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LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM MAHATMA GANDHI



"We must become the change we want to see" Mahatma Gandhi

Revered the world over for his philosophy of passive resistance, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was known to his followers as Mahatma, or "great-souled one". He began his activism as an Indian Immigrant in South Africa in 1893 and following World War One became the leading figure in India's struggle to gain independence from Great Britain. Known for his austere lifestyle and devout Hindu faith, Gandhi was imprisoned several times in pursuit of non-cooperation. He undertook a number of hunger strikes to protest the oppression of India's poorest classes. After the partition in 1947, Gandhi continued to work towards tolerance between Hindus and Muslims. In January 1948, at the age of 78, Gandhi was shot dead by a Hindu Fundamentalist.

Even after his assassination, Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence and his belief in simple living have been a beacon of hope for oppressed and marginalised people throughout the world. His actions inspired future human rights movements and his teachings remain relevant today.

Some of his lessons are below.

1. A Master Communicator

To appreciate Gandhi as a communicator, it is necessary to bear in mind the diversity of his audience, comprising various religions and castes, who often perceived their interests to

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be mutually conflicting. Gandhi eschewed rhetoric in favour of clarity and directness. It was this directness that makes his expression forceful. He also made use of rhetorical questions effectively. His language was polite, shunning harshness. He switched between Gujarati, Hindi and English, depending on who he was addressing. Gandhi appreciated that he needed to get his message to as wide an audience as possible. Gandhi ensured his message reached the mass population, through regional language newspapers. This meant most families were aware of what he was doing, as there was always someone of proximity who could read.

2. **“In a gentle way, you can shake the world.”**

Gandhi recognised that the actions he took to achieve his goal, needed to stand out to have an impact. The Salt Act stopped Indians from collecting and selling salt, instead of having to buy it from the British at a significantly higher price. In protest, Gandhi decided to March from Ahmedabad to the Arabian Sea, 240 miles away. Along the way, he and 60,000 people were arrested. However, the “Salt March” grabbed the world’s attention, putting the spotlight on India’s struggle for independence from Britain.

3. **“You can chain me, you can torture me, you can destroy this body, but you will never imprison my mind.”**

A significant factor in Gandhi success was due to his extraordinary persistence once he had articulated his vision. His dogged persistence in following a policy of non-cooperation inspired an entire country. His determination in following through on what he preached was often at a cost to his well-being and may have ultimately cost him his life.

4. **“I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles, but today it means getting along with people.”**

When Gandhi arrived on the political scene in India in 1915, his non-violent and pluralistic approach to religion and politics brought him into direct conflict with the issues of communalism and religious fanaticism. Gandhi believed the power of the nation was vested with the people, rather than religion. His equal respect for all cultures and religions implied the idea of mutual learning and inter-faith dialogue. Gandhi said that “I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible.” Gandhi knew that the efforts of Hindus alone would not realize India's independence. He, therefore, involved the Indian Muslims in the struggle. This approach helped him to effectively spread his message to the broadest groups within Indian society.

5. **“A ‘No’ uttered from the deepest conviction is better than a ‘Yes’ merely uttered to please, or worse, avoid trouble.”**

As leader of the Indian National Congress Party from 1921, he refused to participate in sporadic violence conducted by its members. As this violence went against his convictions, he announced the end of the movement. He continued to lead according to his own stringent beliefs despite opposition from a growing frustrated minority.

6. “If I had no sense of humour, I would long ago have committed suicide”.

Although he was known as a strict disciplinarian, Gandhi also possessed an infectious sense of humour, a quality that helped him withstand the rigour of the arduous journey of India’s struggle for independence. A good leader appreciates that for people to reach their goals their needs to be some laughter from time to time. Gandhi used humour as a tool to lift his followers in times of hardship. It made him more relatable, quashing the notion he was a deity-like figure.

7. “To believe in something, and not to live it, is dishonest”

Gandhi held integrity in such high regard that he would not advise anyone anything he did not do himself. A mother once brought her child to him, asking him to tell the boy not to eat sugar. Gandhi replied, "I cannot tell him that. But you may bring him back in a month.". One month later she returned, not knowing what to expect. Gandhi told the boy "do not eat sugar, my child. It is not good for you." Then he embraced him and returned the boy to his mother. The mother, grateful but perplexed, queried, "Why didn't you say that a month ago?" "Well," said Gandhi, "a month ago, I was still eating sugar." How can business leaders be successful in their values are not at the forefront of their minds? Integrity is the foundation of trust, and what followers most value in a leader.

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Contact us

Sydney p +61 2 9253 0950

Melbourne p +61 3 9653 9510

w www.blenheimpartners.com