

# Maimonides: Flexible Leadership

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## Abstract

A leader's flexibility can be expressed via a multi-dimensional structure containing a variety of dynamics and context-dependent adaptations. Leaders who possess these abilities can inspire a wide range of people to trust and follow them. This article focuses on the leadership style of Maimonides, a medieval scholar who became one of the most influential figures in Jewish history. His success in appealing to and influencing vast and varied populations can be explained through the flexible leadership model. The model of flexible leadership demonstrated by Maimonides will serve as a model for research on other leaders in various fields. In addition, the potential of the model, as well as how it is demonstrated by Maimonides' leadership style, can inspire leaders in a complex and changing reality.

## Keywords

Maimonides, Flexible Leadership, Guide for the Perplexed, Mishneh Torah, Epistle

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines flexibility in a leadership style. The purpose of the article is to demonstrate how Maimonides manifested a flexible leadership style by analyzing his means of operation, opinions, and influence. The study of Maimonides is based on his own writings as well as books and articles about him. As a leader, Maimonides had a profound consciousness that the period in which he lived was characterized by dramatic changes, and he understood that he must eschew dogmatism in favor of a flexible approach.

Insight into Maimonides' leadership practices expands and enriches understanding of the situations in which a flexible leadership style is appropriate and can also form the basis for research into the leadership approaches of leaders

from different time periods and diverse fields. In addition, the potential of the model, as well as how it is illustrated by Maimonides' leadership style, can inspire leaders in a complex and changing reality.

## 2. Literature Review

Flexible leadership refers to adapting one's leadership style, method, or approach to diverse and changing contexts (Kaiser & Overfield, 2010). Flexible leadership requires a broad repertoire of behaviors that may be adapted to varied situations. It also demands the ability to know when to apply each behavior and the skill to accomplish the necessary actions in order to resolve new challenges in a complex reality.

The flexible leadership theory draws on ideas from several areas: leadership, human resources management, strategic management, organizational theory, and organizational change (Yukl, 2008; Jones & Nieto, 2015). Flexible leadership can be manifested in various contexts (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). A resilient leader has the ability to balance competing values and contrasting behaviors in a way that is suitable to a complex situation (Landin, 2017). This article emphasizes that, in this time of rapid and significant change in multiple areas (political, cultural, and industrial), leaders must be able to adapt to the demands of a shifting reality. Followers need to trust a leader, believe the leader is working on their behalf, and perceive the leader to be operating in a way that suits each particular situation.

The flexibility of a leader is expressed by a multi-dimensional structure that contains a variety of dynamically activated forces and changes in a context-dependent manner (Wilkes et al., 2011). Flexible leadership requires a high level of emotional intelligence, logic, intuition, ability in interpersonal interaction, ability to assess a situation, adjust to it, and to adopt the correct course of action (Novicevic et al., 2011; Baron et al., 2018; Hurtado & Mukherji, 2015; Heemsbergen, 2006; Pillay, 2010). As Hurtado and Mukherji explain, cognitive flexibility includes abilities such as sense-making and framing, the ability to lead processes of change, persuasive communication, and the ability to motivate others. They suggest that cognitive flexibility and its corresponding abilities require self-awareness, other-awareness, task-awareness, and situational awareness (Hurtado & Mukherji, 2015). A leader who possesses these abilities may convince a wide range of people to trust and follow him. His approach will consider the nature of the audience being addressed (Jia et al., 2018). In order to lead with flexibility, a leader requires a deep recognition of the person or audience to which his messages are directed. Without knowing the specific needs and character of the audience for whom a message is intended, it is impossible for a speaker to convey an accurate message that resonates with his listeners.

Maimonides wrote the comprehensive book *Mishneh Torah*, which includes all Jewish laws and thus created a text about the laws of religion which is open and accessible to all. In addition, Maimonides created a connection between

philosophical and scientific ideas and the religious world (Halbertal, 2013: Introduction). From the Epistles of Maimonides, in which he responds to the spiritual crises of the Jewish people during his lifetime, one can learn about Maimonides' unique way of leadership (Halkin & Hartman, 1993). In Jewish thought, Maimonides is considered a model of exemplary leadership from the past, through which one learns about the desired leadership and its adaptation to the new reality (Idel, 2008). A central idea learned from Maimonides is that the leader must always act according to considerations of justice and in accordance with reason (Shapira, 2018).

