

# Leadership Qualities from Successful Leaders in The Theravāda Perspective

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## Abstract

This article aims to explore leadership concepts in Western and Theravāda perspectives and analyze qualities of successful leaders. The qualitative research design is employed a documentary-based method. The result was found that there are 34 good leadership qualities from 3 Western scholars (6 from Plato, 7 from Bennis, and 21 from Maxwell). Also, there are 21 effective leadership concepts in Buddhism relying on *Rājadhamma*, *Adhipati*, and *Sappurisa-Dhamma* as well as other doctrines related to *sīla*, *saṃādhi*, and *paññā*. The integration of Theravāda and Western viewpoints reveals 55 theoretical qualities divided into four principles: the dominance that characterize moral characters, the services and cooperation, the organization and achievement, and the emotional adjustment. Finally, the GIVEPCS formula highlights seven essential qualities for a qualified leader: Generosity, Integrity, Vision, Expectations, Persistence, Character, and Self-control. These are considered on fundamental minimum requirements for successful leadership.

**Keywords:** Successful leadership qualities, GIVEPCS, Theravāda perspective

## Introduction

Leadership is known no bounds. Surprisingly, even the meekest can become a formidable leader with dedicated learning and training. From celestial realms like *Deva* and *Brahma* to animal communities, each has its own society. Even a family embodies a mini-society requiring a capable leader to foster happiness and harmony. Effective leaders inspire and steer societies toward great achievements. Whether leading a family, classroom, university, or nation, these individuals embody leadership. The path to leadership varies, but successful leaders share defining qualities. Aspiring leaders must understand their emergence and embrace these traits for triumphant leadership.

In Buddhism, leadership is rooted in morality, mental development and wisdom. Successful leaders may be moral or immoral. However, embracing Dhamma is crucial in this life and beyond. Western scholars like W.G. Bennis and J.C. Maxwell believe leaders can emerge from

diverse backgrounds, regardless of age, gender, or nationality. Anyone has the potential to become a change-making leader. Leadership is essential for mankind's spiritual and physical advancement. The MON language has a saying: "An organization without a leader is like a boat in the heart of the ocean without a boatswain." Without a leader, people may wander aimlessly like a boat at sea. A good boatswain guides the boat to shore, just as a leader does for humanity. Thus, having a leader is crucial. However, not just any leader will do; an effective and successful one is necessary to ensure a brighter future. Choosing the wrong leader can be detrimental, akin to a lame trainer causing a horse to limp or King Ajātasattu missing his highest goal. Therefore, this paper aims to explore leadership qualities from successful leaders in the Theravāda perspective, emphasizing the importance of selecting a good and effective leader. Through such leaders, humanity can progress towards its aspirations, both spiritually and physically.

### Research Objective

- 1) To investigate the concepts of leadership in Western ideas,
- 2) To study the concepts of leadership in the Theravāda perspective
- 3) To analyze the qualities that characterize successful leaders in the Theravāda perspective.

### Literature Review

Everyone is possible to become a leader, but it is not easy to become successful and noble leader of the team. Even some of them becomes leader in social such as political and business leader. Somehow, according to the *Theravāda* perspective, they might not be competence leader for both individual and social development. The reason is that, most of the leader among the society and country, they focus on the management, power, and educational background than morality which is conceived inside them. The leadership of the Theravada Buddhism more emphasize about morality, concentration, and wisdom. Therefore, this paper is describing about Buddhist leadership qualities from the teachings of the Buddha, especially based on the morality.

1. Alan Peto (2023) expresses in his article, the 5 Leadership Lessons of the Buddha, how to become a great leader by practice ng the Dhamma of the Buddha. It mentions that the Buddha is not only a religious master but also a psychotherapist and advisor from all perspectives for the benefit of all beings. Although the teachings of the Buddha are primarily focused on the highest goal, Nibbāna, there are numerous practices that could comply in the modern world. He describes the five leadership lessons of the Buddha, which are 1) having a purpose, 2) having a mission, 3) having a vision, 4) setting the tone, and 5) being mindful, which are similar to the qualities among the seven qualities of a gentleman, which are knowing the cause and consequences, and so on.

