

On Leadership

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Political theorists seldom have direct experience of power. Bringing together two decades of experience in educational leadership and my vocation as a political theorist, I offer advice to prospective leaders. This essay takes Machiavelli's *Prince* as a model in terms of format, and occasionally draws on his prose, either in agreement or to offer a different opinion. I emphasize the importance of context and organizational type in thinking about leadership, and of paying attention to what leaders actually do. I describe some of the qualities that often prove helpful to leaders, and discuss the distinctive attractions and pitfalls of power-holding.

Dedicatory Epistle

Those who wish to impart knowledge about leadership to others preparing to be leaders nearly always follow the custom of presenting anecdotes about their own experiences. Thus we often see prospective leaders given books of memoirs or lists of accomplishments to read. Desiring to offer students of leadership my own coun-

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sel, I have not found any way to do this that is likely to be as useful as sharing my particular perspective on our craft—that of a scholar trained in political philosophy who has spent many years as a college and university president. I have devoted much time since retiring from office to pondering these matters, and now, having summarized my thoughts in this little essay, I present them to interested readers. My hope is that this will enable them to understand in a very short time some of the things I have learned at the cost of some perils and mistakes over many years.

It is unusual for political philosophers to be leaders in large organizations; thus, it is rare for anyone in authority to have the background and mindset that political theory provides. Plato said in *The Republic* that the world's problems would be solved only when philosophers become kings or kings take up philosophy. I have no illusions about being a philosopher-queen; but Plato was surely correct to comment on the rarity of the combination.

Many political observers have looked at leaders as one might look at an inscrutable god or a powerful but somewhat dangerous animal, trying to determine how the behavior of the leader could be effectively controlled and guided for purposes they considered worthy. Most traditional political philosophers from Aristotle to Rawls have discussed ways in which leadership can be structured to be beneficial for subjects. They write about the organizations in which leaders hold power, the duties of rulers and subjects, justice and injustice, freedom and oppression. Even the rare leader who has studied political philosophy has seldom written about what it feels like to be a leader or offered an account of choices leaders make.

There are a few exceptions. The best known—the one most vilified and most emulated across the centuries—is Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Machiavelli served as a chancery officer, diplomat, and militia supervisor, and had ample opportunities to observe powerful leaders in action in his native Italy and other parts of Europe. He was fascinated

by power and moved to write in exile partly by the lack of it. Among his apparent purposes in writing this brief, pungent treatise were to explore the psychology of princes and give counsel to prospective leaders.¹

In his presentation letter to Lorenzo de' Medici, Machiavelli said: "Just as men who are sketching the landscape put themselves down in the plain to study the nature of mountains and highlands, and to study the low-lying land they put themselves high on the mountains, so, to comprehend fully the nature of the people, one must be a prince, and to comprehend fully the nature of princes one must be an ordinary citizen."² History has not recorded Lorenzo's response to this, if he ever saw the letter; but I doubt that he would have agreed with it.

I have not embellished this essay with abstract categories, impressive words, or any blandishments or superfluous decorations of the kind that many are in the habit of using in order to appear more authoritative. For my ambition has been that the essay should prove useful, if at all, because of the distinctiveness of its perspective and the seriousness of its subject matter.

I. How Organizations Differ in the Concentration of Power and the Ends They Are Designed to Pursue

Leadership is a complex human activity, with subtly different characteristics in different situations.³ In judging and applying advice given to leaders, therefore, it is important to bear in mind the level of authority and kind of organization for which the advice may be most relevant.

Organizations in which leaders hold power vary according to degrees of hierarchy. In some simple organizations, a single leader or a small group of collaborative leaders performs all the necessary functions; in other, more complex, organizations, power is heavily concentrated at the center of the organization; in still others, it is dispersed broadly across many different levels, units, and persons. My counsel in this little treatise is directed especially at those who hold power at the top of complex organizations in which power is broadly dispersed. Some of my advice will, I hope, prove helpful to leaders in other types of organizations or at different levels of power within complex organizations. But in each of these cases, the challenges, constraints, and opportunities will be somewhat different. Thus I have in mind particularly those leaders who hold the highest authority in a complex institution.⁴

There are also many different human purposes that associations may be designed to foster. Aristotle rightly says that "all associations are instituted for the purpose of attaining some good," and that they differ according to the particular type of good they are organized to pursue.⁵ Universities have a number of features in common with politics and with corporations; they also have distinctive features that derive from the particular good they are orga-

nized to pursue: the discovery and transmission of knowledge. Nonetheless, although a few of my precepts will be especially relevant to the heads of institutions of higher education, my advice is intended to be useful to leaders with significant authority in all kinds of complex organizations.

In one of my first addresses to the faculty at Duke University, I introduced a strategic planning endeavor and attempted to enlist the energies of the faculty in carrying it forward:

We are in the position of a group of adventurers linked by institutional affiliation, all in the same boat, as the saying goes, generally agreed on our destination. We know that there will be unforeseen storms and currents—we may be buffeted about, blown off course, becalmed; there will be problems with logistics in the galley, and arguments about how to get back on course at the helm. We also know that there is no LORAN system cueing us in to precisely our location on this globe at every moment of our trip and homing us in to our destination. There are only compasses and rough maps indicating generally the direction in which our destination lies. But we are better off relying on these guides than just setting out and trusting our luck to wind up someplace interesting.⁶

I noted that Duke had been compared to a large ship, "big and cumbersome and hard to move even when one knows the direction in which one wants to go." I suggested that "Duke might better be compared to a flotilla made up of several schools of different sizes, all generally agreed on the destination, each with its own resources and some degree of independence in charting the course." And in that context, I reflected on the role of the president:

Captaining a flotilla is complex in many ways, not least because it is hard to get everyone on board at the same time. Nonetheless, there are many advantages in a flotilla rather than a cumbersome barge or even a streamlined cruise ship—advantages of deftness, imagination, variety, and if we are to be a collection of enterprises, I like this metaphor better than . . . "each tub on its own bottom." Much better to be a group of boats going somewhere together, however haphazardly, than a stolid set of tubs firmly positioned on their bottoms.

Indeed, the admiral of a flotilla is an apt analogy for the presidency of many research universities; the image conveys the shared adventure, movement, and restlessness a campus exemplifies. An alternative image with some of the same implications, which would be a more accurate description of some institutions, is a system with the deans and tenured faculty as feudal barons and the president as a more or less powerful prince. The deans are like nobles who have states and subjects of their own. These subjects acknowledge the deans as their superiors and feel a natural attachment towards them. The deans and the faculty have their prerogatives; the president cannot take these away except at his or her own peril.

The flotilla image would not work for the presidency of a liberal arts college, which is a smaller, more cohesive institution—just one ship, but with many different types of persons aboard. Nor does this image describe a corpo-

rate CEO, the president of the United States, the chair of a university department, the head of the Junior League, or the warlords in Afghanistan. Not only are the degrees of hierarchy different in each case, but so are the purposes that the organizations are established to pursue. In each of these cases, the characteristic challenges to the leader, the expectations of the followers, and the sets of skills that will be most valuable are different.

It follows from this that we should be cautious in offering generalizations about leaders in diverse kinds of settings. Many have come to grief in overlooking the truth of this observation, making statements notable for their blandness and lack of relevance to the diverse situations that leaders face. We must assume that all the exemplars have some things in common; we use the same term “leadership” to describe them. But any leader listening to advice, or reading treatises like this, undoubtedly knows more about her specific situation than the advice-giver does. Advice offered *ex cathedra* from a source that pretends to have the detailed answers about any leader’s dilemmas or choices should certainly be suspect. Perhaps the best a counselor can do is to suggest ideas that will help the leader think more carefully about the problems or opportunities she faces; the wise reader may adapt this counsel to her own specific situation.⁷

II. On the Activities of Leadership

When embarking on a venture that others have taken before us, we nearly always follow the tracks made by others, proceeding in their paths by imitation even though we cannot entirely attain the excellence of our models. This holds for those embarking on leadership as well as other human endeavors.⁸ If we look at leadership from the perspective of those who have become leaders and attempt to discern what paths an aspiring leader might be advised to follow, we may first notice what leaders *do*.

Leaders make decisions. They listen to proposals or petitions from others. They assemble resources and deploy incentives, both rewards and sanctions. They give voice to vision and articulate goals. They identify strategies for solving problems, and they attempt to persuade, require, or force others to follow a course of action that they have determined is desirable. The appropriate verb depends on the kind of organization they are leading.

