

# People-Oriented Leadership: A Qualitative Exploration in Indian Organizations

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**Abstract:** *Many perspectives on leadership have defined it in different ways. A unified understanding of leadership does not yet exist, but every investigation of leadership takes us closer to it. The current study explores and revalidates different ways in which people oriented leadership is expressed in Indian organizations. Data was collected using various methods from 282 leaders during diagnostic studies conducted before a workshop. This data from 11 Indian organizations was subjected to thematic analysis. A total of 5 themes emerged which included: Openness, Empowerment, Positive leader attitude, Communication and Teamwork. The obtained findings point to the fact that employees in Indian organizations expect leaders to be people oriented along with having task orientation. Thus, a novel approach of wholesome leadership can be the way forward for future leaders.*

**Keywords:** leadership, people orientation, task orientation, Indian organizations

## 1. Introduction

Leadership theory has been the center of debate in psychological research for a long time. The current study focusses on data from 11 reports that represent Indian organizations. These reports were generated by Pragati Leadership Institute as part of their process for delivering workshops. The qualitative data was thematically analyzed to arrive at various domains in which a people oriented leader expresses his leadership style.

Various theories of leadership have evolved over the years starting with trait theories, followed by behavioral ones (Derue et. al, 2011). Derue et. al. (2011) provide a detailed discussion, integration and meta-analysis of trait and behavioral theories of leadership. Influence of trait and behavioral theories can be seen on the subsequent theories. For example, the contingency theories of leadership combine leader traits and behaviors with situational factors (Fiedler, 1978; Blake, Mouton & Bidwell, 1962). The behavioral approach that is most commonly encountered is leader's orientation toward task vs orientation toward people (Derue et. al, 2011).

## 2. Literature Review

A brief description of people and task oriented leadership approaches along with a model that is specific to Indian society follows.

Description of task orientation is encountered in many leadership models. For example, Stogdill (1950) describes task orientation as 'initiating structure'. It is defined as "the degree to which the leader organizes his own role and the role of his followers, the degree of goal orientation and sets well defined patterns and channels of communication."

(Fleishman, 1973). Similarly, transactional leaders also exhibit task oriented characteristics. For instance, they set clear expectations for task performance and contingent rewards for task performance. (Derue et. al, 2011) Further, Blake and Mouton (1962) include organizational needs for profit and production as one of the key drivers of leadership in their managerial grid model.

Leader's orientation toward people has been documented in several theories as well. Stodgil's (1950) description of consideration which is, "the degree to which the leader shows concern and respect for followers, looks after them and expresses appreciation and support." (Bass, 1990). People oriented behaviors are often described as participative (Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 1997), democratic (Gastil, 1994) and empowering (Conger, 1989; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006). People orientation also resembles transformational leadership in some ways. For example, transformational leaders give individualized consideration. Further they focus on building follower respect and encourage followers to think about the group as a whole (Derue et. al, 2011). Finally Blake and Mouton's managerial grid model (1962) considers human needs for mature and healthy relationships as one of the key variables. Thus, there is abundant scientific literature that talks about task vs people orientation in leadership.

A leadership model particularly developed keeping in mind the Indian society and culture is that of a Nurturant leader. "A nurturant leader cares for his subordinates, shows affection, takes personal interest in their well-being, and above all is committed to their growth. In order to be effective, however, he makes his nurturance contingent on the subordinate's task accomplishment." (Sinha, 1984 p.87). Although this model is apt to Indian culture, this model has been criticized. The critics say that nurturance is basically authoritarian culture under a glorified facade. The

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current study explored leader behaviors to find that people orientation is expressed in different ways. The qualitative data analysis revealed five themes that are consistent with the existing literature.

### Objectives

The objectives of this study were twofold:

- To explore the construct of people oriented leadership in Indian organizations using qualitative methodology.
- To map themes relating to desired leader behaviors in Indian organizations.

### 3. Methodology

#### Data Collection:

The primary sources of data for this paper were the 11 reports of the pre-program studies. Before conducting a leadership intervention, facilitators from Pragati leadership institute conduct a pre-program or diagnostic of the client organization. The pre-program studies include a detailed summary of actual data collected, thus, the qualitative data source can be considered as secondary. The program reports particularly included data on 3 important domains; they were strength, weakness and challenges of leadership in the respective organization.

