

# MALALA LEADERSHIP ESSAY

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PART 1



*Narrative*

*“You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”*

*- Mahatma Gandhi*

Malala Yousafzai, a young social change leader in Pakistan’s Swat Valley, works on the basic human right of equal access to education for children around the world. Her vision stems from childhood experiences, and her political actions address needs she first identified within her local community. With strong support from her father, and a newly established foundation, Malala engages local participants, government administrators, and world leaders to advocate for policies that will effectively provide education to all citizens. This essay will examine Malala’s leadership work, recognized internationally, through the following learning objectives:

- Leadership theories
- Malala’s leadership style
- Leadership goals and strategies
- Collective action

## Background

While Malala was in primary school, Taliban forces took control in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, and they issued a decree that all girls’ schools be closed. Parents and teachers were threatened if they refused to comply. Malala’s daily walk to school became dangerous when the Taliban patrols exerted power over the community’s institutions and directed the local women to cover themselves, stay indoors, and travel with a male protector. Because these directives

were framed as deriving from religious teachings and were filtered through the valley in print and radio broadcasts, some community members sympathized with the edicts and joined the Taliban ranks and many chose to be silent. Ziauddin Yousafzai, Malala’s father, was one of the few who spoke on national and international media resisting the Taliban’s decree while promoting the rights of children to an education. He opposed the mandate and continued to keep his school open. In her memoir, Malala wrote of her father’s actions and of the challenges Swat Valley social institutions encountered from political and religious factions. Eventually her actions gained outside community support and contributed to shaping a larger platform for universal access to education.

## Leadership Overview

The concept of leadership is conditioned by cultural, religious, economic, political, and social conditions, and it is informed by historical and contemporary stories. Leadership topics can be traced throughout history; both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* reference effective leadership qualities, and philosophers from Plato to Confucius, wrestled with the subject. For Muslims, Prophet Muhammad’s<sup>ﷺ</sup> life and actions serve as a model of good leadership. Legends, folk tales, adventure stories, and religious narratives detail individual feats or events that inspire a community to action and instill values.

An important historical figure for Pakistani and Afghan schoolchildren in the Pashtun culture is Malalai of Maiwand, for whom Malala Yousafzai is named. In 1880, Malalai,

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<sup>1</sup>The salawat, “salah allahu alaihi wa sallam”, is a phrase that Muslims use to pronounce blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad. Sometimes the phrase is abbreviated as SAW or PBUH for “peace be upon him,” but these abbreviations are controversial and to some, suggest a lack of respect. With this in mind, we have used the full salawat in Arabic, as a superscript, in line with contemporary literary conventions seen in texts about Islam.

a young Afghanistan heroine, rallied Pashtun people to continue their battle against British invaders. Malalai's story inspires Pashtun identity and core values, while connecting succeeding generations to Pashtunwali, the code of the Pashtuns, which includes centuries-old traditional principles of courage and generosity. In her text, Malala claims this leader as "our very own Joan of Arc." (Yousafzai 15)

Though no universally accepted definition of leadership exists, many contemporary writers identify leadership as a complex process that involves the engagement of a community working toward a shared goal, vision, or interest. Leaders act as a catalyst within an organization or community: initiating collective action around a common interest, accepting responsibility for completion of stated goals, communicating the community's position with outside partners, and exhibiting courage in the face of conflict.

The essential characteristics for a successful leader include vision, self-knowledge, critical thinking and problem-solving capacity, adept communication skills, personal integrity, and responsibility. At the outset of the text, Malala reveals her vision: a concept of equal access to education. Speaking at public events, first as an apprentice to her father and later as a featured guest, she has developed language skills and reasoning ability to effectively communicate her vision. When an opportunity opens for more dialogue or action, Malala seizes the invitation. She writes about her fear of public speaking and the greater responsibility to carry out the mission of access to education. In interviews, she responds insightfully to questions about the actions and decisions that affect education rights globally.

Charismatic leaders motivate and inspire others to take action. Malala identifies Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's former prime minister, as a powerful role model who embodied leadership qualities of charisma, political astuteness, and tough opposition to rivals. Prime Minister Bhutto received the 2008 United Nations Prize for Human Rights; following in her role model's footsteps, Malala Yousafzai was a 2013 recipient of the same prize. Recognizing the importance of community participation to effect significant policy change, Malala does not present herself as a heroic leader but as a humble and responsible member of a working group. In a 2013 U.N. speech to other young education advocates, Malala identified herself as "one girl among many," and she spoke of the philosophy of nonviolence learned from the work of Bacha Khan, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Teresa.

Integrity is viewed as an essential trait for effective leaders. Participants are willing to invest when they can rely on the leader's core values; trust inspires confidence. Malala accepts responsibility for working within existing community structures to implement change, and she speaks for those without a public platform. Writing about the U.N. speech she delivered in 2013, she states: "Deep in my heart I hoped to

reach every child who could take courage from my words and stand up for his or her rights." (Yousafzai 310) She intended her speech to reach beyond the delegates in the room, to travel deep into the fault lines of poverty and give others hope and support.

