What the Garden Taught Me—and Leadership Is Teaching Me

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My first lessons about leadership did not come from a classroom, a university, or a book. They came from a small garden in Delhi, India, where I grew up watching my father cultivate vegetables and share his harvest with others.

I remember that the joy of growing vegetables was not limited to bringing them home. My father found equal happiness in sharing what he had grown with neighbors, friends, and others around him. At that time, I did not think much about leadership. I simply saw someone who loved growing things and found happiness in giving. Looking back, I realize those experiences planted something in me long before I understood its importance. They taught me that the value of what we grow is not measured only by what we harvest, but also by what we share.

Perhaps that is why horticulture has always meant more to me than plants, flowers, fruits, or vegetables. Over the years, it has become both my profession and my way of connecting with people. Whether teaching students, conducting research, or working with farmers and communities through Extension, I find the greatest satisfaction when something I do makes a difference in someone's life.

For me, horticulture is hope, health, and humanity.

When I was selected for the American Society for Horticultural Science (ASHS) Leadership Fellow Class VI, I was excited about the opportunity to learn, meet fellow horticulturists, and prepare myself for greater responsibilities. Having spent much of my professional life teaching, conducting research, organizing Extension programs, and serving farmers and communities, I thought I had developed a reasonable understanding of leadership through experience.

I was not entirely wrong, but I am beginning to realize that experience alone does not necessarily mean we understand ourselves as leaders.

Our fellowship journey began on August 7, 2026. By our October 9 meeting, only 63 days had passed. What surprises me most is not how much I have learned about leadership, but how much I am beginning to discover about myself.

One of the first surprises came through a book.

I must admit that I have never been particularly fond of reading books outside my academic and scientific interests. Most of my professional reading involves research articles, scientific literature, and information that helps me solve practical problems. A book about leadership was not something I would ordinarily have chosen.

Then came *The Secret: What Great Leaders Know and Do* (fourth edition), by Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller.

As I read it, I began thinking about leadership differently. The book's emphasis on serving others, helping people grow, and placing their needs at the heart of leadership felt strangely familiar. It reminded me of my father and his garden. He never spoke about servant leadership, at least not in those words. Yet through his actions, he showed me that sharing what we have and helping others can bring greater satisfaction than keeping everything for ourselves.

Perhaps the most unexpected outcome was that I actually enjoyed reading it. The book has awakened my curiosity, and I now find myself interested in reading more about leadership, human behavior, and personal growth.

Another entirely new experience has been the introduction to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).

Before joining the fellowship, I knew very little about these tools. As a scientist, I am accustomed to collecting data, measuring responses, comparing treatments, and interpreting results. However, applying that same curiosity to my own personality, behavior, and interactions with others was unfamiliar territory.

When I received my assessment reports, I initially approached them much as I would approach experimental results. I looked at the numbers, categories, and descriptions, trying to understand what they meant. Some findings seemed familiar; others surprised me. More importantly, they encouraged me to reconsider situations I have encountered throughout my professional career. I am learning to use these reports as starting points for reflection, not as fixed definitions of who I am.

My MBTI results identified preferences associated with reflection, practical experience, personal values, and flexibility. These descriptions resonated with aspects of how I work with students, colleagues, and communities. My TKI results, however, gave me something more challenging to consider. They suggested that I frequently accommodate others or avoid conflict, while making relatively little use of collaboration as a conflict-resolution strategy. Here, collaboration means working through a disagreement, not simply working together on a project.

I have always believed that maintaining good relationships, respecting others, and avoiding unnecessary disagreements are important. When working with colleagues or organizing programs, I generally prefer finding a peaceful way forward rather than creating tension. But the assessment made me wonder whether I sometimes place too much importance on maintaining harmony.

Could there be situations where I should express my concerns more clearly? Have I sometimes avoided difficult conversations when discussing them openly might have led to a better outcome? Could I become a better leader by learning not simply to accommodate others, but to work through disagreements and find solutions that address everyone's concerns?

I do not yet know all the answers. But I had rarely asked myself these questions before.

The IDI assessment introduced another perspective that I found particularly thought-provoking. Its results suggested that although I see myself as someone who recognizes and appreciates cultural differences, I may sometimes focus so much on what people have in common that I overlook differences that matter. Initially, I found this difficult to understand. I have worked with students, researchers, farmers, and communities from different cultural and professional backgrounds for many years. I have always tried to treat people fairly and respectfully. What could be missing? As I began reflecting on the assessment, I recalled familiar situations from my teaching and Extension work.

