

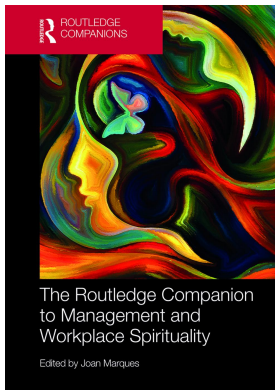
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## **The Routledge Companion to Management and Workplace Spirituality**

Joan Marques

### **At the Intersection of Yoga and Leadership**

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# 10

## AT THE INTERSECTION OF YOGA AND LEADERSHIP

### Humility as a Practice

*Susanna Kislenko*

When an individual has achieved complete understanding of her true self, she will no longer be disturbed by the distracting influences within and around her.

*(The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali)*

Yoga is a journey and so is leadership. And yoga has its own different lineages, different schools of yoga, different traditions who have their own pathway. And leadership is also a journey. And I would hope that leadership would be a journey to a deeper understanding of oneself in the world ... my leadership journey is also a spiritual journey ... it's about wholeness and oneness.

*(Interviewee #13)*

### Introduction

The dissemination of yoga across the world, from East to West has been rapid since it was first brought to the West in the 1960s through celebrities like the Beatles, inspired by the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh, the father of transcendental meditation (Feuerstein, 2006). Up until the middle of the 20th century, yoga and its philosophies were not much known or studied outside South East Asia, with the practice originating in India itself. The word *yoga* means “union” in the ancient language of Sanskrit and in its purest sense is a mental, rather than a physical practice. It was only once the practice and traditions of yoga were brought to the West that the physical postures known as *asanas* and the breath component, *pranayama*, were brought to light (Olsen, 2014). The first wave of people bridging East and West practices and making yogic principles palatable for the global masses included B. K. S. Iyengar, whose texts remain the center of yoga teacher training programs around the world (Feuerstein, 2006). Although much of the widespread dissemination of yoga and yogic principles to the West took place in the latter part of the 20th century, this holistic practice owes its origins to sages and practitioners that lived over 5000 years ago (Samuel, 2008). Patanjali, an Indian sage from the second century BC, wrote *The Yoga Sutras* to explain how to live a life in balance (Adhia, Nagendra, & Mahadevan, 2010) and it is these sutras that guide yoga practice around the world today.

In a similar way, the study of leadership and its principles can be traced back to ancient philosophers in the East, back to sixth century BC with Lao Tzu, and in the West with Machiavelli

and Plato (Bass & Bass, 2009). Leadership, however, did not become a true discipline of its own until the mid-1940s. Today, leadership remains one of the most debated and heated topics in business academia and beyond. In the context of this project, a distinction is made between leader development—an expansion of individual capacity toward leadership effectiveness—and leadership development, which is focused on the aggregate leadership capacity of an organization (Day, 2017). As the focus of this study is the change within the individual themselves as the result of a yogic practice, it is leader development that is the topic of interest. Although leadership was initially thought to be trait-based and stemming from genetic predispositions, current thinking on leader development shows that a great deal of leadership capabilities can be taught and learned (Day & Sin, 2011; Day & Dragoni, 2015; Day, 2017; Hammond, Clapp-Smith, & Palanski, 2017).

This chapter is focused on weaving the philosophical underpinnings of yoga and leadership, universally accepted concepts and practices in an effort to understand the way in which yoga influences leaders, leadership as a whole, and leader development in particular. As explained within the sections that follow, the findings of this study point to the significant influence of yoga on leader development, primarily centered on elements of humble service, being human by example, and tuning in through the practice of presence.

### Yoga Practice and Leader Development

Much of the existing literature that brings together yoga and leadership originates in South East Asia. Specifically, there have been a number of attempts to prove and test the assertion of James McGregor Burns that “transformational leaders raise followers to higher levels of morality” (Mulla & Krishnan, 2012, p. 85). In the South East Asian context, this is evaluated through the lens of karma yoga. As it is explained,

the word “karma” comes from the Sanskrit root *kri*, which means, “doing, affairs or activity” and includes all actions that a person performs, whether they are of body, speech or mind. The word “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which means “to join”.

