

# The Making of an Awakened Leader

Dr. Joan F. Marques, School of Business, Woodbury University  
Dr. Satinder Dhiman, Chair, MBA Program, Woodbury University

## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the meta-leadership style called “Awakened Leadership”, which is characterized by a heightened awareness of leadership as an activity, leadership context, and followership. This style of leadership is highly flexible and can be applied in all types of situations and with all types of followers. The paper subsequently highlights ten qualities of awakened leaders, following a consistent pattern of explaining the commonly understood meaning of the leadership trait, grace notes to elaborate on the interpretation of the trait presented, a quotable quote that captures the essence of the trait, and a tale to illustrate the application of the trait in the myriad contexts. This felicitous structure makes for a clear understanding of these traits and helps in bringing out their inner meaning more succinctly. Keywords: Awakened leadership, Mindfulness, Self-Awareness, Acceptance, Non-judgment, Creativity, Compassion, Humility, Unlearning, Connectedness, Zestfulness.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages, leadership has been described in numerous ways. A broad array of theories has been developed about this phenomenon, all emphasizing the fact that there is no single leadership style applicable to all circumstances. In this article we present “Awakened Leadership,” a way of living and leading that interfaces with all areas of the leader’s life: leader’s self, leadership context, and diversity of followers.

A short clarification is in order regarding the choice of the phrase “Awakened Leadership.” Although there is no affiliation indicated or proposed toward any religion or ideology, the term was derived from a leader who transcended time and contemporary boundaries with his wisdom and legacy. It is fairly well-known that the Buddha is generally referred to as the “Awakened One.”

The expression refers to a state of heightened awareness of reality—within and without—that manifests itself in the form of constant mindfulness of one’s conscious being, a felt sense of one’s presence in the moment.

Huston Smith and Philip Novak charmingly tell the story of Buddha’s experience, as follows:

How many people have provoked this question -- not "Who are you?" with respect to name, origin, or ancestry, but "What are you? What order of being do you belong to? What species do you represent?" Not Caesar, certainly. Not Napoleon, or even Socrates. Only two: Jesus and Buddha. When the people carried their puzzlement to the Buddha himself, the answer he gave provided an identity for his entire message:

"Are you a god?" they asked.

"No."

"An angel?"

"No."

"A saint?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

Buddha answered, "I am awake."

His answer became his title, for this is what "Buddha" means. The Sanskrit root *budh* denotes both "to wake up" and "to know." Buddha, then, means the "Enlightened One," or the "Awakened One." While the rest of the world was wrapped in the womb of sleep, dreaming a dream known as the waking state of human life, one of their number roused himself. Buddhism begins with a man who shook off the daze, the doze, the dreamlike vagaries of ordinary awareness. It begins with a man who woke up (Buddhism: A Concise Introduction, 2003, p. 21).

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AWAKENED LEADER

So, what does it mean to be an awakened leader? An awakened leader is one who enshrines a certain set of values in his or her interactions with other human beings. Some of these values are: self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-reflection, mindfulness, wisdom, understanding, equanimity, acceptance, non-judgment, integrity, authenticity, humility, selflessness, kindness, compassion, detachment, spontaneity, zestfulness, peace, and contentment. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on a few of these values as hallmarks of an awakened leader and present them through a framework of meaning, grace notes, select quotes, anecdotes, and stories. Based on their universal appeal, we select the following values for presentation:

1. Mindfulness
2. Self-Awareness
3. Acceptance
4. Non-judgment
5. Creativity
6. Compassion
7. Humility
8. Unlearning
9. Connectedness
10. Zestfulness

### OVERVIEW OF THE TEN QUALITIES

1. **Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is described by Dictionary.com as the trait of staying aware of your responsibilities, and paying close attention to them. In the context of awakened leadership, mindfulness refers to remaining alert and living in the present; not allowing the mind to wander from the situation at hand.

*Grace notes.* It is not hard to figure out that remaining mindful is truly an art, which one only masters through practice. Especially in our hectic daily environment, it may be difficult to keep our attention focused on a person or situation, while there may be so many other issues that need to be considered. Yet, by continuing to remind our mind that we should focus on the here and now, we can elevate this trait into a habit. By doing so, we increase our satisfaction and decrease our stress level. In this process, we learn to concentrate on one thing at the time, and get better results, which augur instant fulfillment.

