



## **WHAT IS GOOD LEADERSHIP?**

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The moral triumphs and failures of leaders carry a greater weight and volume than those of nonleaders. In leadership we see morality and immorality magnified, which is why ethics is fundamental to our understanding of leadership. Ethics is about right and wrong and good and evil. It's about what we should do and what we should be like as human beings, members of a group or society, and in the different roles that we play in life. Leadership entails a particular kind of role and moral relationship between people. By understanding the ethics of leadership we gain a better understanding of what constitutes good leadership.

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The point of studying leadership is to answer the question, What is good leadership? The point of teaching it is to develop good leaders. The use of the word good here has two senses: morally good and technically good (or effective). The problem with this notion of good leadership is it is sometimes difficult to find both qualities in the same person. Some people are ethical, but not very effective; others are effective, but not very ethical. History only makes things more difficult. Historians don't write about the leader who was ethical but didn't do anything of significance. They rarely write about a general who was a very moral person but never won a battle. Most historians write about leaders who were winners or who changed history, for better or for worse. While leaders usually bring about change or are successful at doing something, the ethical questions waiting in the wings are: What were the leader's intentions? How did the leader go about bringing change? And was the change itself good? Leadership educators and educators in professional schools face the challenge of seamlessly teaching students to do things right and do the right thing.

Sometimes what we teach in leadership courses conflicts with reality. Leadership is largely a social construction based on the values and events of the times. The idea of a leader is shaped by what people in a culture think a leader ought to be. One finds this normative strand in the leadership literature, but it is most noticeable in popular books on the subject. Popular books on leadership often say leaders *are* participatory, supportive, etc., when what they really mean is that leaders *should* have these qualities. Leaders sometimes don't live up to the descriptions in leadership books. As David Gergen has noted, leadership scholars today preach and teach that participatory, empowering leadership is best. Yet President Bush does not practice this kind of leadership, and few leadership scholars would prescribe his style of leadership in their work.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, President Bush has scored some of the highest approval ratings for his leadership in recent history. This might be because events can quickly change our ideas about good leadership, but there is also a certain ambiguity about what people want in their leaders. History has shown us how quickly people are willing to revise their ideas about democratic leadership when they are afraid.

## OUR FASCINATION WITH PIZZAZZ

Leadership scholars have spilled a lot of ink about the effectiveness of charismatic leaders. But as Rakesh Khurana argues in his book *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs*, the mythical belief in the powers of charismatic leaders is overestimated when it comes to their actual effect on corporate performance.<sup>2</sup> Our fascination with charismatic leaders blurs the line between leaders and celebrities. As we have seen in politics, it is almost impossible for a highly competent but dry and boring person to be elected. It's certainly more fun to work with charismatic leaders, and they are more interesting to study, but it's not clear that they are always more effective than leaders with less pizzazz.

American writers used to pay more attention to the moral virtues of leaders than to their personality traits. Benjamin Franklin argued that good character was necessary for success. In his autobiography he listed eleven virtues needed for success in business and in life: temperance, silence, order, resolution, sin-

cerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility.<sup>3</sup> This list does not describe the ideal political candidate or the business leaders who frequently grace the cover of *Fortune* magazine.

In the nineteenth century, William Makepeace Thayer specialized in biographies of business and political leaders. His books focused on how the moral values that leaders formed early in life contributed to their success. Thayer summed up the moral path to success this way: “Man deviseth his own way, but the Lord directeth his steps.”<sup>4</sup> Other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers preached that strong moral character was the key to leadership and wealth. By the early twentieth century the emphasis on moral character shifted to an emphasis on personality. In Dale Carnegie’s 1936 classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, personality, not morality, was the key to success in business.<sup>5</sup> Until recently, this was true in the leadership research as well. Scholars were more interested in studying the personality traits of leaders than their ethics.

