

The Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's Vision of Educational Leadership

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to look at Mahatma Gandhi's leadership in the domain of education through the conceptual lens of 'Building a Vision for Your Organization', a recent article in Harvard Business Review which analyzed the vision and mission statements of organizations that have survived for many decades in the marketplace. This paper will endeavor to explore whether Gandhi's intuitive understanding of the dynamics of leadership implicitly incorporated the elements articulated in this article, as indispensable for the survival of organizations.

Keywords: Ahimsa (non-violence), ashrams (residential schools), BHAG, core ideology, core purpose, core values, envisioned future, satyagraha(acquiring truth), transformational leadership, vivid explanations, yang principle, yin principle

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Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), revered as the father of the nation by the people of India but described by the then British rulers of India as a 'Cunning Asiatic', won India's political independence through a non-violent revolution. Gandhi has been presented by his biographers in various images, for example as a powerful political leader, a philosopher and a saint. Gandhi himself said that he gave many things to the nation and in his own estimation his scheme for education was the best among them. Volumes have been written about Gandhi's contributions to education, but little has been written on Gandhi as the Institution Builder: He founded ashrams [residential communities] in South Africa and India. They were successive and cumulative experiments in transforming human nature through an ashram which adopted an alternative lifestyle towards unwavering commitment to the values of *sathya* [truth] and *ahimsa* [non-violence]. In this alternative lifestyle, living and learning were concurrent and reciprocally transformative processes (Joseph 2011).

Gandhi's leadership and management of the *ashrams*, and transformative institutions, were based on a well-articulated vision which was rigorously translated into practice, although he did not formulate any theory in this regard in an explicit academic fashion. The 'Ashram Model' of Gandhi is a revolutionary, pioneering experiment unprecedented in the history of educational enterprises around the globe. Gandhi conceived, built and successfully managed his successive ashrams at four locations namely: Phoenix and Tolstoy in South Africa and Sabarmati and Sevagram in India (Joseph 2011). As educational establishments, these Ashrams are unparalleled for their well-articulated vision, their core values that are robust and a purpose that is pristine and practical. With non-violence as the central motif of his educational philosophy, Gandhi was a paradigm case of transformational leadership. The salient feature of Gandhi's approach is his primary commitment to raise the level of moral consciousness in all human endeavors (Joseph 2012).

As an effective transformational leader, Gandhi catalyzed the moral core of the residents of his Ashrams. He was very successful in achieving this task by his *in situ* direct interactive teaching enhanced by unique and powerful modes of communication. He further demonstrated through his own personal model the expectations of his educational establishments. His views inspired, empowered and elevated the level of human conscience and human performance in the inmates of his ashrams. His transformational leadership was so powerful that it was not only charismatic, but also contagious in causing evolution of true leaders from his followers (Bryman 1992).

The genesis of Gandhi's vision of educational leadership

Gandhi's ashrams enjoyed enduring success with core values and a core purpose that remained fixed while its organizational strategies and practices endlessly adapted to a changing world (James & Jerry 1996). Gandhi's educational theory and the outcome of his experiments through his four ashrams had a clear social orientation (Joseph 2011). He envisaged the education of the whole man through craft (Varkey 1939). Gandhi considered the introduction of craft his unique contribution to education for he believed that it would at once transform education, society in general and the personality of youth. In his ashrams he had adopted and tested a sound educational theory which aimed at character building, was craft-centered and self supporting

(Joseph 2011). In the democratic society of Gandhi's vision, the spirit of non-violence and truth were the guiding forces (Bose 1953). An overall development of the individual to be of the highest value could only be realized in a society where individual freedom was limited by the freedom and welfare of others. Gandhi's individualism derived from the ancient Hindu concept of *dharma* (natural duty) and *yanja* (selfless sacrifice) (Thomson1993). The Ashrams established by Gandhi understood the difference between what should never be changed and what should be opened for change, between what is genuinely sacred and what is not (James & Jerry 1996). Gandhi had the rare ability to manage continuity and change, a consciously practised discipline which was closely linked to the ability to develop a vision for his Ashrams (Joseph 2011). The vision provided guidance about what core to be preserved and what stimulated future progress. Gandhi meticulously documented all the details pertaining to the founding and management of his ashrams which were residential institutions where, as we presently see, learning and living were designed to be concurrent and integrative processes. Gandhi managed his ashrams very successfully with sound vision and inspiring academic leadership (Joseph 2011).

