

# Bahá'í Leadership Style

## INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

One of the outstanding and unique features of the Bahá'í Faith is the progressive *style* of leadership unfolding within it. Committee members, Regional Bahá'í Counsel members, local and national Assemblies members, Counselor members and their agents, or any other elected or appointed position wherein one is given a task to perform, can be service in a leadership capacity. Whatever it may be, all Bahá'ís are called upon to demonstrate a new style of expressing that leadership through the application of specific spiritual principles.

Leadership, as we are accustomed to it, has one purpose, which is to realize the task or goal for which it is created. Most societies achieve their goals by applying leadership styles modeled after those demonstrated in the animal kingdoms. That is, leadership is often expressed in a dominant, forceful or coercive manner. These styles of expression naturally create suspicion, distrust and resentment of leaders and governing bodies, be they secular or religious.

Bahá'í leadership, on the other hand, has *two* objectives as its purpose: to meet the goals for which it is created, *and* to preserve and strengthen group unity. For Bahá'ís, the *means* for attaining any *ends* must be compatible with unity. That is, the leadership *style* must facilitate a condition of harmony, agreement, peace and accord in human relations, free of conflict, dissension, contention and strife, simultaneous to attaining any goals or objectives.

Shoghi Effendi clearly noted: "Unity, both of *purpose* and of *means* is, indeed, indispensable to the safe and speedy working of every Assembly, whether local or national."<sup>1</sup> And again the Universal House of Justice wrote: "The guarantee of well-being and success in all your endeavors to serve the Cause of God can be stated in one word: unity. It is the alpha and omega of all Bahá'í objectives."<sup>2</sup>

Helping to facilitate this overarching principle of unity, are the numerous other spiritual principles that guide the believers in their leadership roles. In consideration of these vital principles, the Universal House of Justice wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States: "Do clearly bear in mind that our emphasis of the spiritual requisites [principles] of your functioning is not a mere expression of pious idealism. Far, far from it. Their exclusion from public discourse and from the considerations of the world leaders largely accounts for the current state of society. Indeed they are as practical in effect as they are spiritual in essence. Employ them consciously, constantly, confidently; and see how your actions will attract the confirmations of the Holy Spirit in the response of the community."<sup>3</sup>

Let us now investigate those spiritual principles that guide Bahá'í leadership.



**Bahá'u'lláh's Comb and Shawl**

<sup>1</sup> *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 48

<sup>2</sup> *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 384 ¶183.29

<sup>3</sup> *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 384 ¶183.49

## OBJECTIVE: *A look to the horizon...*

### Facilitator

Review the following objective with the participants:

The objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding Bahá'í leadership style.

## THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

### Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations that follow, one at a time as described below.

- 1. READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*
  - A. Read the quotation** out loud in its entirety.
- 2. CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*

To better understand certain words used in the quotation, take turns with the following:

  - A.** Each participant **choose a word** from the quotation and **state it** for the whole group to hear. (Like a fun game – pick a word!) Then...
  - B.** Read out loud the sentence that contains the **word** you selected, **while substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition, or synonym from the boxes below the quotation.
  - C.** Repeat A and B above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words.
- 3. FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*
  - A. Read the quotation** out loud again in its entirety.
  - B.** Take turns **stating each basic fact or truth** you can find in the quotation about **Bahá'í leadership style**.

## QUOTATIONS: *Within the meadows of Thy nearness...*

1. Election to an Assembly [or, in principle, any other position of leadership in the Faith], from a Bahá'í point of view, is not a right that people are entitled to, or an honour to which they should aspire; it is a duty and responsibility to which they may be called.

(The Universal House of Justice, *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 6, ¶18)

**aspire:** seek to attain or accomplish  
**Assembly:** Administrative Body of the Faith  
**called:** summoned or invited to accept  
**duty:** morally due obligation  
**entitled:** given or have proper grounds to attain

**honour:** position of esteem or superior standing  
**people:** Bahá'ís  
**responsibility:** deed for which one is morally accountable  
**right:** just claim or privilege

2. *The path to guidance is one of love and compassion, not of force and coercion. This hath been God's method in the past, and shall continue to be in the future!*

(*Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 77)

**coercion:** restraint, control, or domination by threat or deception  
**compassion:** selfless understanding and tenderness towards another's difficulty or suffering

**force:** moral, intellectual, or physical pressure  
**guidance:** leading or influencing others  
**love:** warm and benevolent affection  
**path:** way or course of action

3. Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion, and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 63)

**arbitrary:** rule by absolute authority [with]  
**authority:** legitimate and rightful power  
**candor:** unreserved, honest, and sincere expression  
**consultation:** “spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 72-73)  
**courage:** mental and moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty  
**dictatorial:** domineering, oppressive, or an arrogant overbearing  
**discretion:** caution in making responsible decisions  
**fellowship:** companionship, friendly association, and mutual sharing  
**frank:** free, straightforward, open, and sincere expression  
**freedom:** the ability or capacity to think and act, exempt from power or control of another