(Mulla & Krishnan, 2012, p. 31)

Karma yoga is further interpreted as “made up of two dimensions: a sense of obligation or duty towards others and an absence of desire for rewards” (Mulla & Krishnan, p. 33). The literature from mostly India and Sri Lanka has found that there is, in fact, a relationship between yoga (karma yoga in particular) and transformational leadership specifically (Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003; Mulla & Krishnan, 2008; 2009; 2012; Satpathy, 2013).

As noted by Bass,

Superior leadership performance—transformational leadership—occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group.

(1991, p. 21)

One of the few studies that has merged yoga and leadership outside South East Asia looked at the effect of yoga on the potential of entrepreneurship traits being cultivated within university students (Marques, Ferreira, Rodrigues, & Ferreira, 2011). The study concluded that yoga

contributes to the encouragement of typically accepted entrepreneurial traits such as autonomy, creativity, self-control, and self-esteem (Marques et al., 2011). These were also confirmed as being more general leadership traits, based on evolutionary understandings of leaders (Van Vugt, 2006).

### ***Methodology and Case Selection***

Using best practices for qualitative methods design (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007; Pratt, 2008; 2009) when the topic itself is understudied or in its nascent stages (Yin, 2013) such as the topic in question, this is an inductive study using semi-structured interviews. To support the way in which yoga might influence leadership, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who live and work at the intersection of yoga and leadership, either as yoga teachers who teach leaders or executive leaders (in the non-profit, for-profit, or public spheres) who are practicing yoga regularly. The interviews were conducted between January 2015 and July 2016 with individuals residing in Canada, Spain, Germany, and the US (a full list of interviewees appears in the Appendix to this chapter). An interview protocol was developed and used as a guide during each interview, adjusting as necessary based on the particular nature of the conversation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2013).

All interviews were transcribed by the author, aligned with best practices of staying close to the data (Yin, 2013) comprising a total of 87 transcribed pages at a cumulated length of 7 hours and 24 minutes. A personal meditation journal of one of the interviewees was also used to supplement the interviews themselves. All interviews were conducted either in person or over Skype and took place in either English or Spanish, depending on the language the interviewee was more comfortable using.

### ***Findings***

Using the Gioia methodology for data analysis (Gioia Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), the data collected provided the following aggregate dimensions: humble service, human by example, and tuning in. Figure 10.1 illustrates the data structure, capturing first order concepts, second order themes, and the aggregate dimensions in question.

#### ***Humble Service***

A number of the interviewees highlighted the way in which a steady yoga practice supports the release or transcendence of the ego and thereby the promotion of humility within the leadership process. This idea was closely intertwined with seeing beyond oneself as an individual leader and supporting the growth of the collective as well as the larger concept of being of service. As one leader who is a long-term yoga practitioner explained,

the fact that it's the kind of practice that requires you to let go of your ego, I find that very interesting because that's something that I struggle with a little bit. So it kind of puts me in my place and reminds me about how much I have to grow.

*(Interviewee #1)*

This was a common sentiment among the various leaders interviewed. One long-term political and non-profit leader explained the particular leadership approach from a service-oriented perspective,

