

A HIGHER
STANDARD OF
LEADERSHIP

Lessons from
the Life of
Gandhi

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*Focus On Responsibilities
Not Rights*

*Reconcile Power
With Service*

*Emphasize Values-Based
Service*

**THE SPIRIT
OF SERVICE**

*Make a Commitment
To Personal Service*

*Understand The Needs Of The
People You Wish To Serve*

Gandhi never held any official position in government, he had no wealth, he commanded no armies—but he could mobilize millions. People were willing to serve with him and for him because his life was devoted to serving them.

Many of us have come to believe that leadership is the attainment of power. But as long as power dominates our thinking about leadership, we cannot move toward a higher standard of leadership. We must place service at the core; for even though power will always be associated with leadership, it has only one legitimate use: service.

The importance of service to leadership has a long history. Ancient monarchs acknowledged that they were in the service of their country and their people—even if their actions were not consistent with this. Modern coronation ceremonies and inaugurations of heads of state all involve the acknowledgment of service to God, country, and the people. Politicians define their role in terms of public service. And service has always been at the core of leadership in the spiritual arena, symbolized at the highest level by Christ washing the feet of His disciples.

Service exists in the context of a relationship. In politics it is between elected officials and their constituents, in academia between teachers and their students,

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in religion between priests and their congregations, and in interpersonal relationships between loved ones. In business it is between companies and their customers, shareholders, management, and employees.

The ideal is selfless service—you see everybody as yourself and expect no reward. But if you wait until you can serve without any selfish motive, you may wait forever. Gandhi insisted that the best way to attain the ideal was to start on the journey: “If we all refuse to serve, until we attain perfection, there will be no service. The fact is that perfection is attained through service.”¹⁸

Service-oriented leadership does not mean you always do what the people want. Service must be conducted within the bounds of moral values—it must be *truthful* service. If you are committed to truthful service, you may not always tell people what they want to hear. You will have to tell them when you think they are wrong. For this reason truthful service is not always popular. Gandhi, for example, was unrelenting in his criticism of his fellow Indians for their practice of untouchability, their lack of cleanliness, and their tolerance of the extreme poverty and wealth prevalent in India.

In February 1916, Gandhi spoke at the opening of Benares Hindu University. Famous people came from all over India. Maharajahs, in their finery and jewels,

sat upon the speakers' platform, but Gandhi first focused his message on the students in the audience.

"I do a great deal of traveling," he said. "I observe the difficulty of third class passengers. But the railway administration is by no means to blame for all their hard lot. We do not know the elementary laws of cleanliness. We spit everywhere on the carriage floor, irrespective of the thought that it is often used as a sleeping space. We do not trouble ourselves as to how to use it; the result is indescribable filth in the compartment."¹⁹

Later, he turned his attention to the maharajahs. "I compare with the richly bedecked noblemen the millions of the poor," he said. "And I feel like saying to these noblemen, 'There is no salvation for India unless you strip yourself of this jewelry and hold it in trust for your countrymen in India.'"²⁰

Gandhi was not afraid to tell the people the unpleasant truths they had to hear to meet their individual responsibilities. Leaders committed to truth and service and not to power and popularity can do this.

As leaders we must build organizations committed to service. We must create an awareness about service, develop a core group who will train others to serve, develop a system to deliver the service, and measure the service to evaluate performance. There is nothing

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new in these tasks. Many business and volunteer organizations do all these things very well.

As an organizational leader, Gandhi performed all these functions effectively. But he also placed before us a higher standard—a standard based on an enduring spirit of personal service founded on individual responsibility and a moral imperative.

If the single standard is the foundation of a higher standard of leadership, the spirit of service is the material with which the structure must be constructed. In examining the life of Gandhi in the context of today's leadership tasks, I have found five steps that will help make service the centerpiece of leadership:

- Focus on responsibilities
- Emphasize values-based service
- Make a commitment to personal service
- Understand the needs of the people you wish to serve
- Reconcile power with service

To climb these steps requires no special talents, only the desire and commitment to serve.

