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Soft Leadership: *An Innovative Leadership Perspective*

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Abstract

A new style of leadership is needed in our interconnected, global, and technocratic world. “Soft Leadership” is the answer to this need. This paper explores the characteristics of soft leadership — a relationship-oriented style of leadership. It builds on four OB frameworks. It describes soft leadership with 11 C’s and illustrates each characteristic with examples. It discovers how the soft leaders adopt tools such as influence, persuasion, negotiation, motivation, recognition, appreciation, and collaboration for the collective good. It calls upon readers to consider how leadership insights acquired from this paper may be applied individually and organizationally to make a difference in the lives of others. The 11 C’s that collectively constitute soft leadership is a unique concept. This paper provides the location of soft leadership in Blake-Mouton Grid and is infused with snippets of dialogue from a recent international leadership association webinar, further enriching this concept.

Introduction

“A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.”
— **Mahatma Gandhi**

I have coined a new concept: *soft leadership*. I have authored a book on it and led an International Leadership Association webinar on this concept due to the interest it has been generating globally. During the webinar, the topic generated substantial interest among the participants who are experts in the domain of leadership. Dialogue ensued giving way to the following, more enriched concept of soft leadership.

What is Soft Leadership?

Soft leadership is leading through soft skills and people skills. It blends soft skills, hard skills, and leadership. It emphasizes the significance of precious human resources. It helps in managing the emotions, egos, and feelings of the people successfully. It focuses on the personality, attitude, and behavior of the people, and calls for making others feel more important. It is an integrative, participative, relationship, and behavioral leadership model adopting tools such as persuasion, negotiation, recognition, appreciation, motivation, and collaboration to accomplish the tasks effectively.

Soft leadership is not a type of submissive leadership nor does it constitute a lame duck leadership; rather, it is an assertive leadership where soft leaders adopt pleasing and polite communication to get the tasks executed. Succinctly, soft leadership can be defined as the

process of setting goals; influencing people through persuasion; building strong teams; negotiating them with a win-win attitude; respecting their failures; handholding them; motivating them constantly; aligning their energies and efforts; recognizing and appreciating their contribution in accomplishing organizational goals and objectives with an emphasis on soft skills. It is based on the right mindset, skill set, and toolset.

Soft Leadership – Four OB Frameworks

There are four different OB frameworks or models the organizations typically adopt: autocratic, custodial, supportive, and collegial (Cunningham, Eberle, 1990; Davis, 1967). The autocratic framework draws mostly out of McGregor's Theory X while the rest of the three frameworks portend from McGregor's Theory Y. Although organizations adopt these four frameworks, they predominately operate on one main framework as per their vision, mission, philosophy, principles, policies, and culture. In addition, organizations consider the type of the industry or the sector they are into, and above all, the type of its employees such as skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled employees.

In an autocratic framework, the superiors behave like autocratic leaders and the subordinates are at the mercy of superiors. Employees are hired and fired, and are at the whims and fancies of the employers. Employees don't appreciate this framework and, as a result, the performance is the lowest. In a custodial framework, employees are provided with job security, and are cared for by their superiors. Hence, employee performance improves in this framework. In a supportive framework, the superiors support the subordinates on all spheres. The employees are encouraged and empowered to participate in decision-making. They feel that they are part and parcel of the organizations resulting in improved organizational bottom lines. In the fourth framework of collegial, there is not much gap between the superiors and the subordinates as are all considered partners. Precisely, there is no leadership and followership in this framework; all are treated as partners for progress. This framework invites amazing responses from all stakeholders, thus enhancing organizational excellence and effectiveness. The soft leaders adopt collegial framework as they believe in partnership, not in followership.

Soft Leadership and Blake-Mouton Grid

Soft leadership is based on behavioral theory. Here is its explanation from the perspective of Blake-Mouton Grid (1964) – a behavioral leadership model: The Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid¹ or Leadership Grid coined by Robert Blake and Jane Mouton presents five leadership styles: Country Club Management, Authority-Compliance Management, Impoverished Management, Middle-of-the-Road Management, and Team Management. This Grid theory breaks behavior down into seven key elements which include Initiative, Inquiry, Advocacy, Decision-making, Conflict resolution, Resilience, and Critique.

