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## **Mahatma Gandhi as an Authentic Leader: A Narrative Autobiographical Approach**

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### **Abstract**

*Mahatma Gandhi was the architect of the Indian freedom movement from the British Empire. Employing nonviolent civil disobedience strategies, Gandhi forced the British to capitulate to Indian freedom demands. This victory inspired civil rights and freedom struggles across the world. The present article aims at exploring the leadership style of Gandhi through the lens of authentic leadership style, based on his autobiography, "The Story of My Experiments with Truth". Authentic leaders are true to themselves. A qualitative research design was employed using the narrative autobiographical approach in order to capture Gandhi's experiences and the meanings he drew from his life, that helped him understand his true self and which led to the development of his authentic leadership style. The article attempts to explore the various life events of Gandhi displaying authentic leadership style through the four parameters of self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, as well as internalized moral / ethical perspective. The paper further demonstrates how through life experiences, Gandhi personified authentic leadership. The paper concludes by pointing out that sharing life stories of great leaders like Gandhi can inspire present leaders in their journey of becoming authentic leaders.*

**Keywords:** Authentic Leadership, Balanced Processing, Internalized Moral Perspective, Relational Transparency, Self-Awareness.

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### **1. Introduction**

The corporate work environment today is perhaps more complex and filled with more change than ever before. Corporate ethical malpractices regularly make the media headlines which reflects leadership failings at multiple levels. Consequently, organizations are seeking leadership characteristics that could develop leaders who can translate core values into day-to-day behaviors and lead to a virtuous cycle of performance and growth. Leadership research in its search for these characteristics came together and made an attempt at capturing the essential meaning of all positive perspectives (Luthans and Avolio, 2003) and it resulted in conception of authentic leadership. Authentic leaders through their self-awareness, turn their life experiences into lessons that act as a guide for themselves to be transparent, ethical and balanced in their conduct (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Avolio and Gardner, 2005).

Diversity in India exists due to a mixture of numerous languages, sub-cultures, and religions. The idea of becoming "the self" and finding a purpose are grounded in Indian culture. It promotes

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individuals to discover their innermost true selves and translate that discovery into a meaningful life path. Numerous great leaders have influenced the destiny of India and their leadership characteristics can be examined carefully to inspire and guide leaders to resolve the present days problems.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, one such great leader is revered as the “Mahatma” (great soul) and the father of modern India. He is considered to be a role model for leading an ethical and moral life. Gandhi considered life to be a continuous journey, growing and learning from ‘truth to truth’ every day both in moral and spiritual status. For him honesty was a principle and he practiced Nishkam karma (self-less action) and self-restraint. This paper looks at the major life experiences of Mahatma Gandhi from the perspective of Authentic leadership. In the following section, we discuss the construct of authenticity, authentic leadership and its advancement.

## **2. The Construct of Authenticity and Authentic Leadership**

Authenticity is owning our thoughts, desires, choices, experiences and ways to know our own inner self (Harter, 2002). Hence, authenticity includes owning what a person really thinks as well as believing and behaving accordingly (Harter, 2002).

According to Kernis and Goldman authenticity is “the unobstructed operation of one’s true, or core, self in one’s daily enterprise”, (Kernis and Goldman, 2005, p. 32). Leadership authenticity and inauthenticity was first formally defined and operationalized by Henderson and Hoy (1983) and was followed by Terry in 1993. However, authentic leadership was popularized by George (2003) who called for a need to entirely reconsider leadership because of increased occurrence of corporate scandals and emphasized that leaders should personify integrity and deep sense of purpose (George, 2003). Authentic leadership “can incorporate transformational, charismatic, servant, spiritual or other forms of positive leadership”, (Avolio and Gardner, 2005, p. 329).

Authentic Leadership is defined as, “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development”, (Walumbwa et al 2008, p. 94).

According to George and Sims (2007), the Moral Compass or True North, is a positioning point which is based on values, motivation, things that are important for you and are sources of satisfaction in life. Some leaders are often not what they appear to be. Publicly, they may support something by their actions and words, but privately they may act and speak contrary. This difference reflects a lack of authenticity. More about authentic leadership development is discussed in the following section.

