



# Leadership in the promotion of peace: Interviews with the 2015 Business for Peace honorees

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## KEYWORDS

Business and peace;  
Ethical leadership;  
Peacebuilding

**Abstract** Ethical leadership can lead to many positive organizational outcomes. Previous studies have shown a correlation between ethical conduct and profitability; in addition, firms that have high ethical standards have fewer legal issues. The existing ethical leadership literature assumes a stable external environment. The business and peace literature, on the other hand, assumes instability but has thus far largely ignored the role of leadership within companies as a possible driver of peacebuilding activities. The practitioner community has already begun to recognize that leaders of organizations are the key drivers of change in the peacebuilding context. The Business for Peace Foundation, the foremost organization in the practitioner community, gives its annual award to business leaders who promote peace within their organizations and communities. These Business for Peace honorees represent the ‘ethical leadership’ qualities of peace promotion, without reference to academic theories in either area. We conducted semi-structured interviews with the 2015 Business for Peace honorees and combined those with their public speeches at the Business for Peace events to examine what role these business and peace leaders saw between ethical leadership and peace promotion. Unlike the academic research that suggests only a theoretical and sometimes a direct but tangential connection to peacebuilding, the honorees highlight the direct and visible connection of ethical leadership to peace in unstable environments. We begin by describing the relevant business for peace and ethical leadership literatures. Then we highlight the significant aspects of the interviews and speeches and relate these to the prevailing theories of both business and peace and ethical leadership. Our findings suggest that ethical leadership may be an important missing link within the business and peace literature as an avenue for peace promotion, and that the leadership literature may be ignoring an important positive impact of ethical leadership.

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## 1. Peace promotion by business: The role of leadership

Ethical leadership can lead to many positive organizational outcomes, including better ethical decision making; pro-social behavior among employees; higher employee satisfaction, motivation, and commitment; and better self-monitoring (Brown & Treviño, 2006; De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Kim & Brymer, 2011; Zhu, May, & Avolio, 2004). Many studies indicate that, projected over the long term, there is a correlation between ethical conduct (sometimes called ‘corporate social performance’) and profitability (sometimes called ‘corporate financial performance’; Campbell, 2007; Margolis & Walsh, 2001). In addition, firms that have high ethical standards will logically find themselves with fewer legal issues as well (Brickley, Smith, & Zimmerman, 2002; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001).

Though some work has been done on ethical leadership in international contexts (Resick, Hanges, Dickson, & Mitchelson, 2006), the existing literature on ethical leadership assumes a stable external environment. The business and peace literature assumes that certain activities are achievable in different conflict contexts (Oetzel, Westermann-Behaylo, Koerber, Fort, & Rivera, 2009) but largely ignores the role of leadership within companies as a possible driver of these activities.

In the practitioner community, however, there is an increasing recognition that leaders of organizations are the key drivers of change in business supporting peace drivers. The Business for Peace Foundation, the foremost organization in the practitioner community, gives its annual award to business leaders who are promoting peace within their organizations. Each year, Nobel Prize winners in Peace and Economics select individuals on behalf of the Foundation from public nominations. The Foundation then honors these individuals at their annual awards ceremony. These business leaders are selected because they have engendered trust in their communities, advocated for ethical business practices, and lead by example (Business for Peace Foundation, n.d.b).

Business for Peace honorees represent the values and ideals that many in the practitioner community view as the embodiment of ‘ethical leaders’ who are promoting peace, without reference to academic theories in either area. It has been theoretically suggested in the past that ethical businesses (Fort, 2007) and leaders (Fort, 2015) may enhance peace. In making this argument, scholars have focused on an incremental addition that ethics makes to peace, one that may or may not occur in conflict-sensitive environments and one that may or may not be

measurable. The honorees, however, highlight a new, important, visible, and concrete connection of ethical business practices to peace in unstable environments.

In the first part of the article, we discuss the relevant business and peace literature. In the second part of the article, we introduce the 2015 Business for Peace honorees and the actions that led to their nominations. In the third section, we examine whether the honorees’ statements indicate support for the business and peace literature. And in our final section, we note some avenues for future research based on our findings, suggesting that the business and peace literature misses an important aspect of management theory function—namely, ethical leadership—in its assessment of abilities to alleviate conflict.

## 2. Business and peace literature

Within all types of economies, business’s primary societal impact is economic development. Some scholars, such as William Frederick (1995), have analogized business as a kind of societal metabolism: converting raw materials into socially desired products. The current academic literature identifies five potential impacts that businesses can have on buffer economies (Oetzel et al., 2009).

