



## A Higher Standard of Leadership

Lessons from the Life of Gandhi  
by Keshavan Nair  
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174 pages

### Focus

#### Leadership

Strategy  
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### Take-Aways

- Gandhi based his teachings and life on truth, non-violence and service to humanity.
- A higher standard of leadership requires integrity and a commitment to absolute values.
- As a leader, you should follow a single standard of conduct, serve others and make decisions and act based on moral principles.
- Base your single standard of conduct on absolute values.
- Besides acknowledging this ideal, commit yourself to the journey and put these practices into daily life.
- Train your conscience through regular reflection.
- To reduce the forces that contradict this high leadership ideal, reduce your attachments to power, privilege and possessions.
- Be willing to “stand scrutiny” by reducing secrecy and promoting openness.
- Power’s only legitimate goal is service to others, so you should see yourself as a leader seeking to serve others.
- Moral principles should guide all your decisions and actions.

### Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>

## Review

### A Higher Standard of Leadership

Keshavan Nair emphasizes the need for leadership based on a fundamental moral standard, as taught and lived by Mohandus Gandhi. The Indian leader embodied a moral life centered on truth, non-violence and service to others. Nair argues that business leaders today need to follow these basic principles. He stresses that these principles – and the practices based upon them – make good business sense in the long run, as well as being crucial to the survival of society. The text combines Gandhi's experiences with Nair's exhortations on how to apply these principles in the workplace. However, Nair provides few examples of contemporary leaders who practice these principles. Thus, the book occasionally comes across as somewhat preachy, wishful, overly idealistic and out of touch with the everyday realities of business. Yet, *getAbstract.com* recommends it in the face of those realities as a counterbalance, as well as a good quick read that encourages thought.

## Abstract

### The Need for a Higher Standard

Mohandus Gandhi exemplified key qualities that provide a good model for both personal and professional life. These include personal responsibility, truth, love, courage and respect for the individual. Such a model for leadership is necessary to inspire everyone and to “harness the ideals in all of us, appeal to what is best in us and move us to a better quality of life.”

Unfortunately, many people today think it is not possible to succeed in business or politics while staying true to their moral principles in all activities. Many people also think political and business decision makers would be less effective if they were guided by moral principles.

However, these beliefs aren't true. Rather, when people believe their leaders lack integrity, their leaders will fulfill their expectations. Thus, everyone needs to hold a higher standard of leadership, for themselves and those they follow. To find a guide to leadership based on this higher standard, look to Gandhi and the principles he followed.

### Gandhi's Basic Principles of Leadership

Gandhi demonstrated moral principles of leadership during more than 50 years in public life. He is best known for inspiring millions of people in India to resist the exploitation of the British Empire, and for doing so without commanding armies or holding official government positions. Rather, he provided leadership through his teachings and the example he set based on the principles of truth, non-violence and service to humanity.

Gandhi illustrated many of the characteristics of a successful leader. He showed courage and determination. He had a high level of energy and could work for long periods. He was good at making decisions, had good interpersonal skills and combined thoughtful reflection with action. Additionally, he paid careful attention to how his ideas could be implemented.

“As long as we believe that our leaders lack integrity, our expectations are likely to be mirrored in their conduct. Therefore, it is up to each of us to improve our own standard of leadership and thus raise our expectations of those who would lead us.”

“We need a new heroic ideal: the brave, truthful, non-violent individual who is in the service of humanity, resists injustice and exploitation, and leads by appealing to our ideals and our spirit. Such a heroic ideal is embodied in Gandhi.”

“We lose respect for our leaders if we do not approve of their conduct – public or private. Leaders who do not command our respect reduce the legitimacy of their leadership and lose our trust.”

“The qualities that Gandhi exemplified, such as personal responsibility, truth, love, respect for the individual and courage, have applications throughout our work and social lives.”