### 3. Maimonides and His Leadership Style

Maimonides (1138-1204) was a great Jewish leader and leading philosopher, an important *posek* (person determining religious laws), an astronomer, a skilled physician, and a polymath. He remains one of the most influential figures in the Jewish world (Halbertal, 2013; Shemesh, 2018), inspiring a diverse range of followers to this day. An analysis of his ideologies, management style, morality, leadership principles, personal qualities, and ethics (Ahn et al., 2012; Dion, 2012) offers insight into the lasting impact of his leadership.

Maimonides' leadership style can be characterized as flexible leadership, and his adaptation to particular audiences, a defining characteristic of flexible leadership, enabled him to affect people in a clear and dynamic manner. The methods by which he communicated his ideas depended upon the situation, context, and target audience. He possessed a creative ability to convey a message in different ways and to relate to the same issue in different ways. He understood that in new and different situations, it was not enough to rely on knowledge from the past, but rather, leaders had to forge new perspectives. He could discern the complexities of a situation, adapt his proposed solution to the specific situation, and offer a new perspective on changing realities. He saw his responsibility as not only bringing his target audiences closer to him, but also bringing himself closer to them, feeling solidarity with them, and adapting his message accordingly.

An examination of Maimonides' leadership reveals that a flexible leadership style has been embodied by leaders in the past, long before the current terminology came into use. As a philosopher (Bohl, 2019) and well-respected religious authority, Jews from around the world turned to him for spiritual guidance and to help them act in a righteous manner and follow a path of truth. In fact, Maimonides was viewed as a type of mediator; he was perceived as an intermediary between the metaphysical and physical world, between God and man (Silver, 2012). The crises he addressed were related to his spiritual mission (Halkin & Hartman, 1993).

Maimonides, in his writings and deeds, demonstrated the model for the religious leader and thinker with enormous social involvement in a complex and changing reality (Ravitzky, 1992).

In Maimonides' view, leadership is a distinctly religious task and therefore the ideal leader has superior character traits (Breslauer, 1980).

#### **4. Maimonides: Between Dogmatism and Pragmatism**

In examining Maimonides' broad range of activities, one can note certain contradictions. On the one hand, he exhibited flexibility and the ability to adapt to different situations and specific cases. On the other hand, Maimonides codified Jewish law, which can be seen as having introduced an element of dogmatism into Judaism (Kellner, 2016). In his early commentary on the Mishnah (the first major written collection of the Jewish oral traditions), Maimonides formulated 13 principles of faith. Before Maimonides, Judaism did not entail a set of compulsory beliefs, and certainly none clearly defined as obligatory. His monumental project the *Mishneh Torah* is the compilation of all the laws of Judaism, which essentially eliminates the basic ideal and culture of controversy that is typified by the Talmud, the central text of rabbinic Judaism. A major concern addressed in the Talmud is the presentation of a variety of arguments and an extensive debate on each topic. According to Kellner (2016), Maimonides was the first known Jewish leader to emphatically assert that Judaism is based on dogmatic beliefs. Maimonides was one of the first to see Judaism as a "religion" in a way that is similar to the modern meaning of the word.

Seemingly, there is a contradiction between Kellner's assertion that Maimonides is the primary founder of Jewish dogmatism and Maimonides' flexible style of leadership. However, it should be emphasized that the assertion made in this article that Maimonides had a flexible leadership style does not imply that he encouraged people to be flexible in their religious practice. It can be argued that it was precisely his flexibility that enabled Maimonides to arrive at the deep understanding that most people crave dogmatism. Many people are attracted to dogmatism because it contributes to stable thinking.

However, encouraging flexibility of thought is unquestionably evident in Maimonides' philosophical book *Guide for the Perplexed*. This book is aimed at advanced scholars, and it is clear that Maimonides offers them a wide range of ideas. This is the exact opposite of dogmatism. Students must maneuver between the variety of ideas presented in the different chapters of this book, and in so doing, they develop their worldview (Kreisel, 2012). It should be noted that Maimonides asserts that only flexible-minded people can swim in the multifaceted sea of knowledge addressed in his book. Moreover, he guides them to flexible thought patterns as a condition for understanding the depths and secrets of the book. Advanced scholars are not obligated to accept dogmatism, but must be open-minded, active, and flexible in seeking the truth.