First, businesses promote economic development. This is the most basic form of violence reduction that a business can engage in, yet also one of the most powerful. This is not new territory for companies: all companies generate economic impacts for the societies in which they operate. Economic development in this context is simply business doing what it does best: creating value for shareholders (Friedman, 1962), employing local workers (Fort & Schipani, 2003), transferring valuable technology (Spencer, 2008), and leveraging foreign direct investment (Buckley & Ghauri, 2004; Oetzel, Getz, & Ladek, 2007). By providing these basic inputs for economic development in conflict-sensitive regions, businesses help reduce violent conflict.

Multinational companies regularly look to developing economies specifically as the source of greater global growth gains (Borensztein, De Gregorio, & Lee, 1998; Haufler, 1997; Obstfeld, 1994). Though there are tremendous growth opportunities in developing countries, the risk of conflict re-emerging in buffer, or post-conflict, developing countries often scares away substantial business activity (Forrer & Katsos, 2015). Buffer developing countries have a 40% risk of a return to violence, while non-buffer developing countries only have a 9% risk (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002). This is even more

troubling considering that even modest increases in economic growth greatly reduce the likelihood that buffer countries will revert to conflict (Collier, 2009). There are great opportunities and risks for businesses to achieve substantial growth rates and, at the same time, reduce the risk of violence in communities throughout the world.

Second, businesses can engage in ‘track-two’ diplomacy. Track-two diplomacy is usually defined as informal, non-binding negotiations that are explicitly intended to reduce conflict through face-to-face meetings (Diamond & McDonald, 1996), but it also includes any time corporations are brokers between sides in a conflict (Galtung, 1996; Miall, Ramsbotham, & Woodhouse, 1999; Montville, 1991; Oetzel et al., 2007). Of the five factors, this is the highest level of explicit engagement that businesses have in the political process (Montville, 1991; Oetzel et al., 2009). Within track-two diplomacy, however, there are multiple levels of engagement. Businesses can engage in conflict resolution through NGO partnerships (Oetzel & Doh, 2009; Westley & Vredenburg, 1991), participation in global multilateral agreements (Oetzel et al., 2009), and direct yet informal negotiations between two sides engaged in active conflict (Lieberfeld, 2002).

Third, businesses can adopt principles of external valuations such as international codes of conduct (Emmelhainz & Adams, 1999; Kolk & van Tuldere, 2002; Steelman & Rivera, 2006). By adopting principles of external valuation, businesses are able to improve rule of law within countries by binding themselves to more stable, international initiatives. This is often called ‘hard trust,’ indicating the need for stakeholders to know that companies are bound by some sort of ‘hard’ enforcement mechanism that compels them to follow rules of operation. Examples of external valuations include the UN Global Compact, the International Labor Organization’s Labour Standards, and the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights.

Fourth, businesses can contribute to a sense of community (Dworkin & Schipani, 2007; Fort & Schipani, 2003; Spreitzer, 2007). Management theorists are perhaps most familiar with the notion of contributing to a sense of community, as it is embedded with the literature on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Davies, 2003; Freeman & McVea, 2001). By taking all stakeholders into account instead of just owners of the firm (Freeman, 1984), businesses are able to obtain their social license to operate in a foreign country (Gunningham, Kagan, & Thornton, 2003). This is especially important in conflict sensitive regions (Oetzel et al., 2009).

Finally, businesses can engage in conflict risk assessment both before entering and while operating within buffer countries (Anderson, 2008; Guaqueta, 2008; O’Neill, 2008). Often, businesses unintentionally generate more conflict in a region through missteps that could be avoided through best practices. The Conflict Sensitive Business Practices Guide (International Alert, 2005) and the Guidance on Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas (United Nations, 2010a, 2010b) are but two examples.

The current academic literature also makes two important qualifications to the above. First, the best impacts on peace are often through context-specific solutions that are hard to generalize to other conflicts (Jamali & Mirshak, 2010; Katsos & Forrer, 2014). Second, all five of these impacts will only be present in conflicts in the lowest three levels of intensity on the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (2015) conflict barometer (Oetzel et al., 2009). In limited war and war contexts, conducting most legitimate business will be implausible. Additionally, the largest peace gains from business operations may be in a unique time period often called the ‘buffer condition’ (Forrer & Katsos, 2015), a time when the most violent conflict has subsided but peace has yet to be achieved.

