Eight Buddhist Methods for Leaders

Linda Atkinson
University of Phoenix

Jerelyn L. Duncan
Arkansas Baptist College

Abstract

Leadership is a concept that has intrigued and puzzled researchers for centuries. Studies to address its complexities remain a hot topic of debate and controversy. In an attempt to create a productive workforce, leaders universally strive to adopt effective leadership practices to advance their work. Research of the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, may serve as a conduit to broaden an individual’s understanding of the importance of leadership. Incorporating these methods could assist any individual in maximizing his or her leadership potential regardless of personal religious affiliation.

What makes an effective leader and can an effective leader use Buddhist meditation techniques and teachings to enhance leadership skills? Many Western people consider those who aspire to follow Buddhist philosophy as passive, quiet people who sit in the lotus position meditating all day. There is actually a lot more to following Buddhist teachings than sitting on the meditation cushion. Buddhism is a very active way of life, requiring a great deal of effort internally and externally from those wishing to be peaceful and happy. Those who adopt Buddhist values are urged to develop renunciation, compassion, and superior wisdom through studying, meditating, and practicing.

How do these traits help modern day leaders hire, develop staff, and achieve business goals? Boyce, Prayukvong and Puntasen (2009) analyzed the Buddhist four Noble Truths and other Buddhist teachings for relevancy for Thailand business leaders. Even though Buddha taught 2,500 years ago, the concepts and examples relate well to business life today. Boyce et al. cautioned Thai leaders not to follow the example of Western science, which seeks technological advancements and the accumulation of wealth for its own sake as the solution to societal and personal problems. They affirmed Buddhism philosophy in action supports sustainability.

Marques (2012) asserted that Buddhist values could be used effectively as a psychological and ethical practice as opposed to a religious foundation in the workplace. Moreover, Foo (2012b) described the achievement of Steve Jobs, an incredibly successful entrepreneur, as partly attributable to the Buddhist path to enlightenment. An analysis of the Noble Eightfold Path to include right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration as described by Rahula (1959) will provide insight how these methods can be used to improve the performance of leaders in business today.

Too rigid a dichotomy between Eastern and Western cultures, however, can actually get in the
way of business solutions. Collard (2007) cautioned against assuming cultural stereotypes as predictors of business success in different international regions. Over generalization of cultural traits will not lead to successful outcomes. Organizational leaders must consider other important aspects as values, openness to other cultures, and degree of modernization.

Right Understanding

Buddha gave his teachings as practical advice for laypeople, not just for monks and nuns or practicing Buddhists. In fact, in some Buddhist traditions, many monks and nuns are required to hold outside, worldly jobs rather than living in a monastery (Rahula, 1959). What does co-opting Buddhist methods mean for leaders? Simply stated, if organizational leaders observe these practical teachings, absorb the teachings into the heart, and apply such teaching to their conduct, the character, morality, and ethics of business leaders will improve.

Marques (2012) stressed the common sense aspects of Buddhist thinking can apply to an organization separately from the religious beliefs of the employees and leaders. Marques stated the Buddha urged people not to accept blindly any situation or teaching. Only by becoming awakened out of the sleep of ignorance, can people excel and progress. In addition, the office environment can be transformed into a profitable environment where people love to go to work, where the leaders are eager to develop their staff to the best of their capability, and the goals of the organization are met.

Easwaran (1985) described right understanding as the knowledge that all is perception. All attitudes are formed by the mind. There are no external causes to happiness or unhappiness; these causes are all internal. In essence, happiness is a choice. Leaders should consider obtaining a right understanding as synonymous with the idiom responsibility, which involves managing one’s behavior through internal means (Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Responsible leaders maintain an inner compulsion to do the right thing in relation to others. Although, responsibility follows broad legal and/or moral principles, responsible leaders focus on explicit concerns of others, a duty to act on those principles, and accountability for the consequences of one’s actions. The concept of right understanding is very important for leaders today.

Often ineffective leaders are actively searching for someone to blame when something goes wrong and eager to accept the praise when ventures succeed. The concept of self-grasping is contrary to Buddhist teachings where the emphasis is directed outward to cherishing others. According to Genestre, Herbig, and Shao (1995), Japanese business people embrace collectivism and self-sacrifice for the good of the many as part of their culture. Discipline and hard work are prized ethics for Japanese workers. These ethics are compatible with the list of eight energy drivers complied by Traversi (2007) for Western leaders today which include presence, openness, clarity, intention, personal responsibility, intuition, creativity, and connected communication.

