Have you ever been asked, “Are you a leader or manager?” It is relatively easy for one to confuse leadership with management. This confusion has led to an acceptance of a sometimes Machiavellian (manipulative) fusion of a “leadership” style of hierarchy, authoritarianism, and elitism. Based in self-interest, this is sometimes regarded in North American—“US-ian” culture as, “a great management style”.

Traditionally, leaders have been defined as those in power; allowing presidents, prime ministers and military generals, regardless of their accomplishments, to be considered leaders.

Gandhi, an egalitarian himself, was the antithesis of this top-down theory or normative practice of leadership. He is the model of the essential optimist who, according to Nair, (1994) had five very basic commitments leading to a higher standard of leadership.

1. Acknowledge the idea.
2. Reduce forces that lead you astray.
4. Develop a basis for the single standard: and commit to absolute values.
5. Commit to the journey.

1. A visionary leader acknowledges the idea.

A simple, pious man; yet not pontificating, Gandhi identified with and won the hearts of India’s most politically and economically marginalized people. He spent his life fighting to overcome modern forms of enslavement, caste oppression, religious hatred, gender oppression, and, what he saw as the worst form of violence, poverty. To be such a success there were strategies and characteristics making Gandhi successful. The idea? “Oppression was not the rule but an action of the ruler.”

2. An aware leader reduces forces that lead you astray.

Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence became infused with the struggle for swaraj (self-rule). He raised his philosophy of non-violence to new levels of attention with the hope that organized non-violent civil resistance would awaken the consciousness of India’s British oppressors. His mobilizations of non-violent resistance clashed with Britain’s heavy-handedness which tarnished the British international reputation and provoked irreversible change in Britain’s policy towards India. This exposure cemented the potential of organized, non-violent, civil resistance and true to form, eliminated their oppression, in essence, reducing the forces that might have led the Indian people astray to drift in the riptide of violent resistance.

3. A credible leader is willing to stand scrutiny.

A staunch opponent of violence, continually tested, Mohandas K. held his ground and maintained committed to his virtues. He taught that using violence to fight violence corrupts and debases even the most noble of causes and leaves a legacy of bloodshed. If we look to the revolutionary movements of the twentieth century, we see the truth in Gandhi’s notion. A legacy of death and violence has marked the Bolsheviks, Maoists, the Khmer Rouge, Sein Fein and the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s attempts at “liberation.”

4. A virtuous leader develops a basis for the single standard and commits to absolute values.

Gandhi knew that the only solution to hatred, ignorance and fear was to respond with love, truth, and forgiveness. He knew overcoming unjust hierarchies doesn’t mean inverting them; it means eliminating them altogether and never step away from one’s values, stick to the single standard, truth, the most powerful weapon humanity has even known.

As a leader whose wealth is credibility and integrity, one of the strategies making Gandhi an effective leader, was his ability to build bridges between communities, between upper and lower caste Hindus and among Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The essence of his leadership principles was the notion of being in, “communion with” and not “dominion over.”

5. A stalwart leader is committed to the journey.

Mohandas K. Gandhi sought the moral high ground of leadership, “moral leadership.” Everything his values taught him was worth the struggle. He committed to the journey—stayed with it for the long haul despite the risks. Internally, he reduced forces that could have led people astray— he disempowered groups and individuals that carried negative energy and quietly asked them to leave the cause. Always willing to withstand scrutiny and committed to minimizing secrecy, Gandhi was of such simple means and ends he easily withstood any examination. By great example he showed us the power of credibility and integrity.

I have yet to hear Mohandas K. described as a great manager. The principles of leadership and management can be polar opposites or joined at the hip. Moral, transformative leadership and good management, besides being effective, can exemplify the wisdom and compassion of those who really matter and those who care about a cause, an organization or even a University. Maintaining Nair’s five very basic commitments can create the ability to promote consciousness and a higher moral standard of transformative leadership.