The scope of leadership differs from that of most other human activities. The issues that leaders must address have broad implications, and a large number of human beings are affected. In many situations, including those discussed in this essay, leadership involves an organizational context that gives this particular person the authority to make those decisions and assemble those resources. No one else has the same opportunities or obligations. There is a legitimacy about the leader’s role that sets it apart from other human behavior.

There is also stability in the role, and consequences carry over from one activity and one time period to another. This means that there is a persistent asymmetry between the distinctive actions of the leader and the followers. This asymmetry is at the heart of what we call “power.”

By their actions, leaders make a difference in the organizations they lead. It has been fashionable for some time to dismiss the “great man” theory of history in reaction to what was surely an over-reliance on this theory in the past.⁹ Instead, historians and social scientists often concentrate on the constraints that leaders face, the role of followers in shaping the leader’s behavior, and the importance of circumstance. These are all important factors. But so are the choices leaders make.

Richard J. Samuels called leadership “that constrained place where imagination, resources and opportunity converge. The imaginings need not be original to the leader, but he is the one who can control their use for his ends. The resources need not be entirely of her making, but she must be able to commandeer them for her own use. Opportunities will flow past individual entrepreneurs from time to time, and the successful leader will seize them. Most important of all, the constraints need not be determinant, and the change need not be serendipitous. Determined individuals will demonstrate a range of creative ways to combine resources and ideas and to seize opportunity.”¹⁰

III. On Choosing and Assessing Subordinates

Leaders also enlist colleagues and subordinates to work with them and delegate tasks to those people. Machiavelli put it well: “The choosing of ministers is a matter of no little importance for a prince; and their worth depends on the sagacity of the prince himself. The first opinion that is formed of a ruler’s intelligence is based on the quality of the men he has around him.”¹¹ Subordinates who are both competent and loyal reflect well on the leader because observers assume that the leader knows how to judge their competence and acts so as to deserve their loyalty.

The effective use of power depends on influencing those whose support and involvement are essential to carrying out the leader’s decisions. One of the wisest manuals for leaders, Richard Neustadt’s *Presidential Power*, notes that a leader’s “strength or weakness . . . turns on his personal capacity to influence the conduct of the men who make up government. His influence becomes the mark of leadership.” Neustadt goes on to say that “between a President and his ‘subordinates,’ no less than others on whom he depends, real power is reciprocal and varies markedly with organization, subject matter, personality, and situation.”¹²

A leader should select subordinates based on an accurate assessment of her own qualities, and choose officers whose talents complement her own. Generally, leaders demonstrate three kinds of competence.

In a few areas of governance, a leader may herself be thoroughly conversant with that aspect of the organization she is leading. Thus she can readily assume direct responsibility when this serves the organization well and can to good purpose be closely involved in overseeing actions in that area.

There will be other areas where a leader is not a specialist, but knows enough to judge competently what others understand more thoroughly, ask good questions, give general directions, and assess results. Neither the organization nor the leader is well served if she insists on involving herself directly with all the details of decision making in these areas, no matter how intelligent and energetic she may be. Even if she were justified in believing that she could do the job better than the officer or does not entirely trust that the outcome will be the one she would prefer, the leader should avoid micro-management. The leader must determine the best way to use her own time and energy, neither of which is infinite; too much interference in details discourages skillful managers and deters them from developing their own capacities.

Finally, there will be areas in which even the most talented leader will have little understanding. A wise leader recognizes the lacunae in her areas of competence and acts accordingly. Skills of various types—legal, financial, procedural, technological—may be important in certain types of leadership but not in all. When any of these factors is essential to the good governance of the organization, the leader should be careful to choose subordinates whose technical knowledge in these areas is extensive and whose personal qualities justify her trust.

When the leader knows enough to make shrewd judgments about the broad dimensions of areas that are of particular importance for the organization she leads, has appointed trustworthy ministers who are competent in each of these areas, and has given them a good deal of scope for taking action, the institution is fortunate indeed.

Loyalty is especially important for close subordinates if the work of the leader is to be effective, as is discretion in expressing public disagreement with decisions once they have been reached. Ministers must help the leader through thoughtful criticism and good counsel, not simply mirroring her every wish; but when a policy has been chosen, all those involved in the governance of the organization should devote their talents to pursuing it.

As for how a leader should assess a minister, there is one infallible guide: when you see the minister thinking more of herself than of you, and seeking her own profit in everything she does, she will not be able to carry out her duties appropriately, and you will never be able to trust her. Those who agree to become ministers must be able to think first of the good of the organization and concentrate on helping the leader succeed, rather than directly advancing their personal ambitions. Such men and women may, and often

do, aspire to higher leadership themselves and rightly see the ministerial office as a step along that path, but while they are serving as ministers, they must subordinate their personal goals to those of the leader whom they have agreed to serve. If they cannot do this, they should find some other occupation.

On her side, the leader must be considerate of her ministers and reward them appropriately. She should be quick to praise her officers in public, giving them ample credit for their roles in successful endeavors. A good leader is not overly determined to hoard praise for herself. She routinely expresses gratitude to others for their contributions, even beyond what they have actually contributed, rather than taking all the credit for herself. She should be wary of criticizing her ministers to others, reserving blame for private conversations with the minister himself. When relations between the leader and her officers are of this kind, they can have confidence in each other; when they are otherwise, the result is often disastrous for them both.

IV. How the Set of Qualities Important to the Success of a Leader Will Differ According to the Organization She Must Lead, and Her Place in It

Given the wide range of human organizations and levels of power within organizations, leaders in different contexts need different clusters of skills. A wise historian has said, “The qualities that define an effective leader in one circumstance may be useless or even mischievous in another.”¹³ He notes that Dwight Eisenhower and Ulysses S. Grant were both successful generals, although very different in their styles of commanding. Yet Grant was “embarrassingly inept as president,” and Eisenhower was uncomfortable with the “political” requirements of presidential leadership and reluctant to seize the rich opportunity provided him to advance racial harmony in the country he had been chosen to lead.

All leaders, even the most autocratic, face limits on the scope of their power. Limits may include not only superior authority in a hierarchy, but also the existence of powerful competitors, the interests of key constituencies whose support is important if the leader is to retain power, the necessity for the leader to appeal to an electorate on some regular basis, or a board of trustees or directors that appoints, and may remove, the leader. Each of these types of limits entails different constraints and opportunities, and a successful leader’s course of action must differ accordingly.

The cultural contexts in which leaders hold power differ, and these contexts are relevant in determining which traits or skills will be most useful to the leader. Some aspects of leadership that would be admired and successful in a for-profit public corporation would be regarded very differently in a private research university. The cultural

styles of countries and regions also differ and can prove important in determining success.

Even within the same cultural contexts and the same organizations, we can readily observe that some leaders flourish one day and come to grief the next, without appearing to have changed in character. This is because circumstances also change. Leaders who adapt their behavior to the times will prosper; those whose policies clash with the demands of the times will not. One leader who pursues a certain course or acts with a certain degree of circumspection, may achieve the end she seeks, and another may not; this results from nothing else except the extent to which their methods are or are not suited to the tenor of the times.¹⁴

For all these reasons, successful leadership cannot be explained simply as the possession of an identifiable set of personality traits.¹⁵ Nonetheless, if we are to provide guidance for those aspiring to leadership, we can identify certain traits and skills that will likely prove useful in many settings. This will allow prospective leaders to determine whether they possess such traits or skills or have the rudiments and can with practice hone and develop them.

V. On Those Things for Which Leaders Are Praised or Blamed

It now remains for us to see how leaders accomplish their purposes and how they should govern their conduct toward their followers. I know that this has often been written about before; providing lists of the traits or skills that leaders should demonstrate is a favorite pursuit of scholars who study leadership. Since my intention is to say something that will be of practical value to prospective leaders, I have thought it proper to list qualities that actually prove useful to leaders in a variety of circumstances, rather than ones that followers might wish that they had.

Leaving aside imaginary things about a leader, we may note that whenever human behavior is discussed—and especially the behavior of leaders, who are more exposed to view—people are noted for various traits that earn them either praise or condemnation. Some are held to be generous, others miserly; some cruel, some compassionate; one man courteous, another proud; one stubborn, another flexible; one grave, another frivolous, and so forth.

