

## Namaste: How Yoga Can Inform Leadership Education

*“No one is wise by birth, for wisdom results from one’s own efforts”- Tirumala Krishnamacharya*

**Dr. Paul E. Olsen, SPHR**

Assistant Professor of Business Administration  
Saint Michael's College  
Colchester, VT  
polsen@smcvt.edu

### Abstract

My study and practice of yoga have impacted my understanding of leadership and changed how I teach it. After providing an overview of the history of yoga, this paper discusses how yoga has informed and influenced my teaching of leadership. The concepts of knowing oneself, Kula, being present, and ethics are central to both yoga and leadership education. The paper also describes the health benefits of practicing yoga for leaders.

### Introduction

I have been teaching leadership at Saint Michael's College, an undergraduate liberal arts college, since 2001. Many things have informed my understanding of leadership and influenced how I teach it-- my undergraduate studies in psychology, graduate studies in management and leadership, influential books like *The Leadership Challenge*, experience in the classroom, trial and error, experiences as a leader and follower, and leaders themselves. More recently, my study and practice of yoga have impacted my understanding of leadership and changed how I teach my leadership course.

After providing a brief overview of the history of yoga and describing the health benefits of practicing yoga, this paper will discuss how yoga has informed and influenced my teaching of leadership. I believe these lessons are applicable to other leadership educators as well.

### Yoga

The term yoga comes from Sanskrit and means union or discipline (Feuerstein, 2007). Early references to the term meant the “Hindu tradition of spiritual discipline comprising different approaches to self-realization or enlightenment” (Feuerstein, 1990, p. 412). Early descriptions of yoga characterized it as primarily a mental as opposed to a physical practice (Connolly, 2007). As yoga moved west, it came to encompass the spiritual component of enlightenment as well as yoga poses called asana and breath control called pranayama. Today, there are many types of yoga including hatha yoga, meditational or jnana yoga, karma yoga, bhakti yoga, and kundalini yoga (Phillips, 2009). While it is beyond the scope of

this paper to discuss the differences between the various schools of yoga, Frawley (2008) suggested that, regardless of practice type, "Yoga is a way of knowledge, a science. Yoga proceeds systematically to study, explore and unlock the various powers, faculties and levels of awareness within us" (p. 23).

Yoga's goals include spiritual enlightenment and personal growth. "Yoga philosophy is a practical philosophy of self-observation and inner inquiry. We learn by applying it in our daily lives" (Frawley, 2008, p. 28). While asana poses, breathing exercises, and meditation are central to yoga, an individual's yoga practice involves more than just regularly practicing yoga at a yoga studio or class. In fact, Frawley (2008) says:

...real yoga is about being rather than simply doing. Yoga teaches us to know ourselves, which is not a product of outer activity. It teaches us to contact our inner being, which is obscured by outer actions and pursuits. Yoga provides us a great revelation in this regard. We don't ultimately need to do anything at all to be happy; we need only come to rest within our true nature (p. 32).

The Western Yoga movement in the United States and Europe has 30 million members (Feuerstein, 2003). In the United States, it is estimated that 15 million people regularly practice some form of yoga (Yoga Statistics, 2013). The majority of yoga practitioners (72.2%) are female; 40.6% are between the ages of 18-34; 41% between the ages of 35-54; and 18.4% are over age 55. More than 71% of yoga practitioners are college graduates (Yoga Statistics, 2013). These practitioners are concerned with both physical well-being and personal growth and enlightenment.

## Knowing Oneself

"The yoga of knowledge is perhaps the most important aspect of the Inner Yoga of meditation. It is often regarded as the highest yoga, because it takes us directly to self-realization" (Frawley, 2008, p. 79). The concept of self-awareness or knowing oneself is central to both yoga and leadership education.