### IT’S GOOD TO BE KING!

Today as in the past, most people prefer ethical leaders to unethical ones. One often hears people say, “Leaders should be held to a higher moral standard.” But what does that mean? If true, would it then be acceptable for everyone else to live by lower moral standards? The curious thing about morality is that if you set the moral standards for leaders too high, requiring something close to moral perfection, then few people would qualify to be leaders or would even want to be leaders. How many of us could live up to the standard of having never lied, said an unkind word, or reneged on a promise? We set moral standards for leaders too low when we reduce them to nothing more than following the letter of the law or worse, simply not being as unethical as their predecessors. So where does this leave us? On the one hand, if the standards are too high, we become more disillusioned with our leaders for failing to reach them. We might also end up with a shortage of competent people who are willing to take on leadership positions. On the other hand, if the standards are too low, we become cynical about our leaders because they are not worthy of our respect.

When you really think about it, the issue is not that leaders should be held to a *higher* moral standard, but that they should be held to the *same* standards as the rest of us. What we want and hope for are leaders who have a higher rate of success at living up to those standards than the average person. History is littered with leaders who didn’t think they were subject to the same rules and standards of honesty, propriety, etc., as the rest of society. Leaders sometimes come to think that they are exceptions to the rules. It’s easy to see why, given the perks and privileges that we give to leaders, whether in business, politics, or government. For example, Tyco’s former CEO L. Dennis Kozlowski didn’t seem to think that he should have to pay \$1 million in New York State taxes on \$13 million worth of art that he bought for his Fifth Avenue apartment. He simply arranged to have empty boxes and the invoices for the artwork sent to the Tyco headquarters in Exeter, New Hampshire.<sup>6</sup> Commentators have described Kozlowski’s behavior in terms of an overblown sense of entitlement or plain and simple greed. But may have decided that he no longer had to live by the rules. Perhaps comedian Mel Brooks summed it up best when he said, “It’s good to be king!”

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## THE CHALLENGE OF CONSISTENCY

There are some areas, such as moral consistency, where leaders have to be more meticulous than ordinary people—first, because a leader’s moral *inconsistencies* are public and more noticeable than other people’s, and second, because a leader’s credibility rests on some level of consistency. When leaders’ actions do not match their espoused values, they lose the trust they need to be effective with various stakeholders. For example, the complaint one hears most about U.S. foreign policy is that its leaders vigorously advocate certain moral values and principles, but do not apply them consistently to other countries. Moral consistency does not mean that leaders can’t change their policies and opinions over time, but when they do, they need to explain publicly why they have made the change and why the change is morally justified. Leaders who are or appear to be inconsistent risk losing their followers’ trust.

Moral consistency is so important to a leader that moral inconsistency is the weapon of choice for character assassination. Consider the case of Tim Eyman, leader of the citizen group Permanent Offense. This group has sponsored a number of successful citizen ballot initiatives aimed at holding politicians accountable for how they spent taxpayers’ dollars. In February 2002, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* revealed that Eyman had paid himself \$45,000 of the money raised for one of his ballot initiatives. While this is not illegal, the politicians whom Eyman had often called “corrupt” seized on the issue to damage his credibility and the credibility of the causes that his organization supported. Eyman must have realized how hypocritical he looked, because when confronted with the allocations, he denied that he had paid himself the money. He later confessed, saying, “I was in lie mode.”<sup>7</sup> We generally think of hypocrites as people who express strong moral values that they do not hold and then act against them. But hypocrites are not always liars. Some really want to live up to the values they talk about, but fail to do so, either intentionally or unintentionally. This may have been Eyman’s problem. Sometimes people find it difficult to live up to their own values.

