

# SOFT LEADERSHIP: MAKE OTHERS FEEL MORE IMPORTANT

*by M. S. Rao*

First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.

—Mahatma Gandhi

**V**arious leadership researchers, experts, educators, writers, consultants, and practitioners in the leadership domain have championed for specific styles and types of leadership. As a result, we have various styles and types in leadership, thus enriching the leadership domain. Similarly, here is a new concept: soft leadership.

When you look at leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, and Aung San Suu Kyi you can see a common thread connecting all of them.

They are distinguished by

- Character
- Charisma
- Conscience
- Conviction
- Courage
- Communication
- Compassion
- Commitment
- Consistency
- Consideration

And they have contributed extensively toward society and made a difference in the lives of others.

## What Is Soft Leadership?

Globalization, liberalization, privatization, and the rapid growth of technology have redefined the concept of leadership and the role of leaders. Modern conditions call for a new and specialized set of skills that can be popularly called *soft leadership*, which is based on the right mind-set, skill set, and toolset.

Soft leadership doesn't mean submissiveness or being soft physically, but being assertive where these leaders protect their rights without violating the rights of others. Soft leadership touches on caring, connecting, and communicating with people to accomplish desired goals. Soft leaders are basically people-oriented rather than task-oriented. They empathize with others and look at the issues from a human perspective. They have compassion toward others. It is the process of setting goals, influencing people through persuasion, building strong teams, constantly motivating them, and aligning their energies and efforts in tune with desired objectives. Soft leaders set the right example.

This is a new dimension to leadership. The author coined this concept by blending several skills and abilities, as there is a growing need for leaders to demonstrate this style with the changing times and technologies and global dynamic environment.

## Significance of Soft Leadership

In this competitive world what makes the total difference are your soft skills at the workplace either as an employee or as a leader. In addition, soft leadership

- Helps in stress-busting.
- Helps in managing change effectively. Employees appreciate the leader's empathy during organizational change.

## Soft Leadership Versus Hard Leadership

Soft leadership emphasizes character, charisma, compassion, communication, courage, empathy, persuasion, and setting a strong personal example. In contrast, hard leadership focuses on fear, threats, and negative

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*The right mind-set, skill set, and toolset.*

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motivation. Soft leadership involves use of integrative and participatory styles while hard leadership involves the carrot-and-stick policy.

Soft leadership blends both soft and hard skills with a tilt toward soft skills. No leadership is effective without hard skills. However, soft leadership emphasizes the behavioral attitudes and aspects of followers.

If the end of the 20th century belonged to emotional intelligence, then the 21st century belongs to soft leadership—where leaders have to demonstrate pleasing and polite behavior, attitude, and personality to get tasks executed by their partners. The 21st century also welcomes partnership, replacing traditional leadership with a followership attitude.

Soft leadership is the solution to several business challenges. You cannot be hard all the time and get the desired results. Mahatma Gandhi, who was a weak and frail man, brought down the mighty British Empire through his soft leadership. Martin Luther King championed equality of blacks along with whites in America through his soft leadership.

## Characteristics

It is useful to examine the characteristics shared by practitioners of soft leadership in more detail.

## Character

The collapse of Enron, Lehman Brothers, WorldCom, and other companies reminds the world about leaders who lack character at their core. People sometimes blame business schools for producing such leaders without any ethical and moral values. However, we cannot blame business schools for all the ills that happened. The problems often lie with leaders who lack strong character.

Character is one of the key components of soft leaders. Through their strong character, they lead their people by influencing and guiding them. People look at leaders who have impeccable integrity and who can walk the talk. For instance, a company like Hindustan Lever puts an emphasis on character, wherein each individual puts the company's needs before personal needs. It has a strong human resource management and emphasizes a strong ethical system among its employees.

Remember that as a leader you are always under the scanner. You need to set the right example through impeccable character.