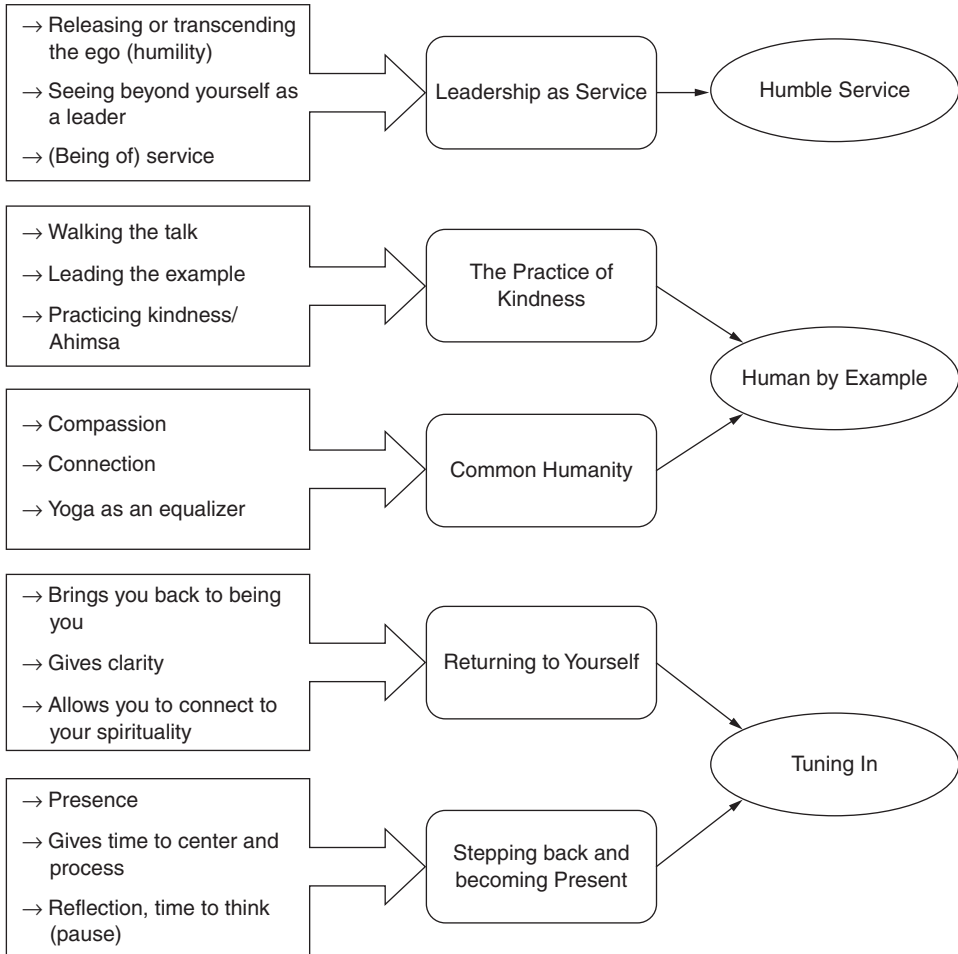


Figure 10.1 Data Structure for the Influence of Yoga Practice on Leader Development

I try to lead by letting people actually do it themselves. Just pulling them back to make sure that they are in sync with the goal we have agreed to. What I try to do is inspire. I try to show an example and live that so that it's real, it's not just words. I try to let people have their part of it and figure out their own answers themselves.

(Interviewee #2)

The leaders interviewed had common views about the perspective that having a regular yoga practice provided, one that forces an immediacy of internal questions associated with the way in which the individual defines themselves in their leadership role and, as a consequence, what type of leadership style and behavior this leads to. A leadership consultant who is also a yoga practitioner explained it this way,

Also, the focus of attention being above or beyond themselves, beyond the ego which also links back to leadership. So what's your impact and how do you lead. From what

center do you lead? Do you lead from the center here in your mind, do you lead from your egoistic center or from a holistic center?

*(Interviewee #7)*

The nature of the yogic approach is as a form of service and this requires a release or a transcendence of the ego in that,

if you can detach your own ego, you can actually unlock potentially what you didn't know was there.

*(Interviewee #1)*

### ***Human by Example***

Beyond the transcendence of the ego, much of the discussion of the way in which a yoga practice affects leader development was centered on walking the walk, leading by example, and the practice of kindness, which is action-oriented and is known by the word "ahimsa" in yogic understandings (Interviews 3, 7, 8, 11). Intertwined with the practice of kindness, many of the interviewees described yoga's ability to bring people together in a common understanding of the human experience, comprising compassion and connection. Yoga, in many instances, was referred to as an equalizer that inspired the understanding of a common humanity. A long-term yoga teacher and practitioner explained it this way,

I try to walk the talk as much as I talk about it. So just by acting in the class in a true yogic way of having non-judgement, having compassion, love emulating, you know just that we're all connected in an incredibly spiritual way.

*(Interviewee #5)*

When discussing the benefits of his yoga practice, one interviewee explained,

Anything that has to do with duality is I find not what I get in yoga. I find yoga is about coming together. Mind, body, spirit. It's you, in the company of other people, all doing the same thing. It's very empowering. Yoga is ... a great equalizer.