X axis represents “concern for production” and Y axis represents “concern for people” ranging from 1 (Low) to 9 (High) (*see* Figure 2). The country club management (1,9) reflects yield and comply; the authority-compliance management (9,1) denotes control and dominate; the impoverished management style (1,1) reflects evade and elude; the middle-of-the-road management (5,5) indicates balance and compromise; and the team

¹ http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_73.htm accessed on September 9, 2012.

management (9,9) emphasizes contribute and commit. Soft leadership falls in the quadrant of Team Management. For soft leadership, 9 out of 9 go for “concern for people”; and 6 out of 9 go for “concern for production.” We can put it as 6, 9 for soft leadership approximately (that is 6 for production and 9 for people) (see Figure 1). Therefore, as per Blake-Mouton Grid, soft leadership falls more on “concern for people” and less on “concern for production.”

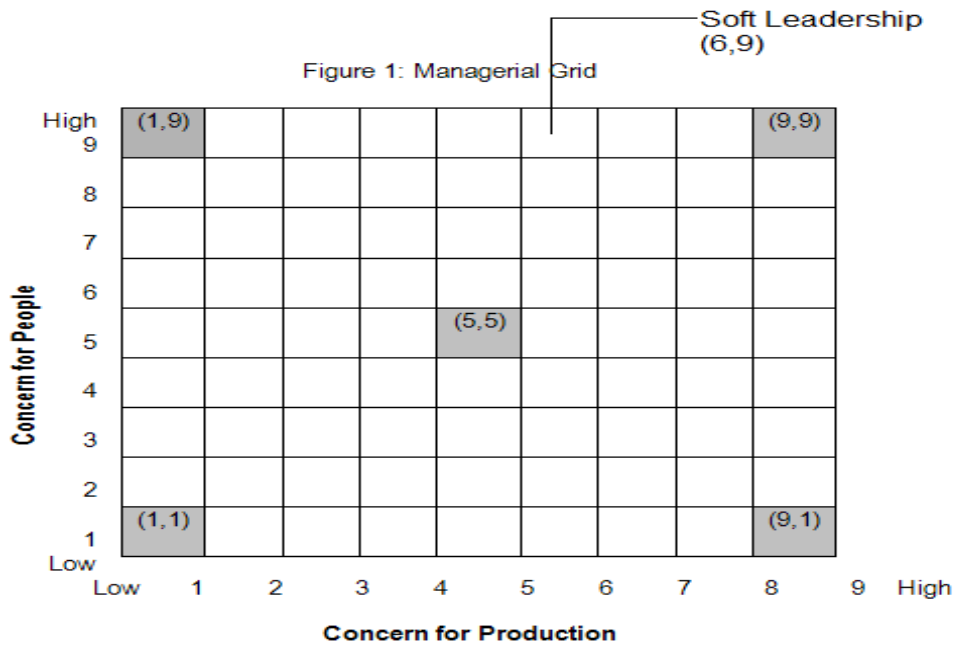
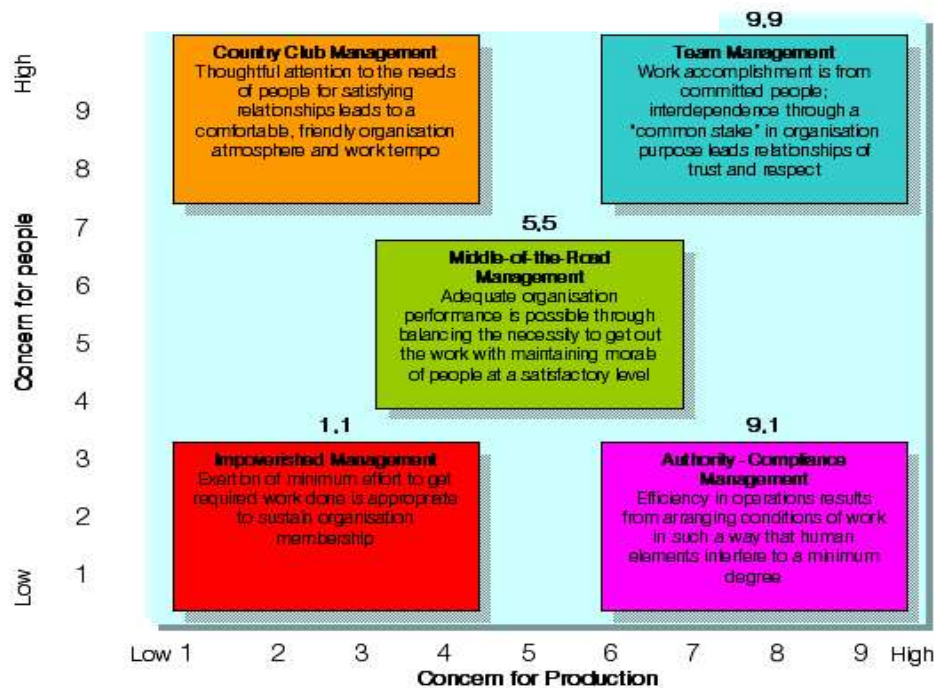