*Quotable quote.* "The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers." – *Thich Nhat Hanh*

*A story.* A Japanese warrior was captured by his enemies and thrown into prison. That night he was unable to sleep because he feared that the next day he would be interrogated, tortured, and executed. Then the words of his Zen master came to him, "Tomorrow is not real. It is an illusion. The only reality is now." Heeding these words, the warrior became peaceful and fell asleep. ("Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors," 1997).

2. **Self-Awareness:** Self-Awareness is described as the act of being aware of oneself, including one's traits, feelings, and behaviors, or the realization of oneself as an individual entity or personality (Dictionary.com, 2006). In the context of awakened leadership, self-awareness refers to remaining down to earth, and not forgetting who one is and where one came from, regardless of the position or status one currently enjoys.

*Grace notes.* It is important for each individual to nurture this characteristic. Self-awareness, as interpreted here, can turn out to be the difference between getting entirely absorbed by a new status quo --and consequently losing contact with one's deepest source: the source within--, and remaining sober regardless of the occurrences one encounters. Self awareness is a useful skill in both the heights and depths of life: it can keep a person rational when honors come waving in from all sides, and it can help one maintain his or her sanity when one disruption after another occurs in his or her life. It can protect a person from an often-made mistake: to define oneself by one's current position rather than by whom one really is. Due to the fact that no one knows you better than yourself, self-awareness can also be an important contributor

to another quality of awakened leaders, humility. Jung (cited in Ray, 2004, p. 23) provides the greatest clue to self-awakening: "Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks within, awakens."

Hinting about the crucial link between awareness and the discovery of truth, Krishnamurti, an Eastern sage, has observed, "When there is inward awareness of every activity of your mind and your body, when you are aware of your thoughts, of your feelings, both secret and open, conscious and unconscious, then out of this awareness comes clarity that is not induced by the mind. And without that clarity, you may do what you will, you may search heavens and the earth, and the deeps, but you will never find out what is true (cited in Baran, 2003, p. 30).

*Quotable quote.* "If you want to be a great leader, you have to be a real human being. You must recognize the true meaning of life before you can become a great leader. You must understand yourself first" (*Confucius, as cited in Senge et al., 2004, p. 186*).

*A story.* During the civil wars in feudal Japan, an invading army would quickly sweep into a town and take control. In one particular village, everyone fled just before the army arrived - everyone except the Zen master. Curious about this old fellow, the general went to the temple to see for himself what kind of man this master was. When he wasn't treated with the deference and submissiveness to which he was accustomed, the general burst into anger. "You fool," he shouted as he reached for his sword, "don't you realize you are standing before a man who could run you through without blinking an eye!" But despite the threat, the master seemed unmoved. "And do you realize," the master replied calmly, "that you are standing before a man who can be run through without blinking an eye?" ("Stories in Zen", 2006).

**3. Acceptance:** Acceptance refers to an act or process of accepting. Defined broadly, it refers to acceptance of What Is. In the context of awakened leadership, acceptance refers to accepting everyone and everything the way it is rather than the way we wish them to be.

*Grace notes.* At first glance, it may seem that acceptance implies a passive attitude towards what is. And from a leadership standpoint, this may appear to be a position of powerlessness or disempowerment. The alchemy of acceptance, though, operates at a much deeper level and may work as a most powerful way to transform current reality. Considering the fact that by non-acceptance we do not and cannot change the reality of what has taken place, acceptance actually may be the most practical way to approach situations and event in our life. The deepest logic of acceptance emanates from an abiding faith in the inherent goodness and perfection according to which everything in the universe is exactly as it is supposed to be at the moment. At both the personal and professional level, acceptance makes one comfortable with oneself and with others as well as with events, situations, and circumstances. The following lines from Lao Tzu say it all:

"Those who wish to embody the Tao should embrace all things. To embrace all things means first that one holds no anger or resistance towards any idea or thing, living or dead, formed or formless. Acceptance is the very essence of Tao."

*Quotable quote.* "If we accept a situation which is displeasing, and remain collected inside, we not only save a lot of nervous energy, but we can use it for our own being." C.S. Nott in *Further Teachings of Gurdjieff*, 1969, p.115.

