

## Ethical Leadership Principles from Shanti Parva: Insights from Bhishma's Teachings to Yudhishtira

Madhavi V. Kalebere  
MA in Clinical Psychology

### Abstract

This paper explores leadership psychology through the lens of Bhishma's counsel to Yudhishtira in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. The verses emphasize dharma (righteousness), truthfulness, emotional regulation, and ethical governance as foundational principles for leadership. The study correlates these ancient insights with modern leadership theories and real-world examples.

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, Leadership Ethics, Dharma, Governance, Bhishma's Teachings

### Introduction

Leadership is not merely about authority; it is about responsibility, ethics, and service. The Mahabharata, particularly the Shanti Parva, offers timeless wisdom on governance and leadership. Bhishma's teachings to Yudhishtira after the Kurukshetra war provide a framework for ethical leadership that remains relevant today.

### Core Shlokas and Interpretations

#### Core Shloka: Dharma as the Foundation of Rule

##### Sanskrit Text

धर्मेण राज्यम् आयत्तं धर्मेण च धनागमः।

धर्मेण मित्रसंपत्तिर्धर्मेण परिपालनम्॥

(Mahabharata – Shanti Parva, Section 58, Verse 11)

##### English Transliteration

Dharmaṇa rājyam āyattaṁ dharmeṇa ca dhanāgamaḥ

Dharmaṇa mitrasampattir dharmeṇa paripālanam

##### English Translation

"By dharma, the kingdom is sustained; by dharma, wealth is obtained.

By dharma, friendships are secured; by dharma, protection is ensured."

##### Interpretation

This verse from the *Shanti Parva* of the Mahabharata highlights the **central role of dharma (righteousness)** in all aspects of leadership and governance:

- राज्यम् आयत्तं धर्मेण – A kingdom or leadership structure stands firm only when rooted in dharma.
- धनागमः धर्मेण – Wealth and resources must be acquired through ethical means.
- मित्रसंपत्तिः धर्मेण – True alliances and friendships are built on trust and moral conduct.
- परिपालनम् धर्मेण – The welfare and protection of people depend on just and righteous actions.

##### Leadership Insight

**Ethical governance ensures sustainable prosperity and trust.**

This wisdom is not limited to kings or rulers. It applies to every **individual** who leads in any capacity:

- A **parent** guiding children,

- A **teacher** shaping minds,
- A **therapist** nurturing healing,
- A **professional** managing teams,
- Or a **seeker** leading oneself toward growth.

### Universal Reflection

*“Every human in life somewhere is a leader—it’s not important that it should be a war place, corporate world, home, or within himself. So it becomes fundamental that every human should follow ethics, prosperity, and trust.”*

This makes **dharma** not just a societal principle but a **personal compass**—guiding us toward meaningful relationships, responsible actions, and inner peace.

### Core Shloka : Truthfulness in Leadership

#### Sanskrit Text

सत्यं धर्मः परो लोके सत्ये धर्मः प्रतिष्ठितः।

सत्यं हि परमं ब्रह्म सत्ये सर्वं प्रतिष्ठितम्॥

(Mahabharata – Shanti Parva, Section 58, Verse 12)

#### English Transliteration

Satyam dharmah paro loka satye dharmah pratiṣṭhitah

Satyam hi paramam brahma satye sarvam pratiṣṭhitam

#### English Translation

"Truth is the highest dharma in the world; upon truth, dharma stands firm.

Truth is indeed the Supreme Brahman; upon truth, everything is established."

#### Interpretation

This verse elevates **truth (satya)** as the **supreme principle** that upholds all aspects of existence:

- **Truth is the essence of dharma**, the moral law that governs life.
- **Truth is the foundation of Brahman**, the ultimate reality.
- **Everything—relationships, society, leadership, and spiritual growth—rests upon truth.**

In leadership, truthfulness is not just a virtue—it is the **pillar of trust, clarity, and justice.**

#### Leadership Insight

**Integrity and transparency are non-negotiable for effective leadership.**

A leader who embodies truth:

- Builds **trust** with followers and peers.
- Makes **clear and fair decisions.**
- Creates a culture of **accountability and openness.**
- Inspires others to act with **honesty and courage.**

#### Universal Reflection

*“Truth is not just a moral choice—it is the very ground on which leadership stands. Whether leading a team, a family, or oneself, truthfulness ensures clarity, strength, and alignment with higher purpose.”*

### Core Shloka: Avoidance of Greed

#### Sanskrit Text

लोभाद्धर्मो विनश्यति लोभाद्धिनश्यति श्रुतम्।

लोभाद्धर्मो विनश्यति लोभाद्धिनश्यति यशः॥

(Mahabharata – Shanti Parva, Section 58, Verse 13)

#### English Transliteration

Lobhād dharmo vinaśyati lobhād vinaśyati śrutam

Lobhād dharmo vinaśyati lobhād vinaśyati yaśaḥ

#### English Translation

"Due to greed, dharma is destroyed; due to greed, learning is lost.

Due to greed, righteousness perishes; due to greed, reputation is ruined."

#### Interpretation

This verse warns against the **destructive power of greed (lobha)**:

- Greed erodes **ethical values (dharma)**.
- It blinds one to **wisdom and learning (śrutam)**.
- It tarnishes **reputation (yaśaḥ)** and undermines **moral leadership**.