### 3. The Business for Peace awards and the 2015 honorees

The Business for Peace Foundation’s Founder and Executive Chairman Per Saxxegaard defines the peace promotion capability of a business as being ‘businessworthy,’ akin to being creditworthy: “To apply your business energy ethically and responsibly with the purpose of creating economic value, as well as value for society.” Each year, honorees are chosen from among public nominations by a panel of Nobel Prize winners in Economics and Peace. Through interviews of the honorees and their public statements surrounding the event, we see their connection to ethical leadership.

The 2015 honorees are Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever in Holland; Merrill Fernando, founder and CEO of Dilmah Tea in Sri Lanka; Zahi Khoury, founder of the Palestinian Development and Investment Company (PADICO) and the Palestinian National Beverage Company in the Palestinian Territories; Poman Lo, CEO and Founder of Century Innovative Technology Limited in Hong Kong; and Juan-Andres Cano, founder and CEO of Semilla and Value4Chain in Colombia. Through interviews and speeches, we were able to broadly assess what, if any, impact the leadership of the honorees might be having on peace.

The honorees were chosen according to criteria listed by the Foundation: they are role models to the public and business community for their ethically responsible behavior and business success ('Examples to Society and their Peers'); they are spokespersons of corporate social responsibility ('Advocates of Ethical and Responsible Business'); and they are trusted in their communities, principally by creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society ('Trusted by the Communities their Businesses Affect')—that is, being businessworthy ([Business for Peace Foundation, n.d.a](#)).

Paul Polman is CEO of Unilever in Holland. Unilever is the third-largest consumer goods producer in the world and owns over 400 brands. Polman is also the Chairman of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. He has been an outspoken leader for a global move away from quarterly financial reporting and for sustainable business practices in all aspects of the supply chain of large multinationals. As CEO of Unilever, he has set for the company a target of doubling corporate size while reducing its environmental impact and sustainably sourcing all of Unilever's agricultural products by 2020.

Merrill Fernando is founder and CEO of Dilmah Tea in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is the fourth-largest tea producer in the world and the second-largest tea exporter ([Chang, 2015](#)). Most of the tea production is marketed under British brands, a holdover from Sri Lanka's time as a British colony. Fernando founded Dilmah to challenge these structures and to re-invest profits back into Sri Lanka. Starting in 1962, Fernando began distributing a minimum of 10% of all profits before taxes to improve the quality of life of Sri Lankans. Recently this has largely taken the form of the MJF Charitable Foundation, which has assisted over 100,000 underprivileged Sri Lankans since its founding. Half of the foundation's recent initiatives are focused on reducing the possibility of a return to conflict in Sri Lanka, with a prisoner reintegration program, war widows entrepreneurship program, and direct funding for projects in the previously war-torn North of the island.

Zahi Khoury founded PADICO and the Palestinian National Beverage Company (PNBC) in the Palestinian Territories. His return came after he and his family fled as refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. After gaining investment banking and executive experience over a 30-year career in the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East, he returned to the Palestinian Territories along with other Palestinian businessmen after the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords. PADICO and PNBC have brought hundreds of millions of dollars of private investment into the Palestinian Territories and have created hundreds of jobs in spite of ongoing political turmoil.

Poman Lo is a businesswoman from Hong Kong. Her main position is as managing director of Regal Hotels, her family's multigenerational business. In 2012, she founded Century Innovative Technology Limited (CIT) to create, in her words, an "educational platform rooted in educational models." She saw the need to create a platform for native Chinese speakers to learn English and other skills and to learn ethical values. Lo thus used her pets as the main characters for the CIT show *Bodhi and Friends*. With more than 100 episodes and Bodhi-related books, apps, games, and an interactive learning platform, Lo's creation has found market success while also addressing critical educational needs in the world's largest economy. Paired with the for-profit business is the Bodhi Love Foundation that specifically supports underserved educational and health needs of children.

Juan-Andres Cano founded three companies, each with the goal of assisting companies in pursuing sustainable business models. Semilla Consultores Ltd is an ethics consultancy based in Bogotá, Colombia. Semilla helps clients develop sustainable economic models "for a market that increasingly requires ethical, transparent, respectful of all people and the environment and, therefore, sustainable practices" ([Business for Peace Foundation, 2015](#)). Cano's second company, Value4Chain, also helps companies identify areas of improvement in ethics, compliance, and sustainability through its Index SLA, a digital ethics performance management tool. Finally, PeaceStartup, a joint initiative of Value4Chain and Business & Human Rights (Spain), helps Spanish and Colombian businesses collaborate on sustainability projects and capacity building.