## MACHIAVELLIANISM AND ROBINHOODISM

We characterize effective leaders largely in terms of their ability to bring about change, for better or worse. This creates a divide between the ethics of a leader and the ethics of what the leader does. Machiavelli was disgusted by Cesare Borgia the man, but impressed by Borgia as the resolute, ferocious, and cunning Prince. Borgia got the job done, but the way he did it was morally repugnant.<sup>8</sup> This is the classic problem of the ends justifying immoral means. Leaders don’t have to be evil, greedy, or power hungry to have this moral problem. It even rears its head in charitable organizations. The fact that Robin Hood stole from the rich to give to the poor doesn’t get him off the moral hook. Stealing for a good cause looks better than stealing for a bad one, but stealing is still stealing. Robinhoodism is simply Machiavellianism for nonprofits.

There are cases where leaders use appropriate means to serve the needs of some of their constituents effectively, but their beliefs are morally suspect in other areas. Trent Lott’s departure as Senate majority leader offers a compelling example of this. Lott was forced to step down from his position because of insensitive racial comments that he made during a speech at the late Senator Strom Thurmond’s birthday party. After the incident, some of his African American constituents were interviewed on the news. Several of them said that they would vote for Lott again, regardless of his racist beliefs, because Lott had used his power and influence in Washington to bring jobs and money to the state. In politics, the old saying “He may be a son-of-a-bitch, but he’s *our* son of a bitch,” captures the trade-off between ethics and effectiveness. In other words, as long as Lott accomplishes the part of the job we’re interested in, we don’t

care about his ethics in other areas. This morally myopic view of a leader explains why people sometimes get the leaders they deserve when their “son-of-a-bitch” turns out to be a *real* son-of-a-bitch.

## THE INTERSECTION OF ETHICS AND EFFECTIVENESS

Some leadership scholars use altruism as the gold standard for ethical leadership. Altruism is a motive for acting, but it is not in and of itself an ethical principle. Requiring leaders to act altruistically doesn't guarantee that their actions will be moral. A terrorist leader who becomes a suicide bomber might have purely altruistic intentions, but the means that he uses to carry out his mission—killing innocent people—are not considered ethical even if his cause is a just one. Great leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi behaved altruistically, but what made their leadership ethical was how they achieved their ends, as well as the morality of their causes. We have a particular respect for leaders who are martyred for a cause, but the morality of King's and Gandhi's leadership goes beyond their martyrdom. Achieving their objectives for social justice while empowering and disciplining followers to use nonviolent resistance—not their altruism—made their leadership good. Altruism is not the moral standard of leaders. It is part of their job description. Leaders are charged with looking after and furthering the goals of their constituents or organizations, not themselves. If the mayor of a city does not look after the interests of the city, she is not doing her job, and that in itself is unethical.

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This distinction between ethics and effectiveness is not always a crisp one. In certain cases being ethical is being effective and sometimes being effective *is* being ethical. Sometimes simply being regarded as ethical and trustworthy makes a leader effective and at other times simply being effective makes a leader ethical. Given the limited power and resources of the secretary-general of the United Nations, it would be very difficult for someone in this position to be effective on the job if he or she did not behave ethically. In some jobs, personal integrity is a leader's sole or primary currency of power and influence. Business leaders have other sources of power that allow them to be effective, but in some situations acting ethically boosts their effectiveness. In the famous Tylenol case, manufacturer Johnson & Johnson actually increased sales of Tylenol by pulling the product off the shelves after some Tylenol had been poisoned. The leaders at Johnson & Johnson were effective at boosting sales of Tylenol *because* of the ethical way that they handled the problem.

In other cases the sheer competence of a leader has a moral effect. There were many examples of heroism in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. The most inspiring and frequently cited were the altruistic acts of rescue workers. Yet consider the case of Alan S. Weil, whose law firm, Sidley, Austin, Brown, & Wood, occupied five floors of the World Trade Center. Immediately after watching the towers fall to the ground and checking to see whether his employees got out safely, Weil got on the phone and within three hours had rented four floors of another building for his employees. By the end of the day he had arranged for an immediate delivery of eight hundred desks and three hundred computers. The next day the firm was open for business with a desk for almost every employee, who wanted to work.<sup>9</sup> We don't know whether Mr. Weil's motives were altruistic or avaricious. Mr. Weil may have worked quickly to keep his law firm going because he didn't want to lose a day of billing, but in doing so he also filled the firm's obligations to various stakeholders. We may not like his personal reasons for acting, but in this scenario, the various stakeholders might not care because they benefited.

