
What Religion Teaches Us About Great Leadership



By [Elizabeth Florent Treacy](#) , INSEAD

What can guiding figures and best practices in Judaism, Islam and Catholicism tell us about leadership?

Even if you are not religious, or believe that religion and business should not mix, understanding how religious and spiritual beliefs might influence and inform leadership and organisational values can provide invaluable insight for work and business.

Graduates of INSEAD's [Executive Master in Change \(EMC\)](#), a degree programme that examines the basic drivers of human behaviour and the hidden dynamics of organisations, sought to do just that. They delved into Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism, and Judaism to uncover religious teachings and role models that have had the greatest impact or the greatest potential for impact on executives and organisations.

The seven forces of good leaders

The world of business today is marked by a constant war for talent as well as evolving role identities and responsibilities. [Michaël Issac Moyal](#), founder

of Nevoaa at Station F in Paris, endeavoured to identify exemplary leadership values in the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah applicable to the contemporary context. He named seven psychological forces and seven leading figures in the Tora who embody these forces:

Chesed – Kindness as embodied by Abraham

Gevurah – Strength/Justice as embodied by Isaac

Tiferet – Beauty/Truth/Harmony/Good Balance as embodied by Jacob

Netsakh – Hope/Ambition/Endurance as embodied by Moses

Hod – Humility/Glory/Acknowledgement/Gratitude as embodied by Aaron

Yessod – Foundation/Stability/Connection as embodied by Joseph

Malkhout – Greatness/Sovereignty as embodied by David

Abraham, for example, devoted his life to taking care of others. Despite his moral contempt for Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham prayed to God for the first time in his life in a desperate attempt to save the two cities. He also demonstrated singular leadership by rejecting the worship of idols that was popular in his time, maintaining that there was only one God.

Moyal created an interview protocol that recruiters could use to assess potential hires on each of the seven dimensions laid out in the Tora. The questions suss out the candidate in relationship to herself, to others as well as her psychological drivers and motivations. For example, Abrahamic leadership qualities were measured by the following questions: When did you feel that you were different (able to lead)? Is it possible to count on you in both good and bad times? Do you think that through kindness you receive more than you give?

First, do no harm

While leadership qualities are vested in several exceptional men in Judaism, for Muslims one man embodies the ideal leader: Prophet Mohammad. From the life of the Messenger of Islam one could distill the leadership traits of humanity, compassion, gentleness and kindness, as well as power and assertiveness, says **Saud Ghassan Al-Sulaiman**, CEO of IKEA Saudi Arabia.

These qualities of ideal Islamic leadership are not so different from contemporary Western models of successful leadership, says Al-Sulaiman. He identified the traits through a comprehensive review of literature on Islamic leadership and interviews with Islamic scholars. One of the latter quoted a hadith, or saying, by the Prophet: “Verily, the worst shepherds are those who are harsh, so beware not to be one of them.”

But of course a good “shepherd” goes far beyond doing no harm. To be a good leader in business means having a positive and smooth relationship with one’s employees or subordinates based on trust, says Al-Sulaiman. And, according to one scholar he interviewed, Islamic teaching encourages leaders and employees to develop their skills with charity, inspiration, wisdom and experience. Another scholar highlighted patience, social intelligence, inspiration, honesty, sincerity, and confidence as important Islamic leadership skills.

Sustaining a company

Regardless of their capabilities, a leader can’t sustain an organisation for long if it doesn’t have the right culture. [Ian Leong](#), a doctor at Singapore’s Tan Tock Seng Hospital who is involved in building community healthcare networks in the city-state, analysed the governing values and practices of the Benedictine and Jesuit Orders of Catholicism to come up with a framework for organisational longevity.

Founded in 529 AD, the Benedictine Order is the oldest monastic order in the Christian West. Benedictine monks live in monasteries, are governed by abbots, and take the vows of stability (commitment to the monastery one belongs to), obedience, conversion of manners (commitment to the monastic way of life), poverty and chastity.

The Jesuit Order, established in 1540, is the largest male religious order in the Roman Catholic Church. Jesuits are required to make a special vow of obedience to the Pope and may be deployed to any ministry that the Pope sees fit. But they are also trained to be “self-leaders” and focus on self-development, a practice evident in the many schools they have founded around the world.

In short, says Leong, the Benedictines focus on community development and stability while the Jesuits focus on self-development and flexibility. Both have been immensely successful.

Leong argues that a modern-day company could combine the paradigms of the Benedictines and Jesuits to create a culture that ensures it stays thriving for years and even decades. Here's how:

- Create a transformational organisation that practises what it believes are good values and try to propagate such values. For example, leaders may focus on promoting higher education and improving quality of life
- Develop a clear and detailed value system that is practised throughout the organisation, constantly emphasised and periodically reinterpreted as required
- Maintain cohesion through respect, positive communication, and forgiveness
- Conduct daily exercises of reflection to promote change
- Provide coaching to help employees process and interpret experiences and decisions
- Develop leaders who are humble, empathetic, resilient, ethical and aligned with the organisation's values

Lesson from a warrior-prince

Even the most successful executives are sometimes plagued with crippling self-doubt due to circumstances beyond their control. Take it from Arjun (also known as Arjuna), the warrior-prince in *Bhagavad Gita* or Song of the Lord, one of the most prominent texts in Hinduism.

A demigod, Arjun is depicted as courageous, intelligent, humble and just. Yet when he finds himself on the brink of a battle against his evil cousins to reclaim land usurped from him and his brothers, Arjun suffers from cold feet. The thought of vanquishing his kinsmen, even for righteous reasons, is too much for him to bear. Krishna, the god who serves as Arjun's charioteer, then engages the warrior in dialogue, helping him overcome his misgivings and triumph over injustice.

The dialogue is a lesson in rising above anxiety and personal attachments for the sake of the collective good, according to [Pankaj Bhatt](#), the former Chief Transformation Officer at Nucleus Software. Bhatt likens Krishna to a dispassionate coach who helps his client through [mentalising](#), [reality-testing](#) and impulse control. Through his dialogue with Krishna, Arjun has better clarity of a leader's role and duty, which is to take justified action even when it's unpleasant and the results can't be guaranteed. In order to do so, the leader should realise that nothing is permanent and strive to be less

attached to emotions, ego and success.

When it comes to leadership, religious traditions have more in common with modern-day practices – and with one another – than one might think. By revisiting long-standing religious and spiritual beliefs, as the EMC graduates did, one can glean insights into individual and collective forces that combine to bring about positive change at work.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/what-religion-teaches-us-about-great-leadership>

About the author(s)

Elizabeth Florent Treacy is a Senior Lecturer and Thesis Director on the core faculty team of INSEAD's **Executive Master in Change** degree programme.