# Leadership

At some point in many peoples’ lives, they will have the opportunity to assume leadership roles of some type. In the business world, this may involve moving into an upper-level management (or even ownership) position. However, leadership is not limited to managers and business owners. Professional organizations, trade unions, parent-teacher associations, nonprofit groups (YMCA, United Way, religious communities, Scouts, etc.) all rely crucially on their ability to recruit effective, ethically responsible leaders. In many cases, assuming a leadership role marks the “high point” of a person’s career, and gives him or her the chance to pursue visions and goals. While leadership roles often involve a considerable amount of work, they can also be very rewarding (and most studies suggest that, all things being equal, people in high-status roles have much less *stress* than those in lower-status roles).

However, becoming a leader also brings with it certain ethical challenges. Among other things, leaders are often tempted to use the resources of their organization for personal advancement, perhaps because they think “they’ve earned it” (as with most people, leaders tend to underestimate the role that *luck* played in their own success). Leaders might also lose touch with the “realities” of the organization they lead, and may be prone to seeing things with “rose-tinted glasses.” Again, this is understandable—no leader *wants* to think the organization they lead is doing badly—but it remains a major ethical problem, since it can lead them to take unwise actions. In this lecture, we’ll be taking a more detailed look at some of these issues, and providing some ideas for avoiding them.

## Machiavelli on Leadership

“[S]ince it is difficult for a ruler to be both feared and loved, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one of the two must be lacking. For this can generally be said of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, avoiders of danger, greedy for profit; and as long as you serve their welfare, they are entirely yours, offering you their blood, possessions, life and children...when the occasion to do so is not in sight; but when you are faced with it, they turn against you. And that prince who lays his foundations on their promises alone, finding himself stripped of other preparations, falls to ruin... For men are less concerned with hurting someone who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared, because love is held by a link of obligation which, since men are wretched creatures, is broken every time their own interests are at stake; but fear is held by a dread of punishment which will never leave you.”

**Nicollo Machiavelli’s** *The Prince* (1513) is probably one of the most influential books on leadership ever written. Machiavelli lived in current-day Italy at a time of widespread warfare, which involved not only various Italian city-states, but also the Papacy, and various foreign powers (such as France and Spain). While Machiavelli himself favored republican/democratic forms of government, his main concern in *The Prince* was the crucial importance of a single leader establishing authority over the state. The book is written as advice to such a potential leader. It is famous for its strong, “realist” bent: Machiavelli repeatedly emphasized that a potential leader must be willing to do *whatever is necessary* to establish authority, even if the common morality would see these actions as being highly immoral. He frequently uses the example of **Cesare Borgia,** a Catholic cardinal-turned-prince (as well as the illegitimate son of a Pope!), who used a variety of brutal methods to unify parts of the Italian peninsula.

**The Importance of Establishing Authority.** While “Machiavellian methods” are often associated with dictators such as Hitler and Stalin (both of whom apparently were inspired by *The Prince*), it’s not clear that this is entirely fair to Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s ultimate concern, after all, is not to show evil leaders how to obtain power. Instead, he begins with the premise that organizations (such as states) *need* strong leaders, and that failure of such leaders to appear has real consequences for people (such as constant warfare in the case of failed states, or unemployment in the case of failed firms). With this in mind, it should not be too surprising that he continually stresses that the first priority of leaders must be to get the other members of the organization to accept their authority. On his view, this may require seemingly “immoral” methods, including the elimination of potential *rivals* for leadership, and the imposition of seemingly disproportionate punishment, at least early on. In Machiavelli’s Italy, this might well involve numerous (public) executions. In today’s business environment, by contrast, a Machiavellian CEO might fire managers and executives hired by a previous CEO, as well as any non-managerial employees who talked too loudly about the “good old days.”