Conversely, effective leaders exhibit drastically different actions and behaviors from those used by ineffective leaders. According to Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991), effective leaders are different from ineffective leaders in certain key respects including leadership motivation, drive, self-confidence, knowledge of the business, honesty and integrity, and cognitive ability.
Leadership research indicates leaders maintain a strong aspiration to lead (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Goleman, 1998; Maxwell, 2012; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Leadership motivation entails the desire to lead and influence others. Longing to lead and influence is often associated with the need for power (Kirkpatrick & Locke). Drive encompasses five elements to include motivation, achievement, energy, initiative, and ambition. Leading others is often quite difficult (Kirkpatrick & Locke). Therefore, self-confidence plays a crucial role in leaders’ ability to make decisions and earn trust.

Effective leaders constantly gather extensive information about the company and the industry to stay ahead of the curve (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Honesty and integrity are desirable virtues for any individual, but have particular significance for leaders. With advancing technologies, today’s leaders must collect, incorporate, and interpret increasing amounts of information. There is no surprise that leaders need cognitive competencies to solve problems, make proper decisions, and devise appropriate strategies (Kirkpatrick & Locke). As effective leaders operate on a higher plane, they make people feel important and give credit where credit is due.

How many times have inventions and innovations risen out of failure? Kay (2013) stressed the importance of acknowledging personal deficiencies to be prepared for and to overcome failure. First, leaders must recognize failure is possible. Second, leaders must understand that failure is not the end of the world. People can learn from failure to improve methods and thinking. Kay wrote that being honest about one’s shortcomings and addressing the methods needed to overcome these shortcomings is the path to wisdom and success.

A combination of compassion and wisdom is sought here. Leaders need to possess compassion and exhibit compassion to their employees. One important step is to distinguish between guilt and regret. Guilt is a negative mind fostered by delusion. Regret is a positive mind that helps us improve. For example, if a leader has a hostile argument with an employee, the leader may think, I could have handled the situation better (regret) or I am a terrible, inconsiderate person (guilt). Embracing the power of regret is the beginning of right understanding.

Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) explained power has earned a negative connotation. Bennis and Nanus (1985) affirmed that power is a leader’s means of exchange, or the principal tool in which to accomplish work within the organization. Leaders cannot be effective without the use of power and influence. If leaders cannot change or influence behavior - what is the purpose of leadership? To know oneself well enough to identify one’s default influence style and have the courage to add other styles to use as people and situations demand is hard work (Nixon, 2005). Effective leaders do not recognize power as a competition magnet but as something produced and distributed to followers without diminishing from their own power (Kirkpatrick & Locke).

Collins and Porras (1997) in Built to Last urged continual self-improvement. Collins and Porras described the role that fostering deliberate discomfort to fight complacency has in organizations. The same can be said about leaders. How many times have leaders read something or listened to someone they respect and taken the advice to heart? According to Collins and Porras, leaders often question their inability to discern shortcomings or opportunities to expand their thinking capacity. Recognition of these critical moments is uncomfortable, but provides excellent learning experiences.
Right Thought

When one is able to renounce selfish motives and project one’s cherishing outward, right thought develops (Rahula, 1959). With right thought, one avoids violence in actions or speech to achieve desired ends. And wise leaders do not use people as tools, only to be discarded when the ends are achieved. Leaders know themselves, and so can better know the minds of others. Rahula emphasized such thinking capacity as a wisdom mindset, which develops in meditation. So often, people run from spending time alone and fill their every waking moment with distractions. Many Westerners cannot be one moment without texting, emails, or social networks. The constant busyness serves to distract people from their own thoughts. Westerners receive instructions early in life to make every moment productive. According to Maxwell (2012), most people undervalue the inconsequentiality of practically everything in their lives. Many people allow distractions to dominate their time and thoughts. The result is Western leaders have lost the ability to sit quietly and think. A loss of coherent, disciplined thinking can manifest in one’s conversation.

