

Community Leadership: A Commitment to Excellence

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INTRODUCTION

“Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile.”

- Vince Lombardi

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership qualities of Mohindar Singh Gill, by investigating his civic engagement as an immigrant activist. Past research has revealed the many commonalities of successful leaders. Interviews were conducted with two purposively chosen participants, Mohindar Gill and Gurmail Gill. The results uncovered various similarities between the qualities of great leaders and Mohindar’s traits, as seen through his civic engagement. Noteworthy characteristics of sacrifice, intellect, courage and commitment were comparable to that of previous research. A critical examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the research were discussed. Following this, a discussion of possible future research regarding this topic and policy implications were mentioned. Finally, I discussed some lessons learned and questions arising from my research.

Throughout history, there have been several revolutionary leaders that have inspired the masses and have helped bring about drastic changes to virtually all aspects of the social world. These leaders have emerged from social movements, politics, sports, entertainment and several other realms within society. Prominent public figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Martin Luther King and even Wayne Gretzky have demonstrated remarkable leadership qualities within their own respective domains. Although many of these leaders have come from different parts of the world, countless researchers have revealed a common set of attributes. Denehy (2008) states that leaders must have the ability to grasp important elements that are necessary for their group’s overall success. In other words, they must be well-educated and experienced in dealing with the particular issues that arise within their respective fields. Denehy (2008) also explains that certain traits of successful leaders – honesty, competence, inspiration, intelligence, courageousness and imagination – develop from hard work and are vital in promoting a sense of faith within their leadership.

Universally speaking, successful leaders are confident that their efforts are able to make a difference. This confidence is established by firm convictions that are often ingrained within them at a very young age; these, of which, drive their actions towards their

professional capacities. Thus, they do not feel coerced to act; they genuinely feel that they need to act, in order to satisfy their inner desires. Denehy (2008) summarizes this by stating that:

“Emotional traits of leaders include self-confidence, a desire to improve oneself, courage, optimism, loving what he/she is doing, being a risk taker, empathy, and a belief that they have control over their own destiny.” (p. 108)

Kerpelman (1969) supports this statement by affirming that one of the many qualities of good leader is a strong internal locus of control, or a powerful feeling that an individual is in command of his/her own life. This extraordinary sense of confidence not only serves to motivate themselves, but also serves to motivate others within the general population.

Other researchers have examined the unique leadership qualities among community activists. Bertaux (1990) found that many activists were fueled by “strong moral feelings” (p. 154); some, of which, were so powerful that they would temporarily drop other important priorities, such as getting an education, to help support their movement. In other words, many prominent community leaders do not always take into account the precise personal costs of their involvement within their particular social movement. Bertaux (1990) also found that most activists could remember a specific turning point in their lives, “a moment where a lifelong commitment took hold of them” (p. 164). It is here that each activist’s belief, in the integrity of their particular movement, is significantly hardened.

To help achieve their goals, community leaders must have the right skill set for the situation. Manning (2006) states that this sort of civil engagement “demands knowledge, civic values and the envisioning of a better society” (p. 172). Not only must the individual be passionate about his/her civic engagement, but the individual must have proper interpersonal and task-oriented skills that help to achieve these collective goals (p. 172). This implies that only with hard work and a firm conviction can one become a successful community leader.

Geller and Howard (1972) examined the socio-psychological characteristics of political activists. In general, they found that these activists tended to be more intelligent and ethically oriented than non-activists (p. 115). Whereas non-activists tended to place more of an emphasis on furthering themselves, activists were shown to act more altruistically and give support to others.

Although much of the research in this area offers an extensive amount of information about leadership qualities among community activists, few studies have taken into

account the unique experiences of immigrant activists. I have attempted to resolve this issue by examining the lifelong civic engagement of, my grandfather, Mohindar Singh Gill. Originally born in India in 1923, Mohindar's life can be defined by his community involvement. Beginning as a political activist fighting for India's independence in the 1940s, he eventually immigrated to Canada and continued to pursue equality rights for various other groups. When I originally started this study, I planned on doing a complete life history of my grandfather; this, however, changed throughout the interviewing process. The new goal of this study quickly became clear. My aim was to conduct an exploratory examination of the immigrant activist experience by investigating the sacrifices, intellect, courage and commitment of Mohindar Singh Gill's civic engagement in India and Canada; these, of which, were seen as the many essential qualities of a great leader.

