

LEAD FROM THE OUTSIDE

Unless you suffer severe amnesia, you can probably remember your name and share it with a group, but that's not what Monica Sharma has in mind when she invites you to introduce yourself.

By John Nagy

Nor is she primarily interested in your job title or responsibilities. What she most wants to know is who you are at your core. More important, she wants you to know it and to be it — to live and lead from that core. Call it your soul, call it your essence, Sharma calls it the unique “space” that is you.

This explains why it takes nearly an hour for 23 busy senior executives to introduce themselves on a frozen Notre Dame morning in late February: Monica Sharma, a self-described “stand for freedom and justice,” a physician and global health changemaker-turned-leadership thought leader, has to coach them through it. Until you know who you are, she posits, you cannot expect to lead others into the swift and challenging headwinds of our young century.

“We are drawn to each other out of our passion and energy,” not our knowledge or rank, Sharma says, inviting these accomplished entrepreneurs and educators, physicians and directors, financiers and even a Nobel Laureate, to come forward and inspire each other, and to listen.

So Kevin Callahan '05 EMBA, consultant and business blogger, stands at the front of a classroom in the Mendoza College of Business's Giovanini Commons and begins. “My name is Kevin Callahan. My purpose in life is to become a more just person and to help the world around me become more just. My contribution is to never walk away when I see injustice happening near me. You can count on me for high-energy, brutal

honesty and being a bulldog when there's a problem to be solved.”

When he finishes, Sharma comments. “Kevin, you're not going to be more just. You are justice. You are a space for justice to manifest. You don't have to apologize for it. You just be yourself.”

Callahan sits down and before long he's met fellow students like Jerry White, who wishes to “align with the universe and understand truly what healing is so I can love and serve others better;” Sandra Eisele, M.D., whose contribution is “to enrich people's lives in the arts, sports and health;” and John Bennett, on whom Callahan may now depend for “personal responsibility, spirituality and protection of the sacred.”

The premise underlying Vital Leadership Advantage, the program that brings Callahan, White, Eisele and Bennett to campus, is that even the most talented executives with more than 20 years experience in the public, private and non-profit sectors aren't prepared to handle the complexities of today's world. Setting the tone of transparent honesty that will permeate every aspect of the six-week pilot program, its principal architect, Leo Burke ('70), admits he's not sure the course will work. “We'll see,” he says with a calm grin.

A former Motorola executive and prior director of Notre Dame's Executive Education, Burke has designed the curriculum drawing on his expertise in organizational development, as well as leadership and systems frameworks that Monica Sharma has developed during a remarkable career in the United Nations overseeing multinational initiatives.

Much will depend on the participants' capacity for openness, vulnerability and confusion. They have arrived with a self-selected business problem in hand. After three days, they will return to their homes and workplaces to put their learning into practice, challenging each other to dive deeper during weekly phone calls. They'll come back to campus six weeks later for a final, two-day session.

Later, many will agree that the first hour of introductions was one of the seminar's most powerful — and valuable — moments.

"Normally when you're doing executive education, whether it be an MBA or seminars, the learning tends to focus on technical tools and even concepts of leadership that are formulaic," says White, who holds an MBA from the University of Michigan. "And for me, what's a breakthrough here and rather bold at Notre Dame is to lead from questions of principles and vision and your best soul self. It's not the type of conversation you have at most business schools."

But it is the type that's needed, Burke and Sharma say. Much has changed since these participants (average age = 50) were in college. The changes themselves are hard to see and happening fast. For most leaders, pressing responsibilities leave little time to grasp salient trends, such as the failure of global financial markets and unsustainable methods of production and consumption, let alone to synthesize what Burke calls the "weak signals" all around them. How often, for instance, do they consider the impact of demographic or technological changes upon their current big project?

India's population is projected to eclipse China's by 2028, and Palestinians will soon outnumber Israelis, Burke says. Does that matter? Cell phones are democratizing information in ways that authoritarian governments can't seem to manage. Burke calls that a "game-changer" but what does it mean if you're trying to save banks in Puerto Rico or manage a Catholic hospital system in the Mid-Atlantic? And as solar technology develops, have your competitors given more thought than you have to who owns the sun?