I know that everyone would agree that it would be a very praiseworthy thing to find in leaders all the qualities we think admirable, but because of the conditions of power, leaders cannot always observe those good qualities in exactly the way they might as private persons. Furthermore, leaders must not flinch from being blamed for qualities that in private life might justly earn them condemnation, but that are in fact necessary for accomplishing the goals of the organization they lead.

For example, a wise leader will not worry about being called a miser. The temptation for the leader to accept

every proposal and approve every request is strong, since it is much harder to say no than yes, and saying yes to everyone is an easy path to popularity. Leaders who serve for only a brief period may be able to follow this course and be judged successful. However, a leader who is in office for any significant period of time should recognize that choices must be made about the use of resources, which are inevitably scarce even in the most fortunate institution. She will not be afraid to say no to some requests even when they are attractive and widely supported if she judges that they are not the best choices for the organization in the long run or will make it impossible to follow other courses of action that are in her judgment superior. Nothing is as self-defeating as excessive generosity: in the act of practicing it, you lose the ability to do so, and over time, you will be regarded not with gratitude, but with contempt. The leader who follows this counsel will find in the end that she is praised not only for her frugality but also for her foresight.

There are also situations in which public and private virtue may not entirely overlap.¹⁶ Machiavelli's famous counsel on this score seems harsh and alien to ordinary morality, but even punctiliously moral leaders who would recoil from following his advice will recognize the fundamental tension he identified. Leaders of nations must make decisions about the use of force—including war and peace—that can lead to the deaths of some of their compatriots, thus making commitments whose human costs would not be acceptable for someone in private life. Leaders of corporations or universities rarely face such stark choices, but they do face moral dilemmas in which one must weigh the good of the institution against the good of specific individuals within it. Downsizing and outsourcing are among the most obvious examples.

The problem of “dirty hands” has been explored by a number of philosophers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, in his play by that name. Michael Walzer's thought-provoking discussion poses the key problem here: “It is sometimes right to try to succeed [politically] and then it must also be right to get one's hands dirty” if an immoral action is essential to this success.¹⁷ As Bernard Williams describes it, the problem of dirty hands may rest on our wanting leaders to make decisions that we (and often they) recognize as “morally disagreeable,” in order to accomplish goals (or avoid other evils) that we and they believe are of great significance for the institutions that they lead.¹⁸

Leaders may also be called upon to decide among conceptions of institutional good with respect to issues where members of the communities in which the leaders hold authority have different deeply held moral perspectives. Any decision the leaders make will be judged immoral by some followers; some decisions a leader deems appropriate may even conflict with her own personal moral codes. In university settings, decisions about financial disinvestments, how to handle invited speakers who profess views

that are reprehensible to many, whether to offer same-sex partners of employees the same benefits as spouses, and what privileges it is appropriate to give to talented athletes are examples of dilemmas that will be familiar to many leaders in these institutions.

VI. How Judgment Is Essential to Leadership

The quality preeminent among those important to leadership is, in all contexts, judgment. Judgment is needed to identify issues and priorities, know how to allocate time and energy, make decisions, choose and recruit the people best qualified to be lieutenants and collaborators, and see how to use their skills. Contemporary commentators who list this among the qualities important to leadership rarely explore what it involves, yet judgment in leadership is like “location” in real estate. It is the bedrock on which everything else must rest.

Only a few political philosophers have offered accounts of judgment. In book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explores the different mental faculties or “virtues of thought” involved in various kinds of human undertakings, distinguishing these from “virtues of character.” He covers scientific knowledge, craft knowledge, wisdom, and understanding; he gives particular attention to *phronesis*, which may be translated as “intelligence” or “prudence,” but which many readers have associated with “judgment.”¹⁹ Aristotle describes this as a way of “grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being.” *Phronesis* relates to action, not production; it is particularly useful for “household managers and politicians.” For Aristotle, Pericles exemplifies this faculty. Unlike scientific knowledge, judgment is concerned with belief rather than truth, with “what admits of being otherwise.” Unlike wisdom, the “content” of this faculty is not always the same; it depends on the situation of the actor, and even animals that demonstrate forethought can be said to possess it. *Phronesis*, on this account, is more focused on particulars than on universals; it involves cleverness, but is not reducible to that capacity. It concerns both the individual and the community, is prescriptive, not just reflective, builds on experience, and often requires deliberation.²⁰

Thomas Hobbes described judgment not only as the final act in the chain of appetites we call deliberation, but also as a particular kind of “intellectual virtue,” distinguished from “fancy.” Of persons who demonstrate this quality, he noted that “in case, such discerning be not easy,” they “are said to have a *good judgment*: and particularly in the matter of conversation and business; wherein, times, places, and persons are to be discerned, this virtue is called *discretion*.” Judgment in this sense is similar to prudence, but for Hobbes, prudence is more common and more easily attained. Prudence “depends on much

experience, and memory of the like things, and their consequences heretofore.” But men of roughly the same age have roughly the same amount of experience, and the difference among them lies in the “different occasions” that have led to these experiences. “To govern well a family, and a kingdom, are not different degrees of prudence; but different sorts of business.”²¹

In sketching out her proposed essay on “Judging,” Hannah Arendt noted the scarcity of treatments of “this faculty” by major thinkers across the years, and said: “I shall show that my own main assumption in singling out judgment as a distinct capacity of our minds has been that judgments are not arrived at either by deduction or induction; in short, they have nothing in common with logical operations. . . . We shall be in search of the ‘silent sense,’ which—when it was dealt with at all—has always, even in Kant, been thought of as ‘taste’ and therefore as belonging to the realm of aesthetics.”²² She was intrigued by Kant’s assertion that “judgment is a peculiar talent which can be practiced only, and cannot be taught,” and that “its lack no school can make good.”²³ From his *Critique of Judgment*, she drew the insight that “the faculty of judgment deals with particulars”; it involves the use of “imagination” and “enlarged thought,” being able to put oneself into the situation of someone else.²⁴

More recently, some social scientists have explored the differences between “intuition” and rationality in human life and linked the former with the development of habits or skills that allow for shortcuts in dealing with complex situations. Behavior of this kind is essential to all of us in navigating the world as we confront it, even though these shortcuts sometimes turn out to be dead ends. Those whose intuition is finely honed include “the chess master who walks past a game and declares ‘white mates in three,’” or “the experienced nurse who detects subtle signs of impending heart failure.”²⁵ As Daniel Kahneman describes this particular human practice, “Some of the determinants . . . are probably genetic; others develop through experience. The acquisition of skill gradually increases the accessibility of useful responses and of productive ways to organize information, until skilled performance becomes almost effortless.”

Drawing on these accounts, we can understand judgment as a distinctive mental faculty or skill, a way of approaching deliberation and decision making that combines experience, intuition, taste, and intelligence. It rests on well-founded beliefs about “times, places and persons,” is oriented towards action rather than production, and focuses on particulars rather than universals. We praise leaders when they exercise it and deplore the consequences when they do not. Thus President George H. W. Bush showed good judgment in handling the end of the cold war, dealing firmly but thoughtfully with the Soviet leaders rather than humiliating them, and maintaining the support of his country’s allies. President Kennedy and

Chairman Khrushchev showed good judgment in finding a way out of the Cuban missile crisis instead of remaining locked in to the courses of action that may have been most readily to hand.²⁶

We should be careful not to conflate good judgment with successful outcomes. In many instances, the exercise of good judgment will lead to good outcomes; and it is easy to credit a leader with good judgment if the outcomes turn out to be ones that we would have desired. Yet persons who we think possess this quality will sometimes experience failure in endeavors where they have used their judgment to decide on the appropriate course of action. Although we may credit President Kennedy with good judgment in the missile crisis, we blame him for the failure of U.S. policy in the Bay of Pigs. This may have been partly a matter of learning from experience, or insisting on getting better information, but even leaders who generally demonstrate good judgment cannot control all the factors that determine any outcome; nor can they be sure, in advance, that they are considering all the factors that may come into play. Chance may be compared to the weather, which can neither be predicted with confidence nor easily resisted. A version of what Bernard Williams calls “moral luck” may also enter into our assessment.²⁷

One feature that distinguishes or accompanies judgment is what we might call “peripheral vision”: the habit of looking around to gauge the tone of your environment and noting where the next opportunity or threat is coming from. It is important also to know how to concentrate, but that ability is useful in lots of settings; peripheral vision is especially helpful for leaders.²⁸

With this in mind, we might draw an analogy between judgment and a particular kind of skill with spatial relations. People differ in their way of dealing with topography: some are especially adept at reading maps; others at sensing the lay of the land—using sun or stars, seeing the way the hill lines lie; still others at recalling with uncanny accuracy how to traverse a landscape after having done it only once themselves, with no further aids. In leadership, there are no maps or scripts that give specific guidance in each situation. Knowing how to sense the territory is useful and so is being able to find your way again unerringly if you have once been in that place, recalling landmarks that were essential in finding your way before.