In the pre-programs study, a variety of data gathering methods are applied, such as one on one interviews, focused group discussions, telephonic conversations, etc. The data points are gathered from with various stakeholders, such as participants of the workshop, HR personnel, senior leaders of the organization, etc. A detailed account of the various characteristics (sources, methods used, participants) of the data follows.

#### Sample:

Data from 282 leaders was included in the current study. The data was collected from leaders at different levels in the organization. The following table describes number of cases that included senior, middle and junior level leaders.

\* Table1 showing the number of cases that included senior, middle and junior level leadership

Leader level	Number of cases
Senior level	10
Middle level	7
Junior level	2

The total qualitative data was collected in relation to three important domains, strengths, weaknesses and challenges of leadership. Out of the 11 cases, 9 contributed to the strengths data, all of the 11 cases included weaknesses data and 7 of the cases included challenges data.

\* Table 2 showing the number of cases that included strength, weakness and challenge data

Data Type	Number of cases
Strength data	9
Weakness data	11
Challenge data	7

Industry sector-wise distribution of the 11 cases included in the current study is given below:

\* Table 3 showing the sector-wise distribution of cases

Sector	Number of cases
IT	5
Manufacturing	4
Banking	1
Pharma	1

#### Procedure:

A varied number of data collection methods were employed in the current study. These included: one to one interviews, telephonic discussions, focused group discussions, exit interview analysis, survey data and document review. The following table describes the number of cases that used each of the aforementioned data collection methods.

\*Table 4 showing number of cases using the given methods.

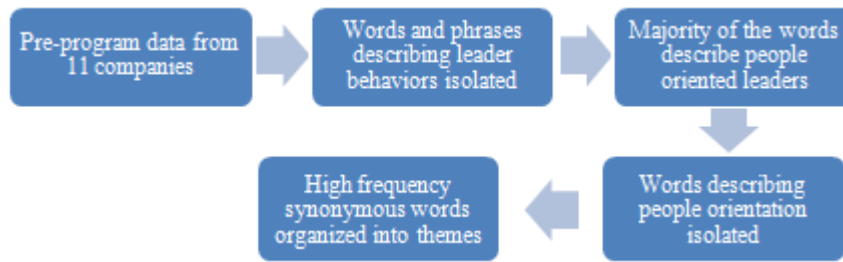
Data Source	Number of cases
One to one interview	9
Telephonic discussion	1
Focused group discussions	9
Exit interview analysis	1
Survey	3
Document review	1

#### Data Analysis

To analyze the data from the pre-program reports, words and phrases that described leader behavior were isolated. The words describing strengths of leadership provided clues into what is present and desirable in leaders. On the other hand, words describing weakness and challenges provided clues to what is absent but desirable in leaders. The total words describing leaders were 484.

From this initial word pool, it was observed that there were more words describing the 'people oriented' leaders, for example "employee centric" and "supportive". Hence, words that described 'people oriented leaders' were considered for thematic analysis. Approximately 18% of words also indicated task oriented leadership style, for example, "target oriented" and "gives clear directions". But this data was not thematically analyzed due to overall less number of words.

In the thematic analysis, high frequency synonymous words were segregated into themes. All of the themes obtained had some theoretical basis which is discussed further. The percentages for obtained themes were calculated by comparing words relating to a particular theme to the total number of words/ phrases within that theme.



**Figure 1:** Illustrating the process of qualitative data analysis

#### 4. Results

After an initial investigation of the data, it was found that majority of the words and phrases described a people oriented leader (396 words in total). Some data also

indicated characteristics of task-orientation of leaders. The qualitative data (words/phrases) was analyzed for themes. The themes relating to people orientation that emerged after data analysis are described below:

**Table 4:** Showing the numbers and percentages of words describing each theme under people orientation

Theme	Person Orientation	Openness	Positive Leader Attitude	Empowerment	Communication	Teamwork	Total
No. of words	24	50	120	94	79	29	396
Percent	6	13	30.3	24	20	7.3	100

##### Person Orientation:

Person orientation is also known as consideration (Stodgil, 1950) or human need for healthy and mature relationships (Blake and Mouton, 1962). It is the leader’s behavioral style to show concern to his followers, and behave in an empowering (Conger, 1989; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006), caring (Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 1997) and democratic (Gastil, 1994) way. This was the major theme that was observed in the current study.

