



Vincent and Gandhi

Transformational leaders

Systemic change requires transformational leaders. They work with people to identify the needed change, creating a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executing the change in tandem with committed members of the group.[1]"

Both Gandhi and Vincent de Paul were beloved by the people of their country and throughout the world. They continue to inspire leaders today. They achieved this greatness through profound dedication to a lifetime of public service, through which they themselves were transformed as well. Though they lived centuries apart, Vincent de Paul and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi are viewed as examples of transformational leadership. What made them transformational leaders of systemic change?

In unsigned essay the Hay Project at DePaul University explores the theme “Vincent de Paul and Mohandas Gandhi: Five Commitments That Sustain Leadership”

From the essay...

“The achievements and notoriety of Vincent and Mohandas may in part be due to their many other similarities. To begin with, both men studied law, and as young men both anticipated lucrative professional careers (although Vincent’s chosen route to improving his peasant background was the Catholic priesthood, a quite typical choice in his day). As young adults, however, both Vincent and Mohandas experienced a conversion to the plight of the poor, forsaking any personal gain from what became their lifelong works.”

“For Vincent, his conversion came as he confronted the needs, both spiritual and physical, of the sick and poor living in his early parishes. For Mohandas, it came through his own experiences as the object of racial discrimination while working in South Africa. For the remainder of their lives, both men dedicated themselves to service and advocacy on behalf of the poorest and most despised people in their respective societies. Interestingly, both also advocated for the involvement of women in public life.”

“Vincent and Mohandas both were deeply religious, and sustained their dedication to service and societal transformation through a commitment to their beliefs, principles and values.”

“Lastly, both men spoke freely of their faults, exposing their own struggles to live up to their personal ideals. Gandhi’s biography (*My Experiments with Truth*) is remarkably humble and honest. Vincent tells us that he asked God to change his “irritable and forbidding disposition” (Maloney.167)

Keshavan Nair (author of *A Higher Standard of Leadership: Lessons from the Life of Gandhi*) devoted his life to understanding Gandhi’s leadership practices. Nair’s leadership framework, which emerged from his study of Gandhi’s life and leadership, consists of Five Commitments:

- Commit to Absolute Values
- Commit to the Journey
- Commit to Training Your Conscience
- Commit to Reducing Attachments
- Commit to Minimizing Secrecy

The Five Commitments in Vincent's Life

1. Commit to Absolute Values

Vincent urged his companions in service to adhere to five virtues, speaking often about their importance to sustaining a life of dedicated service. These five virtues, offered by Vincent in the language and concepts of his day, summarize his values. They are: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal.

Vincent often stated that the foundation of his beliefs and actions was modeling Jesus, who came “to bring good news to the poor..., to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). His focus on this passage allowed him to value the poor as dignified human beings beloved of God.

Vincent, like Gandhi, clung to truth as an absolute value. He expressed this in his description of the virtue of simplicity. “It also means doing things without any double-dealing or manipulation, our intention being focused solely on God” (Maloney. 163).

2. Commit to the Journey

Like Gandhi, Vincent's response to the needs of the poor developed into a life-long journey. Vincent saw himself following in the footsteps of Jesus, the Evangelizer of the Poor. He saw his work as continuing the work of Christ.

Vincent was still committed to the task of serving the poor even as old age and illness slowed him down physically. As an old man, he once said, “As for myself, my age notwithstanding, I do not consider that I am excused from the obligation of laboring in the service of the poor” (ibid. 170).

3. Commit to Training Your Conscience

Vincent was a man of action. He said, “Let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows” (ibid.31). At the same time, he knew of the value and encouraged setting aside time to connect with our inner life. “You must have an inner life; everything must tend in that direction. If you lack this, you lack everything.”

Both Vincent and Mohandas eventually set aside one day a week for quiet and reflection.

4. Commit to Reducing Attachments

Vincent's approach to detachment is revealed in how he spoke of the virtue of simplicity as seeking "an unadorned lifestyle." He urged his companions in service to avoid acquiring "vain and useless things," and to use "with great simplicity the things that have been given to us" (ibid. 39). Vincent saw this detachment as liberating, allowing himself and others "to go anywhere, to do anything, to brave all hardships" (ibid. 76).

5. Commit to Minimizing Secrecy

Vincent de Paul spoke often of the need for openness and honesty in all interactions. He once wrote, "...they that use craftiness and duplicity are in constant fear lest their cunning be detected, and lest in consequence other people cease to have confidence in them (ibid. 163).

Kesavan Nair was inspired in his life and work by the example and teachings of Mohandas Gandhi. As Vincentians we seek to draw the same inspiration from the examples and teachings of Vincent de Paul. Nair's five-commitment leadership framework, and the teachings and actions of Vincent de Paul and Mohandas Gandhi explored through this framework, combine to form a practical guide for our own values-based leadership and service.

Reflection Questions

What are my non-negotiables?

How do I manifest my commitment to the journey?

Do I take time out regularly to examine my life?

How much stuff am I attached to?

How transparent am I?