Judgment also involves the ability to discern what is new about a given situation, as distinct from routines that have become familiar, and adapt one’s response accordingly. Terry Sanford, an illustrious leader in both university and public life, used the image of a carousel to make this point. Being a leader, he said, is like watching a carousel move past. The observer notes: “I’ve seen that red horse before,” or “That giraffe just came around, right after the hippopotamus and the chariot.”²⁹ The important point for the leader is to remember to look out for the animal she has not seen before.

VII. On the Advantages of Foresight

Another quality that benefits leaders is the ability to foresee strategically what is likely to follow from actions that are suggested as policy options and to recognize the pitfalls that lie in the path ahead. Successful leaders not only cope with present troubles, but also attempt to address those that are likely to arise in future. When trouble is sensed well in advance, it is easier to remedy; if you wait for it to show itself, any remedies you might apply will be too late because the situation will have gotten out of hand.

There are many examples of leaders who have exercised foresight with great benefit to their organizations. We all recall the Egyptian pharaoh who accepted the wisdom of Joseph’s counsel about storing up food for the lean years ahead. We should also recognize the foresight of the officers of information technology companies like IBM, who discerned that some kinds of popular devices would soon “become commoditized”, and shifted their organization’s resources into other areas in order to take advantage of their research capabilities and maximize their profits.

This is as the doctors say it is with certain diseases, which are easy to cure at the outset, but difficult to diagnose; in their later stages, the same diseases are easy to diagnose, but difficult to cure. So it is in governance. Organizational problems can often be solved if they are seen well in advance; but when they are ignored, and allowed to get to the point where everyone can recognize them, the remedies are too late. Thus a prudent leader is often one who has the gift of foresight and assembles others around her who also have this quality.

VIII. On the Importance of Getting and Using Information

A related skill important to leadership is knowing how to get and use information. This includes obtaining crucial data in a usable form from sources that the leader has good reason to rely on, and in enough variety that she is not the prisoner of a single line of interpretation. Neustadt suggests that the leader “become his own director of central intelligence,” following “two rules of conduct.” First, “he can never assume that anyone or any system will supply the bits and pieces he needs most; on the other hand, he must assume that much of what he needs will not be volunteered by his official advisors.”³⁰

Given the constraints on the time available to leaders, obtaining information from a variety of sources presents a significant challenge. It is easy simply to take what one is given. Yet receiving information only in a heavily digested form, from a single source or a few people who have good reasons to provide the leader with what they want her to know or what they believe she wants to know, is very risky

for a leader. President George W. Bush has been rightly criticized for boasting that he never reads the newspapers and accepts the news exactly as it is presented by those close to him.

Another serious mistake is to create a climate in which people are afraid to tell you the truth. This is a temptation to which many leaders across the years have fallen prey, including Roman emperors, Renaissance princes, and Louis XIV of France as well as many modern dictators. Machiavelli says, “[T]he only way to safeguard yourself against flatterers is by letting people understand that you are not offended by the truth; but if everyone can speak the truth to you then you lose respect.”³¹ His solution is to choose your advisors carefully, let them know they should always speak truth to you, but only concerning matters on which you ask their opinion; then ask them often for advice and refuse to listen to anybody else.

This might have worked for a Renaissance prince; it is not very helpful for a modern politician or university president to be told to listen only to those whom she appoints and then only when she asks their advice. We can all think of leaders who follow this course, but in doing so close themselves off in a narrowly circumscribed world and fall victim to the other temptation I have just noted—relying so heavily on a few advisors that things they really need to know never come to their attention.

A leader’s attitude towards her councils and each one of her advisors should be such that the more freely they speak out, the more acceptable they will be. She should ask questions frequently, probing the answers in order to judge the value of what she is told.³² She should also occasionally practice “management by walking around,” moving freely among her people and listening to their views as well.

Yet leaders must also recognize the kernel of truth in Machiavelli’s “if everyone can speak the truth to you, then you lose respect.” Effective leadership involves maintaining an aura of competence and of being in control. Sometimes this is an accurate depiction, at other times a necessary sham; in either case, soliciting opinions and criticisms on any subject from any source and at all times damages this aura of competence. A leader should make clear that she will determine how to assess and use the information provided to her and will not necessarily believe everything she is told. Leaders must also be able to make decisions and move on; they cannot spend their entire time seeking and weighing information.

Leaders need to learn how to use information strategically. They must keep in mind the consequences of when and how they share information—and with whom—for achieving whatever it is they are trying to achieve. Possessing information can be a form of power; knowing how to get it efficiently and when and how to share it are among the things that distinguish successful leaders from those who are less so.

IX. The Arts of Persuasion and Listening

Successful leaders must be able to articulate persuasively what they envision, give voice to inchoate realities and call them by appropriate names, and thus convince others to see the world the way they see it. John F. Kennedy is widely credited with having captured the spirit of an age in his inaugural address, inspiring others to follow the course he set before his people. Twenty years later, Ronald Reagan effectively voiced a very different vision, in ways that resonated with many at that time.

Yet a leader will surely fail if she falls in love with the sound of her own voice. Leaders must also listen carefully to other people and try to understand their hopes and dreams as they determine what should best be done and how to do it.

Leaders thus need rhetorical gifts as well as the gifts of a good listener—qualities not often found in the same person. Charisma is advantageous to the leader who possesses that indefinable aura, but it is not essential; other leaders make their points compellingly in a low-key style. However, being effectively persuasive, which involves knowing a good deal about the needs and desires of the listeners, is essential.

Leaders should be sensitive to various forms of communication in order to give voice to these realities in different ways for people of different backgrounds—and to persuade them to respond. In the case of a university president, for example, these include faculty members, alumni, students, townspeople, government officials, and journalists. Good rhetoric allows a leader to reach many different audiences.

X. How Leaders Should Keep Faith and Honor Their Word

Some leaders interpret “using information strategically” to mean lying when this would advance the goals they have in mind, or telling the truth to some and lies to others. Such an approach has become common in our own political system, and there are many examples one could cite in which lying did indeed appear to advance the goals of the leader or was justified as being necessary to protect the state against its enemies.

Machiavelli notes that although we give lip service to truthfulness, “none the less contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles.” He counsels that “a prudent ruler cannot, and must not, honour his word when it places him at a disadvantage,” and justifies this by noting that since “men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need not keep your word to them.”³³

The cycle of wretchedness Machiavelli describes, as any student of game theory can attest, is self-fulfilling. If leaders deceive or betray people, it should be no surprise that they react in kind. But if a leader behaves with integrity, there is at least a chance that others will respond similarly. Surely the outrage that some followers feel when they discover they have been lied to and, even worse, the corrosive cynicism that begins to characterize the organization and undermine trust in its leaders are heavy prices to pay for a short-term success.

In the long run, it is important to successful leadership that people can count on the leader to do what she says and play fair. The element of trust must always be present if a leader is to have long-term success. If you lack this trait of integrity, others will be disinclined to follow you and will always be suspicious of the real motivations behind your strategies. They may be intimidated, misled, or deceived, but the energies that allow leaders and followers to accomplish great things together can never be galvanized without trust.

XI. On the Need to Sustain Courage

Courage is another virtue that is important to successful leadership. Leaders demonstrate courage in several ways: being able to make tough decisions and stick with them even when the heat is on; being willing to stand up for something the leader believes in; and having the inner strength of conviction to face the loneliness that sometimes comes with holding power.

Sometimes courage leads appropriately to boldness, to great endeavors, and to striking demonstrations of ability that win the leader lasting fame. Leaders of resistance movements, including leaders whose styles and situations were as different as George Washington and Charles de Gaulle, are often called upon to show courage of this kind. At other times, in other settings, courage may involve being willing to show patience, humility, and a low-key approach to solving the problems of the institution in face of great pressure from ministers or followers to do something dramatic and decisive.