A well conceived vision of Gandhian educational leadership consists of two major components: *core ideology* and *envisioned future* of Gandhian ashrams (James & Jerry 1996). As the leader of the ashrams, Gandhi succeeded in generating a vision and communicating it to all successfully. Communicating a vision to followers is the most important act of the transformational leader (Bryman1992). Core ideology, the *yin* principle in Gandhi's ashrams, defines what the Ashrams stand for and why the Ashrams exist. *Yin* is unchanging and complements the *yang* principle, the envisioned future (James & Jerry 1996). The envisioned future was what Gandhi aspired for the ashram to achieve and to create that required significant change and progress in and through his ashrams (James & Jerry 1996).

Core ideology of Gandhi's ashrams

Core ideology defines the enduring character of Gandhi's Ashrams giving a consistent identity that transcends the life cycles, technological breakthroughs, management fads and individual leaders (James & Jerry1996). In fact the most significant contribution of Gandhi who built his visionary ashrams is the core ideology. The Core ideology of Gandhi's ashrams endured as a source of guidance and inspiration. Core ideology provided the glue that held his Ashrams together as it grew, decentralized, diversified, and expanded in South Africa and later in India (Joseph 2011). What urged Gandhi to place his theory on a national scale was an abhorrence of the British system as impractical and destructive of Indian imagination. Gandhi called it an "unmitigated evil". He thought it ignored everything India had discovered in the evolution of its educational thinking, such as children integrated with the environment, strong pupil-teacher relationships, identification with one's people and appreciation of Indian culture (Thomson1993). The purpose of Gandhian education is to raise man to a higher moral and spiritual plane through the full development of the individual and the evolution of a new man (Iyer 1973). Non-violence and truth are the two principles entering into every aspect of Gandhi's thought and activity (Varkey1939). Character building was the fundamental enterprise in the ashrams he envisioned. Gandhi believed and practised that the individual who orders his life upon an unshakable faith in duty, sacrifice, truth and non-violence remains morally autonomous from collective agencies and is an unconquerable agent of social progress (Thomson, 1993). *Satyagraha* (acquiring truth) was conceived by Gandhi as the only effective sanction

against wrong-doing available to such an individual (Gandhi 1955). Any effective leadership vision must embody the core ideology of the organization which in turn consists of two distinct parts: core values; a system of guiding principles and tenets; and the core purpose; the organization's most fundamental reason for existence (James & Jerry 1996, p.67).

Core values of Gandhi's ashrams

Core values are the essential and enduring unique tenets of Gandhian ashrams. His ashrams had a set of timeless guiding principles, without any external justification. They have intrinsic value and importance to those inside the ashrams. As usual his ashrams had only a few core values, usually between three and five (James & Jerry 1996). Gandhi gave the first place to the culture of the heart, the building of character. He regarded character building as the proper foundation for the education and was confident that if the foundation was properly laid, pupils could learn all other things by themselves with the assistance of friends (Varkey 1939). Gandhi regarded righteousness or good life as an essential part of character (Andrews 1929). He did not want education without character and character without personal purity. Character building comes from pupils' lives and from within themselves. The second core value was practising the doctrine of truth and non-violence (Varkey 1939). The third core value was educating the pupils through the medium of a self supporting craft that is learning by doing and earning while learning (Varkey 1939). Gandhi as a transformational leader recognized and harnessed the needs and demands of followers to higher purposes (Joseph 2012, p.6). Gandhi did this through a vital teaching role which shaped, altered and elevated the values and goals of his ashram inmates to a higher level through empowerment and inspiration.

Gandhian values can be truly *core*, that is so fundamental and deeply held that they will change seldom, if ever. Gandhian core values always stood for the test of time. As sound institutions, none of Gandhi's ashrams changed its core values in response to market change; rather it sought to change the market, if necessary, to remain true to its core values (James & Jerry 1996, p.67). Gandhi selected highly credible followers who were willing to do a superb job articulating the core values precisely because his followers were exemplars of those values- a representative slice of the genetic code of Gandhi's ashrams (Balwantsinha 1962). Gandhi's ashrams were composed of people from widely diverse religious faiths who identified a set of shared core values (Thomson 1993). The secret was to work from the individual to the ashrams. Followers involved in articulating the core values in his ashrams needed to answer three questions: What would the followers tell their children about the core values that they held in the ashrams with a hope that they will hold when they become adults? If the followers awoke in the morning with enough wealth and money to retire for the rest of their lives, would the followers continue to live those core values? If the followers were to start a new ashram tomorrow in a different line of work, what core values would they build into the new ashram regardless of its industry? Those three questions made the crucial distinction between enduring core values that should not change and practices and strategies that should be changing all the time (James & Jerry 1996).