A total number of 396 words described different people orientation characteristics of leaders. Out of these 396 words, 24 or 6% of the words described people orientation in general. For example, words such as, “*participative*” and “*strongly people oriented*” were often seen in the data. Out of the qualitative data, 5 specific themes further relating to people orientation emerged. These five specific themes describe the various desirable ways in which leaders express people-orientation.

##### Openness:

Managerial openness refers to subordinates’ perceptions that their boss listens to them, is interested in their ideas, gives fair consideration to the ideas presented, and at least sometimes takes action to address the matter raised. (Detert, 2007) Such behaviors are important in maintaining initial motivation to speak up (Milliken et al., 2003). Behaviors that indicate openness are essential to creating an environment where employees feel like discussing ideas that might be potentially risky (Edmondson, 2003).

Total 13% of the data or 50 words described leader’s openness as a desired attribute. For example, words that described openness as a strength of leaders included: “*Receptive*”, “*Transparent*”, “*Free from politics*”, “*Open to perspectives*” etc. The words that described lack of openness included, “*need to be responsive*”, “*need to be approachable*”, “*lack of trust and transparency*” etc.

##### Positive Leader Attitude:

The current data revealed that employees value leader’s positive attitude. Positive leader attitude theme in the current study is very similar to the concept of ‘authentic leadership’. Authentic leaders are defined as “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” (as cited in Avolio, Gardner et al., 2004).

A total 30% or 120 of total words described positive leader attitude as one of the important characteristics of the people-oriented leader. A few words that described positive leader attitude as the strength of leaders included: “*enthusiastic*”, “*passionate*”, “*trustworthy*”, “*supportive*”, “*leads by example*” etc. The words that described lack of positive leader attitude included, “*motivation and recognition required from the top management*”, “*pro-activeness missing*”, “*taking initiative to find solutions required.*” etc.

##### Empowerment:

In the current study, the leader’s orientation toward empowering his employees was a major theme that was observed. Sullivan (1994) describes the importance of empowerment in a manager’s role. This line of thought suggests that an empowered organization is the one where managers supervise and delegate responsibilities to subordinates (Malone, 1997). According to this perspective, leaders act like coaches and help employees to find solutions. The leader’s empowering style results in more satisfaction and respect for the leader (Keller and Dansereau, 1995).

In the current study, 24% of the total or 94 words described empowerment orientation as important. The words that described empowerment as a leader strength included “*Leaders enable*”, “*Bosses explains*”, “*coaching- leader shares areas of opportunity*” etc. The words/phrases that described a lack of empowerment on part of the leader

included, “*Developing leadership in people is required instead of managing them*”, “*Creating a learning organization is needed*”, “*Empowerment of employees to take responsibilities*” etc.

#### **Communication:**

According to a qualitative study by Vercic et. al. (2012), “Respondents describe internal communication as a management function in-charge of intra-organizational communication and as an interdisciplinary function integrating elements of human resources management, communication and marketing. On the other hand, they see it in charge of information dissemination and of management and production of internal media.”

In the current study as well, the data indicated communication as one of the sub themes of people orientation. A substantial 20% of the total or 79 words described communication as an important quality in a leader. The words/phrases used to describe communication as strengths included, “*transparency in communication*”, “*leader never shouts but reasons*”, “*leader collects feedback*” etc. The words/ phrases that described the lack of communication included “*creating more touch points required*”, “*communication (inter-departmental) needs improvement*”, “*lack of communication of feedback*”.

#### **Teamwork:**

The teamwork theme obtained in the current study resembled ‘functional leadership’. According to the functional leadership approach, leader’s main task is to get done what is not adequately taken care of by the group. The leader is effective when he can manage the task as well as maintain the group (McGrath, 1962). In the current study, the data revealed that people oriented leaders show teamwork.