## **3. Authentic Leadership Development**

Varied events spread out during the course of an individual’s life helps in the authentic leadership development (Luthans and Avolio 2003; Gardner et al., 2005 and Shamir and Eilam, 2005). According to Avolio and Gardner (2005) it would be a mistake to think that authentic leadership could be developed through a structured formal training program. Rather, the training program is “life” and its associated experiences (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; George and Sims, 2007). However, Cooper et al (2005) claim that there are few leaders who do not require training to make them more authentic such as Gandhi and Nelson Mandela who were undeniably authentic leaders. However other individuals may need help in becoming authentic leaders. This paper examines how Gandhi’s life events helped him understand his true self. The authentic leadership style of Mahatma Gandhi is explored through the narrative autobiographical approach which is discussed in the next section.

#### **4. Research Method**

A qualitative research method was adopted to understand and make sense of the phenomena of authentic leadership development. Qualitative research design in the narrative tradition was found to be appropriate for this study. A narrative study focuses on “the ways humans experience the world”, (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990, p.2) and gives researchers insights into the phenomenon, (Creswell, 2012). Narrative research comprises many procedures, including data collection through collation of individuals’ stories, segregating their experiences, and chronologically delving into the meaning and impact of those experiences (Creswell, 2013).

The well-known narrative approaches include the following:

- a) A biographical approach in which the researcher collates the individuals’ life experiences.
- b) An autobiographical approach in which the subject of the study writes or records his or her own experiences.
- c) A life history approach which explores an individual’s entire life in multiple episodes.
- d) An oral history approach that gathers personal reflections of events from one or several individuals.

Although there are many narrative approaches, their different elements can be combined (Creswell, 2013), and the combination can cover the entire lives of individuals or specific life events (Lieblich et al., 1998). Leaders’ self-life narratives or autobiographies have been identified as very important sources (Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005) for knowledge management, communication (Forster et al 1999) and influencing others (Simmons, 2006). An attempt is made here to uncover and to describe the meaning Gandhi gave to his experiences and the authentic leadership developmental processes in his life as recorded in his autobiography (Gandhi, 1948) and thus, the present study is interpretive and descriptive by nature.

#### **5. Brief Profile of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)**

The great spiritual and political leader Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, was an important leader of the Indian freedom movement.

Gandhi got married to Kasturba Makanji at the tender age of thirteen. In 1888, he travelled to England to study law there and qualify as a lawyer. He took up a job in South Africa in 1893. Gandhi’s social service started early in South Africa during his tenure, where he taught English to Indians. He also made efforts to improve their living conditions despite continuous ethnic tensions. In South Africa, he organized (1906) demonstrations against anti-Indian laws by embracing the approach of Ahimsa or non-violent resistance and Satyagraha or insistence upon truth. Later, after his return to India in 1915 he followed the same path to fight the British rule and was also jailed numerous times because of his non-violent resistance. In 1932 he undertook fasting as a form of passive resistance against the social segregation of Dalits. Gandhi led from the front and marched in front of his followers in peaceful protests of the British imposed tax on salt in 1930, famously known as Dandi march. In 1942, he launched the “Quit India” movement. On January 30, 1948, Gandhi was killed by Nathuram Godse who could not come to terms with Gandhi’s firm resolve to make hostilities end with Muslims through non-violent techniques and by viewing Muslims as equals to Hindus. Countries across the world converged to pay their last respect to Gandhi on the day of his death.

As Gandhi had been a prolific writer his complete work was published in the 1960’s by the Indian government comprising of 50,000 pages in about hundred volumes.

## 6. Leadership Qualities of Gandhi in Relation to Authentic Leadership Style

In the following section, we discuss the leadership traits of Gandhi in relation to authentic leadership style constructs as defined by Walumbwa *et al.* (2008) which includes self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internalized moral / ethical perspective. The four constructs are illustrated in Figure 1.

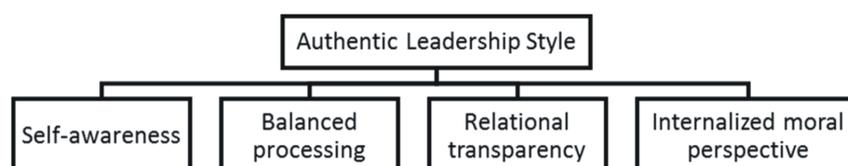


Figure 1: Constructs of Authentic Leadership Style

**1. Self-awareness:** It is the understanding of own self, knowing one's strength and weaknesses through experience and being conscious of the effect they have on others. It is the core of authentic leadership and needs time and efforts (Avolio and Wernsing 2008).