"Traditionally, yoga aims toward self-realization, a term most of us can relate to. We all want to realize our higher potential, to be or gain all that we can in life" (Frawley, 2008, p. 15). This self-awareness is also seen as key to leadership development. Hughes and Beatty (2005) describe this as knowing who you are and where you want to go. Haas and Tamarkin (1992) stress the importance of introspection as a form of self-discovery. Lipman-Blumen (1996) characterize this search for personal meaning as a time when "we introspect about who we are, what we have done, and the nature and limits of our own worth...we dig into issues of personal authenticity and integrity" (p. 329-330). After interviews with 125 leaders, George, Sims, McLean and Mayer (2007) found that leadership emerged from life stories. "The journey of authentic leadership begins with understanding the story of your life" (p. 132). Authentic leaders reframe life events "to discover their passion to lead" (p. 132). Learning from life experiences is central to knowing who you are and your development and effectiveness as a leader. "If people are capable of learning from their experiences, they can acquire leadership," Northouse (2010, p. 43) concluded.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggests that this learning can also come from reflecting on failures. "Life is the leader's laboratory, and exemplary leaders use it to conduct as many experiments as possible. Try, fail, learn. Try fail, learn. Try, fail, learn. That's the leader's mantra" (p. 20). Dreher (1996) agreed, concluding:

Remember that any successful political leader, artist, scientist, or Olympic athlete has had many failures. What separates the leaders from the losers is that they learn from their difficulties, make adjustments, and go on. Like bamboo, they bend, but do not break. Persevering, they stay the course to reach the finish line (p. 25).

So how can leadership educators concerned with leadership development provide a vehicle for introspection, self-reflection, and learning from successes and failures? Yoga's focus on personal development, yogic principles, ethics, and health benefits may be one answer. In fact, Feuerstein (2003) said "Yoga offers answers to the fundamental questions of human existence: Who am I? Why am I here? Where do I go? What must I do?" (p. 15).

## Yogic Principles

While offering yoga in the context of an undergraduate leadership course may not be practical, a number of terms and concepts from the practice of yoga do apply in the classroom. One of the first yogic terms I introduce in my leadership course is the concept of a Kula. "The word Kula ordinarily means 'family' or any group closely connected through emotional or other bonds" (Phillips, 2009, p. 325). A group of people practicing yoga together is considered a Kula. Similarly, a group of students coming together as an intentional community to study, practice and learn about leadership is a Kula. Rather than coming together to study and practice yoga, our Kula spends the semester studying, observing, and discussing leaders, leadership, and leadership theories. Being present is also central to the practice of yoga. In our study of leadership, I ask my students to be present during our Kula. That means, where possible, filtering out distractions, avoiding technology (e.g. cell phones), and being present and engaged in class.

The second term introduced in my leadership class is that each student is his or her own best teacher. In yoga this concept is referred to as sat guru. Feuerstein (1990) says sat means "being" (p. 316) while guru means "weighty one" (p. 123). Whether teaching yoga or leadership, an instructor can only do so much by providing support, structure, instruction, and encouragement. In the end, a student is his or her own best teacher. I remind my class of this concept throughout the semester. Our study of leadership is more of a mentor/mentee relationship as opposed to teacher/student. "First of all, the needs and outlook of the individual student is primary," Connolly (2007, p. 210) said when discussing teaching yoga. "Yoga classes are points of contact rather than primary vehicles for teaching, though they do have a value for beginner students." My leadership class sessions are points of contact for our relationship and my relationship with each student is different. "We're in this together," I remind them. "And you are your own best teacher."

Another concept I have learned from the yogis in my life is to watch my students. "Watch your class, they will tell you what they need," my yoga instructor Susan often says. I find this also true of students in my leadership course. They tell me, through nonverbal communication and body language, what they need. By observing my class, I can tell if a class activity, lecture, or guest visit isn't going well. If that's the case, I'll change things around.

As previously discussed, learning to be an effective leader requires introspection. This is consistent with the practice of yoga. As Frawley (2008) notes:

The main approach of the yoga of knowledge is self-inquiry, directly looking into who we really are behind the veils of body and mind. It often begins with asking the question, 'Who am I?'; not just at a mental or emotional level but with our full attention and energy. Through this question one learns to dive deep within, to the mind's origin located in the heart (p. 80).