**humble:** freedom from pride, arrogance, and assertiveness [in]  
**justice:** administering what is deserved  
**keynote:** leading idea in a course of action  
**mercy:** lenient kindness and compassion towards the offender or condemned  
**principles:** basic governing truths or standards  
**prudence:** practical wisdom that conduces to reason and moral virtue  
**reconcile:** bring together and harmonize  
**right:** morally entitled powers and privileges  
**sanctity:** sacredness; holiness  
**self-surrender:** the yielding up of oneself or one’s will to influence or demand of another  
**spirit:** disposition, outlook, or attitude  
**submission:** voluntary obedience or yielding to the authority or will of another  
**vigilance:** alert watchfulness for danger or hazard

4. Theirs is the duty to purge once for all their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs from that air of self-contained aloofness, from the suspicion of secrecy, the stifling atmosphere of dictatorial assertiveness, in short, from every word and deed that might savor of partiality, self-centeredness and prejudice. Theirs is the duty, while retaining the sacred and exclusive right of final decision in their hands, to invite discussion, provide information, ventilate grievances, welcome advice from even the most humble and insignificant members of the Bahá'í family, expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them [in this case the NSAs] on one hand and all local Assemblies and individual believers on the other.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 143-144)

**air:** look, appearance, bearing, or attitude  
**aloofness:** state of emotional or physical distance from others  
**assertiveness:** bold self-confidence and determination in expression of opinion  
**atmosphere:** surrounding condition or environment  
**confidence:** faith and belief that one will act in the right, proper, and effective way  
**deliberations:** consultations and careful considerations of options  
**dictatorial:** domineering, oppressive, arrogant, or overbearing  
**duty:** moral obligation  
**exclusive:** single; sole  
**expose:** make known or disclose  
**foster:** carefully promote growth and development of  
**grievances:** any circumstance or condition that constitutes an injustice to a sufferer and gives just grounds for complaint  
**humble:** simple; lowly  
**interdependence:** reliance and trust of one another

**justify:** prove or show to be right, good, and true  
**motives:** emotions, desires, and ideas which move them to act or choose certain ways  
**mutual:** of the same feelings one for the other, [in]  
**partiality:** favoring one side over another  
**prejudice:** preconceived opinions without just grounds or sufficient knowledge  
**purge:** make clean and free  
**revise:** review and study again, to correct or improve  
**right:** privilege they are entitled to by authority  
**sacred:** holy and spiritually important  
**savor:** have the distinctive quality  
**self-contained:** complete in itself  
**stifling:** suffocating and restraining  
**suspicion:** state of being suspected  
**theirs:** “those who have been called upon to initiate, direct and coordinate the affairs of the Cause  
**them:** the National Spiritual Assembly  
**ventilate:** openly and freely examine, discuss, and investigate  
**verdict:** opinion or judgment

5. They [those elected] should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavor, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candor, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 64)

**affection:** moderate feelings of warmth, tenderness, and fondness  
**anxieties:** uneasy or fearful concerns; worries  
**atmosphere:** surrounding condition or environment  
**attitude:** mind set, disposition, or emotional state  
**banish:** drive out or remove  
**body:** organized structure  
**candor:** unreserved, honest, and sincere expression  
**capacity:** potential abilities  
**Cause:** Bahá'í Faith  
**central:** main, dominant, or most important  
**confidence:** faith and belief that they will act in a right, proper, or effective way  
**deliberations:** consultations and careful considerations of options  
**devotion:** acts of ardent dedication and affection  
**discretion:** caution in making responsible decisions  
**domineering:** disposed to flaunt dictatorial authority in a way to override any protestation  
**duty:** moral obligation  
**endeavor:** with earnest effort, try to achieve  
**esteem:** warm feelings of high regard and worth  
**exclusiveness:** limiting or leaving out others from participating

**friends:** Bahá'ís  
**humility:** consciousness of one's defects and shortcomings, making one free of an arrogant, prideful, or assertive manner  
**intrinsically:** really and truly by nature of their position  
**justice:** rendering and conforming to what is right, good, and true, in compliance with the Word of God  
**merit:** character and conduct deserving of honor or esteem  
**modesty:** humility, decency, and moderation in dress, speech, and conduct  
**open-mindedness:** receptivity to opinions or ideas  
**ornaments:** persons whose virtues or qualities adorn or beautify  
**passion:** acting on ungovernable emotions as distinguished from reason  
**prejudice:** preconceived opinions without just grounds or sufficient knowledge  
**respect:** a courteous and considerate attitude  
**welfare:** well-being in respect to prosperity, happiness, and good fortune

6. In a society where “telling it like it is” employs a style of expression which robs language of its decorum, and in a time when stridency is commonly presumed to be a quality of leadership, candor is crass, and authority speaks in a loud and vulgar voice. People are frequently obliged to receive direction from their leaders in such disrespectful modes; this is a reason for resentment and suspicion towards those in authority. By contrast, Bahá'í institutions have the task of accustoming the friends to recognize the expression of authority in language at a moderate pitch.

