



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### A BUDDHIST APPROACH FOR STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2015  
Received in revised form  
22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2015  
Accepted 17<sup>th</sup> December, 2015  
Published online 31<sup>st</sup> January, 2016

##### Key words:

Teachings of Buddhism,  
Leadership,  
Strengthening leadership.

#### ABSTRACT

This research aims to clarify the definition of leadership, levels of leadership, characteristics of each level of leadership, and the teachings of Buddhism that can be used to strengthen leadership. We also present a conceptual framework for using Buddhism to develop leadership. A mixed methods approach, using both sequential and parallel designs, was used. We found that leadership refers to the relationship between leader and follower in a relational process that transitions to a new world or a better future, whether one is a leader by position or by nature. Leadership is divided into three levels: (1) self-leadership, (2) team leadership, and (3) organizational leadership. The characteristics of leadership that reflect the "talent" of leadership is "the ability of leaders to think, to have, and to do." The teachings of Buddhism should be used to strengthen and develop the concept of leadership as perceived by Western scholars. Eastern and Western views of leadership are not in conflict; neither is "better" than the other; and they each have their own strengths. The researchers conclude by presenting a conceptual model for developing leadership called the H-E-B-M-H-F Model.

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**Citation:** Wirot Sanrattana, Forrest W. Parkay, Phrakrusutheejarayawattana, Phrakrupaladsamai and Paisan Suwannoi, 2016. "A buddhist approach for strengthening leadership: Implications for the west", *International Journal of Current Research*, 8, (01), 25863-25867.

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Buddhism has been the cornerstone of Thai culture. The teachings of the Buddha have been incorporated into Thai culture and are the foundation of life at all levels of society. Buddhism is reflected in the Thai way of life, language, traditions, and morals (Sribandit, 2013). In Thai school settings, "Buddhist teachings center on paying attention, being compassionate, experiencing freedom, and living together with others rather than some hoped for but never achieved vision of success" (Gates, 2005, 149). Buddhist practices are ethical and moral. As the Buddhist Society (2015), explains, "Not to do any evil; to cultivate good; to purify one's heart—this is the teaching of all the Buddhas." Though Buddhists value highly such virtues as loving kindness, humanity, patience, and giving, perhaps they value wisdom and compassion most of all. The idea of *ahimsa* or harmlessness is very closely connected with compassion—the desire to cause no harm to all beings including animals, plants, and the world in general. In addition, Buddhism places great emphasis on self-reliance; for example, the Buddha himself

told his followers not to believe without questioning, but to test his teachings for themselves. Buddhism is also a very practical religion and helps Thai people live their lives peacefully. Thai Buddhists try to practice Buddhist virtues actively in their everyday lives. The ultimate goal of their practice is to bring about the same "awakening" that the Buddha himself achieved through active transformation of the heart and passions and "letting go" of desires and attachments. The foregoing Buddhist practices, we maintain, provide sound guidelines for the practice of leadership not only in Thailand and other Buddhist cultures in the East, they clarify the role that leaders in the West can follow to create societies in which all people coexist peacefully.

### Purpose

Since leadership theories and research have been, and continue to be, largely developed in the West, our purpose in this research is to develop a model for using the teachings of Buddhism to strengthen the practice of leadership in the West. Toward this end, we will address the following questions: What is leadership? How many levels of leadership are there? What are the characteristics of each level of leadership? And, how can the teachings of Buddhism strengthen those characteristics of leadership? We will then conclude by

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presenting a conceptual framework for strengthening leadership, both in the East and the West.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

We used a mixed methods design that aims to boost confidence in the results of the research by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods as suggested by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009). Thus, we conducted our research in three phases between 2013 and 2015. During Phase 1 (2013), we conducted documentary research to answer the questions posed above. During Phase 2 (2014), we validated Phase 1 findings by using two sequential, parallel methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009): (a) in-depth interviews of ten experts in the field of educational administration and the field of Buddhism, and (b) focused group discussions with experts in the field of educational administration and the field of Buddhism. Lastly, during Phase 3 (November 2015), we validated our findings and the conceptual framework during a doctoral-level seminar at Mahamakut Buddhist University, Isan Campus.

## RESULTS

### Definitions of Leadership

Our analysis and synthesis of leadership concepts developed by Burns (1978), Rost (1991), Astin and Leland (1991), Komives, Lucas, and MacMahon (2006), Smith (2010), Small Biz Connect (2012), Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (2013), and World Press (2013) revealed that definitions of *leadership*, in general, emphasize two dimensions of this complex, multifaceted concept. The first dimension of leadership refers to *achieving success through others*. This view of leadership stresses the importance of people's desire to achieve a shared goal and ability to work together as a cohesive group. This typically requires an inspirational leader and a desire to create a "new" organization or a new, "better" world. The second dimension of leadership emphasizes *promoting change and building a better future*. This approach emphasizes the importance of addressing current challenging circumstances. It outlines steps that can be followed to transition to a new, better world. Any member of the group—even a person without the designated authority that comes with being named *the leader*—can exercise leadership. In short, every member of a group can be a leader, and everyone must be a leader. With respect to these two dimensions, the researchers maintain that both dimensions must be integrated. In other words, leadership refers to the relationship between leader and followers in which all work together in a relational process to transition to a new world or a better future. According to this view, one can be a leader by virtue of holding that position or by acting as a leader. With reference to these two dimensions, the following sections describe three characteristics of leadership: (1) self-leadership, (2) team leadership, and (3) organizational leadership.