FOCUS ON RESPONSIBILITIES

H.G. Wells once asked for Gandhi's views on a document Wells had co-authored entitled "Rights of Man." Gandhi did not agree with the document's emphasis on rights. He responded with a cable that said, "I suggest the right way. Begin with a charter of duties of man (both D and M capitals) and I promise the rights will follow as spring follows winter."²¹

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

The emphasis on duties and responsibilities is essential to developing a spirit of service. Most leaders meet the responsibilities related to the functional aspects of their positions very well. The challenge for leaders is to live up to their fundamental responsibility as human beings:

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to treat others as themselves. Leaders need to set an example that will inspire all of us to live up to our individual responsibilities in our families and communities and among our circles of friends.

Gandhi did not ask others to give up the practice of discrimination until he himself had lived among the untouchables and done their work cleaning the latrines. As he wore only handwoven handspun cloth, he could ask others to do the same. He offered nonviolent and truthful resistance to unjust laws, and he willingly went to jail. Consequently, he had the moral authority to ask others to follow.

As a business leader, you ask others to meet their responsibilities to shareholders by generating profits through reducing costs. You must set an example by reducing the costs you directly control. As a CEO, you have the responsibility to ensure that corporate staff costs are below benchmarked values before you ask others to reduce their costs to below industry standards. Whether you are a department head or a supervisor, the principle remains the same: meet your responsibilities before you ask others to meet theirs.

MEETING RESPONSIBILITIES WHILE
INSISTING ON RIGHTS

When we fail to meet our responsibilities to others, they have to insist on their rights. In some cases, these rights have to be written into law. The founders of the United States did not meet their responsibilities to women by denying them the right to vote, nor did they meet their responsibilities to African Americans by allowing slavery. Until recently we did not meet our responsibilities to those with physical disabilities. Each of these groups had to struggle for their rights and get them made into law.

Business leaders insist on their right to be free from government interference in the conduct of their business. However, the majority of government regulations have been put in place because businesses did not meet their responsibility, for example, to protect the environment or the safety of their employees. If business had met its responsibilities initially, it wouldn't have to spend so much effort arguing for its rights today.

Gandhi always believed that those being denied their rights also had to meet their responsibilities. He insisted that his fellow Indians meet their responsibilities to each other by working to end untouchability and poverty. This, he argued, would give them greater moral authority to ask the British for their own rights.

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Gandhi also insisted that his opponents had a right to courtesy and respect as individuals — to be treated as he would like to be treated. He never forgot the human aspect in any relationship. For Princess (now Queen) Elizabeth's wedding he sent a teacloth that had been handwoven from yarn he had personally spun. When he was in jail in South Africa, he made a pair of sandals for Field Marshall Smuts, who was responsible for putting him in jail.

This same principle can be applied to business relationships. Business leaders participate in labor negotiations, dealings with government regulators, and competition with other businesses. They should always try to treat individuals on the other side with respect and consideration.

Gandhi worked against all forms of exploitation and always tried to convince those who benefited from exploitation to realize that they were not meeting their individual responsibilities as human beings. He felt that this was not only consistent with truth and nonviolence but was the only long-term solution to exploitation. In his campaign for the wearing of handwoven handspun cloth, for example, Gandhi called for a boycott of foreign — primarily British — cloth. This caused a decline in exports from the English mills in Lancashire, resulting

in reduced wages and some unemployment. When he went to London for negotiations with the British in 1931, Gandhi insisted on visiting the mills in Lancashire, where he explained to the mill workers that the villagers in India needed to sell their own product to rise above poverty. He pointed out that average unemployment compensation in England was ten times the average Indian's wages. "Do you wish," he asked, "to prosper by stealing the morsel of bread from the mouths of the Indian spinners and weavers and their children?" The workers could see by the way Gandhi lived that his concern for the poor was genuine, and they showed him a great deal of affection. Gandhi was deeply moved and said he would remember those days until "the end of his earthly existence."²²

As a business leader, you need to make your employees aware of the challenges the business faces. Show them how you are trying to meet your responsibilities, and learn how they are trying to meet theirs. Then you may be able to find ways to help each other.