Figure 2: Leadership Grid



Soft Leadership - 11 Characteristics

Character

Warren Bennis says, "Successful leadership is not about being tough or soft, sensitive or assertive, but about a set of attributes. First and foremost is character." The collapse of companies like Enron, Lehman Brothers, and World Com reminds the world about the leaders who lack character at their core. People sometimes blame business schools for producing such leaders without any ethical and moral values. However, we cannot blame business schools for all the ills that happened at the business houses globally. Here the problem lies with the leaders who lack strong character resulting in such downfalls.

Character is one of the key components of soft leaders. It is through their strong character they lead their people by influencing and guiding them. People look at leaders who have an impeccable integrity and who walk the talk. Hence, most companies emphasize character during leadership development programs. For instance, companies like Hindustan Lever focuses on character wherein an individual puts his company's needs before his own. It has a strong human resource management system and draws upon a strong ethical system and principled character among its employees.

As a leader, you are always under the scanner. You need to set a right example through impeccable character in order to grow as a leader. People have the tendency to look at the weaknesses rather than strengths of others. Hence, it is essential to demonstrate strong character to lead from the front in order to influence people around you.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." Character is the key thing that differentiates good leaders from others. In fact, good character makes a person a great leader. What counts at the end of the day or your life is who you are, not what you have.

Charisma

One of the greatest characteristics of soft leaders is their charisma. Soft leaders make other people more important and valuable through their charisma. Charisma helps in connecting with others easily as people feel valued and pleased to talk with these leaders. Marianne Williamson says, "Charisma is a sparkle in people that money can't buy. It's an invisible energy with visible effects." The soldiers of Alexander blindly followed him because of his charismatic leadership. The soldiers marched toward victory during Second World War under the charismatic leadership of Winston Churchill. The Americans were influenced with the charismatic leadership of John F. Kennedy who gave a clarion call: *"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."*

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus said, "Charisma is the result of effective leadership, not the other way around." Charisma is something related to extraordinary powers bestowed through divine means. It is the rarest of the rare qualities which are usually acquired through birth. However, the research reveals that charisma is a skill that can be honed by training, experience, and practice. There is an urge in all human beings to be liked by others. Charisma paves the way for being liked by others. There are various components of charisma such as warmth, smile, grace, body language, voice, and confidence. A person is said to be charismatic when there is coincidence in all these components.

In 1947 Max Weber came out with three leadership styles such as bureaucratic, traditional, and charismatic leadership. Weber² defines charismatic authority as: “resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.”

Charisma needs substance than style. Have knowledge and content to speak and connect with others. Charismatic leaders are known for walking the talk. So is the case of soft leaders who have the passion to serve their people.

Conscience

Sophocles said, “There is no witness so terrible and no accuser so powerful as conscience which dwells within us.” Conscience is one of the major key components of soft leaders as clear conscience makes them stand out from other leaders. People expect leaders to be ethical and responsible. They also look up to leaders whose conscience cares for them. Conscience differentiates right from wrong. Leaders must have a clear conscience to convince themselves so that they can persuade others. If there is a chasm between word and deed conscience reminds the same. Mahatma Gandhi was always clear with his conscience. He unveiled the mistakes he made in his life in his autobiography. Every person makes mistakes but how many unveil and admit the same? In fact, it requires a lot of courage to reveal wrong-doings on their part.

Several leaders resigned because of their conscience. They left their high positions due to the call from their conscience. Hence, conscience is powerful. Leaders have to convince their conscience first to convince others. Aung San Suu Kyi underwent several trials and tribulations from military rulers during the house arrest as her conscience did not allow her to leave country. Mahatma Gandhi led the Civil Disobedience movement which was a non-violent protest against British. It was an act of conscience.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. aptly said, “Justice is a temporary thing that must at last come to an end; but the conscience is eternal and will never die.” Several problems and evils in society are the result of people compromising with their conscience. People may cheat others, but not their conscience. Conscience is always clear, and it is powerful. People have to be accountable to their conscience. People may do several wrong things for their survival or their selfish motives. Ultimately, they need to persuade their conscience which is always clear. It is a remainder for every human being. Hence, don't compromise with your conscience as compromising with conscience is equal to the death of a person morally.