A 7% of the total data or 29 words described teamwork as a theme. The words/ phrases that were used to describe this theme as a strength included, “*leveraging right people in right way*”, “*participates in team*”, “*collaboration is high*”. The word/phrases that described a lack of teamwork included, “*leaders need to spend time with the team*”, “*manage and move people better*”, “*strained relationship between team managers and members*”.

## **5. Discussion**

The current study involved a qualitative investigation of the people oriented leadership in the context of Indian organizations. Data from diagnostic studies of 11 Indian organizations was subjected to thematic analysis. From the data, 5 themes of people-oriented leadership emerged. These themes describe the desirable ways in which leaders express people-orientation.

In the current study, the review of literature indicated that the people oriented leader are participative (Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 1997), democratic (Gastil, 1994) and empowering (Conger, 1989; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006). The themes obtained after data analysis support the existing research. Such as, the current study revealed that people oriented leaders are empowering in their leadership style. Further, the empowering nature of these leaders is

appreciated and expected by the employees. Further, the teamwork theme is similar to leaders that are participative with the teams. The results of the current study highlight the fact that, Indian employees very much value leadership. As noted before, a ‘nurturant’ leader (Sinha, 1984) in the Indian organization makes people orientation contingent on task performance. The findings of the current study did not particularly support this existing perspective.

The current study highlights the fact that positive leader attitude is one of the most important ways (30% of the data indicated this theme) in which people-oriented leadership is expressed and appreciated. This finding is consistent with the previous studies. Authentic leadership, a positive psychology approach to leadership, closely resembles the positive leader attitude theme. Authentic leadership is positively related to supervisor rated job performance, organization citizenship behavior and work engagement (Walumbwa et al. 2008, 2011 and Walumbwa et al. 2010). Thus, the current study indicated that positive leader attitude is an important aspect of leadership in Indian organizations.

The current study further points to the importance of empowerment in people-oriented leadership. A 24% of the total data indicated that employees want an empowering leader who can coach and mentor them. This pattern is consistent with the previous findings of empowerment and leadership. A study that involved employees from telecommunication industry in China indicated that an empowering leader promotes trust in the employees. Thus, employees voice their opinion more readily when the leader is empowering (Gao, Janssen & Shi, 2011). Further, empowering leadership is related to knowledge sharing and team efficacy, which in turn promotes performance (Srivastava, Bartol & Locke, 2006).

The findings of the current study suggest that positive leader attitude, empowerment and communication are three of the important ways in which people oriented leaders can express themselves. For instance, 30% of the total data indicates the importance of positive attitude on the part of leaders. Consequently, the current study revalidates some important ways in which people-oriented leadership is expressed. The current study also indicates that employees appreciate task orientation but also want their leaders to be people oriented. In today’s times, task or people orientation alone may not be enough. The question arises: How can we look at leadership in a way that goes beyond the set roles?

A possible answer can be ‘Wholesome Leadership’\*. After 30 years of developing leadership with Indian organizations, Pragati Leadership Institute has come up with this approach. This new perspective is about leading in a way that not only impacts your organization but also the environment and society at large. “Wholesome leadership is defined as the leadership that arises when one is being one’s whole self.” It is standing up and acting for what has meaning and heart for oneself in a way that inspires other to follow. It is leadership by love for the unfolding of peoples’ fullest potential and executes actions with consummate skill. This study validates that ‘Wholesome Leaders’ are required to lead Indian organizations.

## 6. Conclusion

The thematic analysis of qualitative data relating to people oriented leadership revealed 5 subthemes. These were: Openness, Positive leader attitude, Empowerment, Communication and Teamwork. The study clearly highlights the importance of how leaders even today need to have a positive attitude towards work, team interactions, communications, within the organization. A novel approach relating to 'Wholesome Leadership' can provide some answers.

## 7. Limitations and suggestions for further research

A major limitation was that the qualitative data used in the current study came from pre-program study reports that have an exhaustive summary of statements. Thus, the data source in the current study was secondary and did not include any verbatim responses. The pre-program studies were conducted by a variety of facilitators or trainers and thus somewhere lacked overall consistency of formats.

\*The concept of Wholesome Leadership is taken from the book "One Wholesome World", Published by: Light Spira, Sweden  
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