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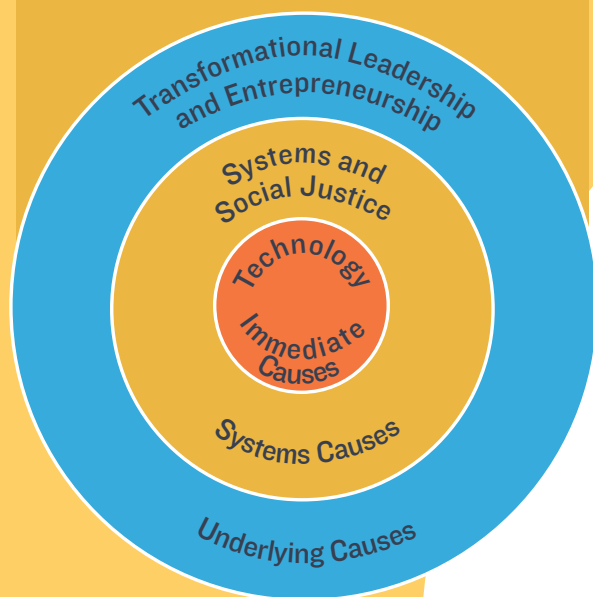
Sharma and Burke created Vital Leadership Advantage, or VLA, as a capstone to the College's Integral Leadership Portfolio of executive education programs. After stepping down as an associate dean and director of executive education at Notre Dame in 2008, Burke focused on creating a course that could go beyond the flagship Executive Integral Leadership curriculum he had designed for mid-career professionals. When he met Sharma in 2009 he found a promising match to his fascination with those aspects of integral theory that emphasize the interdependencies of people and organizations, trends and events, across whole economies and cultures.

Sharma was in the process of retiring from a career in the United Nations, which she'd begun by figuring out how to raise immunization rates from 30 percent to 80 percent of all children in her home country, India. Five years ago, she was overseeing global HIV/AIDS initiatives for the U.N.'s Development Program. More recently, she had traveled the planet training hundreds of world leaders — especially those in developing countries — to transcend mere problem solving by changing the very systems that caused those problems in the first place.

One fruit of this work with established leadership tools, frames, processes and theories was the generation of her own synthesis, a model of leadership that views problems — be they business challenges or matters of injustice — as having three layers that "transformational" leaders can address simultaneously by "sourcing" who they are as individuals to tackle systemic problems and get things done.

Imagine three concentric circles and take the example of hunger in a developing country. On one level, the inner circle, this may appear simply to be a

Ways of Sourcing Actions and Results



problem with existing food programs that calls for a technological solution like the introduction of new agricultural methods. But when crop yields improve and hunger persists, invisible systems emerge in the next circle that doom merely technological solutions to failure. Think unemployment, suppressed wages, trade imbalances, social discrimination or the mismanagement of private and public debt.

But what creates those systems? We do, Burke and Sharma say. Sharma's outside circle is you and me and our assumptions about the way life is organized. Let's continue with the hunger example. When we assume, for instance, that convenience and low food prices are consumer rights; that profit is the only corporate bottom line that matters; or that creditor nations have no responsibilities toward debtor nations, our values emerge in global monetary and financial systems that shape national and local agricultural and economic policies, which in turn have real consequences for the poor and powerless.