Conviction

Conviction is another key ingredient for soft leadership without which soft leaders cannot lead successfully. It is their convictions that take soft leaders forward and make their people move forward toward achieving their goals. Walter Lippmann aptly said, “The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men, the conviction and the will to carry on.” There are leaders who died for their people due to their convictions. They never compromised and stood like rock despite stiff opposition and challenges and threats to their

² http://books.google.co.in/books/about/Charismatic_Authority.html?id=IDQfQwAACAAJ&redir_esc=y accessed on September 9, 2012.

lives. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Dalai Lama, and Aung San Sui Kyi are the symbols of sacrifices and convictions.

It is hard to imagine leadership without firmly showing one's convictions. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. firmly believed in his convictions. He did not appreciate the inequality of blacks from whites. He sacrificed his life for the cause of civil rights movement and, finally, became a martyr. People followed him because of his convictions. He could lead the movement successfully because of his convictions. He finally proved himself as a symbol of soft leadership.

Courage

Courage is an integral part of soft leadership. According to Aristotle, courage is the first virtue, because it makes all of the other virtues possible. Courage does not mean fighting physically with others. Courage doesn't mean killing people ruthlessly. Courage doesn't mean being aggressive all times. Mark Twain rightly remarked, "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear." Courage is about standing by your values and morals and principles and policies despite being pressurized by others and receiving threats from others. People often believe that courage as a characteristic is confined to military personnel alone. That is not true. Courage is essential for everyone. Courage is also a major key component for soft leaders because courage commands confidence from their followers.

People always want leaders with backbone. David versus Goliath is an amazing example where tiny David took on the mighty Goliath successfully. Few leaders proved globally that it is not the size but the strength counts. When we take the example of Yugoslavian leader, Marshal Tito he broke the back of Soviet empire. President Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came together to bring down the crumbling walls of the Soviet Union, giving hundreds of millions of people the chance to enjoy freedom. The leader like Lee Kuan Yew brought Singapore from nowhere to a prosperous country despite being dearth of natural resources. All these leaders made a difference to this world through their courageous leadership. What counts at the end of life is neither muscle power nor money power, but will power.

Communication

James Humes said, "The art of communication is the language of leadership." The success of soft leadership depends more on communication than anything else. It is through communication leaders express their ideas, ideals, and insights and persuade others to follow them.

Leadership is about handling people for accomplishing goals. While handling people communication becomes the core component through which leaders connect with others. As leadership styles are different to touch different people with different emotions, needs, egos, and feelings, there are different communication styles such as aggressive communication, submissive communication, assertive-aggressive communication and assertive communication. The leaders need to adopt assertive communication style ideally and other styles from time to time to make the leadership effective. Because of the key role communication plays while leading others, we can assert that communication is the sister of leadership.

Leaders can influence others through communication alone. Nitin Nohria observed, “Communication is the real work of leadership.” It is through the magic words leaders influence and inspire others to do the impossible things. Soft leaders demonstrate assertive communication so as to connect with others and carry forward them toward their goals.

Compassion

When we look at soft leaders like Lord Jesus and Buddha, we find them being filled with compassion. They changed the face of the world through their compassion. The soft leader like Mother Teresa helped lepers and poor through her selfless service. She made an immense difference in the lives of poor and downtrodden in India. In fact, compassion is an integral characteristic of soft leadership. It helps in connecting with others easily. People appreciate the leaders who care and touch them.

Compassion means caring for others by ignoring your own interests. Compassion is not weakness. Kahlil Gibran says, “Tenderness and kindness are not signs of weakness and despair but manifestations of strength and resolution.” Compassion is all about genuinely caring for your people. It is handholding them without expecting any returns. Compassion commands great inner strength, courage, and power. Compassion is a key to ministering to people. Compassion makes a lot of difference in making leaders as soft leaders. Soft leadership flows from the fountain of compassion.

The real leaders are the ones who encourage others and who take care of others and who empathize and demonstrate compassion with others. Only such leaders have the ability to influence and maximize the potential of their people and organizations.