*A story.* Once Shmelke of Nikolsburg asked Dov Baer of Mezritch to explain the Talmudic commandment that we should praise God for evil as much as we praise him for good. Dov Baer said, "Go to the House of study and ask my student Zussya." Shmelke went to the House of Study and found Zussya: emaciated, filthy, and clothed in rags. Shmelke asked, "How can we praise God for evil as much as we praise him for good?" "I can't tell you," said Zussya, "because nothing bad has ever happened to me." (Mitchell, 1992, p. 207)

**4. Non-Judgment:** This refers to an attitude and a habit of mind according to which one accepts people and their behavior, events, and situations without judging them as good or bad, acceptable or non-acceptable. As such, both acceptance and non-judgment go hand in hand.

*Grace notes.* A casual observance of human condition would reveal that the Biblical injunction of "judge not and be not judged" is honored more in breach than in observance. An awakened leader does not pass judgment on people and their behavior, thereby pigeonholing them into a certain way of reality. By the operation of what is called self-fulfilling prophecy, we make people as we judge them to be! Nelson Mandela, the African leader, once said, "By trusting people more, we make them more trustworthy."

We mostly fail to notice that we judge all the time. And there is nothing too small or unimportant for judging. This is the most inveterate habit of mind: it likes to judge everyone and everything, all the time! Until one starts paying attention to the mind's ways. From a spiritual point of view, judging tantamounts to second guessing divine intelligence.

*Quotable quote.* Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov once gave his last coin to a man of evil reputation. His students reproached him for it. Whereupon he replied: "Shall I be more judging than God, who gave the coin to me?" (Cited in Mandelbaum, p. 171).

*A story.* There is a humorous story about a father and a son who were journeying to a neighboring city on a mule. When people saw both father and son sitting on the mule, they said, "Look, how uncaring of both of them to sit on the mule. Poor mule. They will break his back." The father heard the comment and decided to get off the mule. Then people who saw them said, "Look at that insensitive son! While his old father is walking beside the mule, he has the nerve to sit comfortably on the mule." And then the son got off the mule and the onlookers said the same thing about the father. After hearing this, both decided to get off the mule and started walking beside the mule. Next, they heard the comment, "How foolish! They have the mule and are still walking beside the mule!" Now the only option that was left for them was to carry the mule on their shoulders! (Folktale transcribed by one of the authors)

**5. Compassion:** Compassion refers to an attitude of loving-kindness towards all existence. Living compassionately means extending one's kindness to all, without first requiring to ensure their identity (race, color, creed) and worthiness or deservingness, and without asking for kindness in return. The sandal wood tree, for example, shares perfume even with the axe that cuts it. If your willingness to give blessings is limited, says Lao Tzu, so also is your ability to receive them.

*Grace notes.* Compassion represents the hallmark of an Awakened leader. At its most profound level, compassion is the mother of all virtues. At its best, it is the highest form of human emotion, even finer than love. It is a sad fact of modern times that people are increasingly becoming harsher and unkind towards each other in their dealings, at personal and professional levels. As we go forth in our life, let us bear in mind the wise words of Aldous Huxley, who observed the following at the end of his life: "It is rather embarrassing to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life and to find that one has little more to offer by way of advice than, 'Try to be a little kinder'." By practicing what Buddhists call loving-kindness we may hope to create organizations that are 'worthy of human habitation.'

*Quotable quote.* If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion – *The Dalai Lama.*

*A story.* There was a couple that was unable to conceive a child. They decided to adopt one and sought a child from a poor country, thinking this would be of greater service. They adopted a beautiful two-month-old baby boy from India. During the first year, it became evident that the child had grave health problems. First, it was discovered that he was profoundly deaf and would never hear. Second, he had cerebral palsy that, though it would not affect this intelligence, could cripple the development of his body. They taught him sign language so they could speak to him, and then they got him a small wheelchair when he was old enough to walk so that he might move about. After this, they created a support network of parents who adopted disabled children. Because they were afraid their son would be isolated, they did a most astonishing thing. They wrote to India to ask if they might adopt another child who was also deaf (Cited in Kornfield, 1995, p. 223).

**6. Creativity:** According to Webster's Dictionary, "Creativity is marked by the ability or power to create—to bring into existence; to invest with a new form; to produce through imaginative skill; to make or bring into existence something new."