Gandhi demonstrated that meeting one's responsibilities in no way diminishes the intensity of the struggle for justice. It intensifies it, since it is all put in the same context: living up to our responsibilities as human beings.

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MEETING RESPONSIBILITIES CREATES BENEFITS FOR ALL

There are pragmatic reasons for all of us to focus on our responsibilities rather than our rights. A society driven by responsibilities is oriented toward service, acknowledging other points of view, compromise, and progress—whereas a society driven by rights is oriented toward acquisition, confrontation, and advocacy. If we meet our responsibility to treat others as ourselves, the fabric of society does not have to be threatened in the struggle to achieve rights.

In business the highest level of motivation occurs when all employees are driven by a sense of personal responsibility to do their work to the best of their ability. When this occurs, there is less need for supervision and there is more efficiency and greater productivity.

Today, however, the trend in all aspects of society seems to be toward rights and not responsibilities. The concept of meeting obligations and responsibilities because it is the right thing to do seems to be declining. We cannot expect to reach a higher standard of leadership if we do not recognize that meeting our responsibilities should be a way of life, not a way of gaining rewards. It should have its foundation in the family,

where parents and elders set an example for the children who will be the leaders of the future. It needs to be reinforced in the community and workplace where you, as a leader, set an example by focusing on your responsibilities and calling on others to meet theirs.

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EMPHASIZE VALUES-BASED SERVICE

The service that Gandhi espoused was based on a moral imperative: you serve your fellow human being because it is the right thing to do. The rewards for such values-based service are personal fulfillment and a sense of satisfaction.

The service most organizations deliver is designed to meet organizational objectives: it is based on policy. Policy-based service relies on effectiveness and external motivation. The rewards are advancement, money, and acclaim. When your commitment is based on policies, it is easy to reduce service when conditions change or short-term results are not favorable. An enduring spirit

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of service, one that will lead to a higher standard of leadership, requires a values-based approach.

SERVICE TO ALL

Gandhi, believing in the oneness of humanity, placed service within the context of service to all. "Personal service," he wrote, "when it merges into universal service is the only service worth doing."²³ For Gandhi, all acts of service had to pass the tests of truth and nonviolence, and service to any group had to benefit all of humanity.

In 1946 it was clear that Gandhi's political vision of a free, united India was not going to prevail. There were ongoing political negotiations about the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, and there was a threat of violence between Hindus and Muslims. The violence finally erupted in the province of Bengal, where Muslims subjected Hindus to violence, murder, rape, and looting. Hindus retaliated in the province of Bihar, subjecting Muslims to similar treatment. Many of Gandhi's political colleagues advocated using force to quell the riots, even though they had committed themselves to nonviolence during the struggle for independence. Under the new circumstances, they felt violence would be a more efficient policy. Gandhi disagreed. He immediately left the scene of political power and went

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to the riot-torn areas to comfort those who had suffered and to counsel those who had committed violence. He served all the people, and as his service was based on absolute values, it would not be compromised because the circumstances had changed.

Service to any group—shareholders, customers, employees, or society—should be done in the context of service to all. If you deliver superior customer service or increase shareholder wealth by mistreating employees, or provide excessive employee and management benefits and compensation by making the business uncompetitive, the business will suffer in the long term.

The CEO of a major Japanese corporation effectively explained this principle in his orientation speech to new employees. He would draw a circle on a board to represent the income of the company and divide it into segments, each segment representing the share of a constituency—such as management, labor, customers, and shareholders—and then explain how each constituency used to try to increase the size of its segment at the expense of another. He told them that he believed the purpose of each individual in the corporation was to increase the size of the whole circle, which could only be achieved by serving all constituencies. Then he would erase all the lines that divided the circle into segments.

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In serving many constituencies, there will always be short-term inequities. However, when the people are convinced that the leader's commitment to service is enduring and based on values, they will be more tolerant of the short-term inequities.

MAKING SERVICE A TRADITION

In business it is not possible to make service a moral imperative because of the system of rewards and compensation. Service can, however, become a cultural value or tradition in the business. When this happens, service becomes the expected thing to do.