**Fear, Love, and Hatred.** Machiavelli is famous for writing that “it is better to be fear than loved,” at least if you are forced to choose between the two (ideally, of course, both is best). His basic idea is that, given the way human nature actually is, people tend to be pretty self-interested. For this reason, being “loved” by one’s subordinates isn’t enough to ensure that they will actually follow your leadership when the crisis hits: after all, the crisis might involve them doing something they don’t want to do (taking a pay cut, moving to a new position, or whatever). Machiavelli argues that *fear* is a much more reliable motivator of good behavior: the leader should make it obvious (early on) that there are *consequences* to violating core policies. However, Machiavelli emphasizes that the leader must be careful not to inspire *hatred,* which will happen if subordinates see the leader *arbitrarily* targeting important interests (Machiavelli’s example: abuse of tax laws to steal property from people you don’t like). We don’t need to endorse Machiavelli’s methods to recognize that there is *something* to his basic idea: leaders really do have a moral obligation to make sure that they can actually exercise the power with which they are trusted. Organizations with weak leadership (whether these be nations or firms) are prone to collapse when confronted with external threats, largely because they are incapable of quickly and effectively deciding on a unified response. Instead, the various groups within the organization spent their time bickering about the “best solution” even as they are destroyed.

**Limitation of Machiavellian Thinking.** Given its almost exclusive focus on the problem of establishing authority, Machiavelli’s treatise is not (and probably wasn’t intended to be) a guidebook on how one could be a *good* or *effective* leader, all things considered. In order to do this, one needs to have a meaningful **vision** of what the organization can (and should) be in the future. Articulating and communication this vision is, in many ways, a much more complex problem is than the one dealt with by the *The Prince.* (It was also something that Cesare Borgia clearly lacked, which may explain why his “state” fell apart quickly after his death).

## Ciulla on Leadership Ethics: Some Basic Points

In a series of articles and books, the business ethicist **Joanne Ciulla** has written extensively about the ethical issues facing leaders, and how these might be addressed. A few of her ideas are summarized here.

**What is the Relationship Between Moral Virtuousness and Effectiveness?** There is an important relationship between a **morally good** leader and being a **technically good** (or “effective”) leader. First, it important to note these things rare not the *same.* Hitler, for example, was plausibly effective, but obviously immoral. By contrast, ex-President Jimmy Carter is often described (by the political media) as being morally good but ineffective. This being said, however, moral goodness and effectiveness often serve to reinforce one another. Leaders that treat their subordinates well often build successful organizations, and when leaders fail, its often hard to sort out “mere” incompetence from moral corruption. In general, Ciulla thinks leaders (and their followers) should be wary of adopting Machiavellian “the ends justify the means” style thinking, since Machiavellian leaders are all too prone to “break the rules” not just for the greater good of the organization, but in pursuit of personal power and success. In short, a leader who “wants” to be effective should also try to be good (and vice versa).

**What Is a (Good) Leader? What are the Role of Values?** There are a number of prominent theories about what it means to be a *good* leader. These include the historical **Great Man Theory** (“Great leaders are born, not made”) and the still-popularmodel of the **Charismatic Leader,** who is capable of inspiring certain *emotional* responses (such as loyalty, awe, etc.) in those the she leads. Other theories focus on the leader’s role in helping on organization effectively respond to the current **situation** or context, or on empowering the members on the organization to **interact** with other. Finally, Burn’s theory of **Transforming Leadership** helps followers develop (“transform”) and pursue their own set of values, while **Servant Leadership** focuses explicitly on the leaders’ role in *serving* the other members of the organization. This different theories demand different value commitments of leaders, and Ciulla thinks it is important for leaders to reflect on what her or his values *are* (which theory/values are most relevant might well depend on the organizational context and history) and how to translate these values into concrete *action.*

**How Can a Leader Avoid Moral Overconfidence, Moral Silence, and Hypocrisy?** Leaders face a number of problems in trying to translate their values into action. First, many leaders are *too* confident in their moral judgements about which goals should be pursued, how people should be rewarded/punished, and how they ought to relate to other people. The point here is not that leaders should adopt *moral silence* (and refrain from expressing moral judgment altogether, no matter how one’s beliefs), but rather that they need to remember the importance of intellectual *humility*. A related concern is that of *hypocrisy,* where leaders’ actions don’t match their stated views. Both moral overconfidence and hypocrisy can result from poor self-knowledge: leaders do these things “without thinking,” and fail to notice how their actions will appear to the other members of the organization.