“Gandhi preached and – more importantly – lived the gospel of truth and nonviolence, and demonstrated through his life of service the oneness of all humanity. He reminded the world that the human spirit is indomitable and that courage and love are more powerful than force.”

Most importantly, Gandhi led his life governed by principles and values. His religion, which was fundamental to his life, led him to his key commitment: to “truth and non-violence and a life of service to others.” To this end, he committed himself to social and economic reform. The social reform that became his major focus was eliminating untouchability, the status assigned to those on the lowest rung of the Hindu hereditary caste system. He sought to bring better education, sanitation and public health to India’s villages. He promoted village industries, most notably spinning and weaving. He additionally sought to promote peace and harmony between people of different backgrounds and faiths.

In his approach to leadership, Gandhi did not adopt any symbols of power to raise him above the people he served. Rather, he sought to identify with the people he served by wearing a loincloth and committing himself to voluntary poverty. He believed in applying a single standard of conduct in his public and private life, based on his commitment to the absolute values of truth and non-violence. He felt these moral principles should be applied in all areas of activity, including “setting goals, selecting strategies and making decisions.”

The ideals Gandhi embraced are ones that everyone should adopt – the fundamental values of “truth, nonviolence, and service.” His life points the way to a higher standard of leadership based on integrity. To emulate him, you must:

1. Have a single standard of conduct.
2. Have a spirit of service to others.
3. Make decisions based on moral principles.

### Following a Single Standard of Conduct

Commonly, people today believe in having one standard of conduct for private morality and another for public behavior. However, in reality, we lose respect for our leaders when we don’t approve of their public or private conduct. They have less legitimacy as leaders and they lose trust with the public. They also have difficulty inspiring others.

By contrast, Gandhi embraced a single standard of conduct and felt that leaders should set a standard for others. To increase the legitimacy and respect for your leadership, you need to embrace this single standard of conduct. This means making five basic commitments that are at the root of achieving a higher standard of leadership:

1. Develop a basis for the single standard by committing yourself to absolute values – Look to the universal principles of proper behavior to guide your conduct. Such values, which stem from every religion and society, are based on the fundamental rule that you should treat other human beings as you would like to be treated. Like Gandhi, you should make a personal commitment to the truth and non-violence. For example, provide for truth in advertising, selling and marketing your company. Commitment to the truth will help you see things as they really are. This commitment to the truth and absolute values also will help you avoid the pitfalls that come from loyalty to an organization, such as overlooking the poor treatment of employees or defects in product quality. Put these ideals into action, as Gandhi did.
2. Acknowledge the ideal by committing yourself to the journey – Go beyond just believing in the ideal principles of what is right. Make a commitment to put this into practice in everyday life. Evaluate all your actions in terms of the “absolute values of truth and nonviolence” and increase actions that adhere to these principles. Follow a way of life based on continuous improvement and moral action, since this is

“Gandhi’s life was not governed by policies; it was governed by principles and values.”

“Gandhi’s life was driven by his religion: truth and non-violence, and a life of service to others.”

“While most leaders identify with the symbols of power to elevate themselves above the people they lead, Gandhi symbolized the people he was trying to serve.”

“Gandhi believed that moral principles had to be included in setting goals, selecting strategies, and making decisions.”

“the path to a higher standard of leadership.” Unfortunately, staying on this path can become more difficult as you gain more power and prestige, since you will encounter many temptations, such as the temptation to cut corners to make more money. Resist them and increase your commitment to stay on the path. Take a vow to impose the necessary discipline on yourself, in the way that Gandhi used vows to remain committed. You can make your commitment public to help you in sticking to your vows.