This is one area in which there has been great progress in American business. Companies have given front-line employees the training, tools, and responsibility to provide good service, and they have acknowledged individuals and groups who provided superior service. Thus they have created a tradition. The Ritz Carlton hotel chain, L. L. Bean, Federal Express, ServiceMaster, Lexus dealerships, and many other companies have demonstrated that providing great service to customers is the path to business success. When a company becomes known for its tradition of service, it attracts and keeps employees who have the desire to be of service, and the tradition is maintained.

An enduring spirit of service, driven by values, will continue to give purpose to your life even when you are no longer in a policy-making position. President Carter, for example, left office with his popularity at a very low level, but his commitment to service based on his religious beliefs has given him a lasting purpose. He now helps build homes for the poor through Habitat for Humanity and works on mediating conflicts in developing countries. Without much fanfare, he has developed a life of service, based on his values, that has far outlasted the political power he once had. As a result, he has gained the respect of people everywhere.

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MAKE A COMMITMENT TO PERSONAL SERVICE

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When Gandhi left the scene of political power in 1946 to visit the riot-torn areas of India, he was seventy-seven years old. His schedule was brutal. He worked fifteen to eighteen hours a day and walked 116 miles in sixty days to comfort victims in forty-six villages. Here, in the midst of unspeakable savagery, was a frail individual with the courage to fulfill his commitment to truth and nonviolence. He asked those who had suffered to forgive, and, at the same time, asked those who perpetuated the violence to repent.

After touring the villages in Bengal on foot, he went to Bihar, Calcutta, and Delhi with the same mission. These years of service and suffering were considered by many to be Gandhi's greatest achievement. Through



his commitment to personal service, Gandhi brought stability to the province of Bengal and the city of Calcutta at the boundary of India and Pakistan while a force of fifty thousand soldiers could not do the same in the boundary province of Punjab. Lord Mountbatten, the Viceroy of India, referred to Gandhi as his "one man boundary force."

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MAKING A COMMITMENT

You and I do not have to wait for a great cause to make a commitment to personal service. It can start with those nearest to us: our family and friends. Once we feel the satisfaction of living up to our small commitments, we will do more.

In the context of political and business leadership, commitment to personal service requires performing the service through direct contact with the individuals receiving the service. This means "front line" work with customers, employees, shareholders, and suppliers.

Many business leaders have already embraced the concept of performing personal service. I have observed executives who spend time taking customer orders and listening to customer complaints; others go on the road with sales and service representatives to call on customers; and some respond to shareholder and employee

concerns personally. The challenge is to perform personal service on a regular basis.

Everyone in the organization, irrespective of position, can commit to one personal act of service every day. The issue is not lack of time but lack of spirit. It is a question of priorities. Surely you can cut down on some unnecessary meetings or your political and social activities to find time to engage in direct service to your employees, customers, shareholders, or community. The simple step of doing one act of personal service every day will keep you in direct contact with the overarching work of leadership: service.

Gandhi's commitment to personal service began in '897, when he was twenty-eight. He was living in Durban, South Africa at the time and had been thinking of how he might be of service to his fellow human beings. When a leper came to his door, Gandhi took him in, dressed his wounds, and started to look after him. Gandhi soon realized, however, that he could not do this indefinitely in his existing circumstances. He had brought his family with him from India and had established a legal practice. He placed the leper in a government hospital and rearranged his legal work so that he could devote two hours a day at a local charitable hospital for indentured laborers where he presented patient

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complaints to the doctor and dispensed medicines. "This work," Gandhi wrote, "brought me some peace."²⁴ This was the beginning of a life of service.

There are different levels of commitment to personal service. Some individuals, within the constraints of their other obligations, devote their energies to help others with no reward; others receive minimal compensation in return. These are the two groups of people we should revere. Unfortunately, many of us tend to honor those who give money, at no hardship to themselves, rather than those who actually provide service. If we would honor those who gave of themselves instead, we would increase the level of commitment to service in society as a whole. It is not how much we give, but how much of what we have that we give that determines the level of our commitment.