## UNETHICAL OR STUPID?

So what can we say about leaders who do ethical things but for selfish or unethical reasons? In modernity we often separate the inner person from the outer person. John Stuart Mill saw this split between an individual's ethics and the ethics of his or her actions clearly. He said the intentions or reasons for an act tell us something about the morality of the person, but the ends of an act tell us about the morality of the action.<sup>10</sup> This solution doesn't really solve the ethics-and-effectiveness problem. It simply reinforces the split between the personal morality of a leader and what he or she does as a leader. If the various stakeholders knew that Weil had selfish intentions, they would, as Mill said, think less of him but not less of his actions. This is sometimes the case in business. When a business runs a campaign to raise money for the homeless, it may be doing so to sell more of its products or improve its public image. Yet it would be harsh to say that the business shouldn't hold the charity drive and raise needed funds for the homeless. Sometimes it is unethical (and just mean spirited) to demand perfect moral intentions. Nonetheless, personally unethical leaders who do good things for their constituents are still problematic. Even though they might provide for the greatest good, once their unethical intentions are public, people can never really trust them, even if they benefit.

In some situations it is difficult to tell whether leaders are unethical or stupid. They can be incompetent in terms of their knowledge or skill, or incompetent in terms of their ability to identify, solve, or prioritize moral problems. There are times when leaders get their facts wrong or think that they are acting ethically when, in fact, they are not. For example, in 2000, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa issued a statement saying that it was not clear that HIV caused AIDS. He believed the pharmaceutical industry was just trying to scare people so that it could increase its profits.<sup>11</sup> Coming from the leader of a country where about one in five people tests positive for HIV, this was a shocking statement. His stance outraged public health experts and other citizens. Mbeki understood the scientific literature but chose to put political and philosophical reasons ahead of scientific knowledge. (He has since backed away from this position.) When leaders do things like this, we want to know whether they are unethical or misinformed. Mbeki was not misinformed. He knew the AIDS literature but chose to focus on work by researchers who held this minority opinion. His actions appeared unethical, but he may have thought he was taking an ethical stand; however, it was the wrong ethical stand on the wrong ethical issue. His comments demonstrated a misplaced sense of moral priorities. Political concerns about big business and the way the world sees South Africa may have led him to recklessly disregard his more pressing obligations to stop the AIDS epidemic.

In other situations leaders act with moral intentions but, because they are incompetent, the way they solve a problem creates an unethical outcome. For instance, consider the unfortunate case of the Swiss charity Christian Solidarity International. Its goal was to free an estimated 200,000 Dinka children who were enslaved in Sudan. The charity paid between \$35 and \$75 a head to free the enslaved children. The unintended consequence of their actions was that by creating a market for slavery, they actually encouraged it. The price of slaves and the demand for them went up. Also, some cunning Sudanese found that it paid to pretend that they were slaves; they could make money by being liberated again and again.<sup>12</sup> This deception made it difficult for the charity to distinguish those who really needed help from those who were faking it. Here the charity's intent and the means it used to achieve its goals were not unethical in relation to alleviating suffering in the short run; however, in the long run, the charity inadvertently created more suffering.

## BLINDING MORALITY

We want leaders who possess strong moral convictions, but there are times when leaders' moral convictions are too strong and they undercut both their ethics and their effectiveness. Leaders with overzealous moral convictions can be far more dangerous than amoral or immoral leaders. Consider the recent response of the Catholic Church hierarchy to cases of sexual abuse. Many Church leaders still held the medieval view that they could play by different rules than the rest of society, in part because they were the "good guys." The sexual abuse of children is one of the most heinous crimes in our society; however, some church leaders treated it differently because it involved people who "do God's work." Overly moralistic leaders sometimes confuse working for God with being God, usually with disastrous results.