Commitment

Soft leaders have another great characteristic of commitment as it makes them command respect among others. It is their firm commitment toward their causes that wins acclaim from others. If you want your life to be successful, you have to be committed. For instance, when you love your family, you need to be firm in demonstrating your commitment. Commitment consumes your time, but it builds longevity in relations not only in your family life, but also at the workplace. If you, as a leader, demonstrate your commitment, people trust you and treat you with utmost respect. It is rightly said, people don't care how big you are. They only care how committed you are. We find several families breaking due to lack of commitment. We also find teams getting crashed at the workplace due to dearth of commitment. Commitment is the bridge between the word and the deed. A firm commitment toward your word and work makes you as a successful leader.

Consistency

Consistency is another important ingredient for soft leadership. Leaders need to demonstrate their consistency so as to have profound impact on their people. People expect leaders to be predictable, responsible, and credible. Failure to demonstrate consistency might lead to credibility crisis.

Benjamin Disraeli observed, “A consistent man believes in destiny, a capricious man in chance.” Mahatma Gandhi maintained consistency throughout his life by sticking to non-violence and peace. Consistency is essential in every area of life. Consistency is essential in

investing our efforts to achieve significant results. Consistency helps in leadership branding and memory recall. When we talk of situational leadership, we recall Ken Blanchard; when we talk of servant leadership, we recall Robert Greenleaf; when we talk of emotional intelligence, we recall Daniel Goleman; when we speak about self-improvement, we remember Dale Carnegie. These leaders have excelled and branded themselves in their area of specializations through consistent behavior and leadership.

Consideration

Consideration is one of the major characteristics of soft leaders as soft leaders basically care their people. They respect their followers. Consideration includes recognizing the good work done by others and appreciating them promptly, liberally, and graciously. This is the trait of the leaders with people-orientation rather than task-orientation. The transactional leaders are fundamentally task-oriented while transformational and soft leaders are people-oriented with a big heart to care and consider others.

Consideration means how much and how far the leaders are sensitive toward their people. It means how much they empathize with them and how far they can go to handhold others. Consideration includes caring and respecting others with an empathetic attitude. It deals with stepping into the shoes of others and looking at the things from others' perspective. It makes people win the confidence of others as it helps connect with others quickly. Confucius rightly remarked, "Consideration for others is the basic of a good life, a good society."

Contribution

Stephan Girard said, "If I thought I was going to die tomorrow, I should nevertheless plant a tree today." We are what we are here today because of amazing contributions made by several soft leaders to this mankind regardless of their areas of interest. Contribution includes precious time, money, energy, ideas, knowledge, and assistance to the society. Genuine and selfless contribution takes true leadership. People respect the leaders who contribute their best to society without hankering for wealth, power, or prestige.

Mother Teresa rightly said, "We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop." Contributing to others can be in small portions. People often think that the contribution has to be in a substantial way. In fact, a small effort is better than no effort. A significant amount of small contributions makes up to a large amount of differences for society. It is rightly said, "All the whining and complaining in the world is not going to make a difference to the world. It will only drain you of your precious energy from doing things that do make a difference." Hence, contribute your best little by little consistently, and you would be amazed at the differences that you make to the society over a period of time.

John C. Maxwell in his book titled *Teamwork: What Every Leader Needs to Know* says, "People who take advantage of others inevitably fail in business and relationships. If you desire to succeed, live by these four simple words: add value to others. That philosophy will take you far."