#### **5. Expressions of Flexible Leadership in Maimonides' Writings**

Several of Maimonides' prominent personal qualities and methods of influence

are instructive about his tremendous impact. Flexible leadership is Maimonides' dominant quality, and his writings indicate an understanding of the psychological complexity that occurs when people encounter an approach that differs from their own. Reflecting this understanding, Maimonides wrote in such a way that made the reader feel comfortable. His flexibility is demonstrated in his ability to adapt his communication to his audience (Stitskin, 1975). This skill works in two ways: Maimonides was able to adapt himself to his target audience, while at the same time successfully bringing his target audience closer to his viewpoint (Hoffman & Frost, 2006; Kiener, 2011). Following is an analysis of some of his writings, which demonstrate Maimonides' extensive application of the elements of flexible leadership.

***Mishneh Torah.*** This monumental work is a comprehensive code of Jewish religious law presented “in clear and concise terms, so that the entire Oral Law could be organized in each person’s mouth without questions or objections” (Mishneh Torah, Introduction 1). Maimonides wrote the *Mishneh Torah* both for people with a basic knowledge of Jewish religious law as well as for those with a broad and deep understanding of it, in other words, for the Jewish people as a whole. Through the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides made the Torah (the central holy book of the Jewish people, which includes the religious commandments) more widely accessible, enabling more people to learn Torah, to understand *halacha* (Jewish laws derived from the written and Oral Torah), and to live a religious life that was much less dependent on rabbinical authority in daily religious life. Consequently, the sage and the layman had access to the same knowledge. Even if the sage was better informed, the gap between them was reduced, and the difference became quantitative rather than qualitative. The sages were now no longer an exclusive and superior guild. This was a dramatic shift within Judaism and had an explosive impact. In part, this was because it raised the possibility that the spiritual aristocracy of the Jewish people would be considerably diminished by the empowerment of ordinary people (Fenton, 1982).

It appears that in matters of Jewish law (*halacha*), which is expressed in daily life, Maimonides believed in the ability of the common person to observe the Torah with almost no mediation. *Mishneh Torah* is the ultimate expression of the ability to lead processes of change on the basis of flexible thinking, a clear and deep perception of reality, and a vision for the future. The change that Maimonides led was paradigmatic, making knowledge, which until then had been available only to the intellectual elite, accessible to the entire Jewish public. In this book, Maimonides was able to lead processes of change, communicate persuasively in order to motivate people to adopt a new idea, and to consolidate all the Jewish laws and commandments in one comprehensive monumental work.

***Guide for the Perplexed.*** The *Guide for the Perplexed* was written for an observant audience faced with persistent and fundamental questions and difficulties. It was aimed at readers whose psychological character was in tension with

religion and religious obedience and at those who did not find answers within traditional explanations (Lorberbaum, 2002). Until Maimonides, such people had no source of explanation within Jewish thought (Altmann, 1972).

In *Guide for the Perplexed* Maimonides accompanies and guides his students and then lets them continue alone, placing his hope and trust in them. As he wrote, “This is all that I thought proper to discuss in this treatise, and which I considered useful for men like you. I hope that, by the help of God, you will, after due reflection, comprehend all the things which I have treated here” (Maimonides, 1910: p. 576). Whereas the *Mishneh Torah* was written for the entire Jewish people, the *Guide for the Perplexed* was designed for excellent students with unique needs.

The writing in *Guide for the Perplexed* is an expression of Maimonides’ vast knowledge of philosophy as well as an expression of his high level of emotional intelligence when addressing individuals faced with a crisis of faith. Maimonides wrote the *Guide for the Perplexed* with other-awareness, self-awareness, and an understanding that he had a unique ability to help the “perplexed” religious person.

***Maimonides’ Letters.*** Maimonides’ letters, collected and published posthumously, illustrated the substantial efforts he made to offer knowledge to a wide range of people, including Jewish community leaders who held authority, political power, and influence. Maimonides corresponded with congregation leaders and answered their personal letters. He also corresponded with private individuals, enheartening them, contributing to their personal development, and trying to alleviate their difficulties.

Through analyzing his words, the section below illustrates how his advice and recommendations and the way he relates to those he writes to are close to the flexible leadership model presented above.

***Letter on Apostasy.*** In this text, Maimonides took an unprecedented approach that allowed Jews to acknowledge Muhammad’s prophecy, yet remain part of the Jewish people (Soloveitchik, 1980).