*(Interviewee #2)*

A long-term yoga practitioner and executive leader in the non-profit sector explained that,

it's realizing that you are permitted to get to know somebody on a different level. And that is part and parcel of working with people. And if you are moving an organization along, you're leading an organization, that can't be done in absence of the knowledge and connections with the people that you work with. It just simply can't.

*(Interviewee #1)*

Yoga seems to allow people the opportunity to find a common ground and this seeps into the manner of leadership of the practitioner,

So not only compassion for others, but compassion for yourself. So I really learned that through yoga ... just having great compassion for people. And I think that that really has helped me in all of my businesses dealings. Just being, you know, compassionate

and open and understanding and understanding others in a way that I have never understood others before. Because I have a great compassion for them. No judgement. That's been, I think, one of the biggest things that yoga has given ... truly. The compassion and the connection. Connection to people. We are all connected. And it doesn't matter if we're presidents or if we're, you know, custodians, we're all the same. And we can all learn a lot from each other and be more ... just have lots of compassion for each other.

... So you can see how helpful that would be to leadership. Just understanding the human condition on a much deeper level.

*(Interviewee #5)*

### ***Tuning In***

In essence, yoga has been found to provide clarity, bringing the individual back to themselves and allowing all human beings to connect with our spiritual core. In order to truly return to oneself, there is a need to step back and become present, which gives one a chance to pause and reflect as well as to center and process the situation at hand, a skill that is invaluable for leaders especially in the context of decision-making.

One long-term executive leader simply stated,

It gives you time to yourself in a physical, spiritual combination that eases some of the pressures of leadership. That you're not actually thinking about it. It brings you back to being you.

*(Interviewee #2)*

This sentiment was echoed by a yoga teacher who often teaches leaders:

I think that's what this is all about. Becoming present so that you can really experience the moment so that you can really do the best work.

*(Interviewee #3)*

A leadership consultant who is an avid practitioner herself explained the principles of presence and centering as being two of the primary contributions of a yogic practice toward the benefit of leaders:

And do you know what? It's the presence. I think the highest thing has been the presence. Cause it's not something I talk about. It's something people experience and they find themselves there. Through that. It allows them to connect with who they are. With who they are and at intimate levels where they wouldn't have gone otherwise or they wouldn't have experienced before. I think that's the highest impact of yoga in my work.

And that has to do with centering. With finding your center and acting from there. Which links back to mindfulness, which links back to how you, what impact you have and what vibration do you send? And therefore, what vibration do you receive back when you act from that state of being. How much more capable you are to deal with issues, external issues, when you act from that point. Clarity of mind, perspective.

*(Interviewee #7)*

From the leader development perspective, the benefit of the centering and presencing is associated with making decisions, one of the primary leadership tasks (Antonakis & Day, 2017);

that I think yoga helps you in a way exercise your mind because you get into this very calm and centered place.

When you are using your mind to make these difficult decisions all the time, you know you don't have really time to think. Maybe exercising the mind is the wrong way of putting it. Maybe it's resting it, I don't know. It does help you I think.

It does help you I think become a better decision maker. The process of, sort of, reaching that calm place allows your brain to get used to achieving some clarity.

*(Interviewee #2)*

In her experience of practicing yoga for nearly two decades and being in leadership roles for much of that time, one of the interviewees shared that yoga,

helps center me and to allow me the time to process things. I don't think that leaders typically have enough time to process what's around them and it forces me to take that time. And I usually almost ... like if I go into a practice stressed out and bursting with some big items that are on my mind, I always come out of that practice in a much better place, much more prepared to deal with something. The situation has been processed, even without really thinking about it too much. I've just emotionally gotten my head around it and I'm in a much better place to deal with it. It has that mechanism of slowing you down.

*(Interviewee #1)*

Through stillness comes a sense of clarity, a way of being able to connect to our voice within.

the all-knowing guru that lives inside of each of us. That if we just spend time reflecting on that, the answers come to you. So sometimes if you are looking for answers everywhere else, you have to take a moment and just focus on the guru within, the answers are revealed. So yoga has a very interesting and magical way of dealing with things. And it's a humble practice. It doesn't claim to have these amazing benefits, but somehow it does.