Some leaders, in some settings, may be fortunate enough never to face situations that demand substantial courage, but they are rare. For most leaders there will be times when courage makes the difference between choosing the right course of action for the organization and sticking with it, on the one hand, or settling for the less difficult course and storing up problems for the future, on the other. Sometimes courage means choosing a middle path when almost all other participants are committed to one of two extremes. Abraham Lincoln demonstrated courage in sustaining his chosen strategy through the years of the Civil War, maintaining the Union without demonizing the South.

One of the most important challenges a leader can face is knowing when to sacrifice her own ambitions in order to protect the organization. In such instances, courage sometimes requires resigning in order to make visible an important principle that other leaders are ignoring or to avoid damaging the institution for which one is responsible. At other times, courage may require holding fast to an unpopular course of action with which one is identified, rather than stepping aside and allowing others to lead in other directions. Self-deception is a major pitfall here, since it is easy to justify one's indispensability to the organization and the rightness of one's views and remain in office even when the organization would be better served by one's departure.

XII. How It Is Important to Be Rather than Only Seem Good

A leader should not only appear to have the good qualities I have mentioned here, but actually strive to possess them. It is true that people in general judge by their eyes rather than by their hands because everyone is in a position to watch, but few are in a position to come close to a leader. Everyone sees what you appear to be; few experience first-hand what you really are. However, if a leader only *appears* to have these qualities, then as fortunes change, the deception will almost surely fail, and the leader's true colors be revealed.

Successful leaders are consummate actors in certain circumstances. For example, they may often need to avoid showing anger or emotion in settings where this would undermine their ability to accomplish their goals; at other times they may feign anger or emotion in order to convince others to fall into line, but the demands on their acting abilities are significant enough without attempting to feign virtue.

Very few men and women in any profession are able to sustain the appearance of integrity or courage for long periods of time without having some underlying truth to it. In an age of intense media attention and rapid communications of all forms, the chances that a leader can succeed permanently in appearing to be a person of integrity or courage while completely lacking in these qualities are slim indeed.

Possessing qualities such as courage, integrity, and foresight is especially important for leaders in times of crisis. When things are going well, everyone makes promises of loyalty and professes admiration for the leader. But in times of adversity, when danger comes, neither the leader nor the followers can rely entirely on what they have experienced in times of tranquility.

In such circumstances the pressures on the leader to lie in order to avoid unpleasantness, to scapegoat one of his ministers, or dodge a crucial challenge in a cowardly fashion can be intense. The pressures on followers to criticize

prematurely, to resist providing the necessary resources to deal with the crisis, or shift their loyalties to a rival claimant for power are also intense. Wise leaders, however, resist these temptations, and fortunate leaders have followers who will be wise enough to do the same.

XIII. How Other Traits May Prove Important to Successful Leadership

It is advantageous for leaders to have a great deal of stamina, an optimistic and entrepreneurial temperament, and a resilient sense of humor. It helps to have two qualities that are less often found even in successful leaders: a good deal of self-knowledge and a healthy degree of curiosity about the world. Leaders need tenacity and perseverance to stay the course against opposition that is as likely to be passive or stagnant as active and hostile.³⁴

Leaders must develop a high tolerance for having everything they do be the subject for someone's speculation and, therefore, being routinely misunderstood. It helps to be focused on the future. Leaders need to admit their mistakes and learn from them, but then use what they have learned and move on. Leaders don't have time to brood incessantly about how they might have acted differently at some moment in the past. Good decision makers don't perpetually second-guess themselves.

Some successful leaders are described as "visionary." Others, equally successful, are allergic to the "vision thing"—as President George H. W. Bush described it—or believe that "the last thing our company needs right now is a 'vision,'" as Lou Gerstner said on taking office as CEO of IBM. The relevance of "vision" depends on the type of challenges the leader and the organization face.

It is always perilous for a new leader to come into an organization unfamiliar with its mores and history and present a ready-made vision of her own, compiled with little participation from those who will need to be engaged in realizing it. On the other hand, it can be equally unfortunate to adhere so closely to familiar routines and practices that a leader misses excellent opportunities to improve the organization by taking it in new directions, employing a fresh perspective to accomplish this. In this case, as in so many others, the quality of the leader's judgment will help determine when and how it is appropriate to present a bold new strategic vision.

Which of these traits and skills can be taught or learned? How many can be gained from experience? And which ones are "innate," more like having perfect pitch than something you can pick up over time? A few of the traits are no doubt innate. This is why some people are better than others at being leaders. But most, if not all, of these attributes can be learned or enriched through experience and practice. Very few of them can be taught in the abstract, yet those who adhere to precepts such as those presented in this essay and illustrate the precepts with examples of

situations where leaders have succeeded or failed, can prepare prospective leaders to develop qualities and skills that will be valuable.

XIV. On the Crucial Importance of Balance

Successful leadership depends on finding an appropriate balance among qualities that do not routinely appear together in human experience. For example, leaders need both patience and swiftness. In some situations they should be slow to take action, yet they must also not be afraid of their own shadows; bold action must be tempered by humanity and prudence so that overconfidence does not make the leader rash.

Such counsels may seem unhelpful to the prospective leader because they do not come with instructions for knowing when to use one approach and when the other. As one of the best students of public administration has noted, proverbs about leadership often "occur in mutually contradictory pairs. 'Look before you leap!'—but 'He who hesitates is lost.'"³⁵

Even if the apparent contradictions are frustrating, the advice is nonetheless sound. The key is being able to recognize when each of the attributes in the pair is needed. Success at leadership often depends on a good sense of timing, in choosing which issues are ripe to address and also in developing strategies and making decisions.³⁶ Being good at making decisions means not only making those that most people, most of the time, think are correct, but also neither rushing to closure nor taking forever; failing to find this balance is a major pitfall for many leaders.

In a similar vein, nothing becomes a leader more than maintaining a good balance between flexibility and firmness. As John Kerry embarked on his presidential election campaign, he was indecisive on some crucial issues and earned a reputation for waffling; the leader cannot always be shifting her ground. Yet, if the leader never shifts her ground, she will also come to grief. A leader will easily be discounted if she has a reputation for being fickle, cowardly, or irresolute; she should strive to demonstrate strength and firm resolve, but she needs to know when to stand firm and when to move in response to changing circumstances. One must be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves; those who are only foxlike may be regarded with contempt; those who simply act like lions are stupid.

XV. On Compassion and Ruthlessness

A successful leader must truly care about the people she is trying to mobilize, direct, and serve; she needs a real sense of empathy for their needs and visions in life. Leaders should be aware of, and pay attention to, the different associations, affiliations, and commitments of their

followers and meet with them from time to time. Leaders should attend the gatherings of their followers and take time to talk with followers about their perspectives on the organizations they must lead. In this way, leaders learn more about what their followers hope and fear and are not simply distant symbols of authority.

But leaders also have to be willing to make choices that will have negative consequences for some of those followers. Leaders must decide among potential outcomes that are in tension or in conflict. Choosing one course of action inevitably privileges some people and disadvantages others; that is what it means to “decide”—to cut a knotty problem one way or the other. This can seem ruthless to those who come out on the losing side.

A leader must also have empathy for her ministers and officers; she cannot just project her own needs and visions onto them or ascribe to them the needs and visions it would be convenient for her for them to have. However, she must be willing to give them direct negative feedback, set high standards for their work, and let them go if they cannot measure up. This surely feels like ruthlessness to those on the receiving end of the leader’s actions; and in truth, from their perspective, it is.

In his book *Leadership* James MacGregor Burns emphasizes that leaders exercise power, and that exercising power is a distinctive dimension of human experience. He stresses the relationship between leaders and followers.³⁷ In doing so, he joins a large number of authors on leadership who emphasize the crucial role of followers and “relationships.” There is no doubt that successful leadership almost always depends on incorporating the desires and energies of followers in the work the leader does; and the power of followers to influence the behavior of leaders and determine the leader’s fate is important; nevertheless “relationship” hardly seems the appropriate word to use.

When we speak of “relationships,” we usually have in mind close, affectionate, enduring affiliations with a parent, lover, husband, sibling, colleague, or friend. The distinctive connection between leaders and followers is not well captured by this term. In large organizations leaders have many followers; followers have only one leader (or a small number of leaders). The followers may feel that they “know” the leader through observing her in action, shaking her hand at a large gathering, receiving a certificate of commendation, or reading about the leader’s family. On this basis, if they generally approve the leader’s actions and sense any kind of personal warmth on the leader’s part, they are indeed likely to feel that they do indeed have a direct, personal connection with the leader.

