

The Leadership Principles of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Their Relevance to Surgery

F. Charles Brunicardi, MD; Ronald T. Cotton, MD; George W. Cole, MD; and George Martinez
Houston, Texas

In order to face the challenges in healthcare this century, it is essential that surgeons understand modern leadership principles. One of the greatest leaders in history was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who provides a shining example of level-5 leadership for us to study. The study of leadership principles of great leaders can provide us with practical methods of conflict resolution as well as inspiration to keep us engaged and focused. As leaders of the medical community, we face numerous challenges, including discovering and implementing new treatments for disease, providing care for the indigent, overcoming educational challenges such as incorporating the ACGME Core Competencies into our surgical training and promoting diversity in education. Achieving these goals is often hindered by the environment in which we labor—nearly 50 million are uninsured, the rising cost of medical care is currently at 16% of the GNP, and reimbursement rates are falling—which makes the practice of surgery a significant challenge. Effective leadership will be paramount in achieving these goals. In this editorial, which summarizes a presentation given to the Surgical Section of the annual National Medical Association meeting, five important leadership principles that are important for surgeons have been selected and related to the outstanding leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Key words: leadership ■ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ■ surgery ■ education ■ conflict resolution

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INTRODUCTION

In order to face the challenges in healthcare this century, it is essential that surgeons understand modern leadership principles. As leaders of the medical community, we face numerous obstacles, including discovering new treatments for disease, providing indigent care, overcoming educational challenges such as incorporating the ACGME Core Competencies into our surgical training and promoting diversity in education.

Achieving these goals is often hindered by the environment in which we labor—nearly 50 million are uninsured, the rising cost of medical care is currently at 16% of the GNP, and reimbursement rates are falling—making the practice of surgery a significant challenge. Effective leadership will be paramount in achieving these goals.

We believe that leadership principles can be defined and taught, and we have had a leadership training program for our surgical residents for the past seven years. It is important to note that there are many different styles of leadership, which have different purposes and produce different results. In the study of leadership, it is important to understand and incorporate these different styles into our practices. In the 20th century, the practice and training of surgery was based upon a command-and-control style of leadership, often based upon fear and intimidation, which creates the aura of a powerful leader. While effective at appropriate moments, this style can now lead to significant problems in the workplace, as those around us can perceive the fostering of a hostile work environment through the abuse of this leadership style. Another more modern leadership style is that of collaboration, in which the leader gives value to all members of the team, thus enabling the development of a powerful team that can create innovative solutions to problems. In our surgical training program, residents are taught that one should have at their disposal different styles of leadership to apply judiciously when a specific style is appropriate or inappropriate.

To start, it is important to define leadership. One favorite definition is from Confucius, who believed that a leader is a dealer in hope. Certainly, we do this with our patients who come to us seeking a treatment for their ailments and diseases. As leaders who are educating the next generation of surgeons, it is important for us to express optimism about the amazing progress that is being made in minimally invasive techniques and the incorporation of molecular biology into surgery, which is transforming surgery into a kinder and gentler craft. Conversely, we must consider the impact we have on residents and students when we express pessimism

toward what is happening in medicine by complaining about the lack of reimbursements, autonomy and patient control. Therefore, it is the responsibility of surgeons as leaders to encourage optimism to inspire emerging residents and students to appreciate the joy and satisfaction one feels when serving those in need and to remind them, and ourselves, that this is one of the greatest professions one could ever choose.

An important definition of a leader is someone who defines a vision for their constituency, then has the ability to move the constituency toward achieving that vision. One of the greatest leaders in history was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who provides a shining example of timeless leadership for us to study. King set forth a powerful vision that all people were created equal and by applying the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence, he was able to guide a nation to fulfilling its promise set forth in the Declaration of Independence by resolving one seemingly insurmountable conflict after another against all odds.

In *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*, Jim Collins notes five levels of leadership: a highly capable individual (level 1), a contributing team member (level 2), a competent manager (level 3), an effective leader (level 4) and someone who builds enduring greatness (level 5). Collins

Figure 1. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. acknowledges the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial for his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington, DC, Aug. 28, 1963

AP Photo



describes level-5 leadership as a combination of fierce resolve and humility, and suggests that all leaders should strive to attain this pairing. There is no greater prototype of level-5 leadership than King; therefore, it is paramount that we study his methods and motivation in order to understand and emulate this level of leadership. We can learn about leadership principles through the study of great leaders who provide us with practical methods of conflict resolution as well as inspiration to help keep us engaged and focused. While it is difficult to create a synopsis of King's genius in a few short pages, five important leadership principles have been selected as those that are important for surgeons to study as we lead surgery forward into the 21st century.