*(Interviewee #1)*

A long-term executive leader in the for-profit sector who discovered yoga more recently described the change that occurred and the way her yoga practice came to influence many aspects of her life,

I think it brought a certain level of calmness into my life. My professional life was very hectic. It was very dynamic. Constantly changing situations. Dealing with fires a lot. People situations. Business situations. All kinds of challenges and I became calmer after I started doing yoga because I think on some deep level, this ability to calm down and to relax mentally, I brought it back with me to work.

And it became easier not to react right away, not to jump. Not to hectically look for solutions, but rather calm down and take my time. Perhaps to breathe and then to truly take a look at the situation in being more calms and almost becoming more



philosophical about situations. And I think that definitely it was noticed by people who work with me and I was even asked, “Are you doing yoga?” You are calmer.

*(Interviewee #6)*

Presence and a sense of calmness that comes as a result of being in tune with oneself was mentioned often when discussing the influence of yoga on leadership practices.

One is being present. In the moment. I think that is very important and there’s few times in my life that I’ve enjoyed that outside of my practice where I remembered to be completely present in the moment, not thinking too far ahead and not thinking too far behind. And remembering, quite frankly, the only moment that you can change is the moment that you’re in. You don’t have any influence over the past and you don’t have any influence over the future that is real or tangible.

*(Interviewee #1)*

Another long-term leader stated that he sees “yoga as an important part of being able to connect to myself and to sort of a calm place.” He further explained,

That’s just how I see it. It just took me to being calm. Instead of everything sort of being ups and downs, it felt more like I was on ... when I was on doing yoga and now in my professional work it feels more like I’m on a path. A river.

You know, I still have to maybe paddle and enter the flow, but there’s a flow. Instead of being at the intersection of three rivers in the midst of big boils and big waves.

*(Interviewee #2)*

## **Conclusion and Further Reflection**

Over recent decades, the topic of humility has begun to surface within the study of leadership and effective leader traits (Collins, 2001; Nielsen, Marrone, & Slay, 2010; Owens & Hekman, 2012). It is a trait that has made its way into leader development literature (Antonakis & Day, 2017) but as yet more on the periphery of the practice. In many ways, “leader humility is still viewed as a rare personality trait that somewhat mysteriously produces favorable organizational outcomes” (Owens and Hekman, 2012, p. 787). In addition to being mysterious in its effects, humility also appears elusive in terms of how to achieve it.

Connecting humility with ideas of being able to see beyond oneself and the release of the ego, this study has shown that yoga is one path toward humble leadership. When combined with yoga’s ability to allow the leader to connect with themselves, become present and narrow in on the common human experience, yoga provides a valuable form of support for traditional methods of leader development. Moreover, yoga promotes the idea of leadership as service and being kind as a form of displayed leadership behavior that aligns with finding an element of humility in the practice of leadership, just as within the practice of yoga. A number of the long-term leaders interviewed who found yoga later in their careers expressed a common sentiment,

From my perspective now, I don’t think it’s possible to overestimate the positive connection between the practice of yoga and success as a leader.

*(Interviewee #2)*

## Appendix

Table 10.A.1 Interviews

Interviewee	Location	Description	Practicing Yoga in Years
1.	Canada	Long-term non-profit executive	18
2.	Canada	Former political leader/current non-profit executive	2
3.	Canada	Yoga teacher/social worker/teaches leaders	14
4.	Canada	Musician and activist	1.5
5.	Canada	Long-time yoga practitioner and yoga teacher	20
6.	USA	Former long-term executive in the for-profit sector	3
7.	Spain	Yoga practitioner and leadership coach	1.5
8.	Spain	Yoga teacher/manager of a large gym and studio	20
9.	USA	Long-term yoga teacher who teaches leaders	12
10.	USA	Long-term yoga teacher who teaches leaders	20
11.	Canada	Long-term yoga practitioner and leadership expert	22
12.	Spain	CEO of large health company	15
13.	Canada	Long-term yoga practitioner and writer/activist	17
14.	Germany/India	Yoga teacher/clothing designer who teaches leaders	5–6

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