### Three Characteristics of Leadership

#### Self-Leadership

Our analysis and synthesis self-leadership concepts suggested by Neck and Manz (2004), Cree (2006), Maxwell (2008), Rust (2010), Geisler (2011), Kruse (2012), Horne (2013), Catron

(2013), Lauber (2013), Bossong (2013), and Lalonde (2013) revealed that self-leadership characteristics emphasize developing the skills presented in the following table.

#### Team Leadership

Our analysis and synthesis of concepts suggested by Mariam (2003), Bhattacharyya (2011), Webb (2011), Radwan (2011), Andersen (2012), Braniac (2012), Five Star Development Inc (2013), Hall (2013), Scott (2013), and Anderson (2013) revealed that effective leaders develop teams through the following behaviors:

#### Organizational Leadership

Our analysis and synthesis of concepts suggested by Tuner (n.d.), Johnson (n.d.), Ashley (2009), Perkins (2009), Meister (2010), and DMin (2012) revealed that effective leaders demonstrate organizational leadership through the following behaviors:

The results of the analysis and synthesis of leadership—at the individual level, the team level, and the organizational level—identify elements that leaders should think, that leaders should have, and leaders should do in a variety of leadership situations. Taken together, these elements reflect the "talent" that leaders should have—in other words, *the ability of leaders to think, to have, and to do*. Our view is that leadership is a holistic, integrated, multi-faceted process—it is not fragmented, nor is it a single process that can be developed separately.

### Buddhist Teachings to Strengthen Leadership

According to Buddhist belief, humans consist of a physical and mental form. These mental aspects consist of feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. Together, with the physical, they are called "Khan 5." In terms of mental and physical health, change is natural; however, one thing makes humans different—"Karma." According to Buddhism, people are good or evil based on their individual actions. Good or evil karma or action is determined separately—no God or Buddha is involved. Thus, the teachings of Buddhism are intended to strengthen the "mind" by teaching the importance of good mental habits for living according to the law of karma. From the foregoing, in regard to self-leadership, team leadership, and organizational leadership, the researchers suggest that leadership depends on many factors. The factors are associated with the heart (mind), skills, competency, behavior, and so forth, in a manner that is holistic. Among all these factors, the researchers suggest that the "Soul of Leadership" is the beginning of the emergence of the skills, competencies, or behaviors—for example, when a Thai person says that "the mind is boss, the body is servant." A leader should always pursue a good mind—a mind that promotes progress, a mind that aims at changing, a mind of intention, a mind that is enthusiastic, a mind that moves toward success, a mind based on self-development, a mind of good wishes, a mind that is aware of the benefits of the collective, a mind of consideration for the benefit of the public—a mind based on these will inevitably lead to good leadership.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Self-Leadership**

• Self-discipline	• Self-reinforcement
• Self-awareness	• Self-reward
• Self-management	• Endurance training
• Self-observation	• Seeking responsibility
• Self-direction	• Awareness of social situations
• Self-motivation	• Relationship management
• Self-discipline	• Lifelong learning

**Table 2. Characteristics of Team Leadership**

• Showing confidence in the team	• Creating a work atmosphere for a good
• Providing advancement opportunities with a focus on the strengths of each member	• Understanding motivation
• Providing education and training	• Setting goals and planning activities for the good
• Expanding their own experience	• Taking ownership of tasks
• Eliminating what is disturbing	• Setting an example
• Demonstrating ambition	• Acting with integrity
• Helping others see how to achieve a better life	• Demonstrating a broad, clear vision
• Contributing to create something new	• Being enthusiastically committed to the positive
• Daring to change	• Seeking creative solutions
• Providing a stimulus for change	• Striving for excellence,
• Learning from the trial-and-error process	• Being a good communicator
• Empowering others	• Effectively negotiating and strengthening good relations
• Developing the potential of others	• Being open-minded
• Creating a “star team”	• Being a provider and serving people
• Upholding the motto “learn from mistakes”	• Displaying positive energy

