

LEADING WITH WISDOM AND BUDDHIST PRACTICE

by Peter van den Berg*

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the question: How does Buddhism relate to leadership that is beneficial for humanity? To answer this question, I use the concept of leading with wisdom. Leading with wisdom is defined as the type of leadership that effectively leads to the common good of the people involved and consists of three dimensions: charismatic leadership, moral leadership and strategic leadership.

Charismatic leadership appears to be the most effective leadership style in many situations, especially in crises. Not everyone can become a charismatic leader because some inherited traits are required, but Buddhist practice can help to become more charismatic. For example, through study and meditation, a Buddhist may be inspired by the Dharma, while inspiration is an important element of charisma.

Although charisma is a prerequisite for being an effective leader, this characteristic does not guarantee that the leader strives for the common good of the people. This indicates that for leading with wisdom moral leadership is also required. In moral leadership the leader transcends his ego and shows compassion for others. These behaviors are usually seen as the results of following the Buddhist path.

A leader might be charismatic and moral, but his or her actions can still not be effective because he or she has misjudged the effects. An

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example is Evita Peron, the former first lady of Argentina, who tried to fight the economic crisis by giving money to the poor. In contrast, Ghandi, who also was a charismatic and moral leader, was effective in making India independent from England with as less bloodshed as possible. The reason was that he had an open mind and knew the effects of his behavior, for example during his salt walk he acted with the strategy of nonviolence. So, in order to lead with wisdom, a third leadership style must also be exposed: strategic leadership. Buddhist practice stimulates the required openness of mind and the understanding of the cause and effects of behavior by analyzing karma.

The paper will show that all three dimensions of leading with wisdom are related to positive work outcomes and can be argued as related to Buddhist practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is in crisis! More and more countries are being ruled by authoritarian leaders who try to gain or maintain their dominance at the expense of human and democratic values. These leaders may also do something good for their country, but there are many possible negative effects, such as the brutal violation of human rights, the creation of tensions between groups and countries and the taking of impulsive and self-serving decisions. A common characteristic is that they have a big ego and do not have the inclination to listen to advisers and critics, but surround themselves by yes-men. Their leadership style also influences the style of other leaders in those countries and poses a real threat to the world community. As a Buddhist you can ask yourself: What can Buddhism contribute to the development of leaders who make a beneficial contribution to society? That is the question that is central here.

The paradox is that a big ego is often needed to become a leader, while Buddhism learns not to be attached to the ego. At the end of his life, the Buddha said: “Ananda, it never occurred to me that the monks are dependent on me or I am governing the Sangha. The teachings that I have given them and the rules of discipline that I have instituted can be their leader” (Maha-Parinibbána Sutta). Although the Buddha led his followers with humility, he trained the

other leaders to transform their followers into leaders. That is why leadership is also an important issue in Buddhism.

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A Buddhist view of leadership can not only promote the development of leaders in Buddhist countries, but it can also influence people’s perspective in other countries, which will influence future elections and appointments of leaders in politics and business. The aim of this paper is to present such a view. This will be done by first distinguishing the most important characteristics of a more wholesome leadership style and then showing how these characteristics relate to Buddhist practice.

2. LEADING WITH WISDOM

The leadership style that I would like to present is what I call *leading with wisdom* (see Van den Berg 2011). To understand this concept, let us analyze its two constituents: leading and wisdom. As will be shown later, charisma is the main characteristic of an influential leader. Therefore, *charismatic leadership* is conceived as the fundamental dimension of leading with wisdom. A leader must be influential, but it is also important that he or she leads people in the right direction, which is indicated by the wisdom part of the construct. Wisdom is a central concept in Buddhism, but it is also very complex. First, we need a definition of this concept.

1. All suttas referred to can be found at <http://buddhasutra.com>

Sternberg (2004:165) defined wisdom as “the application of intelligence and experience as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests, over the short and long term, to achieve a balance among adaptation to existing environments, shaping of existing environments, and selection of new environments”. The first element of the definition focuses on the common good and takes into account the interests of those involved. Wise leaders strive for the general welfare of society and not only for their own interests. This part of leading with wisdom will be called *moral leadership*. The second part of the definition of wisdom refers to the inclusion of long-term goals and the adequate response to the situation at the moment. This has to do with the strategic used. The third dimension of leading with wisdom is therefore *strategic leadership*. This yields three dimensions of leading with wisdom: charismatic, moral and strategic leadership.