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RESPECTING THE COMMITMENT OF OTHERS

A major focus of Gandhi's life was to improve the lives of the poor who lived in the villages of India. Conditions in the villages were primitive, and literacy and knowledge of public-health principles minimal. Gandhi had walked in the villages, talked to the people, and seen the conditions for himself. He knew what had to be done, and he called on the more fortunate in India to devote some

time assisting the villagers improve their conditions.

However, he still felt he did not understand the difficulties of living and serving in a village. He had been “talking and giving advice on village work without personally coming to grips with the difficulties of village work.”²⁵ So, in 1936, at the age of sixty-five, Gandhi — India’s most prominent leader — went to live in a typical Indian village with no running water, electricity, or paved roads. This was more than a gesture; it was a commitment.

When you call on others to serve, you should understand what you are asking for. A leader committed service spends the effort to understand the difficulties of implementation. If you do this, those implementing your decisions will be more likely to support you because you will have demonstrated your respect for their commitment to service. When you combine your personal commitment with respect for the commitment of others, you will initiate a compounding effect that will create a commitment to service throughout the organization.

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UNDERSTAND THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE YOU WISH TO SERVE

Some months after Gandhi's departure from Bengal, a poor, old man from a remote village came to see one of the individuals who was carrying on Gandhi's work and asked when Gandhi would be returning. On receiving a vague reply, the old man said, "If *he* were here, he at least would have cared for us. Who else is there to feel our woes?"²⁶

To understand the needs of the people you serve, as Gandhi did, you must get personally involved, speaking and listening to the people, observing and sharing their experiences. Look below the surface and identify the hidden or unarticulated needs that others cannot see and create a bond with those you are trying to serve. Opinion polls, employee surveys, and market research

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can help you understand what people need. To achieve a higher standard of leadership, you must go further. *Feel*, not just intellectualize, the needs of the people whether you are in business, politics, or academia. This is what Gandhi did, and this is why a poor, old man in a remote village believed that Gandhi, a world leader, cared about him and understood his plight.

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PERSONAL OBSERVATION

Personal observation and a commitment to the truth allow a leader to see things as they really are: to understand the true needs of the people. Politicians must spend time listening to their constituents, business executives and managers must meet with employees and customers, and those who design and deliver goods and services must listen to consumers. Unfortunately, it is too easy to neglect this task or to rely on others to do it for you. But you must spend time among the people to get a true picture. If the people do not see your personal commitment to serve them, they are not likely to share with you information about their deepest needs.

When Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1916, he spent a year traveling around India and Burma by train. In 1927 he again toured India for ten months to promote his handwoven handspun cloth

program. In 1933 and 1934 he traveled throughout India again for seven months campaigning against untouchability. When he traveled by train, Gandhi rode in third class among the poorest Indians. He spent time with those who lived in poverty—visiting them where they lived, in their villages and huts—and gained first-hand knowledge of their lives. He dressed like them and arrived on foot—in humility and the spirit of service.

Through his personal contact with the people, Gandhi identified and personalized the real problems of Indian society: the practice of untouchability, the lack of interest in sanitation and hygiene, religious intolerance, discrimination against women, and the exploitation of Indians by Indians. Of all the political leaders in India at the time, Gandhi more than anybody saw independence in a broad context that had to include freedom from fear, discrimination, and poverty.

Gandhi's personal observations gave him another clear insight: Indians had lost their self-esteem. How else could a tiny country such as Britain rule a country like India for almost two hundred years? Gandhi saw the need for Indians to stop assuming that Britain was somehow culturally superior and to develop an appreciation for their own language, culture, and heritage.

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Personal observation and a commitment to the truth allowed—perhaps forced—Gandhi to see reality.

We can examine failures in business and the errors of government policy; we can argue about faulty strategy and tactics. But if we look deeper, we are likely to see one common factor: the leaders did not see reality. In the 1970s the automobile industry did not understand the customer or appreciate Japanese competition. During the Vietnam War, the United States did not accept that local Vietnamese support for America had declined. The leaders were not in the field with the people they were supposed to serve. Nor did they have a sufficient commitment to the truth to acknowledge the data they had. To succeed, you must understand the needs of the people—you must commit yourself to personal observation and interpret what you see with a commitment to the truth.