### **Charisma**

One of the greatest characteristics of soft leaders is their charisma. Soft leaders make other people see themselves as more important and valuable. Charisma helps in connecting with others easily as people feel valued and pleased to talk with these leaders. The soldiers of Alexander blindly followed him because of his charismatic leadership. British soldiers marched toward victory during the Second World War under the charismatic leadership of Winston Churchill. Research reveals that charisma is a skill that can be honed by training, experience, and practice. There is an urge in all human beings to be liked by others. Charisma paves the way for this to happen.

### **Conscience**

Conscience is one of the key components of soft leaders, as a clear conscience makes them stand out from others. People expect leaders to be ethical and responsible. Leaders must have a clear conscience to convince themselves so that they can persuade others. Mahatma Gandhi was always clear with his conscience. In his autobiography, he unveiled the mistakes he made in his life. In fact, it requires lot of courage to reveal wrongdoing.

People may deceive others but not their conscience, which is always clear and powerful.

### **Conviction**

Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama, and Aung San Suu Kyi are symbols of sacrifice and convictions. Conviction is another key ingredient for soft leadership. It is their convictions that take soft leaders forward and make their people move

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*Setting the right example  
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forward toward achieving their goals. There are leaders who died for their people due to their convictions. They never compromised, and they stood rock-solid despite stiff opposition and challenges and threats to their lives.

It is hard to imagine leadership without firmly showing one's convictions. Dr. King firmly believed in his convictions. He did not appreciate the inequality of blacks from whites. He sacrificed his life for the cause of the civil rights movement.

### **Courage**

Courage is an integral part of soft leadership. According to Aristotle, courage is the first virtue, because it makes all the others possible. It does not mean fighting physically with or killing people. It doesn't mean being aggressive at all times. Mark Twain remarked, "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear." It is about standing by your values and morals and principles and policies despite being pressured or threatened by others.

People always want leaders with backbone. For example, Lee Kuan Yew brought Singapore from nowhere to a number one prosperous country despite its dearth of natural resources. What counts at the end of life is neither muscle power nor money power but willpower.

### **Communication**

Leadership is about guiding people to accomplishing goals. Communication becomes the core component through which leaders connect with others. Leaders ideally need to adopt an assertive communication style and

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# *People always want leaders with backbone.*

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other styles from time to time (such as aggressive or assertive-aggressive) to make their leadership effective. Leaders can influence others through communication alone. It is through their words that leaders influence and inspire others to do seemingly impossible things. Soft leaders demonstrate assertive communication so as to connect with others and carry them forward toward their goals.

## **Compassion**

Mother Teresa helped lepers and others of the urban poor through her selfless service. She made an immense difference in the lives of poor and downtrodden people in India. In fact, compassion is an integral characteristic of soft leadership. It helps in connecting with others easily. People appreciate the leaders who care for and touch them.

Compassion means caring for others by ignoring your own interests. Compassion is not weakness. Compassion is all about genuinely caring for your people. It is handholding them without expecting any returns. Compassion commands great inner strength, courage, and power. The real leaders are the ones who encourage others and who take care of others and who empathize and demonstrate compassion with others. Only such leaders have the ability to influence and maximize the potential of their people and organizations.

## **Commitment**

Soft leaders have another great characteristic—commitment—that makes them command respect among others. It is their firm commitment toward their causes that wins acclaim from others. If you want your life to be successful you have to be committed. For instance, when you love your family, you need to be firm in demonstrating your commitment. Commitment consumes your time. But it builds longevity in relations—not only in your family life but also at the workplace. If you as a leader demonstrate

your commitment, people trust you and treat you with utmost respect. It is rightly said that people don't care how big you are. They only care how committed you are. We find families breaking up due to lack of commitment. We also find teams crashing in the workplace for the same reason. Commitment is the bridge between word and deed. A firm commitment toward your word and work makes you successful as a leader.

## **Consistency**

Consistency is another important ingredient for soft leadership. Leaders need to demonstrate their consistency so as to have profound impact on their people. People expect leaders to be predictable, responsible, and credible. Failure to demonstrate consistency might lead to a credibility crisis.