(*Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 384 ¶183.42)

**accustoming:** making familiar through experience  
**candor:** unreserved, honest, or sincere expression  
**crass:** gross and insensitive  
**decorum:** dignified and proper form  
**employs:** makes use of  
**expression:** communicating with words  
**moderate:** not extreme or intense but of medium  
**modes:** manner of customary expression

**obliged:** compelled or bound by circumstances  
**pitch:** level, intensity, or extent  
**resentment:** feelings of indignant displeasure, from an undeserved wrong, insult, or injury  
**stridency:** insistence, harshness, and loudness  
**style:** mode, manner, or method  
**suspicion:** feelings of doubt and distrust  
**vulgar:** morally crude and unrefined

7. ...the importance of the Bahá'í administration is its value in serving as a facilitator of the emergence and maintenance of community life in a wholly new mode, and in catering to the requirements of the spiritual relationships which flow from love and unity among the friends. This touches upon a distinguishing characteristic of Bahá'í life which such spiritual relationships foster, namely, the spirit of servitude to God, expressed in service to the Cause, to the friends and to humanity as a whole. The attitude of the individual as a servant, an attitude pre-eminently exemplified in the life and person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is a dynamic that permeates the activities of the Faith, it acquires collective, transformative force in the normal functioning of the community. In this regard, the institutions of the Faith stand as channels for the promotion of the salient characteristic. It is in this framework that the concepts of rulership and leadership, authority and power are properly understood and actualized.

(*Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 384 ¶183.33)

**acquires:** comes into possession and control [of a]  
**actualized:** made to become real  
**administration:** institutions or collective personnel who manage and conduct its affairs  
**attitude:** firm mental opinion  
**authority:** the exercise of power over thought, opinion, or behavior  
**catering:** supplying what is needed  
**Cause:** purpose and plans of the Bahá'í Faith  
**characteristic:** trait and quality  
**collective:** a condition shared and assumed by all  
**deduced:** determined by logical reasoning; inferred  
**distinguishing:** prominently set apart from others  
**dynamic:** change and growth producing force  
**emergence:** coming into being  
**exemplified:** shown or illustrated as an example  
**facilitator:** helper to make ease  
**force:** power and strength of influence and effectiveness  
**foster:** carefully promote the growth and development of  
**framework:** basic concept of ideas  
**friends:** Bahá'ís

**institutions:** established administrative structures authorized and maintained through prescribed rules and agencies  
**leadership:** the office or position of directing and guiding  
**mode:** manner of expression or style  
**permeates:** penetrates and spreads throughout  
**power:** the abilities to produce effects or to influence things or people  
**preeminently:** given the highest importance  
**regard:** considered way  
**rulership:** the office, function, and status of ruling  
**salient:** notably significant  
**servant:** one who voluntarily gives due respect, service, and worship  
**servitude:** a devotion in which one voluntarily gives due respect, service, and worship  
**transformative:** changing in form, character, and function  
**unity:** a heartfelt condition of peace, love, and harmony in human relations, free of conflict, contention, dissension, and the struggle for dominance  
**wholly:** completely and solely

8. Shoghi Effendi repeatedly advised the friends that they should be uncompromising in principle but flexible in subsidiary details.

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, p. 38, ¶137)

**flexible:** capable and ready to adapt to new, changing, or different requirements  
**friends:** Bahá'ís  
**principle:** the basic governing truths and standards  
**Shoghi Effendi:** The person appointed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament to ↗

carry on into the future the function of authoritative interpretation of the Sacred Writings and the care and protection of the Faith.  
**subsidiary:** secondarily important  
**uncompromising:** without concessions; inflexible; unyielding

9. The Guardian is, doubtless, well aware of the existing imperfections in the administrative machinery of the Cause, but these, he strongly feels, should be attributed not to the administrative system itself, but to the administrators of the Faith, who by reason of their human limitations and imperfections can never hope to entirely fulfil those ideal conditions set forth in the Teachings. Many of the existing defects in the present-day activities of the believers, however, will as the Community develops and gains in experience be gradually removed, and healthier and more progressive conditions prevail. And it is towards the realization of this high aim that the friends should earnestly and unitedly strive.