Mahatma Gandhi started the journey of self-awareness early in his life. From his auto-biography we get to know how he started accepting his mistakes and learned from them. He confesses that as a child he was afraid to step outside the house at night (Gandhi, 1948, p. 18).

When Gandhi was 15 he stole a bit of gold but he felt guilty after that. He confessed it to his father, asked for forgiveness and promised never to commit the sin again. His father said nothing but cried which taught him the lesson of Ahimsa. He says in his memoirs that this sort of calm forgiveness was not a normal behavior for his father.

Gandhi used his self-awareness to help his companions to stand up for their rights even if it was difficult. He truly believed in efforts in right direction to achieve the desired goals. He himself did the same and many times went on fasts for long periods, abstained from eating for many days as a means to enact change in India.

**2. Balanced processing:** Balanced processing refers to leader's regulations guided by internal moral standard without being influenced by others. It makes the leader's behavior and decision making in line with the internalized values. For Gandhi, it was dishonest to not live by your beliefs.

When Gandhi was in high school, he had a spelling test. He miss-spelt the word 'kettle', the teacher tried to help him, but Gandhi did not copy the correct answer from his neighbor's slate. He said, "I never could learn the art of copying", (Gandhi, 1948, p. 6). He used specific passive aggressive techniques to get what he wanted.

Gandhi was never after any powerful positions. After India attained freedom on 15 August 1947, Gandhi refused to hold any position in the government. He paved way for young leaders to lead the country.

In his ashram, visitors from the untouchable families were treated as equals and he persuaded other members of the ashram as well to receive and treat them as equals (Gandhi, 1948). This led to opposition and consequently, discontinuation of financial help to the ashram, but Gandhi, persevered and obtained financial help incredibly to run the same (Gandhi, 1948).

He said, "Service of the poor has been my heart's desire, and it has always thrown me amongst the poor and enabled me to identify myself with them", (Gandhi, 1948, p. 135).

**3. Relational transparency:** It refers to displaying the true self to others. Openly sharing the true feelings and thoughts with minimum display of inappropriate emotions promotes trust (Walumbwa et al., 2008). The leader openness with others gives them opportunity to share their ideas and opinions.

All followers of Gandhi were welcomed with open arms. They accepted both positive and negative qualities. Gandhi desired his followers to be genuine not only to themselves, but also to their peers. He promoted it by setting an example "I have known only one way of carrying on missionary work, viz., by personal example and discussion with searchers for knowledge", (Gandhi, 1948, p.237).

Gandhi never claimed to be perfect, he made mistakes and candidly regretted without any dread (Nair, 1994 and Mallik, 1948). His autobiography is full of instances where he acknowledges his mistakes as a child, husband and son. He openly shared his journey of learning and following the path of truth for others to follow.

**4. Internalized moral/ethical perspective:** It is the quality of leader to objectively analyze all relevant aspects of an issue/problem before coming to a final solution. A leader solicits challenging views and is open to ideas. It shows the standard for the moral and ethical conduct of a leader. Gandhi always cooperated with his co-workers and made plans in consultation with them (Gandhi, 1948). For example, when in Bihar he started a school, he did it after discussing it with his companions from that area (Gandhi, 1948) reflecting his focus on collaborative decision making. Gandhi once said that if the direction is wrong speed is useless. He also mentions that "Service without humility is selfishness and egotism" (Gandhi 1948, p.351).