2. It is hard to see the research about Buddhist leadership as the modern, western scholars investigate. Somehow, Venerable Pandava (M.A. Thesis, 2019) expressed the principle of leadership from a Buddhist perspective, focusing mainly on morality. But his groundwork is the

concept of leadership based on the Seven Conditions of Welfare (*Aparihāniya-Dhamma*). Thereupon, by holding his research book, encourage this study to develop and go deeper to study the concepts of leadership from the Buddhist perspective and those of modern scholars.

3. Low Yuen Fah (Ph.D. Dissertation, 2022) in her dissertation of the academic year 2022 entitled, *Shaping Insight Leadership Models and Development Pathways for The Digital Age of Experience* has researched and analyzed data related to living conditions, perceptions, and leadership models within the Buddhist community. It also involves revising the curriculum framework for cultivating insight leadership in the digital context. A new cluster of Insight Leadership Models is emerging, guiding humanity with visionary insight, conviction, and innovation the transition to the Digital Age of Experience. This cluster will have a profound impact on both Buddha Sasāna followers and humanity in the future. To shape these models and their development pathways, updated perspectives and frameworks are recommended, aiming for sustainable peace and well-being for all.

Due to the different researchers has different ideas, there were dozens of leadership qualities that can see on their research works. Somehow, they concluded the Buddhist leadership traits with the tringle qualities which are morality, concentration, and wisdom in the end. Therefore, to win the crowd, one must win him or herself with morality, dignity, and honesty. It is to become the successful leader.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper is employed a qualitative research approach, collecting data from primary and secondary sources including English translations of Tipiṭaka scriptures and Commentaries as well as sub-commentaries. Also, the secondary sources of data, such as textbooks, research works, and Buddhist journals, together with the interpretation of the leadership concept from Buddhist and modern scholars' perspectives are explored. The study is analyzed and synthesized the data to understand leadership qualities from both Buddhist and modern scholars' perspectives. It constructs and outlines covering all relevant dimensions based on the objectives and discusses encountered problems in the scope of the study's significance.

Furthermore, this paper explores Western ideas of leadership, focusing on three experts: Plato, Warren G. Bennis, and John C. Maxwell. It examines into the Buddha's doctrine analyzing *Rājadhamma*, *Adhipati*, and *Sappurisa-Dhamma* to uncover qualities for physical and spiritual leaders. Sources include books, journals, and research. Two case studies; King Asoka of ancient India and King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, exemplify successful leadership traits.

### **Research Results**

The first objective investigating the leadership concepts in Western ideas in Table 1, is fulfilled. There are 34 qualities that an effective leader should possess according to the three leadership scholars: 1) Six Plato qualities 2) Seven Bennis qualities and 3) 21 Maxwell qualities.

Table 1: Leadership Qualities in General by Three Experts

Scholars	Leadership Qualities		
Plato	1) Truth loving 2) Knowledge	3) Courage 4) Loving-kindness	5) Self-discipline 6) Justice
Bennis	1) Guiding Vision 2) Passion	3) Integrity 4) Self-knowledge	5) Candor 6) Maturity 7) Curiosity and Daring
Maxwell	1) Character 2) Charisma 3) Commitment 4) Communication 5) Competence 6) Courage 7) Discernment	8) Focus 9) Generosity 10) Initiative 11) Listening 12) Passion 13) Positive attitude 14) Problem solving	15) Relationships 16) Responsibility 17) Security 18) Self-discipline 19) Servanthood 20) Teachability 21) Vision

In Western ideas, leadership surpasses age, gender, and title; it is cultivated, not innate, and focuses on influencing others. A successful leader takes responsibility for rational problem-solving and achieving positive outcomes. While this research aligns with three Western leadership experts and their 34 identified qualities, even possessing some traits effectively can lead to becoming an influential leader.