## Theories on Leadership: Western and Islamic Perspectives

Historically, stories of leaders who have inspired group actions often emphasize three elements: distinct traits, aspects of a leader's engagement with committed followers working to achieve end goals, and the situational environment or landscape that influences group actions. Current leadership literature combines the identified elements and points toward a nuanced interpretation of leadership as a process, recognizing the fluid interplay among constituent parts of individual, community, and situation. James MacGregor Burns adds to leadership literature with a discussion of the ethical/moral dimension of leadership. Writing about the collective responsibility of citizens to work toward alleviating human rights needs worldwide, he states: "The task of leadership is to accomplish some change in the world.... Its actions and achievements are measured by the supreme public values that themselves are the profoundest expressions of human wants: liberty and equality, justice and opportunity, the pursuit of happiness." (Burns, *Transforming Leadership* 4)

### A. Leadercentric Theories - Traits, Skills, and Style

Traditional Western leadership theory first identified specific leader traits or characteristics derived from great man stories. Professional skills or knowledge competencies and behavior actions or style were identified, mid 20th century, as integral components providing additional tools for assessing successful leaders.

1. **Trait leadership theory**, first identified in the early 20th century, recognized characteristics attributed to the leader. Research on leadership traits "points to six key traits: intelligence, confidence, charisma, determination, sociability and integrity." (Northouse, *Introduction to Leadership* 27) Today, leadership scholars acknowledge these leadership traits as a valuable component in the scope of leadership theory, while also recognizing the limits of a leadercentric perspective. Traits analysis focuses on the leader, without acknowledging the important exchange between leader and follower; and it does not account for different situational needs. Additionally, the demands of working with one group may require traits not appropriate or necessary in other settings.

2. **Skills leadership theory**, first explored by Robert Katz in 1955, identified “skills and abilities that can be learned and developed.” (Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice* 35) Katz positioned management leadership capacity to include technical proficiency skills, human or people skills, and conceptual/idea skills. In the past 20 years researchers have greatly expanded the skills leadership theory and identified a skills-based leadership model that speaks to the potential of individuals to develop leadership competencies in problem solving, social judgment abilities, and knowledge competencies. (Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice* 39)
3. **Style leadership theory** analyzes leaders’ actions as they “facilitate goal accomplishment ... and nurture the community participants.” (Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice* 65) Both actions are joined to accommodate successful goal achievement. How the leader communicates and works with followers and facilitates interactions with outside community actors is studied to frame an analysis of the leader’s style.

## B. Leader/Follower Leadership Theories - Transactional, Transformational, and Social Change

Early Western leadership literature focused on the leader or the follower, but it did not investigate vital relationships between leader and follower. In 1978 James MacGregor Burns identified transactional and transformational leadership styles that examined the role of leader/follower relationships. Another addition to leadership theory, the social change leadership model, developed as a collegiate training program defining a “purposeful, collaborative, values-based process that results in positive social change.” (Komives and Wagner xii)

1. The **transactional leader** engages in an exchange with followers, based on a system of rewards and benefits.
2. The **transformational leader** gets the community to invest in the common goal and transcend individual rewards for greater community needs.
3. The two core elements of the **Social Change Model** state that leadership is tied to social responsibility and the common good, and that leadership functions as a collaborative process. Every participant is a stakeholder in SCM, and the leader role may shift in response to the organization’s needs.

## C. Islamic Leadership Values

In Muslim countries, the life and work of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has had a profound influence on leadership models. The Prophet’s ﷺ words, actions, and life choices serve as a role model for thoughtful leadership. John Adair in a treatise on the leadership of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ writes: “Islam today is both an inheritor of the world’s body of knowledge about leadership and ... a great contributor to it.” (Adair 110)

Muslim leaders’ actions are influenced by Islamic religious values of honesty, integrity, equality, truthfulness, and sincerity. (Khan and Varshney). Self-awareness is considered one key leadership trait, and it “involves thankfulness and respect for Allah and His creation (the Quaranic concept of at-taqwá)... Additional qualities a leader exhibits are “purity (taharat), patient perseverance, and steadfastness (sabr).” (Danielewicz-Betz 140)

In Islam, “leadership is based on trust (amanah)” and “the focus is on doing good.” (Danielewicz-Betz 140) These deeply rooted spiritual ideas drive Malala’s understanding of effective community participation and inspire her work and active citizenship. In her memoir, Malala references core values from religion, family, and teachers as significant guiding principles that inform her understanding and perception of community. She proudly locates herself within a specific cultural and religious community, identifying the basic values and needs of the group through a generous description of family and community lives.

## Conclusion

Writing with passion and conviction, Malala reveals personal stories and insightful observations across the intersections of everyday life and the existing power structures of Pakistan’s Swat Valley. She acknowledges support from both community and world leaders, evaluating the progress of the journey thus far. She works within the community to invest in the common good and develop capacity in followers working toward equal access to education. She speaks to authority figures as an advocate and community action driver, representing the group’s needs. Within this dialogue, she reveals her charisma as she channels hope through an optimistic attitude that change is possible. Her story reveals the active process of engaging others to join the cause for equal access to education and accept social responsibility for change.

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