Mahatma Gandhi maintained consistency throughout his life by sticking to nonviolence and peace. Consistency is essential in every area of life. Consistency is essential in your efforts to achieve great things. It is required to be noticed as a credible and responsible person. Consistency helps in leadership branding and memory recall. When we talk of situational leadership we recall Ken Blanchard; when we talk of servant leadership we recall Robert Greenleaf; when we talk of emotional intelligence we recall Daniel Goleman; when we talk of self-improvement we remember Dale Carnegie. These leaders have excelled and branded themselves in their areas of specialization through consistent behavior and leadership.

## **Consideration**

Consideration is one of the major characteristics of soft leaders, as soft leaders basically care about their people. They respect their followers. Consideration includes recognizing the good work done by others and appreciating it promptly and liberally. This is a trait of leaders with people orientation rather than task orientation. Transactional leaders are fundamentally task-oriented while transformational and soft leaders are people-oriented, and they care for and consider others wholeheartedly.

Consideration means how much and how far the leaders are sensitive toward their people. It means how much they empathize with them and how far they can go to hand-

hold others. Consideration includes caring for and respecting others with an empathetic attitude. It deals with stepping into the shoes of others and looking at things from others' perspective. It makes people win the confidence of others, as it helps connect with others quickly.

### Contribution

Contribution includes precious time, money, energy, ideas, knowledge, and assistance to society. Genuine and selfless contribution is a big part of true leadership. People respect the leaders who contribute their best to society without pursuing wealth, power, or prestige.

People often think that the contribution has to be in a big way. In fact, a small effort is better than no effort. A host of small contributions will add up to a large amount of difference for society. Hence, contribute your best little by little consistently and you will be amazed at the difference that you make to the society over a period of time.

### Make Others Feel More Important

People have become so busy that they don't find time to care for others. The world has become ruthless and full of cutthroat competition.

If everyone thinks of contributing something to others by whatever possible means, most problems will be resolved and people will feel better, bigger, and greater. Make it a habit to spend some time daily to listen to people and empathize with them. It comforts them. It is essential to appreciate and elevate others. Learn to look at the similarities, not differences. Learn to look at their strengths, not weaknesses. Here are a few nuggets to make others feel more important:

- When a person achieves something, praise it liberally. But be specific and objective to avoid sounding like a flatterer.



THE 11 C'S OF SOFT LEADERSHIP

- Remember the names of the people and use their names when you talk to them. This helps makes them feel valued. Remember their important events and dates when you greet them.
- Encourage others. It costs you nothing except time. It returns much love and affection.
- Praise promptly and publicly. Don't delay when someone does a good work. Praise in the presence of all. It serves as a motivator for the person and will also encourage others to demonstrate the same behavior. The praise has to be specific and objective.
- Above all, treat others the way you want to be treated.

Remember that it takes years to build a good relationship but takes only a few seconds to break it.

## Final Word

Soft leadership involves making others feel important. Soft leaders don't differentiate the status of others while communicating with them. We all crave attention and appreciation. When you want to grow, learn to recognize the potential of others and make them feel important. Always look at their strengths and appreciate sincerely.

Some might ask, "In a world where people don't find time for themselves how can they find time for their family, friends, and the society?" Yes, it is true! As we have responsibility toward our children we have equal responsibility toward our future generations for passing on to them a society with values and virtues. Hence, it is time for us to find time to think, act, and make a difference in the lives of others to take civilization to greater heights of glory, not in terms of material but in terms of ideals and ideas.



*M.S. Rao is recognized as one of the world's leading leadership educators, authors, speakers, and consultants. He earned a PhD in soft skills from SRTMU (Nanded, India) in 2011. He has three decades of experience in leadership development and conducts training programs for various corporate and educational institutions. He is the Founder of MSR Leadership Consultants, India. He is the author of 10 books, including "Soft Leadership Make Others Feel More Important" and "Spot Your Leadership Style—Build Your Leadership Brand." He has published more than 200 papers and articles in international publications such as Leadership Excellence, Leader to Leader, T+D Magazine (ASTD), Personal Excellence, and Chief Learning Officer Magazine. He can be reached at msrlctrgr@yahoo.com, and additionally maintains the popular blogs <http://profmsr.blogspot.com> and <http://professormsraoguru.blogspot.com>.*