Leadership Principle 1: Vision

First and foremost, a leader must have a vision that is based on principles that appeal to and benefit their constituency. One way to state this vision is called "declaring the future", which has also been called "declaring the impossible." For example, when President Kennedy declared, "By the end of the decade, we will put a [person] on the moon," it was thought to be impossible; however, by having had the leader declare it, the United States began the process of putting a person on the moon. Subsequently, by the end of the decade, Neil Armstrong took his famous walk and the "impossible" had been accomplished. King's vision was that all people are created equal, and he declared his vision in what has been identified as one of the greatest speeches of all time:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

The founding fathers of the United States set forth this creed as the foundation of a new country, and with all honorable intentions, the phrase "all men" should have incorporated minorities and women. King had a broader vision that the United States would embrace the greater meaning of these words and that its citizens would act in accordance with the Declaration of Independence which states:

We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ends governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government shall become destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation

on such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

King began forming his clear and ambitious vision as a child and once remarked to his mother that

... there is no such thing as one people being better than another. The Lord made all of us equal, and I am going to see to that.

Therefore, King had a clear and focused vision that guided his efforts over the course of his life.

King's vision was undoubtedly fostered by powerful role models who were great leaders in their own right such as Frederick Douglass, one of the celebrated leaders of the freedom movement in the 19th century. Although Douglass enjoyed freedom and popularity in Europe, he did not retreat permanently to its comforts. When asked why he would return to the oppression he faced in the United States, he replied,

I choose to go home for the sake of the struggle in the ranks for that emancipation which shall yet be achieved by the power of truth and principle for that oppressed people.

Another powerful role model in King's life was Mahatma Gandhi, whose principle of "Satyagraha" formed a central role in King's methodology. Satyagraha is based upon truth, governments by consensus, persuasion through decision and reason, education of the community, decisive action, and mass civil disobedience. King was an advocate and an avid student of Gandhi and used these principles to lead the Civil Rights Movement in America. King once said,

I had come to see early that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to an oppressed people in the struggle for freedom.

King's philosophy "to protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love" was edified by his belief that "you only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love to accomplish what you want to accomplish." Therefore, King had set forth a clear and powerful vision and through role models had found the means by which he built enduring greatness and helped a nation live up to its promise of freedom and equality for all.

Leadership Principle 2: Effective Communication

In order to communicate the vision, a leader must be an effective communicator. Effective communication

requires a unique combination of knowledge, the ability to speak in public and charisma. In his book, *Frames of the Mind*, Howard Gardner proposes seven forms of intellect: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal. King demonstrated genius in three forms of intellect: linguistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Now recognized as one of the greatest orators in history, King did not simply happen upon this talent by chance. His father was a preacher, as was his father before him, and as a small boy he was expected to take a place in front of the congregation. This prepared him for the events of his adulthood when he found himself at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. King capitalized on the new communication medium of television to speak to a larger audience. Through impassioned speeches at protests and demonstrations, he clearly expressed his vision and the means through which the vision could be achieved. His power as an effective communicator was recognized by those around him, and he was chosen to serve as the leader for the Civil Rights Movement. Those who have heard him speak were amazed by his ability to mesmerize all who were listening with the power of his spoken word. The power and skill of his speaking ability culminated in August of 1963 when he turned the Lincoln Memorial into a pulpit for civil rights. There were 250,000 people present at the Lincoln Memorial when King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech (Figure 1). It is

Figure 2. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Ralph Abernathy remain in a cell at the St. John's County Jail in St. Augustine, FL, after being arrested for integration attempts at a local motel restaurant. During their adversity, the two men can be seen studying and writing, determined to achieve their vision of equality.