#### 4. Qualitative examination of the honorees in light of the business and peace literature

Recent scholarship has categorized three aims for businesses seeking to make a contribution to peace and three kinds of business that can pursue any of the aims. The aims which businesses may have include peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding ([Fort, 2015](#); [Ganson, 2013](#)). The kinds of business include peace entrepreneurs, instrumental businesses, and unintentional contributions to peace ([Fort, 2015](#)).

Peacemaking and peacekeeping are relatively straightforward concepts. In these categories, businesses consciously set out to undertake some action that will dampen the fires of conflict. This could occur in helping conflicting parties to settle disputes; it could also include helping to maintain

peace after an accord is reached. The Business for Peace honorees fit into these categories.

Merrill Fernando noted in our interview with him that the company is “not affiliated with any party” and “never ask a favor in the company’s interests,” but always in the interests of the communities in which Dilmah works. This has allowed Dilmah to make sure that “every [Sri Lankan] government trusts us” and “takes advice from us” as stewards of the economy and peace. During the decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka, many business leaders were targeted with gruesome killings. Dilmah’s operations were threatened with attacks and Fernando himself was physically threatened after a series of beheadings of local business leaders. Fernando insisted on shutting down operations where employees might be injured, but refused to cease work among the top management team, working from his home. Fernando survived. As he describes it, “when they realized that there was no personal benefit to my actions, [all sides] supported us.” Other businesses did take sides in the conflict and with certain parties. Fernando’s decision to take the side of peace above political parties meant that his company survived and thrived and he became a trusted actor by all sides.

Zahi Khoury returned to Palestine after almost 50 years in exile with the express intent of sustaining the peace process that began with the signing of the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords. “I had a comfortable life as a president of a big company [Olayan Development Holdings]. . . I was so scared of failure. There is a moment in life where you say ‘I am going to take that risk.’” Khoury took the risk of going back to Palestine in spite of what he called ‘disablers’ (i.e., the immense number of obstacles to regular business behavior). However, the risk was necessary to sustain what peace could be salvaged. “If we get paralyzed,” he told us, “this [conflict] is going to get worse.”

Peacebuilding is more long term and incremental. Here, the emphasis is on the ways in which businesses conduct themselves so as to gradually change the cultural practices (internally and externally) so that resorting to violence is less likely (Fort, 2015). This incremental approach shares much in common with the Business for Peace Foundation’s notion of ‘businessworthy.’ This conduct may or may not be focused in a conflict-sensitive zone; ethical business conduct could occur anywhere and still have an impact insofar as it incrementally changes the model by which businesses operate. Paul Polman and Poman Lo took the peacebuilding approach. For Polman, business must be a being a key player, not simply a “bystander waiting for governments and others to act.” A major component of being a

peacebuilder was the development of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) in 2009. The focus of the USLP was on abandoning quarterly profit reporting and putting “more emphasis internally on rewarding long-term thinking.” For Lo, the development of the *Bodhi and Friends* comic and show was to enhance the moral development of children in a fun and entertaining way. The end goal was to “foster moral values” in future generations through education on morality and ethics through entertainment.

With respect to different kinds of businesses, peace entrepreneurs are those business people who consciously set out to make some contribution to peace. It is an essential aspect of the firm’s DNA, and they specifically seek ways to use their business activities to contribute to peace. The instrumentalists are more likely to use “corporate foreign policy” (Fort, 2015). In this sense, the business leaders make a rational calculation that their businesses are better off with peace as opposed to violence and thus take those actions that align the firm’s strategic interests with societal peaceful interests. Finally, the unconscious peacebuilders may not have any awareness that their actions do contribute to peace, but because their (ethical) actions correlate with peace practices, the firms do, in fact, contribute to peace.

With this in mind, we can also see that the honorees engage in parts of each of these strategies. Juan-Andres Cano started his companies for the purpose of bringing other companies together to enhance peace, very much in the mold of a peace entrepreneur. Zahi Khoury’s work in opening a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Gaza and through social investments in the Palestinian Territories likely also fit this mold of a peace entrepreneur. As an instrumentalist, Merrill Fernando tries to explicitly enhance peace through the work of his foundation rather than in the business operations. However, the business operations of Dilmah are structured to support the Foundation’s work through automatic 10% donations of pre-tax profits. Poman Lo and Paul Polman operate as unconscious peacebuilders, doing what they think is ethical through their businesses without necessarily having an explicit peace outcome in mind.