The second objective of this research to analyze the concepts of leadership from the Theravāda perspective has been accomplished as shown in Figure 1. The following 21 traits of leadership which are drawn from the three Dhamma categories from the Theravāda perspective were examined: 1) *Dasa Rājadhamma*; the tenfold virtues of ruler are generosity, moral character, self-sacrifice, honesty, kindness/gentleness, self-control, non-anger, non-violence, patience, and conformation to the law 2) *Adhipati*; the four factors of predominance, are ruling over by zeal, predominance of effort, predominance of though and predominance of wisdom and 3) *Sappurisadhamma*; the seven virtues of gentleman are knowing the cause, knowing the consequences, knowing oneself, knowing how to be tempered, knowing the proper time, knowing the society, and knowing the individual.

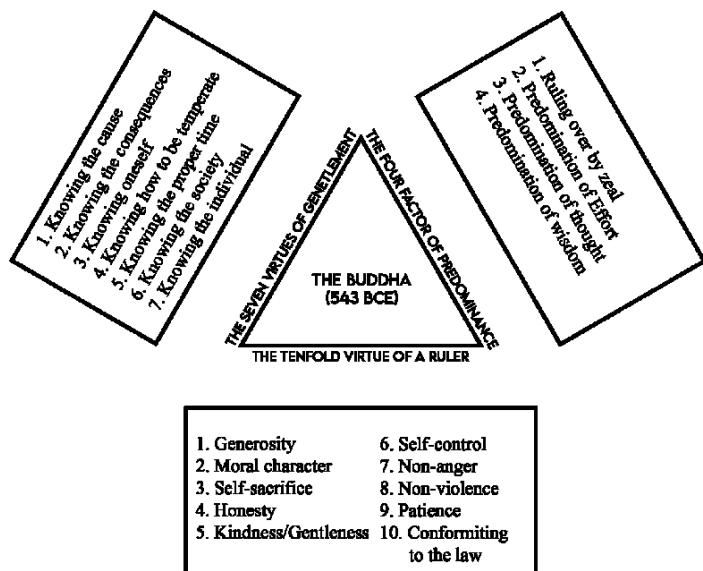


Fig.1 The Leadership Qualities in the Theravāda Perspective

The third objective of this research which analyzes the leadership qualities that characterize the leaders in the Theravāda perspective, has been completed due to the fact that leadership is the result of the interaction of many traits or a spectrum of traits rather than just one trait, so the 55 leadership qualities of which 34 are obtained from western ideas and 21 from the Theravāda view are classified into four principles. Figure 2 demonstrates the four principles 1) The Dominance with moral character principle entails introducing a new idea or personal trait based on moral values 2) The service and cooperation principle embraces a range of qualities related to social and personal sacrifice 3) The organization and achievement principle: includes a variety of leadership traits related to willingness to work hard and 4) The emotional adjustment principle covers a variety of traits related to psychological and temper regulation.

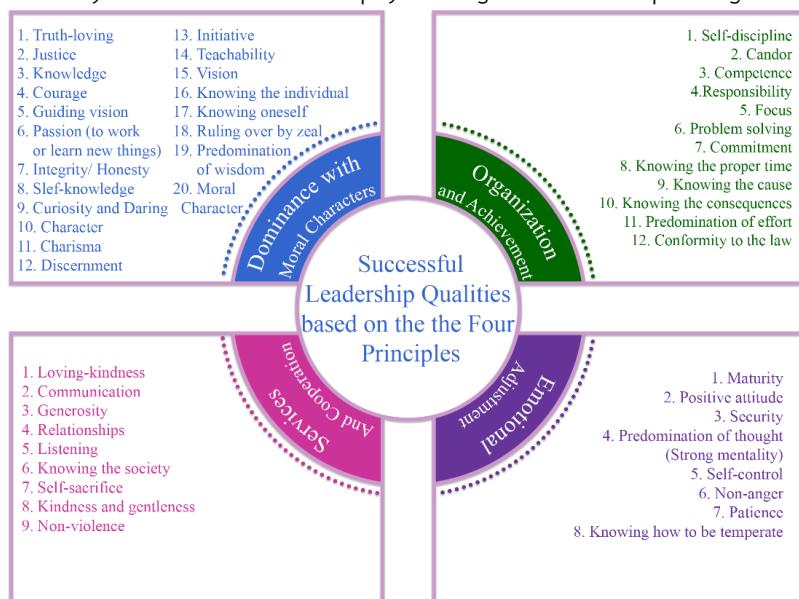


Fig.2 Successful Leadership Qualities according to the Four Principles

Figure 2 depicts a clear understanding of 49 successful leadership traits (excluding repeated traits) from both perspectives: western ideas and the Theravāda perspective. The four principles are: 1) Dominance with moral character 2) Organization and Achievement; 3) Service and Cooperation and 4) Emotional Adjustment.