METHODOLOGY

Since qualitative research is by definition open-ended research, I began with a non-specific, general line of questioning. From this, I was able to incorporate a broad questioning plan, while still allowing flexibility in terms of the nature of the answers. Throughout the interviewing process, I noticed that Mohindar demonstrated a steadfast commitment to bettering himself and his community. This allowed me to address the various characteristics of my grandfather, which I thought could be associated with the definition of a leader. Ultimately, this served as the essence of my research objectives.

The Participants

The main participant for this study was, of course, Mohindar Singh Gill. However, incorporating Esterberg's (2002) definition of triangulation, my father and Mohindar's son, Gurmail Singh Gill, also were interviewed. I chose to interview Gurmail because he had a lot of memories regarding Mohindar's involvement in community affairs. Furthermore, it allowed for me to corroborate the statements given by my grandfather, adding more to their accuracy. By interviewing these participants who I had already built a relationship with, it allowed me to bypass some methodological requirements. Berg (2001) states that before researchers begin the interview process, it is necessary for them to "chat" with their participants. This helps build rapport, which in turn, leads to more useful and accurate data. Since each of my participants and I had already established a high level of comfort with each other, this did not need to be carried out. Additionally, this comfort translated into trust. The participants were able to openly share intimate details of their lives, knowing that I would be respectful and courteous. However, having a pre-established rapport with my interviewees also posed some difficulties. Hammersley (1992) suggests that interviewers may come to take over false

assumptions held by their interviewees. Naturally, I would be less critical of my father and grandfather, than a total stranger. Thus, it is apparent that this closeness could be compared to that of double-edged sword.

Other Data Sources

Lending further credibility to the interview process, I used various other sources of information. A copy of Mohindar's MBA certificate (refer to Appendix A), a photograph of Mohindar receiving the Governor General's Award (refer to Appendix B), a copy of a plaque recognizing his service as the President of the Khalsa Diwan Society (refer to Appendix C), a copy of a plaque given to him by the National Indo-Canadian Council recognizing his Indo-Canadian Community efforts (refer to Appendix D), a copy of a certificate recognizing his involvement with the Federal Government Seniors Advisory Committee (refer to Appendix E), a certificate bestowing The Provincial Government's Community Achievement Award (refer to Appendix F) and a copy of an article about his life in *Mehfil Magazine* (refer to Appendix G) were used to provide additional information for this study. These additional sources were appropriate because they aid in responding to my original research objectives. This gives the audience a better idea of the many achievements my grandfather has attained, furthering my interpretation of viewing him as a leader.

The Interviews

The interview process proved to be very revealing of the true nature of qualitative research. Altogether, I conducted 3 video taped interviews with Mohindar and 1 written interview with Gurmail. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, providing over 2 hours of total interviewing time. Splitting up the interview process into 4 sessions, over the period of a week, gave me time to evaluate each session and sharpen my research questions. It gave me the flexibility to review each session individually, and if I felt some questions needed more explanation, it allowed me to delve deeper into those specific topics in subsequent sessions. In each interview, my participant and I sat on two chairs spaced approximately one meter from each other (refer to Appendix H). All 4 interviews were conducted in the den of our house, in which the three of us live. I chose to conduct my interviews in this location because of its comfortable and naturalistic setting. This was also the location where many of the plaques and certificates, previously mentioned, were posted; these, of which, I thought would help stimulate conversation.

As defined by Esterberg (2002) I incorporated a semi-structured line of questioning for both participants. This allowed each of the interviewees to openly talk about the topics that I posed to them, while still maintaining some structure in regards to the questions.

To properly pretest my schedule and make sure the subject matter of my questions was appropriate, I used Berg's (2001) suggestion of reviewing each question with a person familiar with the substance of the study. This was done with my grandmother, which aided in further refining the wording of each question. I also adopted Berg's (2001) four central interviewing questions: essential questions, extra questions, throw-away questions and probing questions (refer to Appendix I). Including these different types of questions allowed for a variety of responses on the same topic area, which increased the reliability of the given answers. Essential questions and extra questions were aimed mainly at addressing my research objectives. These questions dealt with my grandfather's connections with various social movements and associations, while bringing about his various leadership qualities. Throw-away questions explored Mohindar's life in India before his college years and probing questions filled in any loose ends with regards to his civic engagement. When conducting the actual interviews, I took on Berg's (2001) perception of a director. Here, I was able to reflect upon the comments made by the participants, which demonstrated my interest in their stories. This perception also allowed me to express my feelings in an empathetic manner.