**Table 3. Characteristics of Organizational Leadership**

• Setting a direction for the organization	• Demonstrating high morals
• Developing strategic plans	• Acting collaboratively
• Setting a mission and clear goals	• Providing a fair system of rewards
• Planning workshops that target concrete activities	• Using strengths to advantage,
• Evaluating all aspects of the organization	• Living in harmony with ethical values and the self
• Supervising staff	• Leading others with understanding and mercy
• Acting as a change facilitator	• Maintaining a positive attitude
• Conveying respect to all, not judging	• Communicating skillfully
• Acting as an advocate of members of the organization	• Motivating others to achieve greatness
• Building trust	• Willingly accepting and learning from failures
• Reviewing the organization’s mission	• Learning and developing oneself continuously

Thus, we believe that the teachings of Buddhism should be used to strengthen the concept of leadership and leadership development as perceived by Western scholars. Views of leadership in the East and West are not in conflict—one is not better than the other; each has their own strengths. Western views of leadership contain a variety of concepts and theoretical support. The teachings of Buddhism, we maintain, can add philosophical content and more comprehensive features to the concept of leadership. For example, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are two examples of fundamental Buddhist teaching that can strengthen leadership. The Four Noble Truths are comprised of the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path is comprised of right belief (in the truth), right intent (to do good rather than evil), right speech (avoidance of untruth, slander, and swearing), right behavior (avoid blame worthy behavior), right livelihood (to earn a living without

compromising the precepts), right effort (toward the good), right contemplation (of the truth), and right concentration (will result from following the Noble Eightfold Path).

### **A Conceptual Framework for a Buddhist**

#### **Approach to Strengthening Leadership**

To illustrate how the teachings of Buddhism can strengthen leadership, we will conclude by presenting a conceptual framework that consists of six metaphors based on different organs of the body. The following “**H-E-B-M-H-F Model**” is based on the integrative leadership characteristics previously discussed.

#### **H – Heart**

The heart metaphor is a matter of morality and ethics; it aims to pursue creative goodness that should be developed with the

teachings of Buddhism. It is based on the idea that "knowledge + action = power." It is not based on the idea that "knowledge = power," because there are people who know the principles but they lack correct action. To strengthen leadership through moral conduct is to use the power and commitment of expressive behavior, words, and actions. And the invisible part is specifically indicated in the decision making process in the mind, and this is based on the values and principles upheld. Thus, the leader builds trust in order to bring credibility and respect, establishes cooperation, creates a good atmosphere in the organization, and reflects morality and self-respect.

### E – Eye

The eye metaphor is a matter of looking far into the future, looking to strengthen a vision. The vision is inspiring, conveys an initiative, and keeps pace with events and changes both internally and externally. The eye notes both strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, which are developed based on well-known statements such as the following: "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other." "Great leaders are learners . . . leaders never stop learning." A leader must be a lifelong learner, and he or she must be fanatic about it." "Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers." "Learning anywhere, anytime, and anyone." And, "Not just reactive alerting, but more proactive and predictive alerting."

### B – Brain

The brain metaphor is a matter of intelligence. This process involves thinking skills at a higher level than recall, and it moves toward understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, and creativity. This is necessary for being an intelligent strategist who can convert a strategic vision to meet challenges and to inspire others. These skills that should be developed with the idea that it is "not just remembering, but more understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating or synthesizing."

### M – Mouth

The mouth metaphor is a matter of communication—communicating a strategic vision to others through a variety of channels. A great communicator uses both social skills and human skills and has the power to motivate. The leader understands that the "art of communication is the language of leadership" and "communication is the real work of leadership."

### H – Hand

The hand metaphor suggests that the leader is constantly moving as a tactician who patiently dares to try, dares to risk, dares to fail, and dares to reflect. The leader is a facilitator who uses his or her skills to motivate, to inspire, and to promote a practice that can transform into reality the vision and strategic skills, conflict management, team building, and motivation to influence. As a contributor, the leader uses skills, knowledge, and the personal experience of leadership to make progress through problem solving and decision making, creativity and

innovation, and self-development. These elements are developed with an understanding that leaders "do not tell people how to do things, [they] tell them what to do and let them surprise [them] with their results." and "leadership is action, not position." and "leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality."

### F – Foot

This parable is about a foot stepping forward. A leader does not stand still. Because leadership is for change or for a better future, a leader understands that leadership is a process that never ends. It is not an event occurs at a time and then disappears. People will follow a leader who is committed and who understands the following: "Change is the law of life, and those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future." "Everything is in a process of change, nothing endures; we do not seek permanence." And, "neither a wise man nor a brave man lies down on the tracks of history to wait for the train of the future to run over him." If a leader has features such as the preceding six metaphors, he or she is a complete leader. As researchers, we believe that individuals, groups, organizations, and society itself have many possibilities for perfect leadership. Leadership of this nature we call "Excellent Leadership." Such leadership has elements in the following order of importance: pursuing all the time, in both visible and invisible ways, a very kind and good life; inspiring with a vision; communicating social skills and motivating the human mind to a practice that transforms a vision and strategy into a reality; and demonstrating a commitment to change for a better future.

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