Bettmann/CORBIS



considered the greatest speech ever recorded and can be studied at the website <http://rhetoric.com>. King's ability to communicate his vision for equality led him to be the youngest person to win the Nobel Prize for Peace at the age of 35. In his presentation speech to King, Chairman of the Nobel Committee Gunner Jahn remarked:

He is the first person in the western world to have shown us that a struggle can be waged without violence. He is the first to make the message of brotherly love a reality in the course of his struggles, and he has brought this message to all men, to all nations and races. Today we pay tribute to Martin Luther King, the man who would never abandon his faith in the unarmed struggle he is waging, who has suffered for his faith, who has been imprisoned on many occasions, whose home has been the subject of bomb attacks, whose life and the lives of his family have been threatened, and whom nevertheless has never faltered. To this undaunted champion of peace, the Nobel Committee has awarded the Peace Prize for the year 1964.

In order to communicate effectively, it is important

Figure 3. The signature of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on a copy of *Time Magazine* naming him as Man of the Year is featured in an exhibit of black journalism as part of Black History Month at the National Press Club in Washington, Friday, Feb. 3, 2006

AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



to establish trust, listen, discuss, debate, understand and learn. It is interesting to note that these are the fundamental principles utilized in taking a history and physical, and planning a surgical treatment option for our patients. Therefore, all surgeons are effective communicators in this context, since they lead a team of health-care professionals on a daily basis and guide their patients towards a "vision" of better health. The principles of communication involved in providing the options for a care plan for our patients who have a "conflict" with their health can be readily applied to all areas of conflict resolution that we face as surgeon leaders.

Leadership Principle 3: Willingness to Learn

A leader must possess the willingness to learn. One advantage of an academic career is being surrounded by young people with an intense hunger to learn that is always inspiring. King was a highly educated man with an insatiable academic curiosity. He graduated from high school at the age of 15 and then received his undergraduate degree from Morehouse College. He completed three years of study at the Crozer Theological Seminary and received his doctorate at the Boston University School of Theology. By the age of 25, he had accomplished his doctorate and had 10 years of postgraduate training to his credit. Not only was he highly educated, he was also a prolific writer. He wrote more than 7,000 essays, letters and manuscripts, which are a part of The King Papers at Morehouse College. His first book, *The Stride toward Freedom and the Montgomery Story*, was published in 1958 and described the strategic plan for the Civil Rights Movement. In his lifetime, King authored a total of 10 books. It is important to consider that with his busy schedule and constant demands on his time, he always found time to study and write. He said that "to educate was to learn twice." King is a shining example that the willingness to learn requires a lifelong discipline that is essential to accomplish the vision. A profound understanding of the ever-changing world surrounding the vision is required at all times, as each action results in a series of reactions that complicates the ability to achieve the goal. Through a persistent willingness to learn, the leader can understand the changing political landscape and the complications that can arise from any action plan and help devise new solutions toward the goals defined by the vision.

Leadership Principle 4: Willingness to Lead

Perhaps the most fundamental principle of a leader is the willingness to lead. In the book, *Martin Luther King, Jr. on Leadership: Inspiration and Wisdom for Challenging Times*, Donald Philips describes three revolutions in American history. The first is the American Revolution, the second is the Civil War, and the third is the American Civil

Rights Movement. An educated man, using history as his guide, King would have looked to the leaders of previous revolutions for help in navigating the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement and for the associated risks. The leaders of the Revolutionary War, our founding fathers, knew that had the outcome would have been different had England—then the most powerful country on Earth—been victorious; they all would have been executed for treason. In the second revolution, President Lincoln also knew the risks of pursuing his vision, which was to achieve freedom for all people based on the Constitution and to do so while keeping the fledgling nation together. Against the wishes of Congress, Lincoln wrote and delivered the Emancipation Proclamation, knowing the ultimate risk of personal consequences of his actions. Having been an avid student of history, King knew of the risks in leading the third revolution and demonstrated a complete, unwavering willingness to lead. His deep commitment moved him to the forefront of the civil rights battle and forged ahead through personal sacrifice, the endangerment of his family and friends, and the witness of horrible atrocities and degradations to strive for the vision he set forth.

Leadership Principle 5: Conflict Resolution

If one is willing to accept the responsibility of leadership, then it is imperative to understand the fifth principle of leadership, conflict resolution. For this discussion, two fundamental categories of conflict will be considered: interpersonal and intrapersonal. Interpersonal is conflict between individuals, and intrapersonal is conflict that arises within oneself. As surgeons, we resolve conflicts with the health of our patients on a daily basis and in doing so encounter and resolve many conflicts that arise in the delivery of healthcare. Significant complications arise when our action plan does not resolve the conflict, whether it be the actual patient care plan or from the political ramifications of any of our actions. It is therefore essential to study methods of conflict resolution in order to be an effective leader.