*Grace notes.* Broadly speaking, creativity is the process of bringing something new into existence from the depth of one's being. According to Louis Kahn, "The creation of art is not the fulfillment of a need but the creation of a need. The world never needed Beethoven's Fifth Symphony until he created it. Now we could not live without it" ([www.painterskeys.com](http://www.painterskeys.com)). Michael Ray, the creator of the most successful course on Creativity at the Stanford Business School, starts with three assumptions about creativity: (1) that creativity is essential for health, happiness, and success in all areas of life, including business; (2) that creativity is within everyone; and (3) that even though it is within

everyone, it is 'covered by the Voice of Judgement. (Cited in Senge et al., 2004, p. 30). In an interview conducted by Scharmer and Otto (Cited in Senge et al., 2004, p. 30), Michael Ray refers to a study by Harvard professor Howard Gardner called Project Zero. The study involved developing intelligence tests for the babies. The researchers found out that up to the age of four, almost all children were at the genius level, in terms of the multiple frames of intelligence that Gardner pioneered—spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, mathematical, intrapersonal, and linguistic. But by age twenty, the percentage of children at the genius level was down to 10 percent, and over twenty, the genius level proportion of the subjects sunk to 2 percent! Everyone asks, "Where did it go?" According to Ray, "It didn't go anywhere; it is covered by the voice of judgment."

*Quotable quote.* Most people die before they are fully born. Creativeness means to be born before one dies -- *Erich Fromm* (www.painterskeys.com).

*A story.* In one of his videos on management excellence, Tom Peters tells the story of a Zoo in Canada. This zoo was confronted with the problem of disposing of the enormous amount of waste thrown out of animals' body. Someone suggested the obvious: why don't we package it and sell it as fertilizer under a new brand name. They charmingly called it 'Zoo Do.'

**7. Humility:** Humility is defined as the quality or condition of being humble (Dictionary.com, 2006). Humility refers to an awareness of our relative worth and understanding of our true place in the universe. Humility is not about *thinking less of ourselves*. It is rather about *thinking of ourselves less*.

*Grace notes.* As stated earlier in this article, true humility is born of self-knowledge and self-awareness. Jim Collins in his celebrated book, *Good to Great*, lists compelling modesty to be the hallmark of level 5 leaders, professional will being the other. It is good to remember that the line separating genuine self regard and misplaced ego is a very thin one. More often than not, humility is a disguised pride parading itself as modesty. This could be worse than plain pride. It is said that there is no humility, only different degrees of pride! This brings to mind a story in which a seeker, after reading a book on humility, wrote to the book's author, "Before reading your book, I was very vain and proud. After reading your book, I have become so humble that you would hardly believe it!" (Adapted from Idries Shah, 1978, p.144).

*Quotable quote.* It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err – *Mahatma Gandhi*

*A story.* Once a rich and very stingy man came to his rabbi to ask for a special blessing. The rabbi sat and talked with him for a while and then, all of a sudden, took the man's hand and brought him to the window.

"Tell me what do you see?" asked the rabbi.

The man answered, "I see people out on the street."

The rabbi brought him a mirror. "Now what do you see?" he asked.

"Now I see myself," the man replied (cited in Friedlander, 1973, p. 69).

When we are trapped in our false ego, we do not see the world, but only ourselves. A humble leader has a window mind whereas a proud leader works with a mirror mind. The art of self-development lies in graduating from a mirror mind to a window mind.

Of all the factors that inhibit one's personal and/or professional progress as a leader, misplaced ego seems to be the most fatal one. If cats have nine lives, ego seems to have ninety-nine. Through a genuine understanding of its workings, we can work towards disempowering this human tendency that is responsible for most of the ills human flesh is heir to.

**8. Unlearning:** Unlearning involves the ability to unlearn on an ongoing basis.

*Grace notes.* It has been said that the ability to unlearn is, indeed, the prerequisite to all true learning. As a matter of fact, true learning can more aptly be described as an exercise in unlearning, the emptying of the mind of mistaken assumptions and ingrained habits. Nothing can be put into a full pot: "If you want to fill a container," goes an Eastern saying, "you may first have to empty it." Similarly, an English proverb says that you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs. Picasso was referring to this act of "emptying" when he said, "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction." It may be pointed out that "to make oneself empty" does not mean something negative, but refers to the willingness and openness to receive (Suzuki, Fromm, & De Martino, 1960). We see the operation of this principle

throughout Mother Nature. Imagine a tree that insists on keeping its old leaves when spring comes or a seed that does not want its outer shell to break when it is ready to sprout. According to a Biblical verse, "No one patches new cloth onto an old garment; No one pours new wine into an old wineskin." (Crossan, 1994, p. 85; See, Matthew 9:16-17)

*Quotable quote.* "In the pursuit of knowledge, everyday something is added. In the practice of Tao, everyday something is dropped," says Lao Tzu. (Stephen Mitchell's New English Version, 1988, p. 48.)

