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*Journal of Human Values* 2006; 12; 153

DOI: 10.1177/097168580601200204

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://jhv.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/12/2/153>

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# Wise Ways: Leadership as Relationship

DEBASHIS CHATTERJEE

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*This article describes leadership as the process of evolving adaptive cultures by relating to reality in new ways. Leaders are change artists. They bring about change by creating institutions and communities where people learn to relate to each other in novel ways. Wise leaders transform the quality of relationships within organizations. They ask: What are we able to create together? In a transformational system monologue becomes multilogue. The article further explores the wisdom traditions of the world that have shed light on four fundamental values for personal and organizational excellence. Finally, the author argues that the way towards personal and organizational excellence is to explore the converging ground of these shared values in the form of four interrelated questions: What is right knowledge? What is right action? What is the right way to organize? How do we transform in order to sustain life?*

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## Reality is Relational

Reality is relational. The components of any system can relate in countless combinations to produce different outcomes.

The same atoms of carbon can configure in different ways to produce coal or diamond. In a social system, such as an organization, people relate in unique ways, to create different cultures. Leadership is the process of evolving adaptive cultures by relating to reality in new ways. Leaders are change artists. They bring about change by creating

institutions and communities where people learn to relate to each other in novel ways.

M.K. Gandhi, who created a new reality of a mass movement in India against British imperialism, clearly understood the primacy of relationships. I read one of Gandhi's own observations inscribed in his *ashram* in Ahmedabad, India:

This world is inhabited by all kinds of people. They are isolated by land and water, religions, customs, habits. The mind and hearts of these people are much alike. Under sudden or stressed

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JOURNAL OF HUMAN VALUES 12:2 (2006)

**Sage Publications** New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London

**DOI:** 10.1177/097168580601200204

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emotions, they blossom forth or explode in riots, fights, dance, song and prayer. At such times, they become one mind, one heart. And the world vibrates with the intensity of their feelings, emotions, anger and laughter. (Chatterjee 2002: 86)

Gandhi saw the unity of emotions and feelings as the basis of integration of a whole country. He had an intuitive understanding of the subtle relationship that binds a large group of people.

Martin Luther King, Jr., integrated the large African American community in their fight against inequality. This was the basis of his leadership. He saw integration of mutually interconnected goals the very basis of human civilization. King said:

All... are caught in the inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality. (ibid.: 87)

Wise leaders transform the quality of relationships within organizations. They ask what we are able to create together. In a transformational system monologue becomes *multilogue*.

Wise leaders lead by distributing leadership throughout the organization. This is how organizations become enduring institutions. Wise ways of leadership is not about one leader towering above many, but about many leaders who are willing and able act towards one purpose. In a transformed organization leaders do not lead followers, they lead leaders. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu says, to lead people, walk behind them. He gives us the wisdom of authentic leadership:

The leader leads in a way  
That when the work is done

People say:

We did it ourselves! (ibid. 1998: 55)

## Wisdom Seeks Unity in Reality

The essence of wisdom is to be able to see unity in diversity and differentiation. The way of the wise is to see an inclusive relationship between a microcosmic system and a macrocosmic system, between the infinite and the infinitesimal, between the leader and the follower, between the self and the world.

The Upanishads, the precious body of ancient sacred literature of India, describes this relationship between our self and our world in simple language:

As is the human body  
So is the cosmic body.  
As is the human mind  
So is the cosmic mind  
As is the microcosm  
So is the microcosm  
As is the atom  
So is the universe. (ibid.: 11)

Just think of it: everything in our world is self-created. The world is bright because the retina of our eyes reflects light. The world feels warm or cold because our skin senses it as such. We recognize gravity because we can feel our weight. If we touch a piece of sandpaper with our hand it feels rough. This is just half the truth. What we experience is not just the sandpaper, but the resistance of our skin as it rubs against its surface.

What is true of our physical universe is also true of our psychological universe. Our psychological universe is a photocopy. Our mind is the original document. When we describe someone as jealous or generous we actually experience the states of jealousy or generosity within ourselves. The structure of the mind that recognizes jealousy

or generosity cannot be any different from the experience of these emotions. Our world is only a part of us and not apart from us.

## Attention Unites Knowledge into Wisdom

I remember a few lines written by a Latin American poet:

Stand still  
The forest knows where you are  
You must let it find you! (Chatterjee 2002: 2)

The ancient sages of India did exactly that. They did not run around in the world in search of truth. They looked for it in the stillness of their own selves. In the twenty-first century very few of us live in forests. However, we have to deal with our jungle of information. If we have lost ourselves in the wilderness of information, the only way out is to find our centre in the calm depths of a reflective mind. It is like searching for a misplaced object by quieting our mind rather than running around the room.

