

Leadership style and power tactics of gandhi history essay



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With the aid of leadership theory and specific examples, this paper reflects upon and analyses the leadership style and power and influence tactics of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as portrayed in the movie “ Gandhi”. The analysis is primarily based on Gandhi’s personal identity and behaviour in relation to others and the external environment. More so, the relationship shared between him and his followers is embedded throughout the paper to further support the analysis. Lastly, this paper makes a short comparison between the leadership style of Gandhi and Jinnah.

Gandhi is popularly referred to as ‘ Mahatma’ Gandhi, meaning ‘ great soul’, and is commonly called ‘ bapu’ in India, meaning ‘ father’. He is officially honoured in India as the ‘ father of the nation’, as it was under his leadership and guidance that the freedom movement in India gained momentum, ultimately leading to India’s independence in 1947. Gandhi was a national leader, a freedom fighter, a visionary, a humanist, and a socialist reformer. He has been a source of inspiration and role-model for not only the common man, but various other leaders such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela as well.

Defining Leadership

According to Yukl (2010), “ Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives”.

Gandhi's Leadership Style

Gandhi was not a born leader, but he certainly had traits of one (Exhibit 1).

He was a simple man leading a simple life, but strongly believed in and practiced the values of unity, equality, truth, non-violence, justice, and honesty. His values and personality were instrumental in fighting the might of the British. He was patient but persistent, as he knew it was no simple task attaining India's independence. While he was defiant, resistant, daring and provocative at times, he always remained calm, caring, humble and polite. He exhibited distinct characteristics, qualities and behaviours of a charismatic leader, transformational leader and level 5 leader, which are analysed below.

Charismatic Leadership

According to Weber (1947), charismatic leaders are more likely to emerge in crisis situations. As depicted in the movie, India was suffering from the atrocities of the British rule for decades, causing widespread distress. People were desperate to end the suffering, but were unable to find a solution. Gandhi provided the vision of "Independent India", and led various movements from the front. India's social crisis provided Gandhi with the perfect stage to rise from amongst the masses and lead India to independence.

Most importantly, his actions were highly unconventional. He fought the British using the methodology of truth, non-violence, non-cooperation and peaceful resistance, rather than using violent means. These unconventional means of protest impressed and inspired his followers, who saw him as extraordinary and charismatic.

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Yukl (2010) states that leaders are more likely to be viewed as charismatic if they make self-sacrifices, take personal risks, and incur high costs to achieve the vision they espouse. In the movie, there were various instances when Gandhi made personal sacrifices and took personal risks. For example, he stopped wearing western clothes and donned a simple 'dhoti' to blend with the masses; he was jailed on numerous occasions for lengthy durations; he led a simple life without materialistic pleasures; and even got beaten on occasion.

Gandhi was highly trusted by his followers, given the fact that he was not motivated to free India for personal self-interest, but for the betterment and concern of the people. He drew vast admiration due to his noble intentions, high moral values and ethical standards. During his funeral procession in the movie, the commentator rightly stated, "The object of this massive tribute died as he had always lived. A private man without wealth, without property, without official title or office. Mahatma Gandhi was not the commander of armies, nor a ruler of vast lands. He could not boast of any scientific achievement or artistic gift. Yet men, governments, dignitaries from all over the world have joined hands today to pay homage to this little brown man in the loincloth who led his country to freedom".

Gandhi was highly self-confident, and strongly believed that India would gain independence. It was his belief that it was just a matter of 'when' and 'in what form'. It was his confidence and enthusiasm to free India that united his followers to jointly accomplish what seemed impossible to achieve.

Gandhi's vision, inspiration, confidence and positive attitude motivated and enhanced the collective efficacy of the people, inspiring the belief that unity is critical in order to free India. This collective belief fuelled the determination of his followers to willingly put in additional effort, and persist the long, hard road to freedom.

Gandhi was by no means an impressive leader by appearance either. Despite being old, short, and slim-built, he had the ability and charisma to appeal to the masses through his public speaking and interpersonal skills, which had a widespread effect. In short, he was a "crowd-puller". Meindl (1990) explains this spontaneous spread of emotional and behavioural reactions among the people through the process of social contagion. The people of India were emotionally and physically prepared to make self-sacrifices in order to gain independence. Gandhi activated this social identity amongst the people, at a time when their survival was being threatened. For example, the movie shows how the people of Champaran were facing a social crisis, and how Gandhi travelled there to see, hear and feel their pain. Gandhi's mere presence in Champaran led to his arrest, and what followed was extraordinary. Being a crowd-puller, rioting ensued in the region, and the people swarmed the court room at his hearing. Without any heroics, Gandhi was able to pressurize the British to make changes. However, his followers viewed him as heroic and exceptional, and this feeling began to spread spontaneously among the people, stirring the whole nation.