The examples in Figure 1 may make clear why these leadership dimension are fundamental parts of leading with wisdom. First, to be a real leader and not just a manager or someone with formal power, a high level of charismatic leadership is required. The most important result of this leadership style is the support of many followers. Hitler, however, was a very charismatic leader with many loyal followers, but no one would call him a wise leader because he was responsible for the death of millions of people and for the destruction of much of Germany. Apparently he missed the right moral attitude.

Therefore, moral leadership is a second requirement to lead with wisdom. Supporters of a moral leader will find that justice is done for them and that their human rights are respected. Not all leaders who are charismatic and moral, however, make wise decisions. An example is Evita Perón, the former First Lady of Argentina who has set up a special fund for the poor to counter the effects of the economic crisis. The people who received money felt no more need to work, and the crisis was deepened.

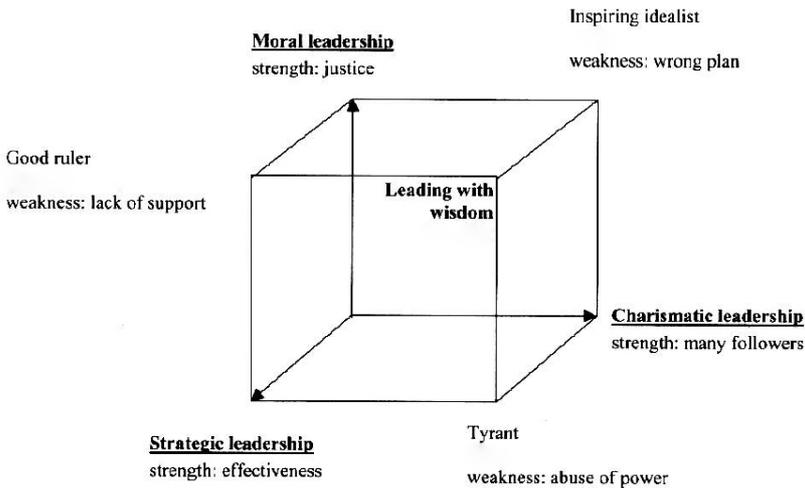


Figure 1 Leading-with-wisdom model

To be a wise leader, a third dimension is required: strategic leadership. A strategic leader uses the best means to achieve the set goal. An example of a leader who stood high on all three dimensions and can be called a wise leader is Mahatma Gandhi. He orchestrated the peaceful liberation of India from the United Kingdom without much bloodshed and prevented a civil war (Easwaran 1997). For example, he walked several thousands kilometers through India to the ocean where he would make some salt from the sea water, which was forbidden by the English. More and more Indians joined the walk and Gandhi taught them the attitude of nonviolence. The English soldiers tried to stop the walk by knocking down the Indians who offered no resistance. To make this public, Gandhi had invited the world press and the resulting scandal led to international pressure on the United Kingdom.

3. CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

Charisma is a Greek word that means 'gift by grace' and indicates that a leader has inexplicable powers that are not within the reach of normal people (Weber, Henderson & Parsons 1947). But in a way charisma is also a very common phenomenon and many leaders have it to a certain extent. The function of charisma is to get followers

and influence their behavior. It can be regarded as the basis of real leadership. According to the attribution theory of charismatic leadership, charisma is not a personality trait, but a perception of followers that occurs when a leader advocates a vision that deviates from the prevailing opinion, behaves in an unconventional way, sacrifices himself and takes personal risks (Conger & Kanungo 1987). Charismatic leadership can be measured with the Charisma Scale of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Avolio & Bass 2004).

Research clearly shows that charismatic leaders are considered effective. For example, Lowe, Kroeck and Sivasubramaniam (1996) conducted a meta-analysis and reported that charisma was strongly related to the perceived performance of the organization (mean corrected $r = .71$). Another meta-analysis by Fuller, Patterson, Heste and Stringer (1996) showed that charisma was strongly related to the perceived effectiveness of the leader by their subordinates, and also to how satisfied they were with their leader (mean corrected $r = .87$ and $.78$, respectively). Judge and Piccolo (2004) showed in their meta-analysis that transformational leadership, of which charisma is the most important factor, was strongly related to follower's satisfaction with the leader and their effectiveness perceptions (estimated true $\rho = .71$ and $.64$, respectively).