Honorees were largely unwilling, even in one-on-one interviews, to highlight their own accomplishments, even when prodded. The focus is instead on the conflict and the ways they try to overcome it. There is little reference to their personal story, except insofar as it relates to outcomes. Taken together, this highlights some potential aspects of the ethical leadership literature—namely, personality characteristics such as agreeableness,

conscientiousness, and lack of neuroticism. All three are positively related to ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Business success was always a part of the conversation. For instance, Merrill Fernando described his economic success in pure margin terms: as the only tea company based in the country that produces most of the world's tea, Dilmah had a cost advantage of others that, when combined with his traditional business training in marketing, allowed the company to obtain higher margins than competitors.

Each of the honorees, except Paul Polman, started their business with peace and sustainable development as a core value, not happenstance. Of the honorees, all but Paul Polman are what the academic literature would describe as entrepreneurs. This might indicate that the most fertile ground for conversations on business and peace may be found in the entrepreneurship space, not at the MNE level where so much of the focus of work has been. And yet, these are not social entrepreneurs—they are not trying to solve conflict as a social problem through a business solution. Instead, they are harnessing the power of regular business activity—supply chain management consultancy, children's entertainment, and two beverage producers—to solve underlying conflict drivers. Without the entrepreneurship element, Paul Polman seems to be doing the same thing at Unilever.

When it comes to the conflict itself, there is no fear in any of them in the sense that they are not—at least not obviously—attempting to thread a diplomatic needle. Many of them, Khoury and Fernando perhaps most aggressively, were very clear in where they stood on political issues, even, as in Fernando's case, when the clarity was in pragmatism. The notion of staying out of the conflict does not seem to be in their worldview.

But others were also not necessarily directly addressing the conflict, rather the drivers of conflict. Bodhi and Friends, for instance, is not a program designed to overcome conflict drivers. Its founder described it as a way of building ethical values and critical thinking skills in children through entertainment, which would then tackle a potential driver of conflict, namely a lack of education and skills gained from it.

The honorees are acting from what they see on the ground, not based on some best practice, because there is no best practice in this area. All of the honorees noted that they were doing what they felt was ethically correct based on the context within which they were operating. But four of them noted that they had no previous models or examples to work from in pursuing their social aims of alleviating the drivers of conflict or conflict directly.

Perhaps the most interesting quote was from Khoury, who said that to keep his employees motivated in the face of the conflict, he encouraged a worldview that pretended the conflict did not exist within the walls of the manufacturing facility. He noted that without this mindset, the factory might simply cease to operate. This was especially true given that our interview came on the heels of the Israeli-Gaza war, which ended only a few months earlier. This suggests that in particularly violent conflicts, the best contribution a business might have is simply to keep operating, employing workers, and generating revenue for the local economy. Merrill Fernando also hinted at this. He noted that he was forced to close his factory for days and sometimes weeks at a time because of fighting in Sri Lanka but that workers were still doing work at his and their homes. But Fernando noted that this was only in the most violent period of the conflict, when he himself received regular death threats and many business leaders were brutally executed by Tamil militiamen. Again, the sense is that survival was vital to the pursuance of peace. This supports an existing theory in the business for peace literature that most impacts a business can have on peace are not available in high-intensity conflicts. It refutes the theory in the literature, however, that suggests that economic development and employment cannot support peace in a high-intensity conflict.

## 5. Future research and the way forward

Our analysis is a step in proposing the possible link between ethical leadership and peacebuilding in business. A significant conceptual framework has been provided already that ethical business contributes to peace (Fort, 2007, 2015; Fort & Schipani, 2003). This research stream examines attributes of relatively non-violent societies as determined by anthropological study. The interesting finding is that those attributes map well with what have generally been described as ethical business practices. These include (1) attending to shareholder returns (resulting in economic development, jobs, and alleviation of poverty); (2) rule of law practices (especially avoidance of corruption and also support of contract and property rights as well as support of dispute resolution mechanisms); and (3) a sense of community in two meanings—one external, which is akin to corporate social responsibility or corporate citizenship, and the second internal with respect for employee rights, gender equity, and employee voice (Fort & Schipani, 2003). While the honorees were circumspect in not wanting to boast of their

conduct, it is clear from the stories they told that they follow these practices.

Future research should focus on not only interviewing the leaders such as the 2015 Business for Peace honorees, but also interviewing and surveying their followers to examine whether the follower responses match with the prevailing ethical leadership literature. Indeed, the interviews with the honorees suggest that this conceptual foundation is supported by concrete business action today.

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