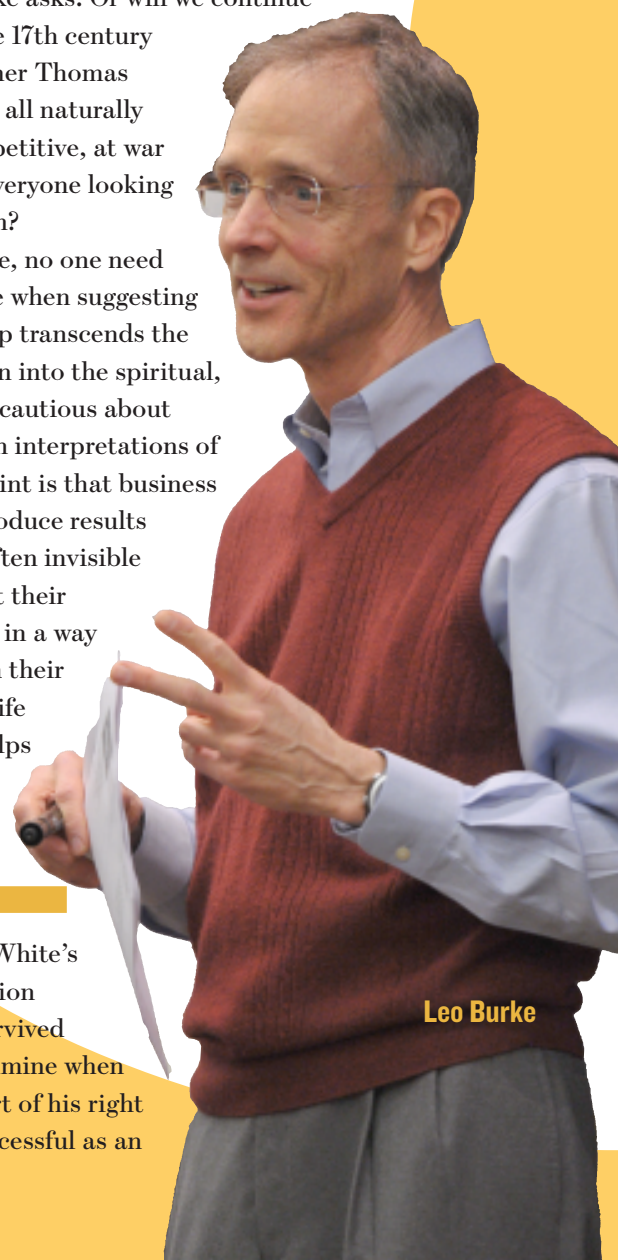
"You don't have to be a genius to figure out that if you have four billion out of seven billion people who are cut out of the equation, that's not going to be a very stable situation," Burke says. "So, it's just not going to work. And the other thing is, it's wrong."

The status quo isn't working for people higher up society's ladder either, he adds. The current recession and uncertainty about the future aside, Burke notes his Notre Dame colleague Matt Bloom's finding that 50 percent of Americans hate their jobs, suggesting that at least half of us need to think through the implications of our choices upon personal happiness and the welfare of our communities — in short, upon our development as human beings.

Like everyday people, no business or organization is exempt from these economic and cultural forces. What makes Sharma's leadership model unique is that third, outer circle. When we stand in that space, will we acknowledge a "deeper wisdom or inherent unity in which all life participates," Burke asks. Or will we continue to assume with the 17th century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes that we're all naturally separate and competitive, at war with each other, everyone looking to game the system?

At Notre Dame, no one need feel uncomfortable when suggesting that real leadership transcends the material dimension into the spiritual, though Sharma is cautious about explicitly sectarian interpretations of her model. The point is that business leaders need to produce results and address the often invisible systems that affect their product or service in a way that connects with their deepest core and life purpose — and helps others do the same.

Participant Jerry White's day-one introduction left out that he survived stepping on a landmine when he was 24, lost part of his right leg and was so successful as an



Leo Burke



Jerry White

advocate for the adoption of the international Mine Ban Treaty that he and his confreres won a collective Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. These days, as he prepares to step down as the CEO of Survivor Corps, an international network of landmine survivor groups, he is lobbying for the passage of legislation before the Knesset, Israel's Parliament, that would authorize and appropriate funds for the removal of the Holy Land's estimated 80 square miles of minefields.

Sandra Eisele, an orthopedic surgeon, had a Jerry Maguire moment as partner, past president and CEO of an established surgical and sports medicine practice with eight locations. Her departure to start her own firm and practice a more humanistic form of patient-centered care and personnel management is so recent that her staff of four hasn't even set up her computer yet.

Not every city police department's assistant chief of operations will say that his purpose in life is to be in communion with God, but John Bennett does. Bennett's public safety deployment plan for the 2009 Super Bowl got the job done for 12 percent of the costs of recent predecessors and earned Tampa "best practices" recognition from the National Football League. Now he must discern, once again, how to do more with less. Recent statistics show a 56 percent drop in all crime in Tampa since 2002, and Bennett's job is to plan

deployments that maintain the pace of progress in the face of citywide budget cuts.