While teaching leadership I ask these questions and apply the process of self-inquiry throughout the semester through free-write exercises, self-assessment tools, and reflective papers. For example, students complete a variety of self-assessment instruments (e.g. Personal Power Profile, Least Preferred Co-worker, Leader-Member Exchange, Leadership Motivation) to learn about themselves and how they lead. They also write a leadership portraiture paper where they think about and reflect on their leadership history, style, strengths and weaknesses, and successes and failures. Similar to yoga, the "process of intellectual self-inquiry and meditation...is absolutely essential to develop our leadership faculty" (Kudesia, 2010, p. 14). These tools all help students gain insight into who they are as individuals, students, and current or prospective leaders and are consistent with the yogic philosophy of self-discovery. "Yoga philosophy is a philosophy of being. You are all that you need to be. But to discover that, you must move aside the veils of the body, mind and senses, and uncover the essence of your being" (Frawley, 2008, p. 32). Uncovering the essence of your being is important in leadership development and is consistent with what Kaplan and Kaiser (2013) describe as an incontrovertible truth: "who you are is how you lead" (p. 40).

While actually practicing yoga in the context of a leadership course may not be practical, a few asana poses epitomize the link between yoga and leadership. One involves placing your hands together in prayer pose with your index fingers on your forehead and thumbs at your heart. In yoga, this demonstrates the link between our minds and hearts. Leaders also need to lead with their minds and hearts. A second pose involves sitting in Easy (Sukhasana) or Diamond (Vajrasana) pose and placing each open palm on each knee. Your left palm represents the past while your right palm represents the future. Both palms are then joined in prayer pose at heart center representing the present, which is what we have now. While all leaders have a past and future, they operate in the present.

Most yoga practitioners end each practice by placing their hands in prayer pose, bowing towards their fellow yogis, and saying "Namaste." Representing the spirit in me bowing to the spirit in you, the term Namaste means "salutations to thee" (Phillips, 2009, p. 259) and is an expression of respect and goodwill. Namaste "recognizes the equality of all, honors the sacredness, truthfulness, and interconnection of all, as well as to the source of that interconnection" (Yoga 101, 2009). I believe that students of leadership as well as leaders themselves can learn from the spirit of Namaste. After all, leaders and followers should be treated with respect; leaders and followers are interconnected; and leaders and followers should be truthful with each other. Namaste is just one yogic concept that I discuss in my leadership course demonstrating yoga's link to ethics.

## **Ethics**

"Yoga is an integrated way of life, which includes moral standards- traditionally called 'virtues'- that any reasonable human being will find in principle acceptable" (Feuerstein, 2003, p. 226). Like yoga, good leadership requires adherence to ethics and moral standards. "There's an ethical dimension to leadership that neither leaders nor constituents should take lightly" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 345).

Ethics in yoga is linked to the concept of karma or “the universal law of action and reaction; cause and effect” (Carrera, 2006, p. 387). “In essence, the idea of a law of karma is that the universe is constructed in such a way that all of our actions generate consequences according to their moral character” (Connolly, 2007, p. 17). Similarly, a leader’s actions generate consequences for the leader and his or her followers. One hopes that these actions are consistent with a leader’s moral standards. This is another area where yogic principles and the teaching and practice of leadership converge. According to Feuerstein (2003), yoga’s moral standards include the following key virtues: nonharming (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya), abstention from theft (asteya), chastity (brahmacarya), compassion (karuṇā), and kindness (maitri). Other principles include greedlessness, generosity, patience, helpfulness, forgiveness, and purity. While they may not all apply to leadership, these standards are consistent with the principles of ethical leadership outlined by Northouse (2010) who says ethical leaders respect others, serve others, are just, are honest, and build community. Similarly, Kouzes and Posner (2007) say the characteristics people look for in a leader include honesty, being forward-looking, inspiring, and competent. “What people look for in a leader has been constant over time” (p. 29). These characteristics are consistent with the values of a yogic life. “Yoga addresses the ethical life through a whole range of practices that encourage us to live in harmony with nature, making our actions conducive to both personal and planetary health” (Francina, 2000, p. xiii).