In my classroom, some students readily ask questions, express their opinions, and occasionally disagree with my explanations. Others remain quiet, even when I encourage discussion. In the past, I might have assumed that a quiet student understood the material, agreed with me, or was simply shy.

Now I wonder whether there may be other explanations. Could some students come from educational or cultural backgrounds where openly questioning a professor is considered disrespectful? Could others be afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates? Does silence always mean agreement, or could it mean something entirely different?

I have started asking similar questions about my Extension programs.

Over the years, I have organized and participated in numerous workshops, field demonstrations, and educational programs for farmers. I have noticed that some farmers eagerly ask questions, discuss their challenges, and even challenge my recommendations, while others listen carefully but say very little. Previously, I might have interpreted their silence as a sign that everything was clear or that they had no additional concerns. Now I wonder whether some farmers are more comfortable asking questions privately, whether they need more time to establish trust, or whether previous experiences influence how they interact with university specialists.

Of course, I cannot assume that culture explains every difference in behavior. A student may simply be tired, and a farmer may genuinely have no questions. But that is precisely what I am beginning to appreciate. I should not be too quick to interpret someone else's behavior through my own expectations. Perhaps I need to create more opportunities for individual conversations, encourage different ways of participating, and listen more carefully to those whose voices are not always heard.

These are small changes in how I am beginning to look at everyday situations, yet they may have meaningful consequences. I am discovering that treating everyone fairly does not necessarily mean approaching everyone in exactly the same way. Understanding people requires more than good intentions; it requires curiosity, listening, and a willingness to reconsider our assumptions.

Reading the reports together, I found myself thinking about something I have valued throughout my life: caring for people. They also made me question whether, in trying to maintain good relationships, I sometimes avoid differences that deserve attention.

I do not want to lose that concern for people. It is part of who I am and, in many ways, part of what drew me to Extension and education.

But perhaps leadership asks something more of me.

Caring for others may sometimes require difficult conversations. Respecting others may require listening to perspectives that challenge my own. Helping people grow may require honest feedback rather than simply preserving harmony. Serving diverse communities may mean recognizing that what works for one group may not work equally well for another.

As a horticulturist, I find myself returning to a familiar comparison. We may grow different cultivars of the same crop under similar conditions, yet their responses to water, nutrients, temperature, or environmental stress can be remarkably different. A good horticulturist recognizes those differences and adjusts management practices accordingly. Perhaps working with people requires a similar willingness to observe, understand, and adapt. Not because people are plants, but because experience has taught me that meaningful differences deserve attention.

When I applied for the fellowship, I hoped to expand my leadership abilities, contribute more meaningfully to ASHS, and prepare myself for future opportunities to serve the horticultural profession. Those aspirations remain unchanged. What has changed is my understanding that becoming a more effective leader may begin with recognizing my own habits, assumptions, strengths, and limitations.

I want to become more comfortable having difficult conversations when necessary. I want to listen before drawing conclusions, turn differences of opinion into opportunities for collaboration, and become more thoughtful about the needs of the people I serve. Most importantly, I want these lessons to influence what I actually do, rather than remain interesting observations in assessment reports.

There is still so much ahead in this fellowship. We have only begun exploring leadership through reading, discussion, reflection, and self-assessment. I am genuinely curious about what the coming months will bring, what other assumptions I may need to reconsider, and what new ideas I may discover.

I entered the program with years of professional experience and a desire to contribute. I now find myself looking forward to becoming a student again, not of horticulture alone, but of leadership and human relationships.

And that brings me back to my father's garden.

As a child, I watched him grow vegetables and share them without expecting anything in return. I did not realize that those simple acts would remain with me throughout my life. They helped shape my belief that the knowledge, opportunities, and resources we receive become more valuable when we use them to benefit others.

The garden taught me the joy of growing and giving. Horticulture gave me a profession through which I could practice those values. And now, the ASHS Leadership Fellowship is encouraging me to examine how I can serve others with greater understanding, courage, and purpose.

Sixty-three days may be too short to measure how much a leader has grown, but perhaps they are long enough to discover how much there is still to learn.

Now I am discovering that leadership, too, is something we must continue to cultivate.

And I am looking forward to what will grow next.