Self-righteousness can also blind leaders to the more mundane things that they need to do in order to be effective. They become so impassioned with the moral rightness of their cause that they forget what they have learned in other areas of life or fail to get the expertise they need to do their job. This is as true today as it was in the past. The story of Magellan, the first navigator to circumvent the globe, is one such case. Magellan led his three ships down the South American coast and on a 12,600-mile journey across the Pacific Ocean. When he arrived in the Philippines, he took up the Spanish cause of spreading Christianity. He began baptizing native leaders and gaining their allegiance to Spain. Magellan's religious fervor became so great that he started to think that he could perform miracles. He then took up the cause of a baptized chief in an unnecessary battle against an unbaptized chief on the island of Mactan. Magellan's seasoned marines would not join him in the battle, so he organized a ragtag group of cooks and other apprentices to fight. The battle was a disaster. Before attacking the island, Magellan failed to get information on the tides. Hence, one of the greatest navigators in the world met his demise waist deep in water, weighed down by heavy armor, and unprotected by his ships, which were helplessly anchored outside the reef, too far away to provide him with cover.<sup>13</sup> All this because he thought mundane details and planning were not necessary when you had God on your side.

The story of Magellan shows us how even brilliant leaders can believe so much in the moral rightness of their goals that they don't listen to others or take mundane precautions to achieve their goals. This case is a dramatic way to think about the mistakes nonprofit leaders sometimes make, such as having earnest but unqualified volunteers keep the books or assuming that when providing meals for the homeless, it is not necessary to follow standard health procedures in the kitchen. Leaders have a moral obligation to consult with experts, get their facts straight, and take care in planning. This is where ethics and effectiveness converge. The line between being incompetent and unethical is often very thin.

Professional schools are good at teaching students what they know, but they are not as good at teaching them what they don't know. Leadership requires a mixture of confidence and humility. It is about how well leaders understand the limitations of their knowledge and personal perspective. Good leadership calls for people who are confident enough to ask for help, admit they are wrong, and invite debate and discussion. Good leadership also requires humility. Leaders are imperfect human beings who are put in jobs where the moral margin of error is much smaller because the effect of their actions on others is greater. That is why good leaders need knowledge, self-knowledge, ethics, confidence, humility, and a lot of help from people who will tell them the truth.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 David Gergen. 2002 November 15. Keynote address delivered at the meeting of the International Leadership Association, Seattle, Washington.
- 2 Rakesh Khurana. 2002. *Searching for the corporate savior: The irrational quest for charismatic CEOs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 3 Benjamin Franklin. 1964. *The autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Lenord W. Larabee et. al. (Eds.) New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 4 Thayer quoted in Huber, R. M. 1971. *The American idea of success*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 53.
- 5 Dale Carnegie. 1981. *How to win friends and influence people*. New York: Pocket Books.
- 6 M. Maremont & J. Markon. 2002 June 5. Ex-Tyco chief evaded \$1 million in taxes on art, indictment says. *The Wall Street Journal*, p. A1.
- 7 A watchdog who got watched. 2002 February 9. *The Economist*, p. 29.
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- 10 John Stuart Mill. 1987. What utilitarianism is. Alan Ryan (ed.) *Utilitarianism and other essays*, New York: Penguin Books. 276-297.
- 11 L. Garrett. 2000 March 29. Added foe in AIDS war: Skeptics. *Newsday*, News Section, p. A6.
- 12 A funny way to end the slave trade: Slavery in Sudan. 2002 February 9. *The Economist*, p.42.
- 13 W. Manchester. 1993. *A world lit only by fire*. Boston: Little Brown.