Only with time and effort can researchers conduct successful interviews. Berg (2001) addressed a number of issues in his ten commandments of interviewing, many of which were adopted within this study. He states that when interviewing, you must "remember your purpose" (p. 99). I remained conscious of this fact and kept a general list of questions with me during the interviews. When my participants got too far off track, I would refer back to this list. Berg also recommended that interviewers "present a natural front" (p. 99). By clearly stating my proposed questions in a relaxed manner, it helped to avoid confusion and misunderstanding. Additionally, Berg mentions that researchers should "think about appearance" (p. 99). Since I was interviewing an adult, I dressed in proper business attire during each session (refer to Appendix H). Lastly, Berg states that interviewers must "be cordial and appreciative" (p. 100). Since my participants, Mohindar and Gurmail, gave up their time to sit with me and be interviewed, I made sure to thank each of them after each session. By incorporating these strategies, I increased the effectiveness of my interviews.

RESULTS

Born in the small farming village of Dhudike, Punjab, Mohindar used to be in charge of taking the family's buffaloes to get a drink of water from nearby ponds. His father, Khem Singh Gill, owned one plow, three buffaloes and acres of farmland. When Mohindar completed his daily duties on the farm, he would play "gooli dunda," a popular game similar to baseball, with other children in the village. Most of his daily activities were peculiar to that of the rural life. In his village, he acquired his primary

school education, which included grade 1 – 4, before leaving the village to complete his secondary school education.

Sacrifice

Upon completing his high school education, Mohindar became involved with India's independence movement in 1940. While attending the D.M. College in Moga, Punjab, he and other students began advocating for India's freedom. Mohindar and his friends used to attend meeting and rallies where other political activists would gather to talk about their social movement. His strong views about British control over India were summarized when he stated:

“At that time, WWII had started and all of a sudden Indian leaders became very conscious of their political status... after listening to them [Mahatma Gandhi and other political leaders] I also became very interested when I realized that actually we are not independent, we are like political slaves of the British government.”

At that time, any involvement in the freedom movement beyond holding small private meetings usually resulted in a prison sentence. All of the heads of government were British officials and regulation of the law was strictly enforced. Motivated by the prospect of change, the majority of students participated in the movement, but restricted their involvement to a couple of hours a week, for fear of being prosecuted. However, Mohindar's eagerness to assist the freedom movement went beyond the likes of his fellow classmates:

“A friend of mine and I, we decided to be a little bit more active. We used to go around at nighttime and post these [anti-government] posters on hydro poles, school boards and every public place.”

Unfortunately, the authorities soon caught up with Mohindar when a fellow classmate reported his nighttime activities. Charged with aiding in the attempt to overthrow the British government, he served 5 months in prison before being acquitted on the grounds of a lack of evidence. While in prison, he got the chance to meet with many other senior-level political activists involved within India's independence movement. Many of these activists were successful lawyers and businessmen themselves, and urged him to get an education if he wanted to continue supporting the rights of the Indian people.

Intellect

In November of 1941, Mohindar was released from prison. He took the advice given to him and went back to school. After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the D.M.

College in Moga, he completed a one-year teacher training program. However, with no real opportunities and still not being satisfied with his current situation, he was given the opportunity to further his education in Canada and stated that:

“My other class fellows said ‘oh my God’ you got that opportunity, don’t miss it! Go to Canada for higher education and maybe they will let you stay or something...maybe they’ll let us come too!”

After being admitted to the University of British Columbia and obtaining his student visa, Mohindar endured through a long, grueling deep-sea going journey from India to San Francisco, before finally catching the rail to Canada. He arrived in Vancouver on September 18, 1950, one day before the start of classes. Enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce degree program (B.Comm), my grandfather found school in Canada to be a big change. In order to cope with the day-to-day school events, he felt compelled to meet other Indian students. Thus, he stated:

“I was instrumental in organizing and forming the East Indian Student’s Association and we first celebrated the Indian Republic Day... the first year I was the General Secretary, the remaining two years I served as the President.”

Mohindar knew that education was the key to being successful as a community leader. Already having two undergraduate degrees under his belt, he continued to pursue his Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from the University of Western Ontario. He realized that one must not wait for change, but one must be intelligent and demand change.