Interpersonal Conflict Resolution

Resolving conflict should always be based on principles, with an emphasis on integrity, as well as a willingness to negotiate and compromise. In the book, *Getting to YES: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, researchers from the

Harvard Negotiation Project present the theory of “principled negotiation.” One must understand the underlying principles of the negotiation and then enter into the negotiation focusing on those principles, as opposed to the individuals involved in the negotiation. This method of negotiation places the principle as the guiding point for the discussion and removes the individual from the conflict. For example, three principles that help guide academic surgery are the education of the residents and students, research and the optimal clinical care of our patients. Whenever entering into a conflict resolution process, the surgeon can select one of these three principles as a guide toward the discussion and negotiation. It is important to recognize that the command-and-control leadership style under which many of us trained was not conducive to negotiation; therefore, we must learn these techniques if we are to be effective leaders in today’s complex political environment.

Among King’s important principles was to protest courageously, with dignity and Christian love. With these guidelines, he led the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, which is an excellent example of interpersonal conflict resolution at its finest. Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, a professor at the University of Alabama and civil rights activist, later published an account of King’s method for persevering and resolving the unconstitutional bussing practices in Montgomery, AL in her memoirs, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*. In 1949, after experiencing humiliation when trying to board one of the Montgomery City buses, Robinson propelled the Women’s Political Council to target racial seating practices on Montgomery buses. In 1954, a year

Figure 4. Martin Luther King, Jr. eats Sunday dinner with his wife Coretta and their young children at home in Atlanta

Bettmann/CORBIS



before the bus boycott took place, she wrote a letter to the mayor of Montgomery, threatening a boycott of the Montgomery City bus lines if the commission did not act to improve bus service for black citizens. The evening a courageous young seamstress named Rosa Parks was jailed for not giving up her seat on a bus, 7,000 would-be protesters crowded into the Hope Street Baptist Church, where King inspired the audience with his words, "There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression."

King used Gandhi's principle of Satyagraha to organize the boycott and created a plan based on setting goals, creating a plan of action, creating new formal alliances involving the people, seeking dialogue, seeking negotiation and innovating. The result of this hard work was the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), which is a fascinating name for the group of protesters. The first tactic of the MIA was to create a taxicab service to replace the function of the buses for the same price. Although it seemed a victory for the MIA, the local government quickly outlawed the taxicabs. The MIA regrouped to determine a peaceful method around this new obstacle and instituted a network of volunteer carpools; however, the carpools were soon outlawed as well. Instead of being deterred, King and the MIA continued to strategize and outmaneuver the obstacles being placed before them by powerful politicians who were utilizing legal means to block the protesters. King said,

The carpool is out of operation. I do not think any court would be ambitious enough to get an

injunction against feet, so we are going to continue to walk and share rides.

On November 13, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that Alabama's laws on bus segregation were unconstitutional. It was calculated that in the one year that protesters walked to work, nearly 40,000 people expressed a massive act of noncooperation and nonviolence, inspired by King's principles of the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence. Of the sacrifice to walk to work, King complimented the protesters by stating, "They came to see that it was ultimately more honorable to walk the streets in dignity than to ride the buses in humiliation."

It was an incredible victory in the Civil Rights Movement; however, King warned his constituents, saying:

I would be terribly disappointed if any of you go back to the buses bragging, "We won a victory," but we must take this not as a victory over the white man, but as a victory for justice and democracy. Let us go back to the buses in all humility and with gratitude to Almighty God for making this decision possible.

Furthermore, in the Integrated Bus Suggestions, King wrote:

The whole bus is now for the use of all people. Take a vacant seat. Pray for guidance and commit yourself to complete non-violence in work and action as you enter the bus. Remember that this is not a victory for Negroes alone, but for all Montgomery and the South. Do not boast! Do not brag! Be loving and absorb evil and understanding enough to turn an enemy into a friend.

Figure 5. Police officers O.M. Strickland and J.V. Johnson apply force in arresting the Reverend Martin Luther King for loitering near a courtroom where one of his integration lieutenants was on the stand. King charged he was beaten and choked by the arresting officers. Police denied the charges.

