

M.S. Rao interview

Professor M.S. Rao has three decades of experience in leadership development. He is a leadership educator, author, speaker, researcher, consultant, and practitioner who conducts training programs for various corporate and educational institutions. He is a specialist in soft leadership. His areas of interest include leadership, learning and development, and soft skills. Professor M.S. Rao is the Founder of MSR Leadership Consultants, India, and the author of *Soft Leadership – Make Others Feel More Important*.

What is soft leadership?

Soft leaders are the leaders who make a difference in the lives of their partners. They do not believe in leadership and followership, but in partnership. They adopt various tools such as participation, persuasion, influence, negotiation, motivation, recognition, appreciation, and collaboration. They adopt soft power, soft tactics, and soft tools and techniques to get the tasks executed successfully. They are more of people orientation rather than task orientation, and adopt transformational style rather than transactional style. Succinctly, soft leaders are relationship-oriented, people-orientated, service-oriented, transformational, authentic, and thought leaders who lead through soft skills.

What is the difference between hard and soft leadership?

Soft leadership emphasizes on persuasion while hard leadership on pressure; soft leadership on transformation while hard leadership on task; soft leadership on soft power while hard leadership on hard power; and soft leadership on soft tactics while hard leadership on hard tactics. Soft leaders adopt transformational, democratic, servant, and authentic leadership style, while hard leaders adopt transactional and autocratic style of leadership. Soft leaders are others-centered leaders, while hard leaders are often self-centered leaders. Soft leaders emphasize on what is right, while hard leaders emphasize on who is right. Succinctly, soft leadership believes in how much you care for others, while hard leadership believes in how much you produce.

Can you give some examples of leaders with “soft” characteristics?

When you look at leaders like Booker T. Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Mikhail Gorbachev, Dalai Lama, and Aung San Sui Kyi, there is a common thread connecting all of them – soft leadership. They are all soft leaders who silently performed and led the people to accomplish their dreams. They have character, charisma, conscience, conviction, courage, communication, compassion, commitment, consistency, and consideration and contributed extensively toward society and made a difference in the lives of others.

What is your background?

I have 36 years of experience in leadership development, a PhD in Soft Skills and I coined a new leadership style soft leadership, and I am also known as the father of soft leadership globally. I am passionate about serving and making a difference in the lives of others.

What sort of “personality type” are you?

I am a blend of both soft and hard leadership. As I served in Indian Air Force, I adopt hard leadership at the core. As I am into teaching, research, and consultancy currently, I adopt soft leadership. I am flexible and adaptable at the core. Hence, I reinvented as a soft leader with the changing times and technologies.

You advocate a “polite smile despite facing severe shocks and setbacks”. Is that always possible?

It is not possible always, but it is expected in the future business environment. There must be a shift in the mindset of the leaders to absorb shocks and setbacks with grace. They must remain cool and composed under pressure to lead their organizations successfully.

How counter-productive can hard leadership be?

Hard leadership rarely works in this world. Just because a few hard leaders like Jack Welch and Steve Jobs succeeded, we cannot conclude that all hard leaders can succeed in the world.

What is “sandwich behavior”?

Sandwich behavior is like sandwich feedback where transactional behavior is sandwiched between two transformational behaviors. The ultimate task of leadership is to get the tasks executed smoothly and successfully with people orientation. Hence, instead of approaching in a hard and transactional way, it is essential to approach in a soft and transformational way to get the tasks executed to end up again in a soft and transformational way to accomplish the desired goals and objectives.

Are women better suited to “soft leadership”?

Leadership is not gender-specific. Anybody can grow as a leader, especially as a soft leader. Women are basically effective leaders, and are good at gauging the human egos, emotions, and feelings better than men. They multi-task well and get the things executed smoothly. Hence, biologically soft leadership is more suited to women. At the same time, we cannot conclude that soft leadership does not suit men because some men are soft and assertive in approaching the issues with a humane touch.

Many leaders have had charisma but can it also be a negative?

Charisma is a double-edged sword, and it all depends on the leaders. Charisma helps leaders to get the tasks executed effectively. However, some charismatic leaders develop hubris, thus ending up in a fiasco. Hence, leaders must emphasize character, not charisma to ensure leadership longevity.

How important is it for communication to be a two-way process?

Communication is not a one-way process. By definition, communication is a two-way process with a feedback. As you cannot clap with one hand, you cannot communicate with others without taking their feedback. Hence, ensure that the other person confirms to your messages to ensure complete and successful communication.

Is there a thin dividing line between appreciation and flattery?

Yes. Appreciation is genuine to keep people happy and excited, while flattery is fake and artificial with a hidden agenda. Hence, both are different. Appreciation lasts in the long run, while flattery fades away quickly. Hence, appreciate people sincerely to build trust and transparency to ensure leadership impact.

Mahatma Gandhi has been quoted several times – how inspirational a character was he?

Undoubtedly, Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most inspiring leaders in the world who inspired several international leaders including Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Dalai Lama, Aung San Sui Kyi, and Barack Obama with his principles of truth and non-violence. When the world was beset with violence and wars, he showed to the world that freedom can be achieved through non-violence and peaceful means.

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