Allocating time to think in which the leader focuses on the needs, wants, and desires of followers allows the leader to broaden his or her mental capacity to converse more effectively (Rahula, 1959). A wise leader may seek to engage followers in light conversation during evening hours. A completely different dynamic transpires between leader and followers after formal working hours have ended. The building quiets down; the phone stops ringing, which presents a prime opportunity for the leader to build a relationship with the follower. With uninterrupted conversation, the follower can share with the leader personal and professional hopes, dreams, and aspirations. The exchanges between the leader and the follower may establish a platform to discover values. Peters and Waterman (1982) wrote that values are transmitted more through stories and conversation than through policy memos. Taking the time to share life stories with the team is an excellent way for the team to know what drives the leader both professionally and spiritually.

Right Speech

Saying what one means and meaning what one says is only part of right speech. Avoiding harmful or divisive speech is also essential to those who admire Buddhist values (Rahula, 1959). Employing right speech does not justify sharing information about others even if the information is true. If the words hurt someone’s feelings, revealing the information to others should not occur. Thoughtful leaders will address any professional shortcomings to the employee directly, not to the employee’s peers. Sarcasm is another trait to be avoided under right speech. While the person who makes sarcastic remarks might think him or herself very clever, the cleverness is often at the expense of someone else.

Another part of right speech is to rejoice in the virtues and good qualities of others, while avoiding idle chatter (Rahula, 1959). When someone asks an opinion of a colleague (looking for an occasion to a spread rumor), responding with a compliment about the person in question is an ideal way to defuse idle talk. Engaging in wholesome conversation earns leaders a good reputation. No one respects people who spread stories about others. Eventually, the stories will take a very negative tone that reflects badly on the carrier. Many people have lost jobs and
careers because they confided in the wrong person. The friend of today could be the competitor of next week. Wise leaders keep their own counsel.

**Right Action**

By implementing right action, a leader can be proud of all of his or her actions (Rahula, 1959). Right action helps leaders avoid any hint of sexual impropriety or favoritism among the staff. Virtuous conduct builds a solid, virtuous reputation. The teachings of karma emphasize that positive actions will generate positive effects and that negative action will result in negative effects. These effects do not ripen immediately. The ripening process could take months or years (or many lifetimes) to manifest. Rinpoche (1994) wrote that one cannot escape from the consequences of one’s karma.

Regarding karma, the Dalai Lama (1982) described the ten negative actions of body, speech, and mind to be avoided: “killing, stealing, misuse of sexuality…lying, speaking cruelly, slander and meaningless talk…attachment, harmful thoughts, and wrong views” (pp. 110-111). By practicing the opponents to these harmful actions, one generates positive, virtuous karma. According to Gyatso (1994), negative actions, especially when repeated, form imprints on the mind. These imprints make it easier next time to engage in the same destructive behavior.

Virtuous leaders do not steal anything. Schumacher (1999) stressed environmental concerns stating the use of non-renewable resources profligately is the equivalent of stealing from future generations. Valuing speed, efficiency, and low cost as ends in themselves are not sustainable ways to develop business interests. According to the Dalai Lama (1982), the idea of stealing includes reputation and expertise as well as material goods. The leader who takes credit for the creative ideas of the staff is stealing. The leader who accepts the glory and praise for achieving goals on the efforts of his or her staff without acknowledging their hard work is stealing. Effective leaders share the glory and the achievements with the staff (Banutu-Gomez & Banutu-Gomez, 2007).

To help combat the temptation of assuming all the credit, Japanese businesses use a collective method to make decisions, according to Genestre et al. (1995). While ideas may begin at lower levels of the company, empowered employees send the ideas upward through several stages of management for examination and revision before being approved and returned to the originator for implementation. The focus in Japan is on the follower rather than the leader as the Japanese are more comfortable with adaptation than creativity (Genestre et al., 1995).

The word virtue has gone out of fashion in the West. Many Western leaders consider virtue as unsophisticated. Perhaps the absence of virtue explains the reason so much violence and negativity exist in Western society. Rinchen (1997) outlined several ways to generate virtue, all of which can be applied to leaders of today. Leaders can help people learn a career and earn a living in a respective occupation. Being a mentor to youth is an especially valuable activity. Leaders can guide those who are confused by offering specific performance reviews, praising achievements, and correcting errors. Leaders should help their staff overcome obstacles and remove impediments to success. Leaders accomplish these tasks by being visible and accessible.
to their staff. Leaders provide freedom from fear of unemployment or ambiguous directions. Very importantly, leaders model and teach ethical behavior.