Generally, Maimonides opposed the concept that a person who left the Jewish religion could never return to it. Maimonides differentiated between those who left the religion voluntarily and those were coerced to do so (Stitskin, 1977). Maimonides’ advice was not to follow the extreme and erroneous thinking of “all or nothing”, but rather to try to do one’s best within the existing limitations.

Thus, Maimonides described a type of “conversion” to Islam in which Jews only made a statement acknowledging Muhammad’s divine mission but did not commit any acts of idolatry. This was balanced advice, appropriate to the time and place, to Jews living in Morocco and Spain under the Islamic Empire (Eisen, 2009). Maimonides’ flexibility of thought allowed Jews living at that time to escape the death penalty and still continue to be part of the Jewish people.

Here Maimonides’ leadership qualities were characteristic of the flexible leadership model and took into account the special and unprecedented (at the

time) circumstances. Maimonides taught ethical action in a complex reality. Of course, this advice would not have to be given in an ideal world, in which it would be easy to know right from wrong. However, in practice, there was often tension between religious commitment and real life. Dealing with this complex dilemma required a high level of self-awareness, willingness to offer an unconventional response to a complex situation, and the ability to convince others to accept this response (Landin, 2017).

***Letter to the Sages of Lunel.*** In this letter to the community of Lunel, France, Maimonides expressed his desire to raise the generation of potential leadership that would follow his death. Maimonides communicated the urgency of the Jewish people's catastrophic spiritual state to the sages of Lunel. He then empowered them with the role of spiritual leadership. He remarked that during this difficult time people did not "stand upright" with Moses' teachings, in the words of Rav Ashi in the Babylonian Talmud.

Be therefore strong and fortify yourself for the sake of our people and our God. Strive to be courageous men, for everything depends on you. Upon you devolves the command of fulfilling the levirate precept. Do not rely upon me to carry on the battle as I can no longer navigate. I am an old man and grey, not from aging but from a weak, worn out body. May the Creator support your efforts and render you a famous name and praise you in the midst of the earth. (Stitskin, 1975: p. 191)

Maimonides gave the sages of Lunel the feeling that the fate and future of the Jewish People depended on them, that there were no others who could carry out this holy work, and that they were carrying the holy scepter of the Torah. He encouraged them and expressed his belief that they would find their own ways to lead and to teach the Torah.

Flexible leadership, in this case, is expressed in the ability to delegate authority and to encourage other people to take leadership (Jones & Nieto, 2015), even if they take a different direction. This letter is an expression of Maimonides' self-awareness and clear understanding of the complex reality being faced by future generations. Maimonides led a process of change manifested in his effort to support and empower new leaders of the Jewish people from his unique source of authority. This letter demonstrates the characteristics of flexible leadership described above, such as the ability to lead change processes, communicate persuasively, and motivate others.

Maimonides' did not write only to heads of congregations and communities. He also answered letters to private individuals of various types, from laymen to sages. These letters, several of which are described below, show Maimonides' adaptability to his audience.

***Letter to Ovadiah the Proselyte.*** The famous appeal in this text addressed the convert Ovadiah Ger Zedek (Kellner, 2016). (The term *ger zedek* is Hebrew for "righteous convert" and can be used to refer to any person who became a Jew for all intents and purposes). Maimonides taught Ovadiah Ger Zedek how to

pray like the rest of the Jewish people, while acknowledging and accepting that his prayer may differ somewhat from that of other Jews (Birnbaum, 2005). It was important for Maimonides that Ovadiah should not feel inferior, but that his thoughts and activities would be enhanced through self-awareness. For example, Maimonides suggested that it would be permissible for Ovadiah to adapt the wording of prayers that speak from the perspective of the Jewish nation, such as those that praise God for “bringing us out of the land of Egypt”, while at the same time noted that Ovadiah would be allowed to use the original wording of the prayers, because he had “come under the wings of the Divine” and there was no difference between him and someone born a Jew (Kobler, 1978).

Maimonides was prepared to adapt the prayer text so that it would be perceived as natural and in a language with which Ovadiah felt comfortable. This required flexibility of thought and thinking outside the box. Through emotional intelligence and awareness of Ovadiah’s special situation, Maimonides opened up a number of possibilities to him and treated him in a welcoming and gentle manner.

The way in which Maimonides guided Ovadiah reflects his deep understanding of humans and demonstrates Maimonides’ emotional intelligence and self-regulation.