To get practically effective leadership qualities, the two case studies of great kings were explored namely King Asoka of ancient India (304-232 BCE) and King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) of Thailand (1927-2016).

**King Asoka**, the third emperor of the Mauryan Empire in ancient India was revered like a brilliant star. He earned the title “Devānan Piyatissa: The King beloved by deities.” After the Kalinga War, he embraced Buddhism and promoted religious equality within this empire. Asoka erected 84,000 Dhamma pillars to spread Buddha’s teachings across nine directions including Sri Lanka and Suvannabhumi. He also sponsored the Third Buddhist Council to uphold Buddhism.

### 1) *Apāsinave: Expectations*

People see only their good deeds, saying “I have done this good deed.” But they do not see their evil deeds as saying “I have done this evil deed” or “This is called evil.” But this tendency is difficult to see (Dhammadika, 1993). It was really good for the next generation to see this. There are various theories to practice as a king, leader or even follower to be a better person. Despite the fact that most leaders did not want to follow it, they are the head of the community, the highest person in the organization and the most powerful king about whom they are going to care next. Somehow, King Asoka was different from other monarchs. As he guided his people, he destroyed the bad deed or habit himself as well. The reason is that he speaks as he could practice and he practices according to his instructions.

### 2) *Bahukayāne: Performing for the others’ welfare (Generosity)*

Happiness in this world and the next is difficult to obtain without much love for the Dhamma, much self-examination, much respect, much fear of evil, and much (Dhammadika, 1993). The Grateful King: Asoka inspired his officers to follow instructions to protect the Dhamma and create happiness through the Dhamma, no matter their rank. Protecting people is not just guarding them from dangerous events; it leads them for their welfare to be in a better this life and next with Dhamma.

It is the duty of the king to reduce the suffering of people by protecting them from poverty and creating a happy environment. The *Cakkavattisīhanāda Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* also explains the role of protecting people among the ten duties of the Cakkavattī king (D III 58-80; T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys Davids, 2000). In this *Sutta*, it is mentioned that poverty occurs in the country due to the misfortune of the leader. The reason is that woeful in the world is poverty and debt and poverty is suffering in this world (A III 65-70). Thus, when the head of the community desires to create harmony and a happy state, he should give more attention to the poor to protect them and the Dhamma or moral situation of the country and then provide them with needs and property.

### 3) *Soceya: Moral Character/Purification*

Dhamma as the minimum of sins is the definition of Dhamma given by King Asoka in his Major Pillar II. He said that Dhamma is good but what constitutes Dhamma? It includes little evil much good, kindness, generosity, truthfulness and purity (Dhammadika, 1993). It seemed he showed the way of Dhamma by conforming his men to instructions. In the *Cakkavattīsīhanāda Sutta*, the Buddha said that immorality and crime such as theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, and cruelty could arise from poverty. Kings and governments may try to suppress crime through punishment, but it is futile to eradicate crimes through force (D III, 58-79). Similarly, in the *Kūtadanta Sutta*, the Buddha suggested that instead of reducing crime, theft, a leader should provide them with proper wages to maintain moral and human dignity, (T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys Davids, 2000). Dhamma is the best way to govern and to lead the community harmoniously.

Furthermore, after the Kalinga War, King Asoka converted to Buddhism becoming deeply religious. He offered food, robes, medicine and places to support the Saṅgha. Fake monks emerged causing a conflict with true Buddhist monks who refused cooperation for Uposatha. Learning of this, the king sought to eradicate the fake monks, unintentionally leading to the death of some genuine monks. His pure heart aimed to purify the Saṅgha. He even sacrificed his own family to propagate the Buddha's teaching. Eventually, the Third Buddhist Council was established with the king as the sponsor.