The importance of such connections should not be underestimated; they can be of considerable value both to the followers and to the leader. For an example we have only to recall the outpouring of grief on the part of millions of faithful Catholics from around the world at the death of Pope John Paul II. Some of the mourners had

indeed shaken the Pope’s hand or heard him say Mass during his frequent journeys; most of them had never been physically in his presence. Yet they clearly felt a kind of direct personal connection with him that mattered deeply to them; and the response he elicited from the faithful appears to have been important to the pope during his lifetime as well.

But no leader can have a direct, personal connection with large numbers of followers; this is possible only for those with whom he works most immediately. Occasional personal encounters with other followers can be meaningful to the leader, but they are rarely as important as they are for the follower. Usually these encounters stand as paradigmatic instances in the leader’s experience for the many hundreds or thousands of other connections that can never personally be made. These “relationships” cannot, by their very nature, be symmetrical. So the connection between the leader and her followers must be more abstract, detached, and impersonal than the term “relationship” can usefully be expected to describe. If the leader is truly concerned about the people for whom she is responsible, this connection should not be simply instrumental or coldly considered only in terms of the leader’s own advantage. But for better or for worse, it hardly qualifies as a “relationship.”

From this arises the following question: whether it is better to be loved than respected, or the reverse? If the context is such that one has to choose, it is better to be respected than loved. Wise leaders rely as much as possible on what they can control, not on what they cannot control, and one can more readily evoke respect than affection by deliberate acts of will. But the real answer is that a good leader should try to be both loved and respected. The bond of affection for a leader builds up reserves of loyalty that will prompt followers to give a leader the benefit of the doubt when mistakes are made, at least for a reasonable period of time. If this bond is lacking, respect alone will not carry the day in times of trouble, unless the leader is willing to use instruments of fear and intimidation that erode and undermine genuine respect and store up reserves of resentment and hatred for the longer term.

XVI. How Both Passion and Perspective Are Important to Leadership

In his thoughtful essay “Politics as a Vocation,” the political leader and political scientist Max Weber notes that anyone who holds power needs “three pre-eminent qualities” in order to “do justice to this power.” They are: “passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion.”³⁸ “Passion” in this context means having larger goals in mind, not just advancing your own personal self-interest. Yet the sense of proportion—what Weber later called “perspective”—is equally important. In fact, Weber

describes this as “the decisive psychological quality of the politician: his ability to let realities work on him with inner concentration and calmness. Hence his *distance* to things and men.”³⁹

Leaders do indeed need to care passionately about something, not just be passionate about holding power. Many of the leaders who become most revered, including Nelson Mandela and Vaclav Havel, are distinguished by their passionate commitment to a lofty goal. Unless we are committed to some purpose larger than ourselves, our work is doomed by what Weber calls “the curse of the creature’s worthlessness.”⁴⁰

But leaders also need some degree of detachment from situations, alternatives, and even from other people. This detachment is part of what I meant by “ruthlessness,” and one of the obstacles to describing this connection as a “relationship.” This is why followers often complain that leaders are not sufficiently “touchy-feely” for their tastes. As Weber goes on to say, these two types of qualities are not usually combined: “for the problem is simply how can warm passion and a cool sense of proportion be forged together in one and the same soul?”⁴¹

XVII. On the Distinctive Knowledge or Expertise That Is Useful to Leaders

Bemused colleagues in political philosophy wondered why I would have left the sunlit uplands of scholarship to descend into Plato’s Cave, as president of my alma mater. Why would I spend my days helping people sort through shadowy reflections of reality rather than directly contemplating the Forms of truth?

Even if one accepts the pertinence here of Plato’s image in *The Republic*, when they return to the Cave the philosopher-guardians need to adapt the knowledge they have gained through the contemplation of the Forms during their time outside, in order to be effective leaders for those imprisoned there.⁴² Plato fails to make clear exactly what the guardians do when they go back down into the Cave; if there is to be any point in their returning or any hope for those imprisoned in the Cave, they cannot simply sit on the benches and go with the flow. In some fashion, they must apply the lessons they have learned outside, thus demonstrating a kind of expertise that is designed to improve the lot of those they are supposed to rule. Otherwise, the fable has no relevance to leadership, only to improving the souls of the philosopher-guardians.

In real-world situations, where no knowledge provides the certain patterns offered by the Forms and the institutions one leads are rarely Cave-like, a version of this same truth applies. Leadership requires as much mental acuity as scholarship, but of a different kind; the issues one deals with are anything but shadowy. Successful leadership, like scholarship, involves a degree of expertise in carrying out the tasks of leadership that helps explain why others fol-

low. That point has gotten somewhat lost in modern studies of leadership, which seem troubled by the notion that the leader might have some special kind of knowledge or perspective.

Plato used the image of the navigator to describe the leader; this comes to mind when we consider the analogy of the admiral of a flotilla.⁴³ Burns argues that this image led to “a blind alley in the history of political thought,” since it implied that the navigator has knowledge that the members of the crew do not share. He wants to capture a more appropriately modern sense of the authority of leaders, “emphasizing the influence of followers on leaders.”⁴⁴ Yet some kind of knowledge or skill is involved in effective leadership, and it is not fully explained by the interactions between leaders and followers. This knowledge is not technical or specialized, but experiential, cumulative, broad—a way of looking at the world that followers don’t routinely share.

Those who have studied expertise emphasize that it differs markedly from one domain of human activity to another. Expertise rests heavily on experience, not just training. As a result, “the difference between experts and less skilled subjects is not merely a matter of the amount and complexity of the accumulated knowledge; it also reflects qualitative differences in the organization of knowledge and its representation,” so that the relevant knowledge is “encoded” in ways that “allow rapid and reliable retrieval whenever stored information is relevant.” This “encoding” of experience and the ordering of it to make it easily available at appropriate times is central to the particular expertise that a good leader comes to possess.⁴⁵

Most leaders in modern democracies or universities are, in the spirit of Aristotle’s *Politics*, “ruling and being ruled in turn.” Aristotle, unlike Plato, did not believe that those who have the expertise that distinguishes the leader should do all the work of governance, while others simply do what they do best, whether it is making shoes or writing books.⁴⁶ Leaders are also subject to ordinary human frailties and to the peculiar pitfalls of power. There are clear advantages to a system in which everyone has opportunities to participate, both in providing effective constraints on the misbehavior of leaders and in being involved in making the laws that govern you. However, to be successful at the “ruling” part, the leader must develop a perspective that is different from the perspective of the citizen or faculty member. The mind-set and stock of skills that are relevant to leadership are not exactly those that the same person may display as a follower. There is a division of labor—which is one of the reasons successful organizations need leaders.

XVIII. How the Experience of Holding Power Affects the Leader

What does it do to a person, over time, to hold significant amounts of power? “Power tends to corrupt,” says Lord

Acton. Yet corruption is hardly inevitable. Leaders will be better prepared to resist the corrupting effects of holding power if they have clear values and effective moral compasses. As James David Barber puts it, “Power may corrupt—or ennoble or frighten or inspire or distract a man. The result depends on his propensity for, his vulnerability to, particular kinds of corruption or cleansing—in short, on his character. . . . Political power is like nuclear energy: available to create deserts or make them bloom.”⁴⁷

Nonetheless, exercising power over other people undoubtedly has its effects. Even for the leader who does not covet power as such, having power differs from not having it. And it is easy to see why people can become addicted to it.⁴⁸ It is exhilarating for a leader to discover that she can actually make things happen—direct the solution of knotty problems or help create or sustain a worthwhile institution. A leader often comes to relish the experience of determining a course of action and then having large numbers of people head in that direction just because she says so.

The trappings of power are seductive too: the deference leaders receive from other people on a routine basis—not everyone, to be sure, but enough so that the leader can easily assume that deference is her due; the powerful symbolic impact of a chain of office, lofty titles, ceremonies in which the leader represents a highly respected institution and some of that standing and respect is transferred to her personally. Many people have clear incentives to flatter leaders; and especially when a leader is successful, it can become hard to distinguish flattery from truth. Having people ready to do your bidding, implementing decisions you have made—there’s no doubt that this is heady stuff.

