Bahá'í Leadership Style

INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold…*



Comb and Shawl belonging to Bahá'u'lláh

One of the outstanding and welcoming features of the Bahá'í Faith is the progressive *style* of leadership unfolding within it. When appointed or elected to any institution of the Faith, all Bahá'ís are called upon to demonstrate a whole new style of leadership through the embodiment and 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 developed over time by cultural, religious, academic, business, or governmental models. In these models, objectives are generally attained through the application, oversight, and enforcement of rule and law. Rules and laws alone are insufficient in managing leadership style. Without personal moral integrity, leadership can easily degenerate into intimidation, threats, coercion, and other forms of oppressive control. These styles of expression naturally create suspicion, distrust, and resentment toward leaders, whether religious or secular, and predictably result in disunity and rebellion.

Bahá'í leadership, on the other hand, has *two* objectives: to meet the goals for which it is created, *and* to employ, strengthen, and preserve unity! For Bahá'ís, the *means* for attaining any *ends* must be compatible with unity. That is, the leadership *style* must demonstrate and facilitate a heartfelt condition of peace, love, and harmony in human relations, free of conflict, contention, dissension, and strife, while simultaneously striving to attain goals and objectives. Shoghi Effendi stated clearly that "Unity, both of purpose and of means, is, indeed, indispensable to the safe and speedy working of every Assembly, whether local or national."[1] And from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly: "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."[2]

Facilitating this overarching principle of unity are numerous other spiritual principles that guide believers in their leadership roles, for, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us, "unity is the essential truth of religion and, when so understood, embraces all the virtues of the human world."[3] In consideration of these vital principles, the Universal House of Justice wrote to a National Spiritual Assembly: "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."[4]

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

---

[1] Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day*, (New Delhi, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 48.
[2] *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2010), par. 183.29, p. 394.
[3] `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), par. 12.7, p. 32.
[4] *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2010), par. 183.45, p. 401.

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**

Cited in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice,* (London: The Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), no. 18, p. 6.

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: role 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!* **—The Báb**

Selections from the Writings of the Báb, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), 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, directing, instructing, or influencing others
love: warm-hearted attraction, strong affection, and concern for the good of all
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: Selected Messages 1922-1932, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968), pp. 63-64.

arbitrary: rule by absolute authority [with]
authority: exercise of power over thought, opinion, or behavior
candor: unreserved, honest, and sincere expression
consultation: "…spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love."—`Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), par. 31.2, 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: straightforward, open, and sincere expression
freedom: the ability or capacity to think and act, exempt from the power or control of another
humble: freedom from pride, arrogance, and ⇗ assertiveness [in]
justice: administering deserved consequence or punishment
keynote: leading idea in a course of action
mercy: lenient kindness and compassion towards the offender or condemned
power: force or influence
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 the 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 [the National Spiritual Assemblies] 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 on one hand and all local Assemblies and individual believers on the other. **—Shoghi Effendi**

Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968), pp. 143-44.

air: look, appearance, bearing, or attitude
aloofness: state of emotional or physical distancing from others
assertiveness: bold self-confidence and determination in the 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, 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: modest or meek in spirit or manner
insignificant: lacking position or influence
interdependence: reliance and trust of one another
justify: prove or show to be right, good, and true
motives: emotions, desires, and ideas that 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: independent and uncommunicative
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 representatives] 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: Selected Messages 1922-1932, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968), 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, true, and fair in compliance with the Word of God; *"Know verily that the essence of justice and the source thereof are both embodied in the ordinances prescribed by Him Who is the Manifestation of the Self of God amongst men, if ye be of them that recognize this truth."* —Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952, 1971 printing), LXXXVIII, p. 175.
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
sole: only; exclusive
suppose: believe or imagine
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. **—The Universal House of Justice**

Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2010), par. 183.42, p. 400.

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
institutions: administrative structures
moderate: not extreme or intense but of medium
modes: manner of customary expression
obliged: compelled or bound by circumstances
pitch: level, intensity, or extent
presumed: taken for granted
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 this salient characteristic. It is in this framework that the concepts of rulership and leadership, authority and power are properly understood and actualized. **—The Universal House of Justice**

Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2010), par. 183.33, p. 396.

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: overall way of perceiving
authority: the exercise of power over thought, opinion, or behavior
catering: supplying what is needed
Cause: purpose and plans of the Bahá'í Faith
channels: ways and means
characteristic: trait and quality
collective: 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 or aid to make a process easier and more efficient
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 ability to produce effects or to influence things or people
pre-eminently: given the highest importance
promotion: furtherance or advancement
regard: considered way
rulership: the office, function, and status of ruling
salient: notably significant
service: the performance of beneficial deeds and works
servant: one who voluntarily performs deeds and works for the benefit of others
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 the Universal House of Justice**

Cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), no. 137, p. 38.

details: particulars and specifics of application
flexible: capable and ready to adapt to new, changing, or different requirements
friends: Bahá'ís
principle: the basic governing truths and standards [of the Faith]
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

"The National Spiritual Assembly". In *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice 1963-1990*, (Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), vol. II, no. 1468, 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
human limitations: natural shortcomings and inadequacies that define each person
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
system: organization of beliefs, principles, and methods
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 _____

_____

I felt this way because _____

_____

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.

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

☐ true ☐ false

Continued on next page…

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."[1] 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."[2] 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.…"[3] 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 describes 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 as distinguished from that of other religious or secular organizations. _____

_____

_____

[1] *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986-2001*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2010), par. 183.31, p. 395.
[2] Ibid., par. 183.34, p. 397.
[3] Ibid., par. 183.45, p. 401.

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, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 2016), par. 15.7, p. 203.

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.bahaiessentials.com