IDENTIFY WITH THE PEOPLE

Gandhi went beyond personal observation by sharing the experiences of the people he tried to serve. He lived among the untouchables and did their work. He lived among the poor villagers. When he went to Calcutta to calm the violence there, he lived among the Muslims in an abandoned house.

Shared experience creates the deepest understanding and the most lasting bonds of attachment. We see this among family members, coworkers, teammates, and soldiers. The people of India, especially the poor, felt this bond with Gandhi and recognized in him an individual who truly cared about their well-being. They saw the embodiment of all their religious teachings. But this was not some ancient, mythological figure; here was somebody *living* the talk.

The Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore captured the essence of Gandhi's hold on the poor: "He stopped at the threshold of the huts of the thousands of dispossessed, dressed like one of their own. He spoke to them in their own language. Here was living truth at last, and not only quotations from books. For this reason the *Mahatma* [great soul], the name given to him by the people of India, is his real name. Who else has felt like him that all Indians are his own flesh and blood?"²⁷

Gandhi set a standard that few of us may be able to attain. Nevertheless there are many small steps we can take to move along the path. In business, sharing experience means putting yourself in the customer's shoes, being a customer to your own company to gain the experience of how customers are treated, or working with employees on specific projects to understand their

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difficulties. Politicians could consider living with low-income constituents to understand the realities of being poor. There are many opportunities for sharing experiences, but it has to be done with humility and a spirit of service. Every step we take — no matter how small — to understand the needs of the people we strive to serve will increase our bond with them and move us in the direction of a higher standard of leadership.

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RECONCILE POWER WITH SERVICE

Gandhi had power, but he had none of the means we usually associate with power: wealth, official position, military might. His power was based solely on the willingness of people to follow his lead. They were willing to serve him because his life was devoted to serving them.

One of the great challenges of leadership is to develop harmony between service and the power that is necessary for the exercise of leadership. The ideal is power derived solely from service and used only for service. This is the power that lasts through the ages. It is the power that influences the spirit of humanity.

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politics to academia and family—there is power associated with positions in the organization. The measure of this power is your decision-making authority. In business this authority resides in setting the direction of the business, the assignment of work, the allocation of resources, and the advancement of careers.

Power provides the authority to convince people to act in a way that moves the business, or any organization, toward its objectives. You can exercise power through control or through service. Control motivates people through their attachments. In business it is exercised by supervising employees, determining their compensation, and offering job security. Service motivates people through their sense of personal obligation and a moral imperative. It is exercised by setting an example and creating the moral authority to ask others to take individual responsibility.

The greatest source of power in any organization is personal power: the character, courage, determination, knowledge, and skill of the individual members of the organization. To move the organization toward its objectives, we need to harness this power, not emasculate it. When leadership exercises its control through demagoguery and fear—exemplified in the extreme case by

Hitler and Stalin — individuals surrender their personal power to the leader. The organization then suffers from the lack of spirit, creativity, and commitment these individuals may have provided. By balancing control with service, the leader can exercise decision-making authority without diminishing the personal power of the individual.

RECONCILING POWER WITH SERVICE

Gandhi proposed the concept of *trusteeship* to reconcile the issues of power, wealth, and talent with service. He spent his life as a trustee for humanity. His talents, power, and influence were all used for the benefit of humanity, not for any personal gain.

Such an extraordinary level of commitment is not necessary to live a life of service. However, there is an important lesson to be learned from Gandhi's example. Power is given to you by others. It is not yours; it is in trust with you and it is a great responsibility. Power is to be used for the benefit of those whose trustee you are.

Many business executives think of themselves as trustees of the capital provided by the shareholders. But business leaders must also think of themselves as trustees of the labor provided by employees, of the

*The greatest source
of power in any
organization is
personal power:
the character,
courage,
determination,
knowledge, and
skill of the
individual members
of the organization.*



resources they use to provide goods and services, of the confidence that customers have in the product, and of the relationship the company has with the community and the environment.

Leadership is not a technique. It is a way of life — from the family to the highest office in the land. The power and privilege that come with leadership have the potential to corrupt a leader. But trusteeship allows a leader to reconcile power with the spirit of service.

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