The major pitfall in holding power is lucidly identified by Weber as “vanity.”⁴⁹ All those people are flattering you, admiring you, deferring to you, and doing what you say. But Weber warns that if you fall prey to vanity, you lose your objectivity and sense of proportion, so that holding power “becomes purely personal self-intoxication.” Finding a way to maintain what Weber calls “distance towards one’s self” is one of the most important, and most difficult, challenges leaders face. On this same theme, Machiavelli notes that would-be flatterers are common, and that it is very easy for leaders to be taken in by them. “Men are so happily absorbed in their own affairs and indulge in such self-deception that it is difficult for them not to fall victim to this plague.”⁵⁰

One way to protect against flattery and maintain that crucial “distance towards oneself” is to realize that a good part of leadership is playing a role and to retain some degree of separation between public and private personas. Yet the leader must also recognize that she *is* the leader, not just an actor playing a part. She must believe that, whatever her personal faults and deficiencies, she is just as

capable of doing the job as anybody else, and more so than most.

But the leader should never make the mistake of thinking that she is therefore superior to other people on every dimension, or treat them as instruments, unworthy of her respect. Walking the fine line between the essential self-confidence that makes it possible to be comfortable with power and the arrogance or pomposity that occludes one’s vision and undermines effective leadership is among the most difficult challenges leaders face. This is yet another instance where keeping your balance is crucial to success. It is also easy to assume that the work one does as a leader should last “in perpetuity” and to be upset when successors with different purposes or characteristics make changes, and different times bring different outcomes. Some of a leader’s finest work may indeed make a durable difference to the institution and build a foundation that provides strength for a long time; but the effects of even the best leadership are often transient. One must resist the temptation to assume that one’s success as a leader will best be measured by how long a specific solution one has crafted endures unchanged.

XIX. On the Negative Aspects of Leadership

Being a leader also has significant drawbacks as a way of life. The job is omnivorous—the leader could always be doing something that would advance the interests of the organization she is trying to serve. Carving out time for sustained reflection, refreshment, recreation, is very difficult, even though it is essential for sanity.

A leader must avoid developing close personal relationships with the people who work with her and for her. She can be rightly accused of favoritism and is also in danger of losing her objectivity—what Weber called “detachment”—in managing those people. Yet if the leader has chosen wisely, many of these people would in other contexts be her friends. Having power threatens to destroy what one might call “the authenticity of relationships,” even with followers to whom one is personally close, by introducing new factors that come specifically from power holding on top of more familiar factors that make any human relationships complex. This is hard for many leaders to accept.⁵¹

A leader cannot often risk being intellectually playful, making too many sardonic comments that come back to haunt her, or floating trial balloons in trying out ideas; inevitably, someone somewhere down the line will hear about it, take the idea as the leader’s decision, and start implementing it. The leader is always on duty, always on show, and anything she does is inescapably interpreted not as a private action, but as representing the organization itself.

XX. How Leaders Should Deal with Temptations That Often Accompany Power

Having power also opens up significant moral pitfalls. Just to give one kind of example, Max Weber identifies “a feeling of responsibility,” along with passion and perspective, as crucial to good leadership. One of the less inspiring aspects of today’s corporate leadership is the tendency for CEOs to use the “who, me?” defense when their corporations are caught in egregiously immoral behavior, false accounting, or defrauding stockholders.

Floyd Norris in the *New York Times* called this “the dummy defense,” of the CEO “who remembers doing virtually nothing to earn his millions.”⁵² Walter Forbes of CUC International was the example he had in mind. A few weeks later, Bernie Ebbers of WorldCom told the jury in his trial: “I don’t know about technology, and I don’t know about finance and accounting.”⁵³ In both instances, these leaders pled total ignorance of such details, claiming that they were involved with more important things, like relations with customers or the company strategy-vision. They blamed their chief financial officers, who testified about how they had explained what they were doing to the leader, who understood perfectly and told them to do it.

In thinking about who should take responsibility for corporate fraud that costs millions to ordinary stockholders or, in a very different vein, outrages such as the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, it does seem puzzling that apparently it is only the little guys who ever do anything wrong these days. As Norris put it, “if bosses walk while their subordinates go to jail, it will confirm the wisdom expressed by . . . the not-so-honest boss in ‘The Producers’ . . . it’s good to be the king.” Fortunately, at least some juries seem disinclined to accept this defense.

Nothing can so undermine the legitimacy—and therefore, in the long run, the effectiveness—of any political structure, including a major corporation, as surely as having the head person disclaim all responsibility for something so glaring. The British parliamentary system, in which ministers take responsibility, even when they have in fact known nothing about the action in question, looks better and better these days.⁵⁴

In our society, in many contexts, a leader’s worth is routinely measured by how her compensation compares with that of leaders in similar jobs. In such contexts, it is easy for a leader to succumb to greed. Within reasonable limits handsome compensation is no doubt appropriate for such jobs, but a leader (and those who set her compensation) should be wary of allowing large gaps to develop between her rewards and those of others whose labors are equally essential to the organization in less visible ways, including those in the “bottom ranks” of the hierarchy. Such glaring discrepancies threaten morale and, especially

in nonprofit organizations, can undermine respect for the leader on the part of her followers.

XXI. Exhortation to Think in New Ways about Leadership

In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf reflected on the increasingly somber world of the 1930s. She pondered the particular contributions that women—who then had opportunities for the first time to join the professions of law, business, and government—might make to solving the manifold problems that beset Europe. Woolf saw the involvement of women leaders as a positive step for the world, but she counseled the women who were invited to leadership to think carefully about what they were doing.

According to Woolf, women leaders should not just automatically accept the rules and practices that men have always followed, not go along unthinkingly with what we are told is required for exercising power. Women should use our fresh perspective, derived from centuries of being outsiders to all this, to think anew about where we are going, to step back and ponder the direction society is taking and decide whether we want power on those terms or instead will use our new-found power to shape our course in somewhat different directions.

As Woolf puts it, “Let us never cease from thinking—what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies, and why should we take part in them? What are these professions, and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men?”—her phrase for the set of people who have dominated positions of leadership for so long.⁵⁵

Whether you are female or male, you will be a better leader if you do sometimes ask questions such as those Woolf posed. Leaders are well advised to step back occasionally from what they are doing and think about how it might be done differently. It is worth asking, “Where is this path taking us, and is this destination the one we should be seeking? What are the temptations to which I am now subject because of the power that I hold, and how can I avoid them? What are some of the things that stand as ‘common wisdom’ in my organization, and how can we rethink them to the advantage of us all?”

A leader cannot be successful if she only asks such questions; she must also get on with the work, and she often has to play by the same rules that have structured power-holding for centuries. However, the experiences and distinctive values of an “outsider” can bring a valuable new perspective on power, and nothing brings a leader greater honor than the new policies and new courses of action she establishes. When these are soundly based and bear the mark of greatness, they make her revered and admired and make the lives of many people better.

The importance of asking questions of this kind is one of the most important lessons I learned, as a leader and from my vocation as a theorist, and I commend it to those who are preparing for lives of leadership themselves.