3. Develop the guide that will keep you on the journey by committing yourself to training your conscience – Use personal reflection to help train your conscience. Remain committed to the truth. Otherwise, you will only be rationalizing wrong and expedient behavior. A good way to start training your conscience is to apply the principle of truth to everything you say or do. For example, acknowledge your real reasons for doing something, such as acknowledging that you are lazy, rather than using “not having the time” as an excuse. Time for regular personal reflection is critical, since it will keep you on the path and sustain your spirit. It will help you do more quality work with integrity. This time for personal reflection is like having a meeting with yourself. Evaluate your actions against the absolute values of truth and non-violence.
4. Reduce forces that lead you astray by committing yourself to reduce your attachments to other things – Recognize that your attachments, such as to power, privilege and possessions can make it difficult to keep your moral standards high. Even if you feel committed to providing services to others, you could also have a hidden desire for recognition. It is possible to be successful and have high moral standards, as Nair found with many businessmen and women he met. He encountered people who didn’t measure their success by their position and who didn’t want ever-increasing wealth. Rather, they were committed to doing good work. Although voluntary poverty is extreme, you can establish limits on your needs and control your desire for ever-increasing wealth, which can be major factors leading to immoral actions. Also, you don’t want to think of power as an attachment and misuse it to gain even more power and privilege.
5. Be willing to stand scrutiny by committing yourself to minimizing secrecy – Be open about your ideas and conduct. Gandhi was always ready to say what he thought and did not avoid controversial issues. Reduce secrecy in your company because shared information – about strategy, financial performance and the company’s success – helps your employees feel like partners in the organization. Secrecy nurtures distrust, and openness promotes trust, since “we share information with people we trust.”

All of these guidelines require having the moral courage to pursue the single standard of leadership. This is the quality of “doing what is right and accepting the consequences.” This courage comes from identifying with the intrinsic good in yourself. The more you identify with this, the more courage you will gain. You also need this quality to stay committed to the universal code of conduct, which is based on treating others as you want to be treated yourself. For example, Gandhi refused to submit to unjust laws and wouldn’t retreat or retaliate when law-enforcement officials subjected him to violence.

### **Spirit of Service**

Even though leadership is always associated with power, the only legitimate goal of this power should be service. You should see yourself as a leader who seeks to serve others. Being a service-oriented leader doesn’t mean you always have to do what others want or that you must tell people what they want to hear. Rather, you should be committed to

“Gandhi’s life points the way to a higher standard of leadership, in which integrity based on a single standard of conduct is central, a spirit of service is imperative, and decisions and actions are bound by moral principles.”

truthful service, which is doing what is right and telling people the truth, even if it isn’t popular. For example, when Gandhi spoke at the opening of the Benares Hindu University in 1916, he told the maharajahs that there could be no salvation for India unless they stripped themselves of their jewelry and held it in trust for their countrymen.

Build your organization based on a commitment to service. Make others aware of this crucial quality and develop a core group to train others to serve. Develop a system to deliver service, and evaluate its performance by measuring how it serves. Take these five steps to reinforce your service commitment and to put it into practice:

1. Focus on meeting your responsibilities to others before you ask them to meet their responsibilities.
2. Emphasize “values-based service.”
3. Commit to personal service.
4. Understand the needs of those you want to serve by truly getting to know them and listening to them.
5. Reconcile power with service, so you see yourself as a kind of trustee, just as Gandhi thought of himself in serving the Indian people.

### **Moral Principles**

Finally, use moral principles to guide all your decisions and actions. To do this:

1. Establish principles of governance – Set up the constraints on your goals and actions.
2. Create integrity in the decision process – Use truth in gathering and interpreting data.
3. Change the criteria for decision making – Include truth, non-violence, the universal code of conduct, and the spirit of service.
4. Implement decisions within moral constraints – Don’t compromise your values in the name of expediency. You should remain completely committed to acting based on the highest leadership standards.

## **About The Author**

Dr. Keshavan Nair, a life-long student of Gandhi, has more than 30 years experience as a consultant on leadership development and strategic decision making. He is the author of *Beyond Winning: The Handbook for the Leadership Revolution*, and a graduate of the Advanced Management Program of the Harvard Business School.

## **Buzz-Words**

Absolute values / Higher standard / Public and private conduct / Spirit of service / Standards of conduct / Values-based service