**Right Livelihood**

Some jobs just are not suitable for a virtuous person to obtain and pursue (Rahula, 1959). Schumacher (1999) wrote that the different views of modern economics and Buddhist economics are significant. Where modern economists consider work as something to be avoided on the part of the employee and consider employees themselves as an expensive means of production, Buddhist economists value work as an opportunity to work as a team with others and to develop one’s abilities. Automation whenever possible is the end result of modern economics, and fulfilling and character building work is the end result of the Buddhist path, according to Schumacher. Work should be enjoyed as a complement to leisure, not as a sacrifice of leisure time to be endured begrudgingly.

If one has any guilt about how one spends the work day, how the customers are served, how the staff is treated, and the safety or usefulness of the product and services offered, such promptings may signify time to change careers or employment. Many companies will not disclose inappropriate practices on the outset. Speaking to existing employees and leaders before joining a company serves as a wise caution. If during the interview, the hirers are evasive in answering the hard questions and reluctant to allow a prospective new leader to meet the staff, the company may not be virtuous or lack organizational integrity (Johnson, 2009).

One can examine the company’s products and services for intrinsic worth. Are people any better off for using the company’s goods? Is the advertising and promotional material true representations? Are organizational leaders honest or deceptive? How much repeat business is expected? Ask how much repeat business exists! Some companies take advantage of the gullible by manipulating them to buy their products at least once (Johnson, 2009).

Foo (2012b) described the last words of Steve Jobs as “Oh wow!” Leaders should strive to have this excitement and joy each day of their lives. According to Effron (2011), Steve Jobs stated during a commence speech at Stanford University in 2005:

> Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle. As with all matters of the heart, you’ll know when you find it. (p. 1)

**Right Effort**

Nothing worthwhile is achievable without effort. The effort leaders put into their spiritual development requires the same discipline to yield positive results as the effort put into the organizational setting (Rahula, 1959). The main opponent to effort, according to Gyatso (1980) is laziness. Gyatso admonished leaders to guard against laziness of indolence (seeking a life of ease), laziness of being attracted to what is worthless or non-virtuous, and laziness of discouragement.

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Laziness of indolence. Operating in the sphere of laziness of indolence inhibits leaders from striving for improvements (Gyatso, 1980). Successful leaders are most in danger of falling prey to the laziness of indolence. Goals are being met; the employees are content, so why worry? Why push for product and service innovations when business is booming? Although, an organization is making profitable gains, innovation is still important. Igartua, Garrigós, and Hervas-Oliver (2010) contended to sustain a competitive advantage requires organizational leaders to employ innovation management techniques. Employees need to feel they are part of a growing entity. Maital and Seshadri (2007) affirmed when leaders establish an environment in which employees are inspired and empowered, given necessary resources, and adequate time, ideas flourish. What can leaders do to promote a collaborative type of effort in themselves and their followers? Empowering leaders recognize ideas, reward achievement, mentor high performers, are visible and available to hear all ideas, visit the staff personally, do not depend on the department managers to bring forth employee concerns or ideas, and generate new ideas themselves.

Laziness of being attracted to what is worthless or non-virtuous. Think of the time-wasters in one’s day. Most Westerners’ days are filled with time-wasters. With mindfulness, a trait cultivated in meditation, leaders can make every moment productive (Rahula, 1959). Productive leaders have learned the secret of minimizing time spent checking emails and browsing social networks. By exercising discipline, leaders limit checking these forums only a few times each day. If used correctly social media tools are useful; however, excessive use of social forums is an enormous time and energy waster (Bowman, Westerman, & Claus, 2012).

A successful leader spends his or her day with people. Spending time together provides the platform for idea generation and relationship development (Thompson, 2009). There was one very talented lady who took a leadership position at a branch of her organization across the country. Seeking to ingratiate herself with her supervisor, she spent her first two weeks behind closed doors trying to figure out the management reports rather than getting to know her staff. The resultant negative attitude toward her by her new staff led to her being fired within four months. As demonstrated by the previous examples consumption of time by isolation or abundant activity, attractions to worthless or non-virtuous activities can yield devastating effects.