We must make peace with the forest to find ourselves in it. The fragmented world of information is held together in the wholeness of our attention. This attention knows the relevance of information. This attention puts information in its proper context and perspective. This attention brings us home to our own selves!

## Leaders Use Attention to Create Critical Connections

We have traditionally thought that change happens in society when a critical mass of people decides to change. I do not think critical mass is the primary cause for change. The real seed of change is the critical connection that people make with

their own selves. The world can be altered by a community of people who have connected with their own capacity for greatness. The world, indeed, makes way for those who believe in their ability to change reality.

The critical connection that wisdom traditions talk about is the combination of individual will and collective will. Our individual wills constitute the blueprint for our journey through the world. Our collective wills provide the energy to undertake this journey together. An ancient Indian seer describes this critical connection in a memorable verse:

You are what your deepest nature is  
As your nature, so is your will  
As your will is, so is your deed.  
As your deed is, so is your destiny.  
(*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*; Chatterjee 1998: 71)

The problem of differentiation between individual and collective wills is resolved when we recognize that despite our differences there is a seamless unity in the deepest recesses of human spirit. The Upanishads call this *dharma* (that law which holds us together). *Dharma* is the meta-system that connects individual systems with collective systems.

A fertile seed becoming part of a whole ecology is a good example of *dharma*. A single seed has the blueprint (or the meta-system) of a whole forest scripted inside it. However, to actualize this potential, the seed needs to mobilize its internal resources by making the critical connection with its inborn *dharma*. Then the seed connects with the energizing power of the soil, sunlight and water. Once this connection is made, one solitary acorn can create the destiny of a whole oak forest.

Anita Roddick, founder of the global cosmetic company The Body Shop International says: 'I did not create the Company just to invest in but the one I believed in' (Chatterjee 2002:15). While she

was the chief executive of The Body Shop, Roddick had a board above her office door that read: 'Department of the Future'. She visualized a future where she and her employees would volunteer to grow by serving their community. All the staff at The Body Shop were allowed paid time off, half a day per month, to take part in a community project of their choice. Roddick said that this enabled her staff to 'raise their sense of self' (Chatterjee 2002: 15). Anita Roddick's belief was nothing but an entrepreneurial seed that gave birth to a giant organization with branches around the world.

Lee Quan Yew, former prime minister and the architect of modern Singapore, said in a lunch interview with some of us at Harvard University, 'You can train a leader provided he is born as one'. He was responding to the question whether a leader is born or made. I was wondering whether leadership was a quality that can be thrust on a person from the outside or was it something that grew from within. I am willing to believe that leadership is not an object or a personality that one acquires. Leadership is a set of subjective principles like courage, dynamism and creativity that flows from within the self. Leadership is born when leaders see these subjective resources within themselves as greater than their circumstances.

### **Identity is the Leader's Relationship to Reality**

Wisdom tells us that a person grows rich not by what he has, but what he identifies with. One of the richest corporate leaders of India, J.R.D. Tata, lived in a rented house in Bombay till the last days of his life. Yet he was rich as he identified himself as a mentor and leader of entrepreneurs who generated great wealth for his company and his country. One of J.R.D.'s most successful companies, Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO),

used to advertise its products as: *We also make steel!* TISCO was true to J.R.D.'s identity as a trustee of talented people.

What really is identity? Identity is a subjective process that determines the following:

1. How we make our own meaning of reality.
2. The kind of choices we make in relation to our life.
3. The motives for our action.

Here is a story from Mahatma Gandhi's life that will illustrate the three aspects of identity:

While boarding a train one day, one of Gandhi's shoes slipped off and fell on the railway track. He did not try to retrieve the shoe as the train was already on the move. To the utter surprise of his co-travellers, Gandhi quietly took off his other shoe and flung it back along the track so that it could land near the shoe that was already lost. When a friend asked why he did so, Gandhi said, 'When a poor man finds the shoe that I had lost, he will possibly like to have a pair that he can wear'.

As the story would tell us Gandhi is not poorer because he has lost a shoe but he is richer by identifying with a poor man. We see here how Gandhi creates a new meaning out of the reality of a lost shoe. The choice he makes about what to do with the remaining shoe is unique to Gandhi's identity. (Chatterjee 2002: 39–40)

Like an archer sharpens his arrow and a carpenter sharpens his saw, a great leader sharpens her identity. Leaders develop their internal navigation system before they sail into the great seas of the world. This internal navigation shapes habit patterns, perspectives and world-views. The way to internal navigation is through reflection. The word *reflection* means to *bend back* or *curve back* or

*refer back.* Reflection is how we create a self-organizing universe. We have invented the mirror to look at ourselves. This invention comes from our psychological mirror that gives us our reflective capacity.