Courage

Following the completion of his MBA in April of 1955, Mohindar’s civic engagement really took off. In 1959, he became the General Secretary of the Khalsa Diwan Society (KDS), a community advocating group. From then on, until 1970, he was unanimously selected, without dispute, to be the President of the KDS. People within the Indian community new of his qualifications and past contributions, for they selected him without holding any elections; they knew that he would help to enhance their standing within Canadian society. Not only did he aid in assisting his own community, he reached out and assisted others who desperately needed support. For example, he helped in providing many Ugandans with shelter, as they fled the clutches of their authoritative dictator, Idi Amin. As the leader of the KDS, he was instrumental in negotiating with the B.C. government for the purchasing of the Ross Street temple site. His committee raised donations that helped purchase and construct this new temple, which is now considered to be a landmark within the Indo-Canadian community.

After serving as the President of the KDS for many years, Mohindar joined the East Indian Canadian Citizens Welfare Association (EICCWA), which primarily looked after immigration matters. He served as the President of the EICCWA in 1972 and 1973. While advocating for the EICCWA, he fought avidly for the rights of Indian immigrants. He stated that:

“We took two or three delegations to Ottawa, to make representations to get further rights for our people... until Indian immigrants were landed immigrants, they were not allowed to work...we sought to change this so those who applied to become landed could work immediately.”

His unfettered desire to improve his community continued throughout his career as a Revenue Canada Agent and Sunlife Insurance salesman. Being in such a privileged position, he felt compelled to stay committed to various community affairs.

Commitment

While actively participating in the community and leading on a successful career, Mohindar still found time to spend with his family. Whether going out to Whitespot for burger or celebrating with his family in his home, he and his wife, Gurdev Kaur Gill, remained a happily married couple. On some occasions, he would bring his community affairs to his home, or vice versa. His son, Gurmail recounted that:

“During the week, he was always very busy. Often, I would see him and other active members of the community sit in our living room and confer over different proposals... Sometimes, after picking me up from school, we would go straight to the temple. I would play games with the other children, while he would discuss community affairs.”

In the later years of Mohindar’s life, his commitment to his community had really become highlighted. At an age where others were beginning to wind down, Mohindar remained a widely recognizable figure within the broader community. In 1992, he received the prestigious Governor General’s Award for his tremendous work within the community. In 1997, he was awarded a plaque for his services as the President of the KDS. In 1999, he received two honors: a Lifetime Achievement Award, given to him by the National Indo-Canadian Council, and a certificate recognizing his participation as a member of the Seniors Advisory Committee. Even as late as 2008, Mohindar, as an 84 year old, had collected awards, receiving the British Columbia Community Achievement Award. These various honors and awards displayed his lifelong commitment to community service. Mohindar summarized his feelings about his community work when he stated that:

“I was proud of the fact that I and my group were able to bring some of these changes among our people... until then our people were only working in the wood industry... as they started to diversify, many of them became professionals... I think a big change occurred in the 1970s.”

CONCLUSIONS

The central goal of this study was to examine the extraordinary civic engagement of an immigrant activist, Mohindar Singh Gill, while paying particular attention to the various qualities that led him to become a lifelong leader. Beginning with his involvement in India’s independence movement, he sacrificed his own freedom, for the freedom of his country. As noted in Bertaux (1990), many leaders remember a specific turning point in their life. For Mohindar, this was being imprisoned for 5 months, during which his beliefs became firmly defined and his future clearer. Another characteristic of a successful leader is an exceptional intellect and education (Geller & Howard, 1972). For the first 32 years of his life, Mohindar saw nothing but education and quickly gained the skills necessary to lead a community. Furthermore, leaders must be “innovative and risky” (Bertaux, 1990, p. 153). Mohindar and his committee bought city sites for the development of new community centers and sought and obtained declarations in Ottawa that extended the rights of Indo-Canadians. Finally, and perhaps the most important quality of a leader, is an individual’s commitment (Denehy 2008). Mohindar exemplified this characteristic more than any other, providing remarkable community service his entire life.

Leadership is not a one-day thing. It is a constant commitment to excellence, a habit . . . a daily practice.

