

# The Daily Star

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## Leadership training in Bangladesh

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FORTY years into independence, Bangladesh faces a crisis in leadership. The dearth of effective and strong leadership in our country has been evident for over a decade, and yet no effective measures have been taken to address this problem. Part of the reason for this lies in our understanding of leadership. We usually assume that leadership is a personal trait, a charismatic personality that you are born with. But can leadership be learned? More importantly, can it be taught? As we reflect on our collective past today to forge our country's future, it would be useful to rethink and examine ways to improve the quality of leadership in our country.

### Can leadership be learned?

This depends on how you perceive leadership. During my many interactions with both youth and adults in workshops, I have essentially heard two broad theories of leadership. On one side, some people think that leaders are born with innate leadership abilities - you either have it or you don't. Many term this magical ability as 'charisma'. On the other hand, some people think that leaders are made - you develop leadership abilities through learning and practice.



BBLT 3 students posing for a photo.

My own view leans toward the latter. I believe that leaders are made and that anyone can master the skills and behavior necessary to exercise leadership. Just as you can learn how to swim, you can also learn how to be an effective leader. But before I elaborate further on that, let us first look at the role of charisma. The German sociologist Max Weber defined charismatic authority as a certain trait in an individual's personality that sets that person apart from ordinary people. This trait is usually of divine origin, and therefore, the individual with charisma is treated as a leader. The purpose of charisma is to charm and influence. But is leadership just about influence? Is it about charming people into doing something that you want them to do? Hitler was charismatic, but was he a good leader?

Many in the leadership education business would argue that leadership is just about influence, nothing more, nothing less. I personally disagree with this view because I believe that collective purpose and shared values are as important as influence, if not more. Furthermore, I think there is a misconception in our society that leadership is the same as having individual authority. We see this everyday when we open the newspapers. We refer to people in positions of authority as leaders. We know intuitively that the two are not the same because in the next breath we complain about the quality of leadership in our country. It would be far more useful for us if we perceived leadership as an activity - an activity that mobilizes people to improve the human condition and to make progress on society's problems. If leadership is thus redefined, can people learn how to do it? Certainly, yes. Through trial and error, anyone can learn how to effectively exercise leadership by developing a set of skills and behavior. But the more crucial question is: if leadership can be learned, can it be taught?

### Can leadership be taught?

As someone whose work is to teach and consult on leadership, my answer to this is not as obvious as you might think. Teaching leadership is not like teaching economics. You can teach the dynamics of the market by explaining the demand and supply curves; you can teach consumer preference by drawing

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indifference curves; but how do you teach someone not to be indifferent about the widening and deepening socio-economic disparities in Bangladesh? It is not as straightforward. I say this because I believe that character and empathy are more important ingredients of leadership than knowledge. This said, my two years of training at the Harvard Kennedy School's Center for Public Leadership had an enormous impact on me. I felt that if I could translate the learning I had been fortunate enough to receive among young people in Bangladesh, then perhaps I could contribute to my country's development. Thus began the BYLC experiment in June 2008. So far, more than 100 Madrassa, college and first-year university students have gone through our intensive month-long leadership training. While there is no unifying model in the world for teaching leadership, our curriculum draws heavily from my experiences at Harvard with some of the world's best leadership instructors. Many universities in the West have now incorporated leadership education into their curriculum and it is high time for both private and public universities in Bangladesh to seriously consider introducing similar courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

The structure of a semester-long leadership course would largely depend on the learning outcomes that we would want to achieve. For example, if we want to provide learners with knowledge about leadership, then teaching it would be similar to teaching any subject in the liberal arts. It would require the facilitation of reflective thinking by engaging students in mastering a broad area of literature. Understanding the leadership theories that have been proposed by many authors and practitioners over the past two hundred years may bridge some of the intellectual gaps we have in our society when it comes to understanding leadership. There will be significant value for society if the next generation is better informed about the process of leadership and its role in a democracy.

However, if we want to build the capacity of learners to actually participate more effectively in leadership actions then we need to rethink our conventional teaching methodology. We will need to create learning environments that allow students to put knowledge into practice and to experiment and experience the outcome of their actions through the response of others. At Harvard, Dr. Ronald Heifetz has been doing this for the past 25 years. His course on leadership is one of the most sought after courses in the school. Heifetz uses experiential learning to create a laboratory in the classroom and uses classroom dynamics to illustrate concepts of leadership in real time. His three-step leadership model - observe, interpret and intervene - improves the students' capacity to observe the environment, interpret people's behavior, and design effective interventions. In Bangladesh, there are several ways to do something similar in the classroom: role-plays, simulations, small group discussions, analyzing the social system inside the class and others. It would also be useful for learners if we can create ways for them to apply their knowledge outside the classroom and find ways for them to later reflect on those experiences.

The more we can connect the classroom with the realities of the outside world, the more effective leadership education can be. At BYLC, we take our students for intensive community service in a slum after they complete the leadership training. The purpose is to help them run experiments and test their newly honed skills. At universities, leadership courses could have an organizing component whereby students are given an assignment to mobilize people in their community to achieve an objective that positively impacts society. This will be beneficial for both the student's personal growth as well as the community's development. Just imagine: if each first-year undergraduate student had to complete 30 hours of community organizing as part of their leadership assignment, how much change we could initiate in our society. In the process, we would also be developing a compassionate young generation, more connected to the needs of the community, and better prepared to step up to leadership roles at local and national levels in diverse fields. What Bangladesh will be in forty years is being determined today in the classrooms across our country. Our future may very well depend upon the level of our investment in leadership education for the next generation.

The author is founder and president of Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC).

**URL:** <http://www.thedailystar.net/suppliments/2010/03/26thmarch/page18.htm>