Laziness of discouragement. There are days when things go wrong. The customers are complaining, the staff is unhappy, the managers are quarreling among themselves. Moments such as these lay the foundation for laziness of discouragement (Rahula, 1959). One could understand why the temptation to go on vacation appears a viable option. Depression is contagious and can quickly manifest when leaders start to second-guess themselves and to question their abilities (Joiner, 1994).

It is a good idea for leaders to have a mentor to use as a reality check. The 19th-century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli stated the greatest good a mentor can do for his or her mentee does not entail just sharing his or her resources but inspiring the mentee to discover his or her own (cited by Stempinski, 2011). Good mentors encourage mentees to spend time in self-reflection as self-reflection can energize leaders to find new solutions (Swartz, 2003). Once a leader garners a proper perspective, he or she may shake off lethargy and involve the staff in problem solving processes.
Right Mindfulness. Mindfulness is very close to self-awareness as described in emotional intelligence (EI) literature. EI covers various competencies and expertise that help individuals to flourish when coping with difficult or stressful situations. Goleman (1998) explained that EI includes self-management, self-awareness, social skills, empathy, and self-motivation. If one cannot know oneself, how can one interact with or motivate others? There are many tests to take to gauge one’s EI. Many people have an over-inflation of their abilities regarding EI.

Self-awareness is a key aspect of EI. Mischel and DeSmet (2000) wrote about self-regulation in conflict resolution. Mischel and DeSmet alleged that people who regulate themselves and have strong willpower are actually freer than those who do not. Those who indulge themselves irresponsibly end up being prisoners of their own psyche.

Self-regulation can be learned. Habits of self-control or self-indulgence are formed over a lifetime. People have complete control of their words spoken to others. Leaders should be especially careful, as words are not retractable. Words cannot be taken back. To speak destructive words in moments of tension and conflict is a mistake. Mischel and DeSmet (2000) wrote it takes energy to restrain oneself from reacting negatively to circumstances and challenging people.

To operate most efficiently in the business arena, leaders must recognize their human framework. Knowing one’s self and receiving constructive feedback on one’s behavior may serve as a mechanism to obtaining such understanding, which may improve one’s leadership skills and decision-making capacity.

Right Concentration. Westerners live in a distracted society. Leaders are urged to multi-task, but the truth is that people can do only one thing at a time. Now, one can go back and forth between several times very fast, but is this effective? Japanese leaders have the advantage of Buddhist philosophy and training as samari warriors, training in concentration and achievement, according to Genestre et al. (1995).

Building up one’s ability to concentrate in meditation is an excellent method to increase concentration at work. Foo (2012a) asserted that meditation is an excellent way for all leaders to cope with stressful jobs and situations. There are many ways to concentrate off the meditation cushion including finishing tasks that are started before going on to the next task, enjoying silent moments, turning off the cell phone when driving and doing errands, turning away from the computer screen when people enter the office, allowing people to finish speaking before voicing opinions, and embracing solitude whenever possible.

Thomas (2009) asserted leaders who practice meditation gain inspiration to interact in ways that are more meaningful with others internal and external to the organization. Leaders should develop the ability to sit quietly for at least 15 minutes twice a week and to contemplate a meaningful issue (Rahula, 1959). Concentration should not focus solely on a business problem but on an issue with a spiritual component. Leaders should select an idea before sitting down. Physical movement should be avoided to allow one’s mind to relax and settle down. Then an examination of the issue from all aspects should occur to see if a solution appears. Once an
appropriate solution manifests, concentrate on the insights for the balance of one’s meditation experience.

Here is a good example. Imagine that the leader is having trouble with his or her management team. They are bickering, complaining about each other, and spreading negativity. The leader can take this issue into meditation. Leaders can ask themselves honestly how much of this negativity can be reduced. Then they should look for solutions to the problem that do not involve blaming the leadership team. Next, they should determine if their actions have provoked unhealthy competition. One insight concerning the situation may reveal the need to avoid speaking negatively about other team members. Another insight might disclose a need to obtain a better understanding of team members’ motives in an attempt to build trust.

**Conclusion**

As shown through the literature, everyone can take advantage of Buddhist teachings to improve one’s leadership performance and ability to lead others. These teachings include a combination of self-reflection, compassion for one’s staff, peers, and managers, renunciation of getting one’s own way all the time, and the wisdom that each day’s challenges are usually temporary setbacks. Leaders can avoid over-reacting to these circumstances and develop a positive, rewarding, and profitable organization.

**References**