There is little doubt that Gandhi was a positive charismatic, and that he had a "socialized power orientation". According to Yukl (2010), leaders with

socialized power orientation exhibit the following characteristics, as did Gandhi:

Strong self-control

Motivated to satisfy the need for power in socially acceptable ways

More emotionally mature

Exercise power for the benefit of others

Hesitant about using power in a manipulative manner

Less egoistic and defensive

Accumulate fewer material possessions

Have a longer-range view

His leadership influence emphasized internalization rather than personal identification. He was self-sacrificing and led from the front to communicate his commitment to the freedom struggle. Gandhi once stated, “ You must be the change you want to see in the world”. Gandhi’s followers were responsive to his ideologies and appeals, and became increasingly involved in this socialized charismatic relationship.

According to Yukl (2010), the affective reaction charismatic leaders arouse often polarizes people into opposing camps of loyal supporters and hostile opponents, and the intense negative reaction by some people to charismatic leaders explains why they are often targets for assassination. Nathuram

Godse, a Hindu fanatic, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi on 30th January, 1948, as he felt Gandhi was personally responsible for the partition of India as well as for the deaths of thousands of Hindus.

Transformational Leadership

According to Bass (1985), transformational leaders possess unique charismatic behaviours that include sacrificing personal gains for the benefits of the group, setting a personal example for followers and demonstrating high ethical standards. Gandhi's leadership style clearly showcases the essence of transformational leadership. For example, his followers were motivated by him, trusted him, admired him, were loyal to him, and respected him. Transformational leaders also appeal to higher values like liberty, justice, peace and equality. Gandhi lived for such causes, and fought his entire life to stand by them.

Gandhi's transformational leadership encouraged his followers to transcend their own self-interest and fight in unity. Thousands of Gandhi's followers went to jail, and at times were violently beaten as well (e. g. Hundreds of Gandhi's followers willingly gathered at the ' Dharasana Salt Works' and stood together while being beaten with sticks by the British officials. Nevertheless, they not once resorted to violence because they respected Gandhi's sentiments). In fact, according to Dirks and Ferrin (2002), transformational leadership is highly correlated with trust in the leader.

According to Bass (1985), transformational leaders exhibit the following behaviours:

Idealized Influence – This behaviour arouses strong follower emotions and identification with the leader. Gandhi was able to influence the masses because he was a man of his words, and always practiced what he preached. He was a role model for the masses, and won their respect and trust through his actions. He demonstrated high ethical conduct (non-violence), self-sacrifice (voluntary poverty and non-materialism), dedication and persistence in order to attain India's independence.

Intellectual Stimulation – This behaviour increases follower awareness of problems and influences followers to view problems from a new perspective. Gandhi was always supportive of his followers, and encouraged them to think openly, ask questions, and solve problems. He was willing to accept wrongdoing and mistakes, and was not ashamed to discard a strategy that didn't work as planned. For example, he called off the non-violent campaign despite opposition from his subordinates because there were some people who used violent means.

Individualized Consideration – This behaviour includes providing support, encouragement and coaching to followers. Gandhi was always supportive of his followers. For example, he patiently listened to the grievances and concerns of the poor with regards to their inability to maintain a livelihood due to British policies. Gandhi was also extremely supportive of other leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel. He nurtured them, encouraged them to share ideas, and even empowered them to make decisions, never making them feel dependent on him.

Inspirational Motivation – This behaviour includes communicating an appealing vision, and using symbols to focus subordinate effort. Gandhi stood by his personal values, and consistently communicated his vision of independence. By openly communicating his vision, and using symbols such as the ‘ Salt Satyagraha’ movement, he provided his followers with a sense of meaning, which in turn inspired them to remain optimistic and increase their effort.

Level 5 Leader

Jim Collins (2005) states that a “ Level 5 Leader” is someone who has genuine personal humility blended with intense professional will. Gandhi exhibited distinct characteristics of such a leader (Exhibit 2). He was extremely humble and modest, and lived a life on the principle of simple living and high thinking. He wore the traditional Indian “ dhoti” and shawl, which was woven from yarn spun by hand using a “ charkha”. He was humble and appreciative, and never hesitated in saying “ Thank You”. However, he was extremely persistent in his resolve to gain India’s independence. Despite facing various challenges and set backs in the pursuit of independence, he never gave up.

Leader – Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Gandhi developed and shared a high-exchange relationship with his subordinates, followers and other leaders. This relationship grew stronger over time, resulting in a high degree of mutual dependence, loyalty, trust, respect, support and affection.