Such details emerge during the intersession weeks after the first residential meeting, when participants confer by phone and help each other consciously apply Sharma's three-tiered leadership model to essential practices such as listening, creating and speaking as they manage their projects. Sharma and Burke conduct teleconferences during weeks two and four to clarify concepts and find out where their pupils are stretching themselves to inspire their partners, colleagues and staff and enroll them into a shared commitment to action.

Several acknowledge confusion, an uncomfortable state for the take-charge types who signed up for this. "I don't expect them to get it. I expect them to struggle," Sharma says. "In fact, I would go on and say if you're not rattled enough and confused, it means you just haven't settled down deep enough." It's part of the learning process, she explains.

Haris Ahmed is a member of White's intersession triad who took part in the Executive Integral Leadership program while earning his Executive MBA degree. He admits that life got in the way of incorporating deeply the insights he received from the other course, but expects the weekly conversations with other participants to provide the accountability he'll need to succeed as he manages the expansion of his fledgling international consulting practice. When he jets off to meet clients in Europe and the Middle East in the coming weeks, he'll be thinking in new ways about that most basic of small business problems—how to take on new clients, colleagues and support staff in an "economically feasible manner."

Returning to Notre Dame in April, the participants share their stories. Mike Caci, an energy executive and Catholic deacon, relates his effort to complete a

Integral Leadership Portfolio Offerings

	VITAL LEADERSHIP ADVANTAGE	EXECUTIVE INTEGRAL LEADERSHIP	UNLEASH YOUR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL
CANDIDATES	Leaders of leaders	Successful, accomplished leaders/individuals	Emerging leaders
Business Experience Guidelines	20+ years	15+ years	5+ years
BENEFITS	New way to solve change New models for complexity	New tools Changed perspective	Broaden perspective Accelerate transition to leadership



Mike Caci

downsizing initiative in his company with compassion, grace and power, taking time to listen to his employees' concerns about being unemployed. When he shared his outer circle with his management colleagues, they looked at him strangely. But his VLA peers hear only courage and clarity.

White speaks of the "joy" of meditating on Sharma's three tiers while trying to practice them during an especially busy lobbying session in the Holy Land before Passover and Easter. He read a passage in the Book of Exodus about how the Spirit came upon Moses, who then grew in knowledge, understanding and wisdom. "I was like,

the three circles. Bang! Right there," he explains to the group. He says he shared the insight whenever he could and found momentum for the proposed bill building among key players. "I came back exhausted but also proud that the best work of my life may have happened in the past month because I was practicing and open to these lessons."

In addition to building her practice and encouraging her staff, Eisele describes conversations with local hospital administrators about a potential leadership program for young physicians. Bennett shares his thoughts on moving beyond crime metrics, which don't matter to individual victims. "How do we reduce your fear? How do we give you peace?" he asks. Looking outside the culture of law enforcement for inspiration, he says he sent his staff a copy of the story of Imaculée Ilibagiza, a survivor of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and couldn't believe how many wanted to invite her to speak to the Tampa force.



Sandra Eisele

The learning isn't over. During the final 24 hours, Burke builds on first-session lessons about system interdependencies with a worksheet that helps the group think through the impact that news events could have on the most important variables they need to track in their business. Sharma explains how in the context of team commitment to a project, mere problems can become breakdowns that can lead to breakthroughs which leave both team and project stronger than before. Burke develops the concept of conscious full-spectrum risk management — the notion that leading from one's essence is the best defense against reputational risks that could destroy even billions of dollars of accumulated value in a matter of hours.

When asked if Notre Dame should run the VLA program again, the group's show of hands is unanimous.

Not two weeks later, a deepwater drilling rig explodes in the Gulf of Mexico, killing eleven workers, slicking the seas with oil, destroying the reputation of an iconic, 100-year-old firm, severely testing leadership in government and industry and sending new shockwaves of uncertainty through a disaster-weary public.

What does it all mean? Next year's VLA convenes March 1.

—John Nagy is an associate editor of Notre Dame Magazine.