Reflection is not just a mental exercise. It is the process of engagement of the whole body-mind identity in the creative process. We can watch this process as we see a potter make a pot. As he kneads the clay with his own hands he becomes part of the circular movement that is the essence of his craft. As he shapes the clay on his wheel he internalizes the rounded-ness which is the quality of the pot. Thus, by internalization and reflection he becomes a master of his craft.

## Integration: The Key Leadership Process

Deep engagement, as in the case of the potter, is the starting point of wisdom leadership. The outcome of engagement is integration. A leader needs to integrate a diversity of human motives into a unity of purpose. In the absence of this process of integration, we cannot have a family, organization, society or country.

When leaders integrate with their human contexts, they create critical connections. They bring about a coalition of wills, not just a coordination of resources. The Berlin Wall was not brought down by military might. The former Soviet Union was not reshaped by precise political plans. In both cases ordinary people just expressed their willingness to be free. Leaders emerged among small groups of people who just wanted to be free. When a coalition of such wills made the critical connections, the seemingly impossible was achieved.

Very often corporations are integrated without any preplanned structures. Critical connections are forged between people. These connections snowball into vital human forces. The world's largest

organized information network, the World Wide Web, got created by people who just shared information, not because they were bound to, but for the sheer urge of sharing. One of the largest global airline alliances was forged between KLM Royal Dutch Airlines and the American Northwest Airlines in 1997. It was a mammoth operation that had to deal with synchronized schedules spanning 400 cities in more than 80 countries. The alliance was built not on legal foundations, but on the basis of a common aspiration.

The crisis of leadership today is the crisis of integration. There is no integration between goals and tasks; between principles and practice; between what leaders say and what they actually do. There is a crisis of credibility and of character. Political leaders over-promise and underperform. CEOs of corporations take home hefty pay hikes even as they downsize employees for poor financial results of the company. As a result, energy does not circulate between the leader and the follower. This is an extraordinary energy crisis that prevails in our organizations.

The crisis of integration comes from lack of integrity. David Gergen, who was media adviser to several US presidents, said: 'If leaders have integrity nothing *else* matters and if they do *not* have integrity *nothing* else matters'. (Chatterjee 2002: 89, emphasis original). Leaders have to achieve this integrity within their own self before they can hope to integrate organizations they lead. Real integrity comes from unity of intention and expression. Integrity flows from oneness of speech, thought and action. Great leaders lead with this kind of integrity, as this story from the wisdom tradition of Japan will tell us:

After Takihara, the great Master had passed away, his followers were recounting their own experience of living with him. One blind man who lived near Takihara's house whispered to a friend: 'Since I am blind I cannot see a

person's face. So, I assess a person's character by the sound of his voice. Normally when I hear someone congratulating another for some success or achievement, I also experience a hidden note of envy. Similarly, when condolence is expressed for the misfortune of another I hear the lurking satisfaction, as if the one condoling was glad that such a misfortune did not happen to him.' The blind man continued to say, 'In all my experience, however, Takihara's voice was always sincere. Whenever he expressed happiness, happiness was all I heard. And, whenever he expressed sadness I heard nothing but sadness'. (Chatterjee 2002: 89–90)

An act of integrity is like a small stone dropped in a quiet pool of water. The impact of the stone first creates a small ripple on the surface of the pool. Then bigger ones form around the smaller ones. There comes a point in time when the whole pool is filled with ever-widening ripples of water.

## **Leaders Forge Relationships through Shared Values**

Desh Deshpande, the Boston-based founder of the world's leading information technology company, Sycamore Networks, advises a would-be entrepreneur about the meaning of relationships in a successful entrepreneur's life:

Entrepreneurship is like the art of juggling. Your life is intense. You are trying to juggle with many competing priorities. Each aspect of business is like a moving rubber ball that you have to juggle with and keep moving. If any of those rubber balls falls down, you can expect it to bounce back. You can resume your juggling act again despite the lapse. However, there is one ball among the many which is made of crystal—not of rubber. That crystal ball

defines the movement of all your relationships—with your family and with people around you. Take care not to drop that crystal ball ever. Chances are, you may never recover what you have lost. (Based on personal interview)

Our relationships are a rich artwork of multi-layered meanings. This meaning-making process determines how we stand in relationship with objects, ideas or people around us. What we call our 'self' is merely a window from which we see and experience the ongoing narratives of life. When the awareness of our self grows, we enrich the narratives of our relationship with others. When I realize that I would be nothing without the contribution of my parents who gave birth to me and my teachers who educated me, I grow in my appreciation of my relationships with them. We create meaning through relationships. We demean ourselves when we exclude others through our tags, titles and labels.