*A story.* The following Zen story (Reps, 1958, p. 19) graphically captures the nuances of this principle:

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself, "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

**9. Connectedness:** Connectedness is explained in various ways. Two of these are, "Joined or fastened together", and "Associated with or related to others, especially to influential or important people" (Dictionary.com). In the context of awakened leadership the oneness of relationship with others transcends the limitation of influence or importance of people, because, to an awakened leader, there is no classification of human beings into more or less important.

*Grace notes.* Connectedness may be seen as one of the absolute pillars of awakened leadership. Awakened leaders feel connected to everything in the first place. People are first kindred souls, and then brothers, aunts, colleagues, or competitors. The awareness of being connected to everything that currently lived or once did, human or non-human, is a crucial element in the behavior of awakened leaders. The sense of connectedness adjusts negative tendencies within the awakened leader, and keeps him or her in a positive state of mind, even when others are behaving as if they were members of a superior galaxy.

*Quotable quote.* Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. - *Chief Seattle (1786-1866)*

*A story.* In one of his talks, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, explains the essential interconnectedness of all life as follows:

A sheet of paper, before it came into existence, had been something else. You can see a sheet of paper in a tree; you can see a sheet of paper in a cloud, because -touching this sheet of paper with your mindfulness-, you can see a cloud inside. You don't have to be a poet in order to see that: you know that if there were no cloud there would no rain, and no tree could grow. If the tree could not grow, you could not have the sheet of paper, because this sheet of paper is made from a kind of paste made of trees. So it is sure that the cloud is in the sheet of paper, and if you try to remove the cloud, the sheet of paper will collapse. There would be no paper at all if there were no cloud. That is inter-being -the cloud is inside the paper. (Hanh, 1998, ¶ 69)

**10. Zestfulness:** Zestfulness is spirited enjoyment (Dictionary.com). In the context of awakened leadership, zestfulness pertains to the affirmative mentality of the awakened leader: the willingness to try new things; the spirited receptiveness toward suggestions from others; the inclination to maintain a constructive attitude toward all that happens, and the overall sense of being positively involved.

*Grace notes.* Because an awakened leader is a person in balance, he or she will harbor qualities that, together, attribute toward a wholesome being that has the capacity to relate to different people and circumstances at different times. For that purpose will the awakened leader maintain as much reflection-, peace-, serenity-, and silence-related, as engagement-, driven-, and vibrancy-related qualities. Being zestful entails, being receptive to life, and embracing all that life offers with a positive attitude.

*Quotable quote.* "What hunger is in relation to food, zest is in relation to life" - Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970).

*A story.* A Zen Master lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening, while he was away, a thief sneaked into the hut only to find there was nothing in it to steal. The Zen Master returned and found him. "You have come a long way to visit me," he told the prowler, "and you should not return empty handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." The thief was bewildered, but he took the clothes and ran away. The Master sat naked, watching the moon. "Poor fellow," he mused, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon." ("Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors", 1997)

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The twenty first century presents us with an increasingly interdependent world, which calls for greater understanding, acceptance, and flexibility. The ten qualities of awakened leaders described in this paper provide a good picture of what will be needed to make a positive difference in the workplace of the future, and in the world at large. Although these qualities represent only a part of what constitutes an Awakened leader, mastering these skills will firmly put us on the path of awakened leadership.

The great advantage of this leadership style is that it is multi-applicable, regardless of circumstances or followers involved. Awakened leadership, as can be inferred from this paper, simplifies the theory of leadership significantly, and assists the performer of this way of living to set a constructive trend, not only in his or her life, but in the lives of others, human and non-human, near or distanced, as well. If becoming a true human being is the litmus test of being a true leader, then awakened leadership presents one of the most enduring ways to synchronize life, learning, and leadership.

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