### 4) *Sace: Integrity/Honesty*

Twelve years after his coronation, he started to have Dhamma edicts written for the welfare and happiness of the people, so that by not transgressing them, they might grow in the Dhamma. Thinking "How can the welfare and happiness of the people be secured?" so I can lead them to happiness and then I act accordingly. I do the same for all groups. I have honored all religions with various awards (Dhammadika, 1993).

In addition, he was one of the different kings on this planet because of his honesty with his citizens and his instructions. He gave birth to justice for his empire. Therefore, his empire was named a harbinger of social harmony. He said that every man is a child, and all human beings are my children. It said that he was the father of his citizens. Back to the case that he eradicated the fake monks in the Saṅgha Order, he then invited the Moggaliputtatissa Thera to solve the problem he had done. Normally, an ordinary leader might make an excuse for that case instead of solving it. Because the ordinary leader might say "That is not my order; the order that I gave is to kill the fake monks, not the real monks. Somehow, King Asoka faced the harder situation and in order to reduce his anxiety, he took the admonishing from Moggaliputtatissa Thera. Therefore, the King Asoka was one of the successor monarchs to thousands, thousands of other kings. He was competent not only on the battlefield but also in governing and building peace among various cultures and religions.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej, also known as King Bhumibol the Great or King Rama IX, held the throne of the Chakri Dynasty from June 9, 1946 until his passing on October 13, 2016 making

him the world's longest-reigning king at 70 years. As the third and youngest child of Prince and Princess Mahidol of Songkhla and the younger brother of King Ananda Mahidol, he was a grandson of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The Thai people admired him as a demigod, a humble father and the father of the land.

### 5) Generosity and Helping People

King Bhumibol Adulyadej earned the title “King of the People” through selfless service, compassion, integrity, and generosity. He addressed Thailand’s problems to foster unity and create a better country not merely relying on power or property.

King Bhumibol’s understanding of his people’s needs made him a great leader of Thailand. His projects during his reign significantly improved the quality of life and economy when it mattered most. In 1951, he authorized a project that collaborated with the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, benefiting northeast Thai populations with a protein-rich dietary supplement from acquired fish stock. Moreover, Thailand faced challenges in politics, economics, education, and livelihood during his early rule, but the king knew how to address them. He personally initiated and supervised over 3,000 projects to combat hunger in the country during his six-year reign. In addition, the school milk program was a noteworthy contribution to citizens’ growth, showcasing his vision beyond focusing solely on farming for economic growth. King Bhumibol’s understanding of his people’s needs and commitment to enhancing the kingdom shaped the importance of these projects for the future of his country and its people.

### 6) Perseverance/Hard-working

King Bhumibol Adulyadej: the “father of the nation” after reigning the Kingdom for 70 years was recognized as a beloved king who worked hard to improve the livelihoods of all Thai citizens. The biggest mistake most leaders make is breaking their promises after giving them to their colleagues. The king proved his pledge that he delivered in his coronation: “We shall reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people (Feast Thailand, 2022).” He dedicated himself to royal projects, especially the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, and to visiting every part of his kingdom through his tireless efforts, even spending some time with his vehicles off-road. He attempted to gain a clear understanding of all levels of Thai society through his selfless research effort. He believed that it was the crown’s duty to accomplish it.

The king was a visionary leader, so he understood that it is more effective to build projects that are long-term and serve the environment and natural resources than to improve Thai society with a temporary effort without philosophy. Hence, he promoted and encouraged all kinds of plants and vegetables, such as crops, flowers, coffee, strawberries, and so forth, among his beloved Thai citizens. In order to carry out the benefits of his royal projects in the long term for the livelihood of Thai society, he introduced one of his most significant achievements, the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), in 1974 (Royal Thai Embassy, 2022).

### 7) Vision

Understanding the “why,” “what,” and “how” is crucial for effective leadership within an organization. A great leader comprehends their purpose, the goals they pursue, and the consequences of their actions. Leadership isn’t merely about holding a title; it involves guiding and problem-solving for the team. In a notable speech at Kasetsart University in 1974, the leader emphasized the gradual development of the country, starting with infrastructure and essential provisions for the people in an economically prudent and principled manner. This demonstrated the leaders’ awareness of the positive impact the royal project had on the citizen (NESDB, 2007). The reason was that he realized the consequences of his royal project, which is beneficial to his citizens.