Meanings are patterns of interconnection that hold the tensions of our relationships with people and ideas. They serve as frameworks for expressing our espoused values. For instance, in a capitalist society, the meaning of 'wealth' is understood in terms of financial or material prosperity. In a tribal society in Africa the number of people who come to a funeral determines the wealth of that person. In short, the more connections one makes in a lifetime, the more wealthy one is supposed to be.

In contemporary organizations people learn to work together, but they do not learn to live together. Living together requires life skills and values, not just quarterly targets. Organizations have discovered, to their surprise, that management by objective is not the best way to evoke best performances from groups of people. People perform not through common objective or goal, but through their shared subjective. Thomas Watson, Jr., reflecting on his IBM experience, found out

that the real difference between success and failure in a corporation was how well an organization helped people find common cause with one another. MBNA, one of the largest issuers of credit cards in the world, employs the following yardstick while hiring employees: 'Hire people who like other people'. The consciousness of a shared subjective is the essence of a human community.

Objectives lead people away from themselves. Shared values lead people towards themselves. Shared values enable people to co-evolve and reach their collective potential. They make organizations more sustainable. Human values have a generative capacity that fuels entrepreneurship within organizations.

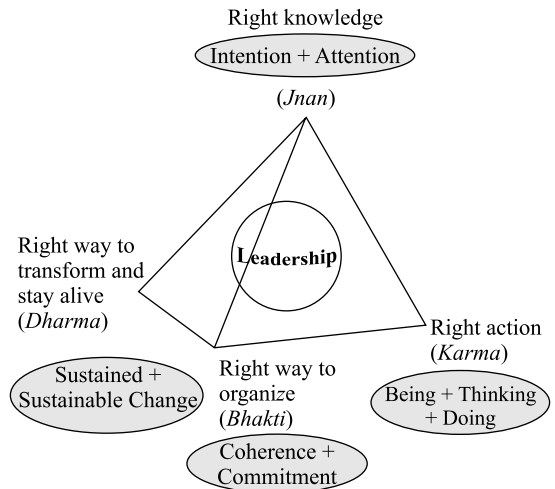
### Four Shared Values of Wisdom Leadership

Wisdom traditions of the world have shed light on four fundamental values for personal and organizational excellence. According to the classical Indian tradition, the dimensional values of life are: knowledge (*jnan*), action (*karma*), integration (*bhakti*) and transformation (*dharma*). These shared values can be expressed in the form of four interrelated questions (their relationship is shown in Figure 1). These questions are:

1. What is right knowledge?
2. What is right action?
3. What is the right way to organize?
4. How does one transform in order to sustain life?

The first dimension of leadership is right knowledge or *jnan*. Ancient Indians believed that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the self and the knowledge of the world. They said that the knowledge of the self needs to be cultivated before the leader acquires the knowledge of the world. To master archery, the archer first needs to sharpen his concentration before

**Figure 1**  
*The Wisdom Model of Leadership*



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his arrow. According to wisdom traditions, right knowledge is intention + attention. Intention refers to the goal of knowledge and attention refers to the process of learning.

Armed with true knowledge, the leader emerges in the field of action. The ancients understood that true action was not just motion of the body. They defined right action as the combination of three elements: being+thinking+doing. The harmony of consciousness, thought and action was, according to the ancients, the source of right action. This is another way of saying that the leader's being and thinking and doing must be in harmony for his actions to be effective.

The third dimension of leadership is the ability to organize well. Ancient wisdom knew that genuine commitment to an organization comes from *bhakti*. This word *bhakti* can be interpreted as love that endures. Ancients knew that the power that enables people to live and work together is love. Although the source of enduring love is spiritual, it is the same love that translates itself into commitment. The real power of organizational



commitment is 'heart power'. So the ancients said, encourage *hriday-vritti* (the culture of the heart) if you want your organizations to endure. *Bhakti* creates coherence and commitment—these are the glues that enable people to contribute collectively to a cause.

The fourth dimension of leadership is *dharma*. Literally, *dharma* means *that which holds together and sustains life*. *Dharma* is the law of life. All the other three dimensions of leadership—knowledge, action and commitment—have to be grounded in *dharma*. *Dharma* is the perennial principle that connects right knowledge with right action and right commitment. It represents the eternal law of life by which everything changes. All forms

of life change. Life forever transforms itself. It inhabits a particular form for a certain duration. When the form ages and dies, life migrates to another form. *Dharma* is the call to creative destruction of old forms—old habits, old patterns of thinking, old customs that are out of tune with reality. By staying in touch with *dharma* leaders transform and sustain life.

The relationship among *jnan*, *karma*, *bhakti* and *dharma* is illustrated in Figure 1. This relationship represents the holistic world-view of many wisdom traditions of the world that harmonize an individual's aspiration for greatness with the collective evolution of the greater system of which the individual is an integral part.

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