Charles Moore/Black Star



Through the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and his ability to peaceably resolve conflict, King was catapulted into world fame. On February 16, 1957, he was placed on the cover of *Time* magazine (Figure 3); the article for that issue read,

The man whose word they seek is not a judge or a lawyer or a political strategist or a flaming orator. He is a scholarly 28-year-old Baptist minister, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., who in little more than a year has risen from nowhere to become one of the nation's remarkable leaders.

Intrapersonal Conflict Resolution

If one is going to accept the responsibility of being a leader, then it is essential to understand the techniques needed to resolve intrapersonal conflict, since the leader will always be placed under many forms of extraordinary stress. The leader will be attacked on many levels, whether it is simply criticism of policy, or attempts to depose the leader by ruining their career or physically harming them. The survival of the leader depends on their ability to handle these stresses. Intrapersonal conflict resolution begins with an understanding of one's individual values and constant alignment with these values.

Values such as honesty, integrity and loyalty are important for leaders to possess, since they guide the leader through the fog of conflict. In order to endure the stress and adhere to the vision set forth by the leader, it is important to possess perseverance and endurance, since the leader will be challenged at many levels.

In the series of books by Paul Stoltz, three concepts are discussed: the intelligence quotient (IQ), the emotional quotient (EQ) and the adversity quotient (AQ). The AQ concept theorizes that it is the ability to turn obstacles into opportunities and thus overcome them that is the true measure of one's ability to succeed. Anyone who has realized the dream of getting into medical school, obtaining a residency and finishing a residency understands the time involved in overcoming numerous obstacles in order to achieve one's dreams and goals. It is also necessary to live a balanced life. For those of us who trained under the old system of every night or every other night on call, we know all too well the damage living an unbalanced life can create. One of the great benefits of the 80-hour work week is the ability for surgical residents to bring balance into their lives. One can only imagine the numerous and complex personal obstacles and personal threats that King faced as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement. Let us consider him now for a moment, not as a legend, an icon and hero, but as a man, a

father and a husband (Figure 4).

King was a highly educated man that deserved all the best in life. As a young man, he was a pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, had a beautiful wife and four children. He had a wonderful style of dress and exuded enormous charisma and charm wherever he went, yet King was the victim of cruel character attacks and was forcibly removed and imprisoned for his civil disobedience protests on multiple occasions (Figure 5). One can only imagine the embarrassment endured at being arrested, having a police record and the anxiety that an arrest would most certainly bring an end to his career as a pastor and livelihood for his family. His actions brought constant personal threats to his family, which he would have to endure as a father and husband. Armed guards were posted outside his home after receiving numerous death threats against himself and his family. Even with guards, their front porch was destroyed by a bomb, while his wife and children, fortunately, were in the back of their home. It was at this point that his father, who was a dominant figure in his life, told King that things were becoming too dangerous and that it was time for him to return to Atlanta. There must have been a part of King that wanted to leave Alabama and send his family to safety in a more peaceful environment. King and his wife, Coretta, were willing to accept the enormous risks and remain in Montgomery. Through it all, King and Coretta enjoyed a family life and raised their children, all the while driven by the goal for creating a kinder, more equal world for them.

Although it brought about personal hardships and humiliating experiences, King continued peaceful protests by saying, "I want my equal share. Like anyone

Figure 6. An Atlanta high-school student places flowers at the tomb of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated April 4, 1968 in Memphis, TN



else, I want to be treated equally.” King had to endure seeing his friends, colleagues and mentees beaten and assassinated for the vision he professed. In October, 1963, soon after the march on Washington, his friend and colleague, Medgar Evers, was assassinated. One can only imagine the sorrow King felt for his friend and how he must have felt as he spoke with Medgar’s wife and family. There must have been times of great doubt when he felt he should have heeded his father’s advice. King paid the ultimate price for his vision, but from the onset of his journey, he knew he must be willing to be totally committed to the cause he led (Figure 6). He saw the vision of equality as more important than even himself. Nonetheless, through all the suffering, King said:

I want you to go home and put down your weapons. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love.

One can appreciate the genius of King to resolve the enormous intrapersonal conflict he endured in accepting the leadership responsibility of the Civil Rights Movement.

It is our hope that you have learned something about leadership principles by studying those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was one of the greatest leaders in history. If we are to lead surgery to its next level of excellence in this century, these principles and his outstanding example will help inspire us to be better teachers, to be better clinical scientists and to be better clinicians for our patients.

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