Various other incidents highlight the authentic leadership style of Gandhi. Some of them are mentioned below:

- a. Once a mother requested Gandhi to convince her son to stop eating sugar. Gandhi asked the mother and child to come back in two weeks. After two weeks when both returned. Gandhi told him to stop the consumption of sugar. The mother asked Gandhi that why he had not done the same thing two weeks back. Gandhi answered that, he was eating sugar himself at that time (Marques et al., 2011). This again shows Gandhi's high moral values where he did not advise anything without following himself.
- b. Gandhi asserted that while he had constantly found that the merchants assumed that honesty was not possible to practice in business, he never believed that this was true (Gandhi, 1948, p. 111). Gandhi always fulfilled his professional duties with complete honesty (Gandhi, 1948, p. 321).
- c. Once Mahatma Gandhi's sandal fell down from train and he could not get back the sandal. Instantly, he threw the other sandal and tossed it close to the first sandal with the intention that, "the poor man who finds it will have a pair he can use", (Marques et al. 2011, p.154). Thus, he always thought for the good of others and worked for it.
- d. When Gandhi was required to wear the customary sacred thread, (a symbol of the high caste Hindu), he decisively declined saying, if the shudras cannot wear it, other varnas also have no right to adopt it. He considered it to be an unnecessary tradition and objected to the explanations for wearing it (Gandhi, 1948, p. 348).
- e. Gandhi took care of lepers (Gandhi, 1948, p. 179) in the age when lepers were shunned and ostracized.
- f. Gandhi offered to nurse the patients (Gandhi 1948, p. 258-262), at the time of deadly plague ignoring his personal safety being fully aware of the risks involved.

g. Gandhi was gifted expensive ornaments in South Africa but he decided not to keep it for his personal use but to give it away for the needs of South African Indians (Gandhi 1948).

As illustrated by the above incidents Gandhi, became an authentic leader by self-reflection which helped him to find his moral compass, and he lived by following it. Self-awareness, values, regulations and motivation are the sources of power for an authentic leader. We can conclude that Gandhi became aware of himself by accepting his mistakes, his shortcomings and by continuously evolving in terms of moral values. And it was not just enough for Gandhi to know what is right but it was more important for him to follow it.

## **7. Discussion**

One of the method of leadership development is by vicarious learning, it involves learning from role models (Popper, 2005). Vicarious learning is a “natural” method of learning; it can be embraced in schools and workshops of management. The narrative autobiographical approach to study the authentic leader development suggest, that examining the life of leaders like Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and others who have practiced authentic leadership style can help the upcoming leaders to be authentic.

Life instances as discussed in this paper suggest that Mahatma Gandhi was an authentic leader who practiced what he preached at every possible level. Gandhi was a celebrated leader, yet he lived the life of a common person who struggled all his life to be as true as possible. Leadership research needs to be based on reality by seeing the leader as an ordinary person who is imperfect and not as a heroic figure who has no shortcomings (Hay and Hodgkinson 2006). Gandhi, himself is an example as he believed that, “any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith”, (Prabhu and Rao, 1967, p 24). Thus, all leaders, regardless of their position, can follow an authentic leadership style.

Gandhi is more relevant in today's time than ever as people today are educated, ambitious but lacking in values that are important for overall development of the society at large. Today's leaders need to ask themselves that to what extent are they true to themselves? Authentic leadership remains important in today's difficult and challenging times ridden with corporate scandals.

Understanding the strengths of co-workers, giving them the right direction and connecting them to organizational goals is an important challenge faced by leaders (Avolio et al., 2004). Authentic leaders have potential to develop authentic followers for positive organizational behaviors which culminates in positive organizational outcomes (Khandelwal and Khanum, 2015).

Outstanding leaders create an authentic self with their values and character strengths. The authentic self is then projected through authentic leadership behavior that is consistent with their self-concept. Leaders can effectively lead only if they have their content, approach and vision right for themselves and for others. So, there is a need to develop authentic leadership style in leaders, as these leaders will have the ability to perform in challenging circumstances.

## **8. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research**

Gandhi's experiences clearly show that he practiced authentic leadership throughout his life. While this study has referred to his autobiography as the main source of data, there remains a lot of scope for research to explore his authentic leadership style by narrative analysis of his speeches. There can be uses of other sources and methods like content analysis, computer based program for political dialogue (Bligh, and Robinson, 2010). Gandhi motivated leaders and inspired agitations such as the civil right movements in United States, Anti-apartheid movement

in South Africa). Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Steve Biko inspired from the writings of Gandhi, developed their own theories of non-violence (Gandhi, 1948). Thus, leaders today could be exposed to the fundamentals of authentic leadership style by sharing life stories of great leaders which can truly offer them guidance in the life long process of being authentic.

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