Notes

- 1 *The Prince* has been subject to multiple interpretations, elegantly summarized by Berlin 1971. We cannot be sure exactly what Machiavelli intended; but whatever his intention, and whatever problems a reader may find with some of his examples and precepts, enough of his counsel rings true that his little book has been read by leaders across the centuries.
- 2 “Letter from Niccolo Machiavelli to the Magnificent Lorenzo de’ Medici,” in Machiavelli 1961, 2. In addition to this translation by George Bull, to which I refer in citing passages throughout, I have also consulted several other translations, notably that of Luigi Ricci.
- 3 Bennis and Nanus 1985, 4–5: “Multiple interpretations of leadership exist, each providing a sliver of insight but each remaining an incomplete and wholly inadequate explanation. Most of these definitions don’t agree with each other, and many of them would seem quite remote to the leaders whose skills are being dissected.”
- 4 In this context, it is helpful to keep in mind the distinction drawn by Heifetz 1994 between leadership with and without authority; see especially 49–50, 69–70, and 183–87. Heifetz argues that although authority provides a platform for leadership it can also stand as a “key impediment” because it brings constraints as well as resources; he stresses the importance of leadership by persons who have no official authority, as well. On authority more generally, see Bass 1981, ch. 14; this volume provides comprehensive overviews of many topics relevant to the study of leadership and provides a number of useful references.
- 5 Aristotle 1958, 1 (*Politics* 1252a).
- 6 Keohane 1994.
- 7 This point (and much else) I owe to conversations with James G. March.
- 8 Useem 1998, 263: “Examining what others have done when businesses, lives, even the fate of nations are on the line . . . teaches us to think more strategically and act more decisively. By watching those who lead the way—as well as those who go astray—we can see what works and what fails, what hastens our cause or subverts our purpose.”
- 9 Among the first to discredit this theory, advanced most visibly by Thomas Carlyle, was Herbert Spencer in *The Study of Sociology* (1873). He associated such a concept with the savage mind and stressed the social factors and antecedents that are crucial in the development of leadership. “And if you wish to understand these phenomena of social evolution, you will not do it though you should read yourself blind over the biographies of all the great rulers on record, down to Frederick the Greedy and Napoleon the Treacherous.” Spencer’s account is excerpted in Kellerman 1986, 10–15.
- 10 Samuels 2003, 6. In his 1890 address entitled “Leaders of men,” Woodrow Wilson says: “In the midst of it all stands the leader, gathering, as best he can, the thoughts that are completed, that are perceived, that have told upon the common mind; judging also of the work that is now at length ready to be completed, reckoning the gathered gain . . .” Included in Kellerman 1986, 437.
- 11 *The Prince*, XXII, 73.
- 12 Neustadt 1980, 4, 32.
- 13 Kennedy 1986, 87.
- 14 Pfeffer 1992, 78, hypothesizes that given their very different traits and skills, if Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan had “been able to exchange decades,” neither would have been a notably successful politician.
- 15 On the misleading implications of what psychologists call “the fundamental attribution error”—focusing on personal traits rather than situational factors in explaining human behavior—Pfeffer 1992, 72–75, notes that some of the traits we associate with being powerful, such as being articulate, poised or self-confident, may “result from the experience of being in power,” rather than explain why one became powerful.
- 16 Montaigne 1958 puts this point memorably: “In every government there are necessary offices which are not only abject but also vicious. Vices find their place in it and are employed for sewing our society together, as are poisons for the preservation of our health. If they become excusable, inasmuch as we need them and the common necessity effaces their true quality, we must still let this part be played by the more vigorous and less fearful citizens, who sacrifice their honor and their conscience . . . for the good of their country.” Book 3, “Of the useful and the honorable,” 600.
- 17 Walzer 1973, 164. Walzer notes that this kind of problem can also occur in private life, but that it is “posed most dramatically in politics” (p. 174). His essay includes probing analyses of the three different positions taken on this issue by Machiavelli, Max Weber, and Albert Camus.
- 18 Williams 1981. See also, in the same volume, “Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence,” 41–42.

- 19 *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 6, especially sections 4, 7, 11–13; Terence Irwin translates *phronesis* as “intelligence.” H. Rackham chooses “prudence.”
- 20 Montaigne’s *Essays* can be consulted with profit for examples of the use of this faculty by someone who prized judgment highly, even though he seldom wrote about it directly. “Judgment holds in me a magisterial seat,” he said; “at least it carefully tries to.” Book III, “*Of experience*” (Montaigne 1958, 823).
- 21 Hobbes 1963, 98, 101–3.
- 22 Hannah Arendt did not live to write the final part of *The Life of the Mind*, which was to deal with “judging.” “*Postscriptum to Thinking*,” from *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1; included in Arendt 1982, 4. Arendt (66) noted the oddity of deriving “the mental phenomenon of Judgment” from “the sense of taste and not from the more objective senses, especially the most objective of them, the sense of sight.”
- 23 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 13, 43–46, 54–56, 61–63. Arendt (69–72) went on to explore Kant’s references to “common sense” in connection with judgment, as “a Kind of *Sensus Communis*” that he regarded as “an extra sense—like an extra mental capacity . . . that fits us into a Community.” Both Kant and Arendt wrestled with the question whether judgment is more properly the virtue of the spectator rather than the actor.
- 25 Kahneman 2003, 1450, describes this kind of intuition, which he calls “System 1” to distinguish it from “System 2” rationality in terms of “accessibility.” Intuitive thoughts “come to mind spontaneously, like precepts” (1451–2). Herbert Simon 1987 offers a thought-provoking account of “judgmental and intuitive processes,” or the “non-rational and the irrational components of managerial decision-making and judgment” (57).
- 26 Defining “judgment” in this way differs from accounts, including those explored by March 1994, chap. 6, that concentrate on developing a “process” for arriving at decisions. Good processes can be helpful, but they are rarely of much use unless those who employ them also use their judgment. March argues also for the importance of developing “skill at understanding the environment and responding to it,” and defines these skills a “learnable and vital to intelligent action” (p. 253). He notes that some successful leaders, nonetheless, are “buffered from attention to the environment by a combination of pigheadedness and luck.” On judgment in decision making, see also Lord 2003, chap. 23.
- 27 Williams 1981; in the situations he analyzes (pp. 30–32), “the ‘luck’ of the agents relates those elements which are essential to the outcome but lie outside their control.” He goes on to ask: if someone “deliberates well, and things go wrong . . . what is the consciousness that he was ‘justified’ supposed to do for the disposition of his undoubted regret about how things actually turned out?”
- 28 Bennis and Nanus (1985) identify peripheral vision—along with foresight, hindsight, a world view, depth perception and “a process of revision”—as the “many dimensions of vision” needed by successful leaders (p. 102).
- 29 Personal communication, 1994.
- 30 Neustadt 1980, 113; Neustadt especially admires Franklin D. Roosevelt for his shrewd approach to information gathering, which he regards as one of the keys to Roosevelt’s success.
- 31 *The Prince*, XXIII, 74–75.
- 32 Bennis and Nanus 1985, 96: successful leaders “are *great askers*, and they do pay attention.”
- 33 *The Prince*, XVIII, 55.
- 34 Neustadt 1980 (48): a leader “need not be concerned with every flaw in his performance day by day, but he has every reason for concern with the residual impressions of tenacity and skill accumulating in the minds” of those he must lead.
- 35 Simon 1946, 53. A similar problem arises with the counsel to “strike a golden mean” between two types of more extreme behavior. Even Aristotle, who is generally fond of this precept, notes at the outset of book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that in many situations, “a person knowing this truth will be no wiser than before.” Aristotle 1956, 325.
- 36 Pfeffer 1992, 227: “Actions that are well-timed may succeed, while the same actions, undertaken at a less opportune moment, may have no chance of success.” He devotes an entire chapter to issues of timing in using power.
- 37 Burns 1978, chap. 1; see also Bass, chap. 16, on the “interdependence of leaders and followers.”
- 38 Weber 1958, 115.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 42 *Republic* VII, 514a–520e.
- 43 *Republic* VI, 488b–489a.
- 44 Burns 1978, 23–25.
- 45 Ericsson 1999, 299.
- 46 It is true that Aristotle allows for the rare possibility that one or a few persons may be “so pre-eminently superior in goodness that there can be no comparison between the goodness and political capacity which he shows . . . and what is shown by the rest.” In most cases, however, human beings are more nearly equal in such goodness and capacity, and in a well-ordered polity, justice requires a sharing of all in governance. *Politics* 1284a–b.

- 47 Barber 1977, 17.
- 48 No less an authority than Richard Nixon said, in describing power: "There are few satisfactions to match it for those who care about such things. But it is not happiness. Those who seek happiness will not acquire power and would not use it well if they did acquire it." *Leaders*, 324, as quoted by Pfeffer 1992, 13.
- 49 Weber 1958, 116.
- 50 *The Prince*, XXIII, 74.
- 51 Heifetz 1994, 250, notes that one reason it's lonely at the top is "because those who lead take responsibility for the holding environment of the enterprise. They themselves are not expected to be held." For the point about "destroying the authenticity of relationships," I am indebted to James G. March.
- 52 *New York Times*, January 7, 2005.
- 53 *New York Times*, March 1, 2005.
- 54 Kellerman 2004 writes to combat the tendency to use "leadership" as a positive rather than a neutral descriptor; in that view, someone who holds authority but does not behave appropriately does not deserve to be called a "leader" at all. She identifies seven types of "bad leaders": those who are incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular and evil, and provides examples in each case.
- 55 Woolf, 1966 [1938], 63.

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