Greed leads to short-term gains but long-term losses—both materially and spiritually.

#### Leadership Insight

**Self-control and ethical restraint prevent corruption and maintain credibility.**

A leader must:

- Practice **contentment and discipline**.
- Avoid decisions driven by **personal gain**.
- Uphold **transparency and fairness**.
- Inspire others through **integrity and humility**.

#### Universal Reflection

*"Greed is a silent destroyer—it corrupts judgment, breaks trust, and stains legacy. True leadership lies in choosing restraint over indulgence, and values over vanity."*

### Core Shloka: Emotional Regulation

#### Sanskrit Text

अक्रोधेन जयेत क्रोधं दानेन जयेत लोभम्।

सत्येन जयेतानृतं क्षमया जयते रिपून्॥

(Mahabharata – Shanti Parva, Section 58, Verse 14)

#### English Transliteration

Akrodhena jayet krodham dānena jayet lobham

Satyena jayetānṛtaṁ kṣamayā jayate ripūn

#### English Translation

---

"Conquer anger through calmness, greed through generosity.  
Falsehood through truth, and enemies through forgiveness."

---

### Interpretation

This verse offers a **practical guide to emotional mastery** and ethical leadership:

- **Anger** is overcome by **patience and calmness**.
- **Greed** is subdued through **generosity**.
- **Falsehood** is defeated by **truthfulness**.
- **Hostility** is resolved through **forgiveness**.

These are not just personal virtues—they are **strategic tools** for wise and compassionate leadership.

---

### Leadership Insight

**Emotional intelligence and ethical restraint are essential for resolving conflict and building trust.**

A leader must:

- Respond, not react.
- Give, not grasp.
- Speak truth, not manipulate.
- Forgive, not retaliate.

Such qualities foster **respect, harmony, and resilience** in any leadership setting—be it personal, professional, or societal.

---

### Universal Reflection

*"True leadership begins with self-mastery. When emotions are regulated and values upheld, a leader becomes a source of peace, strength, and transformation."*

Here are modern leadership examples who embody the principles aligned with Bhishma's timeless teachings, illustrating each model in practice:

### 1. Servant Leadership

Leaders who prioritize the needs of others, fostering growth and community harmony.

- Howard Schultz (Starbucks): Championed healthcare benefits for part-time employees, cultivated a sense of community within stores, and emphasized empathy and connection.
- Cheryl Bachelder (former CEO, Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen): Focused on developing franchisees and cultivating a mission-driven culture prioritizing people and service.

### 2. Transformational Leadership

Leaders who inspire change, personal growth, and a shared vision.

- Oprah Winfrey: Elevated her team and audiences by sharing a powerful vision, empowering others to pursue their potential, and integrating values-driven leadership in all endeavors.
- Reed Hastings (Netflix): Revolutionized entertainment by encouraging innovation and risk-taking, transforming the media landscape.
- Richard Branson (Virgin Group): Known for inspiring teams, fostering creative thinking, and challenging conventional business models.

### 3. Ethical Leadership

Leaders who make principled decisions with transparency and moral consistency.

- James Burke (Johnson & Johnson): During the 1982 Tylenol crisis, he prioritized public safety by immediately recalling products, demonstrating unwavering transparency and responsibility.
- Howard Schultz (again): Known for making socially responsible decisions and steering corporate policy with integrity.

### Leadership Insight

These leaders show that:

- Servant leadership (Bhishma's emphasis on service and protection) fosters community, loyalty, and long-term trust.
- Transformational leadership (Bhishma's focus on inner mastery and inspiration) encourages growth, innovation, and shared purpose.
- Ethical leadership (Bhishma's insistence on truth, restraint, and righteousness) builds credibility, resilience, and moral clarity.

### Universal Reflection

*"Modern leaders who embody these principles create sustainable success and inspire trust—mirroring Bhishma's vision of value-driven, emotionally intelligent, and deeply human leadership."*

### Idealized Influence

Leaders act as ethical role models, earning trust and respect. They demonstrate integrity, sacrifice for the greater good, and embody the mission they promote.

Examples:

- Mahatma Gandhi: Lived by principles of truth and non-violence.
- Nelson Mandela: Forgave oppressors and united South Africa.
- Ratan Tata: Prioritized ethics and customer safety.
- Jacinda Ardern: Led with empathy during national crises.

---

- Satya Nadella: Transformed Microsoft's culture through inclusivity.

**References**

Dhiman, S. (2019). *Bhagavad Gītā and Leadership: A Catalyst for Organizational Transformation*. Springer.

Gandhi, M. (2009). *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (J. Stohmeier, Ed.). North Atlantic Books.

Kalungu-Banda, M. (2006). *Leading Like Madiba: Leadership Lessons from Nelson Mandela*. Double Storey Books.

Orion, S. (2020). *Think Like Mandela: 21 Timeless Lessons on Leadership, Legacy, and the Power of Forgiveness*. Independently published.

Prabhupada, A. C. B. S. (1972). *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.

Aswathy, A. A. (2018). Influence of Bhagavad Gita on Mahatma Gandhi. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 5(3), 123–127.

Vyasa. (n.d.). *Mahabharata: Shanti Parva*. Critical Edition.

Vyasa. (n.d.). *Bhagavad Gītā*. Chapters 2 and 4 (Verses 2.15, 2.47, 2.48, 4.7).