He firmly believed that economics could bring happiness to his people from individuals and families to communities and the entire nation. As he said “being a tiger is not important. The important thing is for us to have a sufficient economy. A sufficient economy means having enough to support ourselves. Each village or district must be relatively self-sufficient” (King Bhumibol Adulyadej, 2017). This led to the establishment of the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy. This philosophy aimed to foster effective progress in the economy, society, environment and culture. During a commencement ceremony in 1962 at Chulalongkorn University, he highlighted the significance of the education of the people, emphasizing insight education over mere schooling (Lao, 2017). He had a visionary approach, recognizing that self-skills, morality, and values of his people were vital for harmonious living, which would ultimately benefit both him and his country.

### 8) Self-control

King Bhumibol Adulyadej emphasized the importance of self-control for leaders, especially when faced with opposition. This virtue was key to achieving better outcomes. However, even he experienced unexpected challenges during his 1962 visit to Australia. Despite being awarded an honorary doctorate in law at the University of Melbourne, Australian students displayed rude behavior and discomforting signs, not welcoming him warmly. Nevertheless, His Majesty maintained his composure and delivered his royal speech. Even Queen Sirikit, the Queen Mother who accompanied him, acknowledged the situation: “My hands were cold, my heart began to race. I won’t even risk a pitiful and sympathetic glance up at his face. In order to offer my love, I finally forced my heart to look up” (Disthana, 2020). This shows the royal couple’s ability to handle difficult situations gracefully.

However, King Rama IX had excellent control over his anger and applied his intellect to find a solution. Instantly, when his speech began all the voices were silent and all the noise was gone. The reason was that even in an opposite crowd, he controlled his manner, knowing the proper time to speak, knowing the audience who was listening to his speech and knowing the cause and consequences of future events. When the ceremony was over, all participants who attended the ceremony came to pay their respects to HM King Rama IX and all the rude behaviors from students were changed. They applauded and followed two of them along the way to the

royal car (Disthana, 2020). This demonstrated his positive and gentle leadership approach, choosing to be polite despite having the freedom to do otherwise. True to Maxwell's Servanthood Leadership Qualities, King Rama IX served his citizens, fulfilling their needs and even sacrificing his own well-being for the betterment of his country and the younger generation. He acted as a bridge, guiding his people towards brighter future.

All in all, King Asoka was found to possess four strong leadership qualities: 1) (positive) expectation 2) performing for others' welfare or generosity 3) moral character and 4) integrity (honesty); while Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej also possesses four different distinctive leadership traits; 1) generosity and helping others 2) perseverance and hard work 3) vision and 4) self-control. As a result, the seven crucial traits that define an effective leader—Generosity, Integrity, Vision, Expectations, Perseverance, Character and Self-control—are offered as the GIVEPCS formula. Generosity involves contributing to the welfare of others, while Integrity is the dependability and sincerity of a leader's behavior. A great leader should also possess vision, positive Expectation, Perseverance, Character and Self-control. Perseverance is associated with diligence and responsibility, while Character encompasses moral qualities such as honesty and goodness. Finally, Self-control is the ability to manage one's thoughts, emotions and actions effectively.

## Discussions

Two recent research worked by Ven Pandava (2019) and Ms Low Yuen Fah (2022) present similar results in relation to the GIVEPCS formula, representing Generosity, Integrity or honesty, Vision, Expectation, Perseverance, (moral) Character, and Self-control.

Ven. Pandava's research focused on the welfare of the group known as the Seven Conditions of Welfare (*Aprihāniya-Dhamma*). These conditions include holding regular and frequent assemblies (similar to Vision) maintain harmony in meetings and business dealings (similar to Perseverance/hardworking), practicing and upholding decisions or agreements (similar to (moral) Character) honoring and respecting elders (similar to Expectation) abstaining from forcibly abducting others' wives (similar to Integrity) honoring and supporting shrines (similar to Self-control) and providing safety for Arahants (similar to Generosity). These traits contribute to successful leadership.