## **6. Maimonides as a Prototype for the Flexible Leadership Model**

Maimonides is a significant example of a leader who understood that since relying on past knowledge is not sufficient to provide solutions to new situations and dilemmas, there is a need for flexible thinking in order to deal with new problems and for openness and courage to think “outside the box” (Baron et al., 2018). In the significant decisions people face, the past often cannot offer guidance because the situation may be unprecedented.

The result of the response to a certain reality is not guaranteed at all. Maimonides’ solutions are an expression of flexibility (Wilkes et al., 2011) and understanding that conventional solutions may be irrelevant, and that the new reality cries out for an innovative way of thinking (Jia et al., 2018). This flexibility may provoke fear, since it is a change from the traditional course and raises suspicion that a change will lead to instability and to a total break from convention. When such approaches come from a religious leader, innovation can be interpreted as a reform that deviates from the traditional path and as a distortion of sacred scripture. Creative and innovative thought simultaneously raises the suspicion of heresy, while also instilling sympathy and appreciation for flexibility in adapting to new situations.

One of the practical expressions of flexibility is the ability to make knowledge accessible and adapt it to different realities and to different people (Lucas, van Wee, & Maat, 2016; Peters & Bradbard, 2010). Maimonides was aware that conventional solutions were irrelevant to the problems of his generation, and the



new reality required completely different thought. To overcome current and future distress and provide solutions to people with specific difficulties, Maimonides proposed solutions that reflected flexibility of thought and the ability to stretch the possibilities to extremes without destroying their foundations.

When Maimonides addressed audiences and individuals, he placed them in the center and adapted his words to their level, needs, and style, thus creating a unique relationship with each group and individual. The examples and analysis presented in the article demonstrate that many aspects of Maimonides' leadership style correspond to the flexible leadership model.

Although Maimonides was probably not the first leader to fit this model, one primary reason for focusing on Maimonides is his vast and varied writings. Furthermore, the flexible leadership model can be used to understand other popular leaders, founders of religions, and contemporary leaders pressing for social and economic change.

## 7. Flexible Leadership as a Model for Analyzing Leaders

This model is not limited to current leadership but is equally relevant to past and future leaders. This broad perspective enables a further explanation and sharper definition of additional principles of leadership. It can assist in the study of leadership in general, as well as the study of flexible leadership in particular.

The flexible leadership model is demonstrated in an examination of Maimonides' writings. A broad demonstration of Maimonides' flexible leadership can be a focal point and platform for analyzing additional leaders.

This type of leadership model includes abilities such as sense-making and framing, leading change processes, communicating persuasively, and motivating others. The flexible leader has the ability to self-regulate at the emotional level, which requires clarity of perception and thinking, and emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is exercised in several dimensions, which include self-awareness, other-awareness, task-awareness, and situational awareness.

## 8. Discussion

The flexibility of a leader is expressed by a multi-dimensional structure that contains a variety of dynamically activated forces and changes in a context-dependent manner. This type of leadership requires a high level of emotional intelligence, logic, intuition, ability in interpersonal interaction, ability to assess a situation, adjust to it, and to adopt the correct course of action. A leader who possesses these abilities can convince a wide range of people to trust and follow him. His influence will take into account the nature of the audience being addressed. The flexibility of a leader requires a deep recognition of the person or audience to whom his messages are directed. Without knowing the specific needs and character of the audience to which a message is intended, it is not possible to convey an accurate message.

Maimonides is one of the most significant figures for the Jewish people. He

led diverse audiences through his many writings. He wrote a monumental book containing all Jewish religious laws (*Mishneh Torah*), which was designed for the entire Jewish people and also a philosophical book (*Guide for the Perplexed*) for scholars for whom philosophical questions make their religious beliefs difficult. In addition, Maimonides wrote letters to various communities suffering from crises, especially crises of faith. He also wrote letters to individuals with hardships. Beyond the quantity, quality, and depth of Maimonides' writings, the wide range of people to whom he wrote indicates that his leadership ability can be explained by the flexible leadership model.

## 9. Conclusion

In many ways, Maimonides is the ideal type of flexible leader. The fact that Maimonides asserted that Judaism is based on dogmatic beliefs does not diminish his flexible leadership style. An analysis of his leadership style provides an opening for research on other leaders through the flexible leadership model. A broad demonstration of Maimonides' flexible leadership can be a focal point and platform for analyzing additional leaders.

In addition, the potential of the model, as well as how it is illustrated by Maimonides' leadership style, can inspire leaders in a complex and changing reality.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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