However, research findings also show that the effects of charismatic leadership are overstated by the subordinates because the relationships with more objective performance indicators are much lower. For example, Lowe et al. (1996) have shown that the correlation between charisma and organizational performance measures is weak (mean corrected $r = .34$) and Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that transformational leadership is only weakly related to objective job performance of subordinates (estimated true correlation $\rho = .27$). The lack of a strong relationship can be explained by the fact that charismatic leaders sometimes lead companies in the wrong direction. There have been many cases where charismatic leaders have ruined organizations and even entire societies, for example Jeffrey Skilling who brought Enron to bankruptcy. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) called this the dark side of charisma, and House and Howell (1992) have distinguished between positive and negative charismatics. Negative charismatics

have a personal power orientation, a high level of narcissism, a greater concern for self-glorification and unrealistic visions. Most negative charismatic leaders do not succeed in the long run because of fraud and self-enrichment and because they do not benefit their followers or their organization. Paradoxically, it is their charisma that prevent their actions and policies from being questioned (Sankowsky 1995). Offerman (2004) has discussed the problems that arise when narcissistic, charismatic leaders encircle themselves with 'yes men' and has recommended to surround such leaders with strong subordinates and to create an environment where criticism is acceptable.

4. MORAL LEADERSHIP

The difference between positive and negative charismatic leaders can be explained by their level of moral development. Kohlberg (1969) described six stages divided in three levels of moral development: the pre-conventional, the conventional and the post-conventional level. The pre-conventional level is characterized by egocentrism, meeting personal goals (Schminke, Ambrose & Neubaum 2005) and following rules only to avoid punishment (Ho, Vtell, Barnes & Desborde 1997). Leaders who are fixated at this level will easily break the law if they think that no one can catch or punish them. Leaders at level two, the conventional level of moral development, show respect for authority, help to maintain the social order (Schminke et al. 2005) and strive to comply with the rules to obtain the approval of others (Shaffer 2002). Few leaders reach the third level of morality, the post-conventional level (Ho et al. 1997). To reach this level, one must have a clear understanding of the general principles that underlie the rules of society and agree with them. An individual at this stage of moral development acts independently of the environment in determining good and evil (Shaffer 2002).

Leaders who have fully developed themselves in terms of moral reasoning have several positive effects on their subordinates. They can deal better with complex problems, act less for self-interest but more for the common good and encourage subordinates to surpass their own interests (Gibbs 2003). Level three leaders see the larger

picture and are more focused on the interests of all people involved, while leaders fixated at earlier stages of moral development are more selfish and demand strict obedience. For example, when Nelson Mandela was president of South Africa, he asked his black colleagues to support the national rugby team, the Springbokken, although the team was a symbol of apartheid. He did so to achieve reconciliation between blacks and whites.

Several studies have shown that moral leadership is related to relevant criteria. Brown, Treviño and Harrison (2005) developed the Ethical Leadership Scale to measure subordinates' perceptions of ethical leadership. Ng and Feldman (2015) found in their meta-analysis that this measure of ethical leadership was related to the job attitudes of followers, their own job performance, the predictions of task performance by their leaders, citizenship behavior and counterproductive work behavior, even after controlling for the effects of various other leadership styles. In our own research (Van den Berg 2009) we used Brown et al.'s measure to assess the moral leadership of 40 managers of four organizations and found that this measure, after correcting for the effects of charismatic and strategic leadership, was significantly related to job satisfaction ($\beta = .40.$) and satisfaction with leader ($\beta = .28$). In another study (see Van den Berg 2011), we used a short form of Gibbs, Basinger and Fuller's (1995) Sociomoral Reflection Measure consisting of 10 item to assess the moral leadership of 25 commanders in the Royal Netherlands Army. The scores for moral leadership, after adjusting for the effects of charismatic leadership, were strongly related to the number of organizational citizenship behaviours of their 306 subordinates ($\beta = .51$).

5. STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Leaders can be charismatic and moral, but they will not improve the performance of the organisation unless they have good strategies. Guillot (2005) defined strategic leadership as: "the ability of an experienced, senior leader who has the wisdom to create and execute plans and make consequential decisions in the violate, uncertain, complex and ambiguous strategic environment." In addition, Boal and Hooijberg (2001) noted that strategic leaders have the ability to change their plans.

Stumpf and Mullen (1991) indicated that strategic leadership not only has an analytic dimension, but also a human dimension. In a qualitative study (see Van den Berg 2011) we asked Dutch generals and lieutenants to give examples of strategic leadership behaviors, which were categorized into groups. Important categories were: long-term orientation, consulting experts, flexibility to changing situations and communicating plans with subordinates. These results suggest that strategic leaders not only focus on the analysis of the situation and make plans themselves, but also pay attention to the human aspect by consulting experts and creating support.

Once a strategy is selected, many leaders tend to become more and more tenacious, and become uncompromising about considering other alternatives. However, Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991) indicate that a leader with an open mind will remain flexible, whereas a leader with a strong power orientation will not deviate from the original strategy that might have been successful in the past. For example, during the battle of Stalingrad in the Second World War Hitler's generals advised him to withdraw his army, but Hitler refused to do that, and he lost a large part of his army.

Although strategy in organizations is an important research topic, strategic leadership as a style has never been studied in a quantitative research. Therefore, on the basis of the qualitative study mentioned, we developed a questionnaire consisting of 23 items to measure strategic leadership (Van den Berg, 2011). In a sample of 358 leaders of the Royal Netherlands Army, we found that strategic leadership was significantly related to subordinates' work motivation ($\beta = .34$), organizational commitment ($\beta = .37$) and job satisfaction ($\beta = .39$), even after correction for the effects of charismatic leadership.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS OF BUDDHIST PRACTICE

The previous sections have shown that leading with wisdom is a multidimensional concept consisting of charismatic, moral and strategic leadership. So, according to this concept a wise leader combines all three leadership styles. This makes clear why there

are so few truly wise leaders, while they are desperately needed in the modern society. The following shows how Buddhist practice can contribute to the development of each of these leadership dimensions.

Charismatic Leadership

A key characteristic of a charismatic leader is that he or she is strongly convinced of a certain vision. All great political, business and religious leaders have presented a vision in a way that impressed their followers. When the Buddha began to preach after his enlightenment, his friends were immediately impressed by his charisma and the way he talked. He had found a new reality that he preached to them with a strong conviction. All Buddhist teachers I met spoke with authority and persuasiveness. In the Soka Gakkai, the lay organization of Nichiren Buddhism, I saw new converts tell how their lives changed by Buddhist practice in a very convincing way. In general, being convinced of the Dharma can stimulate the development of charisma.

However, people with a strong conviction tend to become dogmatic, while Buddhism learns to see the relativity of things. Once a man fiercely claimed that no one could know anything with absolute certainty, after which the Buddha asked: “How do you know that for sure?” The Dharma should not be presented as an absolute truth, but as a life style for which one can choose.

Strong conviction is not unique to Buddhists and can be found in most political and religious groups. What is special for Buddhists that they combine their belief with modesty. For example, when the Dalai Lama was asked about his leadership, he said: “I am just a simple Buddhist monk.” In the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, the second lecture, the Buddha taught the principle of *anatta* or not-self stating that there is no permanent self. According to Buddhism such a self is an illusion and attachment to it is an obstacle for further spiritual development. Therefore, a Buddhist leader who is charismatic should also be modest.

It was noted earlier that the tendency to narcissism is the dark side of charisma. Narcissist leaders are selfish and want the glorification of their image, while modest leaders primarily focus

on the success of the organization rather than their personal success. According to Morris, Brotheridge and Urbanski (2005), modesty as a leader characteristic has several positive effects, such as supportive relationships with others, gaining a socialized form of power and exhibiting a participative leadership style. Charismatic leadership that is in line with Buddhism has the advantage to be less self-centered and more acceptable to many people. However, the down side of modesty might be that the leader is less visible in the larger environment.