Core purpose of Gandhi's ashrams

Core purpose, the second part of core ideology is the *raison d'être* of Gandhian ashrams. The effective purpose of Gandhi's ashrams reflects the idealistic motivations for doing the ashrams works. The purpose of Gandhian education is to raise men to a higher moral and spiritual order through the full development of the individual and the evolution of a new man (Joseph 2012, p.5). The ashrams Gandhi established served as laboratories where he and his ashram inmates tested and retested with truth and non-violence as an alternative way of life (Joseph 2011). In these small monastic communities of men and women living according to absolute vows he sought to lay the groundwork for an egalitarian social organization and economy and to develop an education system that reflected the Indian genius. The ashram provided economic and moral support as well as fostering the discipline and awareness necessary for their members to sustain grass root ideals (Patel 1953). For this, he trained his ashram inmates to be self disciplined by practicing and observing vows such as truth, love, chastity, control of the palate, non-stealing, non-possession of property, physical labour, swadeshi outlook, fearlessness, removal of untouchability and tolerance (Gandhi1955). It doesn't just describe the ashrams output or target the public; it captures the soul of the ashrams. The core purpose of Gandhi's ashrams inspired changes (Balvantsinha 1962). Core purpose is a guiding star on the horizon of Gandhian ashrams. The primary role of the core purpose of Gandhian ashrams is to guide and inspire the followers. Gandhi's compelling visions provided his ashram inmates with a sense of purpose and encouraged commitments (James & Jerry 1996). He encouraged creativity, fostered open communications, demonstrated forward thinking, shared responsibilities and exhibited commitments which helped ashram inmates to meet the challenges of the future (Joseph 2012, p.7). Gandhi constructed a realistic vision and inspired his followers in his ashrams to put greater effort to achieve the goals which attracted more commitments and energized his followers. Gandhi's visions created a real meaning for his ashram inmates in establishing a standard of excellence (James & Jerry 1996).

Discovering the core ideology of Gandhi's educational leadership

Gandhi did not create or set core ideology. There is no need of deducing it by looking at the external environment of Gandhi's ashrams. The core ideology of Gandhian leadership is succinct and authentic. We can discover the core ideology by directly looking inside the Gandhi's ashrams. Discovering core ideology is not an intellectual exercise (James & Jerry1996, p.71). The core ideology of Gandhi's educational leadership was to guide and inspire, not to differentiate. The core ideology of Gandhi's educational leadership was meaningful and inspirational to the inmates of his ashrams because it was the inmates who committed themselves to the ideology over a long period of time. The core ideology of Gandhi's educational leadership played a role in determining who is inside and who is not (Balawantsinha1962).Gandhi's clear and well-articulated ideology attracted the ashram candidates whose personal values are compatible with the ashrams core values; conversely it repelled those personal values incompatible with the ashrams. Gandhi never imposed new core values or purposes on the ashram inmates. The followers shared the core ideology. The followers who were predisposed to share the core values and purposes were attracted and retained in his ashrams. Those who do not share the core values were allowed to leave his ashrams (Gandhi1955). Indeed, the very process of articulating the core ideology caused some followers to leave

when they realized that they cannot personally be compatible with the ashram's core. Identifying core values and purposes was not an exercise in semantic sword play for Gandhi. Gandhi focused on getting the content right on capturing the essence of core values and purposes. Gandhi had a strong and deep understanding of his ashrams core values and purposes which he expressed in a multitude of ways. Gandhi never confused core ideology of his ashrams with the concept of core competence. Core competence was a strategic concept that defined the capabilities that the ashram and its inmates were particularly good at, whereas core ideology of his ashrams was what it stood for and the reason why it existed (Jerry & James 1996, p.72).