According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), high-quality leader-follower relationships are positively associated with transformational leadership behaviours. Even Deluga (1992) found a significant relationship between the transformational leadership behaviours of charisma and individualized consideration and high-quality LMX.

While Gandhi provided the vision and inspiration, most of the ground work was carried out by his subordinates and followers, who were highly committed to the freedom struggle. They also took considerable initiative on their part to carry out the planning. For example, Nehru used his contacts in the press to take Gandhi's message to the masses.

It can also be stated that the exchange relationship Gandhi shared with his subordinates was favourable. Gandhi was highly supportive of his subordinates, and used to frequently consult them. He acted more as a mentor to them. He was non-dominating in conversations, and had to be highly persuasive with Jinnah on multiple occasions. His subordinates began demonstrating organizational citizenship behaviour, as their trust in Gandhi grew stronger. Dirks & Ferrin (2002) validate this by stating that a favourable exchange relationship is highly correlated with subordinate trust.

Gandhi's Power and Influence Tactics

A leader needs to be influential, and so was Gandhi. In the movie, Gandhi primarily used the process of "internalization" to influence his followers.

According to Kelman (1958), under the internalization process, the target person becomes committed to support and implement proposals espoused by the agent because they appear to be intrinsically desirable and correct in

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relation to the target's values, beliefs, and self-image. Gandhi was able to influence the masses by invigorating their values of freedom, justice and self-respect to fight against the British.

To a certain extent, personal identification was also depicted. Kelman (1958) states that under personal identification, the target person imitates the agent's behaviour or adopts the same attitudes to please the agent and to be like the agent. In the movie, Jawaharlal Nehru was initially shown as wearing western clothes. But after Gandhi's influence on him, he chose to wear clothes made of Indian fabric (khadi), thereby adopting the same attitude of Gandhi. Similarly, millions of Indians boycotted English garments in their support of Gandhi's view that we should wear khadi.

According to Yukl (2010), power is the capacity to influence the attitudes and behaviour of people in the desired direction. Gandhi was shown as exhibiting the use of referent power in the movie. According to French and Raven (1959), referent power is derived from the desire of others to please an agent toward whom they have strong feelings of affection, admiration and loyalty. Gandhi's friendly, attractive, charming and trustworthy character empowered him with high referent power. He was able to increase this power by showing concern towards to needs of the people, by demonstrating trust and respect, and by treating people fairly and equally. Moreover, his high levels of personal integrity and consistent values allowed him to maintain this referent power.

According to Yukl (2010), most power studies have found that referent power is positively correlated with subordinate satisfaction and performance, and

that effective leaders rely more of referent power to influence subordinates. He further states that people are more likely to cooperate with an agent who has strong referent power. This partly explains the effective leadership of Gandhi, and reasons why his followers were highly attracted to him.

Comparison Between Leadership Style of M. K. Gandhi and M. A. Jinnah

Gandhi and Jinnah, as portrayed in the movie, seem to be very different in their traits, behaviour, appearance, lifestyle and leadership style.

Jinnah is shown to lead a comfortable, sophisticated and lavish lifestyle, and in certain ways emulates the British. Gandhi led a lifestyle quite opposite to that. While Gandhi was the leader of the masses, Jinnah by no means came close. While Gandhi has been portrayed as warm and affectionate, Jinnah appears to be intimidating, arrogant, stubborn, manipulative, and at times sarcastic.

In terms of leadership style, Jinnah exhibits characteristics of a negative charismatic. Negative charismatics have a “ personalized power orientation”.

In the movie, it can be noticed that while Jinnah’s original ideology was that of an independent India, by gaining power over time, his ideologies changed. He later personally advocated creating a separate Muslim state – Pakistan. While his concerns were valid, they seemed to be highly exaggerated. More so, even though Gandhi persuaded and tried to reason with Jinnah, he remained stubborn. It is only when Gandhi told him he could become the 1st Prime Minister of India with full freedom to choose his cabinet that he seemed content. Hence, it seems that Jinnah had a greater concern for self-

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glorification and maintaining power. In contrast, Gandhi was never in the chase for power, which is supported by the fact that he never held an official title or office.

Conclusion

Gandhi has been a role-model and source of inspiration for many generations. His unconventional means to fight injustice (truth, non-violence, non-cooperation and peaceful resistance) have earned him high admiration and respect. He led from the front to attain India's independence, and influenced millions of followers to fight for a moral and just cause. He epitomised life based on moral conduct, and showed its strength to the world. While laying the foundation for democracy in India, he has also showed how unity and humanity can fight the strongest of forces. While it is highly unlikely to witness another Gandhi in our lifetime, humanity has critical lessons to learn from his leadership and life.