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *The National Spiritual Assembly*, p. 111)

**administrative:** management, directing, or supervising  
**administrators:** people who manage and conduct the affairs  
**attributed:** explained by indicating the cause  
**Cause:** Bahá'í Faith  
**Community:** unified body of the Bahá'ís  
**condition:** mental and moral characteristics  
**defects:** imperfections; inadequacies  
**doubtless:** certainly  
**earnestly:** with serious intent

**Guardian:** Shoghi Effendi  
**healthier:** more moral and spiritually wholesome  
**ideal:** perfect; excellent  
**machinery:** means and application  
**prevail:** become effective and continue  
**progressive:** new, improved, and advanced  
**realization:** bringing into real existence  
**strive:** devote serious energy and effort  
**Teachings:** standards, principles, and moral ideals taught [in the Bahá'í Faith]  
**unitedly:** in agreement and harmony

**SHARING EXERCISE: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...***

**Facilitator**

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, one thing that was outstanding or inspiring and what spiritual feelings it enkindled. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

One thing from the quotations that was outstanding or inspiring to me was \_\_\_\_\_

It made me feel \_\_\_\_\_

Explain \_\_\_\_\_

**SOME QUESTIONS: *A cup from the showers of confirmation...***

**Facilitator**

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

- Leadership in the Bahá'í Faith is a duty and a responsibility to which one may be called. It is not something that Bahá'ís seek out or aspire to, as this promotes self-superiority, which is contrary to spirituality.
  - true
  - false

2. The Báb wrote: “*The path to guidance is one of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, not of force and coercion.*”
3. “The keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving \_\_\_\_\_.”
4. The Universal House of Justice wrote: “People generally tend to be suspicious of those in authority. The reason is not difficult to understand, since human history is replete with examples of the disastrous misuse of authority and power. A reversal of this tendency is not easily achievable, but the Bahá’í friends must be freed of suspicion toward their institutions if the wheels of progress are to turn with uninterrupted speed.”<sup>1</sup> Describe how it is possible for your attitude toward the leaders and institutions of the Faith to be free of suspicion. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
5. The Universal House of Justice wrote: “In such a community leadership is that expression of service by which the Spiritual Assembly invites and encourages the use of the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed, and stimulates and guides the diverse elements of the community toward goals and strategies by which the effects of a coherent force for progress can be realized.”<sup>2</sup> This is because those in leadership positions are to function as \_\_\_\_\_ to help the believers fulfill their desire to serve the Cause.
- a. guiding controllers                       c. domineering forces  
 b. facilitators                                       d. authoritative leaders
6. The outstanding spiritual principles of leadership referred to in this study suggest a whole new and different approach to leadership. Pertaining to these principles, the Universal House of Justice has instructed the administrators of the Faith to “employ them consciously, constantly, confidently....”<sup>3</sup> Name some spiritual principles that guide Bahá’í leadership style.  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
7. The Guardian advised the believers to be progressive in principle but flexible in subsidiary details.  
 true  
 false
8. Leadership style for Bahá’ís is as much about *how* you say and do things as it is about *what* you say and do. Which of the following describe how Bahá’í leadership should communicate?  
 a. with aloofness                       c. in a moderate pitch                       e. with open-mindedness  
 b. with candor                               d. with extreme humility                       f. with courage  
 Name some others \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
9. Describe how you see leadership style in the Bahá’í Faith distinguished from that of other religious or secular organizations. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 384 ¶183.40  
<sup>2</sup> *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 384 ¶183.36  
<sup>3</sup> *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, The Fourth Epoch of the Formative Age*, p. 384 ¶183.49

## APPLICATION: Showing forth divine light...

### Facilitator

Read through #1 together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action in #2. (these are not shared) When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

#### 1. IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES: *Visions of radiant lights...*

**Bahá'u'lláh wrote:** *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....”* Imagine how the Bahá'í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: **“One could....”** Suggest as many ideas as you want.

#### 2. DECIDING ACTION: *Mirroring forth a beam of light...*

From your experience in this study class on Bahá'í Leadership Style, describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** \_\_\_\_\_

**My next step will be...** \_\_\_\_\_

## CLOSING MEDITATION: A heart song...

### Concerning the rulers and the learned.

*It is incumbent upon everyone to aid those daysprings of authority and sources of command who are adorned with the ornament of equity and justice. Blessed are the rulers and the learned among the people of Bahá. They are My trustees among My servants and the manifestations of My commandments amidst My people. Upon them rest My glory, My blessings and My grace which have pervaded the world of being. In this connection the utterances revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are such that from the horizon of their words the light of divine grace shineth luminous and resplendent.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Fountain of Wisdom*, p. 203 ¶15.7)

## ANSWERS: Affirming treasures...

1. true
2. love and compassion
3. consultation
4. all answers are valuable
5. b
6. all answers are valuable
7. false. It should read “*uncompromising* in principle” instead of “*progressive* in principle”
8. b, c, d, e, and f; all answers are valuable
9. all answers are valuable

This study guide and many others are available as free downloads at [www.bahaessentials.com](http://www.bahaessentials.com)