situations positively. Through effective communication, principals modify the attitudes and behaviors of their school communities.

The twelfth and last lesson that principals should learn from Gandhi is how he utilized the general administrative elements that include planning, organizing, coordinating, controlling among others. Successful principals plan, schedule themselves and make comprehensive reports for the head offices. They organize and coordinate curriculum implementation and other functions that are intended to improve their institutions.

However, not all practices that Gandhi exhibited are worthy learning and applying in Kenyan schools. Principals are seen to be organizers, coordinators, initiators, and controllers of resources both human, physical facilities, and materials. If a toilet (as is known in Kenya) looks filthy, the principal consults master on duty or sanitary master to organize students to clean, but not the principal to be seen cleaning the bathroom (as it is known in the United States). Consequently, the principal, sanitary master, or deputy principal has to remind the students on why it is important to keep toilets clean.

Demonstration makes learning life and interesting. Gandhi used demonstration method to illustrate how to spin cloths while strengthening the attitude of wearing loins. This practice is suitable for teaching instructions not for administrative purposes. Some of the political practices such as travelling to different areas talking to people may not be practiced in schools. Since principals are concerned with overseeing the implementation of curriculum in their schools, they have limited time to travel to various places as political leaders.

## CONCLUSION

This article spells out some of the lessons that school principals should learn from Mahatma Gandhi's leadership styles, principles, and practices that included transformational, transactional, task-people oriented, and servant leadership. Gandhi persisted in applying his principles that changed his people's behavior and practices. He changed people's morals and instilled spiritual beliefs that transformed their social behaviors and lifestyles. Some successful world leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela applied Mahatma Gandhi's leadership and principles.

Principals too may be successful in their leadership if they emulate and practice Gandhi's leadership styles and principles that guided and transformed Indian people. Twenty first century principals should be lifelong learners in order to acquire relevant technological skills which may be used in changing the image and academic performance of their schools.

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS MODEL

This combination of instructional procedures focus on the content related to typical leadership courses offered to Master's and Doctoral programs. Practicing school principals and those aspiring to be principals who take this model will begin to realize that leadership styles vary according to situations and circumstances. This model may help them to:

- Realize their own values that may be similar to those of Gandhi.



- Identify leadership styles that may be appropriate for their schools, depending on situations and circumstances.
- Assist their faculty members to become more effective teachers.
- Develop good team attitude and cooperation.
- Promote good communication skills among school community members
- To develop their personal principles, and
- Enable others to achieve upward mobility.

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The leadership approaches described in this model are intended to improve the skills and widen participants' knowledge on leadership practices. Students should be asked to compare and contrast leadership styles that are currently used in educational organizations. In order to understand various leadership styles, students are required to read books on leadership, Journal articles, magazines, and also visit different schools and industries to observe how principals and managers execute their leadership and managerial skills and also how they use their knowledge and manipulative skills to solve some problems. Students should be asked to observe principals' behavior and how they interact with their juniors. Each student or a group of students should write and compile their observations and present them to other members of their classes.

## READING ASSESSMENT

After reading this article, students should answer the following questions:

- 1 a). Define and differentiate between transformational, charismatic, servant and transactional styles of leadership.
- b). Explain, giving sufficient reasons, why a high school principal might prefer to use one of these styles and not the other?
2. In which ways does a people-oriented leadership style differ from task-oriented style?
3. For the last five years, your school has been on the top rank on academic performance. List and explain each leadership style you, as a principal has been using in order to realize such performance.
4. Giving relevant examples, discuss:
  - (a) The potential success of Gandhi's leadership styles in schools.
  - (b) The potential failure of Gandhi's leadership styles in schools, and
  - (c) Suggest how Gandhi would have done it better.
  - (d) Assuming that you are a high school principal whose school is academically performing poorly in the standardized or national examinations compared to the surrounding schools, discuss giving relevant examples how Gandhi's leadership style will help you to raise the academic standards in your school.

## OUTSIDE CLASSROOM ASSIGNMENT

Parents and community members of school "A" have praised the principal of the school for higher performance on standardized examinations and expressed their disappointment with the performance of the principal of school "B" for the poor performance on the same examination.

- a). Develop questionnaires and conduct a research study to establish the leadership and other related causes of good performance in school "A" and poor performance in school "B." The researcher will be required to get the number of candidates in each school and to use statistical methods (e.g. independent t test) to compare the performance of the two

schools using mean scores in the last three years. All statistical analysis should be conducted using the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

b) Present your research findings to the whole class.

c) Suggest what the principal in school "B" should have done to raise the school's performance index.

d) What would you do differently to change school B's poor performance to better performance?

e) Assuming you are Mahatma Gandhi, what advice would you give the two principals?

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