Ethical standards also apply when teaching yoga and I submit that many of these standards and guidelines also apply when teaching leadership. I certainly adhere to many of them in my classroom and I suspect that many other leadership educators do as well. The Yoga Research and Education Center (in Feuerstein, 2003, p. 226-228) developed a code of ethics for yoga instructors (Appendix A). These rules encompass yogic moral standards and are applicable to teaching leadership as well. As leadership educators we are committed to maintaining standards of professional competence and integrity, continuing our study of leadership, accurately represent our training and education, are committed to the well-being of our students, embrace truthfulness when dealing with students and others, don’t discriminate, treat students with respect, respect other opinions, don’t sexually harass students, and are tolerant. Although written for yoga instructors, leadership educators can learn from these ethical standards and should similarly apply them in their work with students.

## Health Benefits

Today, modern yoga emphasizes both physical and mental wellbeing. “It would be fair to say that in the West and, indeed, in much of modern India, a yoga class is generally understood to be concerned with physical movement, stretching and breathing first and with meditation, philosophy and spirituality only second” (Connolly, 2007, p. 205). While yoga is concerned with self-awareness and enlightenment, yoga’s health benefits contributed to its popularity and attracted people to the practice. In fact, Frawley (2008) noted that “most people initially come to yoga for physical healing, applying yoga postures to improve their health and energy, or to counter disease or injury” (p. 95).

These health benefits are applicable to both leaders and followers. American workers experience stress at work, which can be manifested through decreased employee morale, increased absenteeism and turnover, and higher medical expenses. Kudesia (2010) reported that 80 percent of employees experience stress at work and that workplace stress costs American businesses \$300 billion annually. In a study of women

executives, Nelson and Burke (2000) found that workplace stressors included task stressors, overload, organizational politics, sexual harassment, and workaholism. Not surprisingly, work-home conflict also created stress.

Practicing yoga can help manage stress for leaders and followers alike. In fact, when offering solutions to managing stress at work, Nelson and Burke (2000) suggested that employers “encourage training in yoga and meditation” (p. 117). Companies like Apple, GE, AT&T, PepsiCo, Sony, and Nike have recognized the benefits of yoga and offer yoga classes at work (Kudesia, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

My study of yoga and leadership will never end. As I continue to study yoga, my understanding of its applicability to leaders will deepen. As outlined in this article, a number of yoga concepts and principles can benefit leaders physically and mentally and can inform those of us who teach leadership. The concepts of knowing oneself, Kula, being present, ethics, and managing stress are central to yoga and leadership education. Additionally, I submit that yoga, like leadership, meets you where you are. Both are ongoing processes that take time to develop, both are also never finished. Like the practice of yoga, I remind my students to be happy where they are in their leadership journey. I hope the insights discussed in this paper will enhance your leadership journey as well. Namaste.

## References

- Carrera, J. (2006). *Inside the yoga sutras: a comprehensive sourcebook for the study and practice of patanjali's yoga sutras*. Yogaville, Virginia: Integral Yoga Publications.
- Connolly, P. (2007). *A student's guide to the history and philosophy of yoga*. London: Equinox Publishing.
- Dreher, D. (1996). *The tao of personal leadership*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Feuerstein, G. (1990). *Encyclopedic dictionary of yoga*. New York: Paragon House.
- Feuerstein, G. (2003). *The deeper dimensions of yoga: theory and practice*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Feuerstein, G. (2007). *Yoga morality: ancient teachings at a time of global crisis*. Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press.
- Francina, S. (2000). Forward. In J. Lasater, *Living your yoga: finding the spiritual in everyday life*. Berkeley, CA: Rodmell Press.
- Frawley, D. (2008). *Yoga: the greater tradition*. San Rafael, CA: Mandala Publishing.
- George, B., Sims, P., McLean, A.N. & Mayer, D. (2007). *Discovering your authentic leadership*. Harvard Business Review, February 2007, 129-138.
- Haas, H.G. & Tamarkin, B. (1992). *The leaders within: an empowering path of self-discovery*. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Hughes, R.L. & Beatty, K.C. (2005). *Becoming a strategic leader*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kaplan, R. E. & Kaiser, R. B. (2013). *Fear your strengths: what you are best at could be your biggest problem*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. (2007). *The leadership challenge: fourth edition*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Kudesia, R.S. (2010). Innovators love yoga and you should too. *Leader to Leader*, Fall 2010, Issue 58, p. 11-16.