Moral Leadership

Morality is a central to Buddhism and therefore moral leadership fits in the philosophy of Buddhism. In the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta or the Thread on the Setting of the Wheel of the Dhamma in Motion the Buddha set out the Noble Eightfold Path. This path is divided into three basic divisions and one of them is morality, consisting of right speech, right action and right livelihood. The Buddha applied morality to leaders by listing five characteristics an ideal ruler in the Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta:

- i. Atthannu (able discriminate good from bad)
- ii. Dhammannu (knows righteousness)
- iii. Mattannu (knows the limit of punishment etc.)
- iv. Kalannu (Knows suitable time for court work, pleasure and tour)
- v. Parisannu (Knows his assembly; as to what type of people are they).

Many religions encourage moral behavior, but Buddhism takes an extra step not only by learning to follow moral rules, but also by showing compassion for others. Compassion is more than charity. It relates to seeing the Buddha nature in the other individual and thereby stimulating the other's Buddha nature to rise. Based on the Lotus Sutta, Nichiren Daishonin stated that all people have a Buddha nature and that everyone can be a Buddha. He said, "The Buddha nature refers to the potential for attaining Buddhahood, a state of awakening filled with compassion and wisdom" (The Gosho Translation Committee 2006). While charity can be done

with feelings of pity where the other individual is seen as a victim, compassion provides inner connection and empowers others. That is why a leader with compassion respects other people and will not use violence against them. For example, Dzhengis Khan conquered and terrorized a large part of Asia and Europe with the Monguls, but after the Monguls were converted to Buddhism, their leaders used much less violence and became more peaceful.

Strategic Leadership

As previously demonstrated, a strategic leader not only has the ability to make a good plan, but also has the openness to change the plan on the advice of others or because of changes in the situation. Sometimes it is better to escape from a dangerous situation to service the greater good. The flexibility required is in line with the openness that Buddhism encourages by living in the here and now during meditation and in daily life. The Buddha said in the Bhaddekaratta Sutta: “You shouldn’t chase after the past or place expectations on the future. What is past is left behind. The future is as not yet been reached. Whatever quality is present, you clearly see right there, right there.”

The idea that a strategic leader must pay attention to changes in the current situation is recognized everywhere, although not always practiced. The contribution of Buddhism could be to take into account not only the outer conditions, but also the own inner conditions. Everyone has his own life history with good deeds and bad deeds. This behavior pattern determines future actions and is often called karma. Buddhists face their own karma and try to free themselves from it. As a result, they can better be open to the actual situation without the illusions that come from within.

An example is given by the old Hindu scripture of the Mahabharata that tells the story in which Arjuna, as leader of the Pandava’s on the battle field, is ready for a great fight. When Arjuna sees his relatives and old friends as enemies to him, he is filled with despair and cannot give the go-ahead for the fight. In a long dialogue consisting of the Bhagavad Gita (Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada 2014), Krishna, his chariot, declared to him the fight as a necessity and as a selfless action. After Arjuna received a spiritual liberation, he started the battle and won.

10. CONCLUSION

Buddhist practice can be argued for contributing to the development of leading with wisdom. Wise leadership is a complex concept and therefore difficult to train directly. However, by distinguishing the constituent elements of leading with wisdom, it can be easier to manage. The model presented consists of the three dimensions of charismatic, moral and strategic leadership. By encouraging these leadership dimensions prospective Buddhist leaders may lead with more wisdom.

The latent trait of charisma can be further developed by studying the Dharma, which may lead to more conviction, and by speaking eloquently about it. A problem for a Buddhist charismatic leader can be the accompanying modesty that makes the leadership less visible. Although other Buddhists will see and praise the value of this modest behavior, many other people will regard it as a weakness. Buddhist leaders must be aware of this and remain authentic.

Moral leadership can be developed by discussing moral issues with teachers and fellow-Buddhists. In addition to the application of moral rules, the value of real compassion with victims of unjust behavior should be emphasized. This does not mean that you only feel sorry for others, but that you appeal to their own strength.

Strategic leadership can be stimulated by learning to face reality and view the situation without being bothered by illusions. This requires not only full awareness of the outside world, but also of the inner world. A Buddhist should open the eyes for own karma and try to overcome it or at least not get caught up in it.

By combining scientific research into leadership and Buddhist philosophy, some advice is given that can be integrated in existing training programs for Buddhist leaders such as the Awakening Leadership Training Program of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB).

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