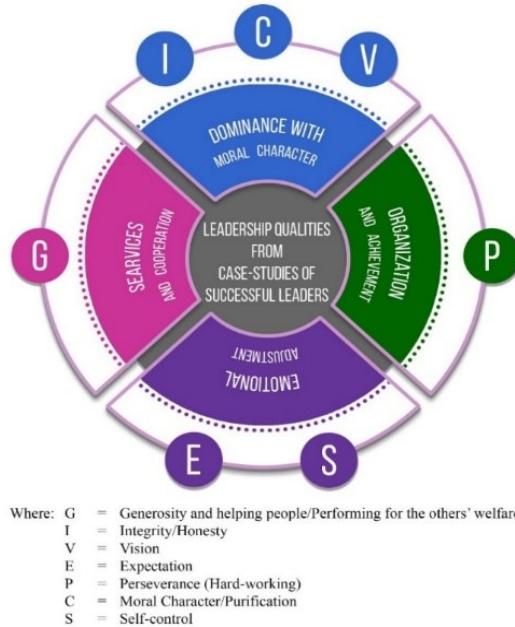
Ms Low Yuen Fah identified over 106 qualities of insight leadership from the Buddhist perspective categorized in three groups as: 1) Insight leadership exemplars of wisdom, character, and compassion (similar to Character and Generosity) 2) Insight leadership models as Dhammaduta, a force for positive change (similar to Expectation, Perseverance, Integrity, and Self-control) and 3) Insight leadership models guide with visionary insight courage conviction and innovative competence for the digital age (similar to Vision Perseverance and Self-control). Her research highlights that leaders who engage in insight meditation differ somewhat from those who do not.

Despite having distinct conclusions from one another both research studies as well as this research are helpful for enhancing traditional and organizational leadership. By putting these

insights into practice, people can advance their individual and social leadership journeys by becoming more successful leaders

### Knowledge from the Research

The body of the research can be explained as follow:



**Fig.3** Knowledge from the Research

The body of knowledge gained the research as the GIVEPCS formula is the fundamental and distinctive characteristics of a good leader. At a minimum, a leader should possess these seven (7) qualities. **Generosity** is contributing to the benefit or welfare of others by offering assistance and having a kind, caring attitude toward other people. **Integrity** refers to a leader's behavior of dependability, sincerity and honesty. **Vision** is a sign of a foresighted leader who understands the goals, contributing factors, outcomes and methods for attaining them. **Expectation** is referred to as "positive expectation". **Perseverance** is the quality of a dedicated, hard-working, and responsible leader. **Character** refers to moral qualities like goodness, honesty and purity. Finally, **Self-control** is the ability to control one's thoughts emotions (such as anger, impatience, etc.) and actions.

### Conclusion

The leadership characteristics of successful leaders were examined from both western and Theravāda perspectives. Furthermore, 55 leadership qualities were identified in total with 21 coming from Theravāda and 34 from Western perspectives. The four principles—Dominance with moral characters, organization and achievement, services and cooperation, and emotional adjustment—may use to view effective leadership traits from four different angles. In order to define the characteristics of a successful leader, the two great kings; King Asoka and King Bhumibol Adulyadej were investigated as case studies to characterize the traits of an effective leader. As a

result, seven distinctive qualities—Generosity, Integrity or honesty, Vision, Expectation, Perseverance, (moral) Character and Self-control—were determined. The GIVEPCS formula was then developed as the minimum set of pragmatic qualities needed to become a good and successful leader.

The Theravāda leadership emphasizes self-improvement through *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, and *Pañña*. Leading to start with mastering oneself, blending Western and Buddhist philosophies. Buddha's teachings stress perspective and attitude for success. Integrating both traditions fosters practical leadership creating a straightforward and effective concept.

### Suggestions

Supervisor level: Emphasize leadership knowledge, mental focus, and ethics for readiness and effectiveness at work. Organizational level: Develop nominated leaders through 15-30 days of meditation to cultivate insight, moral character, and the GIVEPCS effective leadership qualities.

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