– Unknown

DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Throughout this study, the various qualities of great leaders have been outlined. It is evident that leadership is not developed instantaneously, but only through a process of hard effort and dedication. That being said, I feel that the methods and procedures outlined in this study have effectively and sufficiently evaluated the proposed research objectives. One of the many strengths of this research study was the foundation on which it was built on. There was the abundance of literature on the topic of leadership qualities, which provided a solid basis for examination. This allowed me to acquire vital information from my participants, while obscuring other data; Stake (1994) described this method as “comparative description.” Other strengths within this research were seen in the interviewing process. Many of the in-depth and critical questions had been carefully thought out, which provided an extensive amount of valuable data. When it

came to the rationale behind my participant's decisions, I took advice from Berg (2001) and asked "how come" instead of "why." This helped me avoid the problem of getting negative responses. Finally, by using a variety of different sources of data collection, it strengthened the external validity of my findings. For this study, I interviewed 2 participants, Mohindar and Gurmail. This gave me two different perspectives regarding the civic engagement and leadership qualities demonstrated by my grandfather. Furthermore, I incorporated photographs, certificates and other archival sources of information. These helped outline the various achievements of Mohindar and aided in portraying his many leadership qualities.

Although I have outlined the many strengths of this research, it is necessary to take into account some limitations. Firstly, being that the data collected in the study was of a self-report nature, it may be subject to some degree of inaccuracy as a result of mistaken memory recall or discomfort with self-disclosure (Stake, 1994). In this case, my participants could have forgotten or overlooked certain aspects that would have been important to this study, thereby limiting my results.

With respect to the results, one must also consider any rival plausible explanations. For example, was Mohindar's prison sentence, when he was 18 years old, a result of his firm convictions in the integrity of India's freedom movement or a consequence of inexperience and ignorance of the law? If one were to choose the latter, it would likely affect his/her perception of viewing him as a leader. Another example of a rival plausible explanation can be seen when evaluating his input in the various committee gatherings. Was he a vital component in organizing and carrying out the various delegations that were taken to Ottawa, or may he have perhaps been on the sidelines during the entire process? Once again, choosing the latter would influence one's perception of viewing him as a leader.

Taking into consideration the various sources of data collection, and given all of Mohindar's contributions to the Indo-Canadian community and broader society, I am confident that I offer the most plausible explanations in my results. Throughout this study, I have found no evidence of any inconsistencies between the substance of my interviews and any other sources of data. Based on these conclusions, my perception of viewing Mohindar as a leader should be viewed as the most logical explanation.

This research has tapped into the particular leadership qualities among immigrants. Some questions that this research study has tried to answer are: What does it take for immigrants to be successful as leaders? How does this compare to the traditional definition of a leader? Future research in the area of leadership qualities could take into account the experiences of other minority groups. If I was to start another research

project in this same general area, I would study the leadership experiences of women. Traditionally, women have not been known for their strong leadership qualities. For the most part, they are underrepresented in most powerful social spheres, such as politics. Further research could aim to evaluate these claims by examining the characteristics of female leaders. Other research could examine the effectiveness of certain leadership styles among different groups of people. This type of research would address questions like: What leadership styles are most effective for certain groups? What are the implications of these different styles on the broader population? Theoretically, this type of research could reveal important methods of social control, which could greatly benefit society.

Among others, leadership characteristics can also be viewed as important life characteristics. They help build self-esteem, confidence and motivation for individuals of all backgrounds. Mohindar Singh Gill greatly benefited from these particular qualities. Therefore, I would urge that, based on the results of this study, more leadership type programs be available within schools and communities. Young adults should be encouraged to join volunteer groups and/or any other rational associations that have goals aimed at bettering society. Programs that help promote education, courage and commitment should be implemented. I believe that these policy implications would go a long way in improving the overall condition of young adults.

In conducting this study, I learned many valuable lessons. Firstly, I learned that good methods of data collection lead to good research. Although I felt that I did an excellent job of collecting data, in future oral history research I would conduct longer and more thorough interviews. Secondly, I learned that any researchers conducting oral histories must practice and memorize their interview questions. My first interview with my grandfather was not very professional; however, in the subsequent sessions, I learned to be more natural and relaxed. This helped in maximizing the efficiency of my interviews.

Lastly, there were a few questions that arose during my research. These questions were: If Mohindar had not been imprisoned in India, would he have been the same community leader? If Mohindar had not come to Canada, would the full potential of his leadership qualities have been realized? To answer these questions, further research on these particular leadership issues must be conducted.

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