- Lipman-Blumen, J. (1996). *The connective edge: leading in an interdependent world*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nelson, D.L. & Burke, R.J. (2000). Women executives: health, stress, and success. *The Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 107-121.
- Northouse, P.G. (2007). *Leadership theory and practice*: fourth edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Phillips, S. (2009). *Yoga, karma and rebirth: a brief history and philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yoga 101. (2009). What do Om and Namaste Mean? *Examiner.com*. Retrieved on September 4, 2013 from <http://www.examiner.com/article/yoga-101-what-do-om-and-namaste-mean>
- Yoga Statistics. (2013). *Statistics brain*. Retrieved on August 30, 2013 from <http://www.statisticbrain.com/yoga-statistics/>.

## Appendix A

### Ethical Guidelines for Yoga Teachers

1. Yoga teachers understand and appreciate that teaching Yoga is a noble and ennobling endeavor that aligns them with a long line of honorable teachers.
2. Yoga teachers are committed to practicing Yoga as a way of life, which includes adopting the fundamental moral principles of Yoga and making their lifestyle environmentally sustainable ("Green Yoga").
3. Yoga teachers are committed to maintaining impeccable standards of professional competence and integrity.
4. Yoga teachers dedicate themselves to a thorough and continuing study and practice of Yoga, in particular the theoretical and practical aspects of the branch of Yoga that they teach.
5. Yoga teachers are committed to avoiding substance abuse, and if for some reason they succumb to chemical dependency agree to stop teaching until they are free again from drug and/or alcohol abuse. They will then do everything in their power to remain free, including being fully accountable to a support group.

6. Yoga teachers especially embrace the ideal of truthfulness in dealing with students and others, including accurately representing their training and experience relevant to their teaching of Yoga.
7. Yoga teachers are committed to promoting the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of their students.
8. Yoga teachers, especially those teaching Hatha-Yoga, will abstain from giving medical advice or advice that could be construed as such, unless they have the necessary medical qualifications.
9. Yoga teachers are open to instructing all students regardless of race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and social or financial status.
10. Yoga teachers are willing to accept students with physical disabilities, providing they have the skill to teach those students properly.
11. Yoga teachers agree to treat their students with respect.
12. Yoga teachers will never force their own opinions on students but rather will appreciate the fact that every individual is entitled to his or her worldview, ideas, and beliefs. At the same time, Yoga teachers must communicate to their students that Yoga seeks to achieve a deep-level transformation of the human personality, including attitudes and ideas. If a student is not open to change, or if a student's opinions seriously impede the process of communicating yogic teachings to him or her, then Yoga teachers are free to decline to work with that individual and, if possible, find an amicable way of dissolving the teaching relationship.
13. Yoga teachers agree to avoid any form of sexual harassment of students.
14. Yoga teachers wishing to enter a consensual sexual relationship with a present or former student should seek the immediate counsel of their peers before taking any action. This is to ensure that the teacher in question is sufficiently clear about his or her motives.
15. Yoga teachers will make every effort to avoid exploiting the trust of students and their potential dependency, and instead encourage students to find greater inner freedom.
16. Yoga teachers acknowledge the importance of the proper context for teaching and agree to avoid teaching in a casual manner, which includes observing proper decorum inside and outside of the classroom.
17. Yoga teachers strive to practice tolerance toward other Yoga teachers, schools, and traditions. When criticism has to be brought, this should be done with fairness and with focus on facts.

### **Author Biography**

Dr. Paul E. Olsen is an Assistant Professor in the Business Administration and Accounting Department at Saint Michael's College. He teaches courses in leadership, human resource management, peace and justice, and internship practicum. Dr. Olsen has degrees from the University of Vermont (B.A., Ed.D.) and Saint Michael's College (M.S.A.) and is a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR). He has published in the *Journal of Leadership Education* and *Business Case Journal*.