## The “Bathsheba Syndrome” and the dangers of Success

Ludwig and Longenecker’s “The Bathsheba Syndrome” uses a story from the Hebrew Torah (a foundational text for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) to illustrate several of the ethical failings that leaders are prone to. A brief summary: the successful King David chooses to stay at the palace, while his lieutenant Joab directs a battle. While there, David falls in love with Bathsheba, who is the wife of one of his soldiers, Uriah. He directs Joab to make sure Uriah dies in battle (and to conceal this). In the end, David’s actions are revealed by the prophet Nathan, and things go badly for him. Ludwig and Longenecker note four dangers illustrated in the story, all of which relate to relate to the “dangers of success.”

* **Past success can cause leaders to lose “strategic focus.”** When one finally achieves a leadership position, one may feel that one has “finally accomplished one’s career goal!” which can easily lead one to lose focus on the goals of *leadership*, which require acting for the good of the organization. For some people, getting to the “top of the ladder” in this way leaves a “hole” in their life which needs to be satisfied. For some leaders, this may take the form of **emptiness syndrome** (“Why did I want to do this, anyway? Who cares?”). For others (like David), it may lead to risk-seeking behavior in their personal life, which can have profoundly negative impacts on both the leader and the other members of the organization.
* **Past success can lead to “privileged access,” and to greater control of resources, both of which may then be abused.** Organizations frequently allow leaders “privileged access” to protected information or resources, as well as considerable power to control the use of these. Making effective use of these is a necessary part of being an effective leader, and having the power to finally pursue one’s “vision” for the organization can be a very rewarding part of leadership. However, for David (and for many others), the temptation to misuse this power and access to pursue purely *selfish* ends proves to be too much, which can again to failed leadership.
* **Past success encourages overconfidence in personal ability.** Leaders all too often conclude that their *past success* guarantees their *future success.* This problem is compounded when leaders choose to surround themselves with “Yes” men and women, and to isolate themselves from those people who might actually be willing to disagree with them. This overconfidence can extend to decision making in both their professional lives (“there’s no way I’ll lose this war!”) and their personal lives (“No one will ever find out what I did…”).

**What Can We Do?** Ludwig and Longenecker suggest a number of ways to prevent contracting Bathsheba Syndrome. Most importantly, these involve recognizing that, if and when you become a leader, you *will* be tempted by these sorts of things, and taking appropriate precautions ahead of time. These precautions include maintaining strong relationships both inside the workplace (find people who will disagree with you!) and outside the workplace (maintain your friendships and family relationships). It also requires that leaders (and the boards of directors who hire them) make sure to regularly review the extent to which the leader’s actions actually relate to the organization’s goals and values. The main idea here is to be *careful* when one is on a “winning streak,” and to not let it “go to your head.”

## Review Questions

1. To what extent do you think Machiavelli’s ideas about leadership are good/helpful ones? What does he get right? What does he get wrong? Have you ever had to work with a “Machiavellian” manager? How did this work out for you?
2. Ciulla claims that effective leadership and moral leadership are often closely tied together, even though they can come apart. Do you think this is plausible? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of an example from your own experience that exemplifies the “Bathsheba Syndrome” (of past success leading to moral failure)? Describe it in a little detail. Then, consider what sort of practical steps organizations might take to prevent this from happening.
4. Choose a political, business or other leader from the past 50 years that you think did an especially good (or poor) job at exemplifying “moral” leadership. What particular actions or habits of this leader do you think are worth emulating (or avoiding)?

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