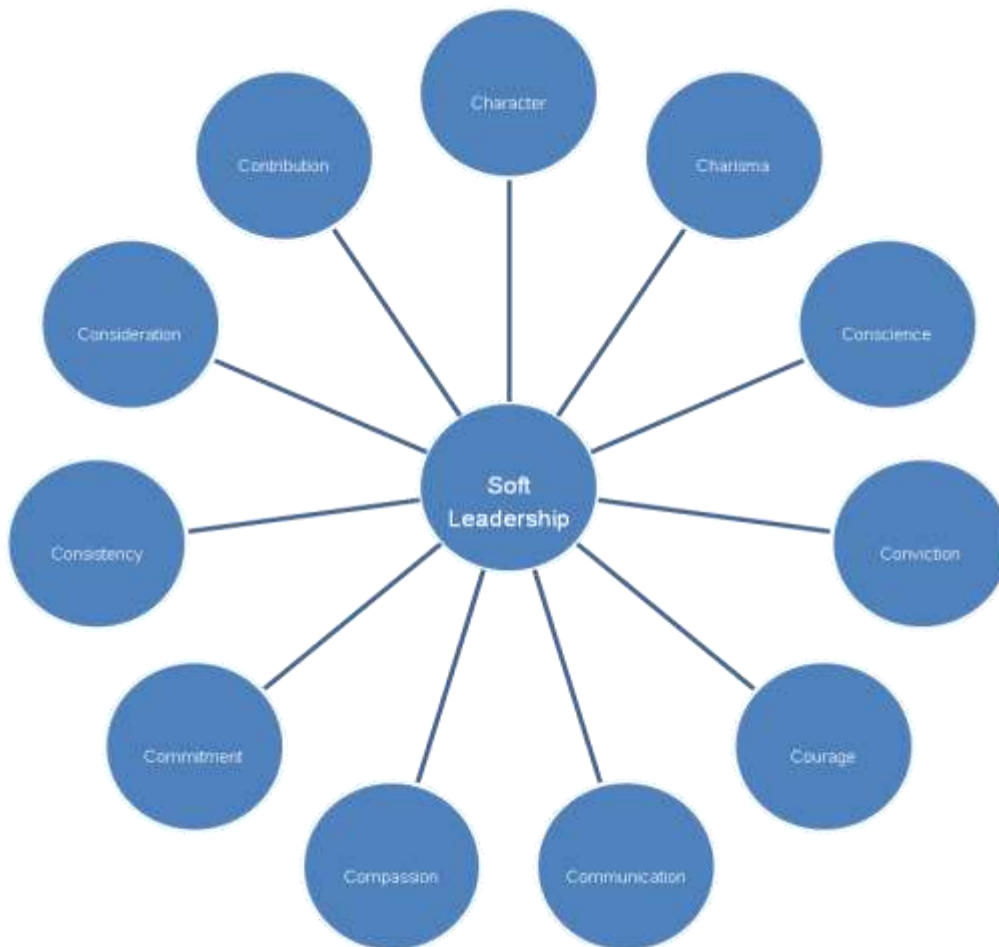
Don't expect anything in return when you think of adding value to others. Remember what goes around comes around in different form. If everybody contributes something for others

imagine the kind of the world we would live in, and the kind of the world that we would pass on to our next generation.

Apart from the character, charisma, conscience, conviction, courage, communication, compassion, commitment, consistency, consideration and contribution, the soft leaders must also possess other characteristics such as coordination, cheerfulness, comprehension, cooperation and connection to connect with others to become successful soft leaders.

Here is the diagram (Figure 3) connecting the 11 C's that collectively constitute soft leadership.

Figure 3



Conclusion

The rapid changes in technology have made the world a global village. People with diversified backgrounds and communities work under one roof. Their aspirations and expectations are growing. Adopting this leadership style meets their aspirations, and also addresses several global leadership challenges effectively. The days of hierarchical command and control don't work any longer. These are the days of communication,

negotiation, facilitation, coordination, collaboration, recognition, and appreciation to get the tasks executed successfully. People expect the leaders to be polite, pleasant, assertive, and supportive. Employees prefer to work in an egalitarian set up. They appreciate leaders with an integrative, participative, collaborative, and relationship-oriented leadership mindset. They want their leaders to become their counselors and coaches to groom them for their all-round success. Hence, companies started to focus on the slogan of “*employee first and customer second.*” Soft leadership emphasizes concern for people, i.e., on employees who are the precious human resources. Hence, soft leadership is the need of the hour to give a soft touch to people who in turn give real touch to customers through dedication and discipline.

Remember that leadership should not be self-centered but should be centered on others. Leadership is not a badge of honor, but a job involving responsibility toward people. Leaders spend three-fourths of their time with people. Hence, they must care for the needs and concerns of the people to establish credibility and influence them, and to lead from the front. Above all, it is the age of partnership, not followership.

We have enough leadership styles such as autocratic, democratic, delegative, transactional, transformational, servant, and situational to name a few. It is time to adopt this new leadership style. Hence, let us explore and adopt soft leadership style to take mankind to greater heights of glory. Let us hand over better society to our next generations so that they can be proud of us. Let us become good ancestors. To conclude in the words of Woodrow Wilson, “You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand.”

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