The future of the ashrams as Gandhi envisioned through his educational leadership

Gandhi developed the second primary component of his vision framework of his ashrams through his educational leadership. Setting the envisioned future is a creative process. It consisted of two parts: a 10 to 30 year audacious goal plus vivid descriptions to achieve the goals (James & Jerry 1996, p.73). Once we scan the periods from the Phoenix Ashram (1904) in South Africa to the Sevagram Ashram (1932) in India, Gandhi had a clear 28 years span of Big Hairy Audacious Goals (BHAG) for setting the envisioned future of his ashrams. During the twenty one years in South Africa Gandhi transformed himself from a prosperous anglophile lawyer leading peaceful agitations through legal channels to a non-violent activist living a simple communitarian life in his ashrams with his ashram inmates and prepared to sacrifice his life for the causes he believed in. Between 1904 and 1908 he gave concrete shape to his doctrine of *Satyagraha* which sought freedom for mankind to live in harmony and dignity (Thomson 1993). Gandhi's envisioned future component was somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, it conveyed concreteness; something visible, vivid and real. On the other hand it involved a time track stretching ahead with as yet unrealized dreams, hopes and aspirations. As a visionary leader Gandhi used BHAG as a powerful way to stimulate progress (James & Jerry 1996, p.74). Gandhi's BHAG was clear and compelling, serving as a unifying focal point of effort and acted as a catalyst for team spirit among the resident of his ashrams. Gandhi had a very clear finish line so his ashrams could know when it had to be achieved and the goals had to be arrived at (Gandhi 1955). Gandhi's BHAG engaged his residents to reach out and grab them. It was tangible, energized and highly focused. Gandhi's followers got them at the right way which took no explanations. Gandhi set the BHAG that far into the future, requiring thinking beyond the current capabilities of his ashrams and its environment (James & Jerry 1996).

Vivid descriptions of Gandhi's ashrams through his educational leadership

In addition to clear and substantial content, an envisioned future needs vivid description that is a vibrant, engaging and specific description of what it will be like to achieve the goal stated. It is translating the "vision" from words into pictures, of creating an image that people can carry around in their heads. It is a question of painting a picture with your words. Picture painting is essential for making the 10-to-30 year BHAG reach across and stay in people's minds. Passion, emotion and conviction are essential parts of the vivid description (James & Jerry 1996, p.74). Gandhi possessed them. Gandhi painted a picture that ashram life would foster an active asceticism, and, while self-realization remained the ultimate goal of the inmates, active service to the society was the means to that end. Further in his painted

picture, religious values could be channeled through positive action to reform the individual and society. When the Sabarmati ashram was established in 1915, Gandhi conveyed both the goal and method of service to his inmates: "Our creed was devotion to truth, and our business was the search for and insistence of truth. I wanted to acquaint India with the method I had tried in South Africa, and I desired to test in India the extent to which its application might be possible" (Gandhi 1966, p.330). As a transformational leader, Gandhi was passionately committed to his works (Burns 1978). Gandhi loved his job and had a great deal of affection for the inmates of his ashram (Balwantsinha 1962). This passion and personal enthusiasm motivated his followers to perform to their highest levels as well. Gandhi transmitted his passion by words and deeds to his ashrams and their inmates and catalyzed the noblest side of their human nature. Gandhi held up before his ashram inmates a vision that he communicated through open discussions and dialogues to bring about at once individual and social change. Thus Gandhi was able to unearth the needs of others and understood the nature of the followers' reality (Richardson & Thayer 1993).

Conclusion

Identifying core ideology is a discovery process whereas setting the envisioned future is a creative process. To create an effective envisioned future requires a certain level of unreasonable confidence and commitment which Gandhi possessed. The successes of Gandhi's visionary ashrams lie in building the strength of his ashrams as their primary way of creating the future. The basic dynamic of visionary organizations is to preserve the core and stimulate progress, not the vision or mission statements. That dynamic was the primary engine which enabled Gandhi's ashrams to endure. Vision simply provides the context for bringing this dynamic to life. The geomancy for building an effective organization requires 1% vision and 99 % alignment. Creating a superb alignment by recasting the vision and mission into an effective context for building a visionary organization is the most important and challenging work which Gandhi has demonstrated.

Gandhi was no armchair visionary. He did accomplish the insuperable task of setting an institution on a visionary task, sharing the vision with the inmates of his ashrams, inspiring them to strive towards the vision and elevating them *en route* onto the moral plane. While sharing the catholicity of the inner thoughts of Gandhi's building of vision with the modern trends in global educational organizations, to uphold core values could be a short cut solution to many of the global problems we are facing today. Gandhi proved through his unique talismanic leadership in the ashrams that truth can be achieved only through non-violence and it is through his effective ashram leadership and management he has proved himself as a transformational leader. Gandhi's vision of educational leadership once again conforms to his basic philosophy of integration of vision and action, means and ends, truth and non-violence. Gandhi gave an organizational design for education that constantly aligns the individual and the social unit by concurrent and reciprocal transformation of both.

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