

Leader more feared than loved: evaluating chapter 17

[Business](#), [Leadership](#)



A leader is someone who is followed by others. All managers are not leaders, but good leaders can be good managers. Those who are not trusted or respected by their employees may fail when attempting to institute something new. They can tell everyone to do something, and even show them how, but the employees do not embrace the new program and it may not succeed. Employees, on the other hand, will embrace a new program (even if they don't particularly like it) simply because they trust the manager's judgment and vision.

We have heard about military leaders who led their troops into dangerous, near-certain death situations. On the other hand, we heard about soldiers in Vietnam who assassinated officers rather than obey them. Why would soldiers in the first example follow the officer into battle knowing they would probably be killed, while those in the second case not only refused to follow, but actually went so far as to kill the officer? Was it because of the cause or because of the officer?

Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* during the Renaissance in sixteenth-century Florence, Italy. It was one of the first texts on leadership. Machiavelli was a government official during a period of warfare and political intrigue between city-states vying for hegemony, and he had a cynical view of human nature, believing that people were motivated by very narrow self-interest.

Most highlighted in the book is Machiavelli's dictum, found in Chapter 17, which advised the leader or prince that it was better to be feared than to be loved by the governed because love is a fickle emotion, whereas fear is constant. In other words, survival is a basic human instinct that dominates

other emotions. Machiavelli also suggested that a leader should engage in lies or deceptions for the good of society, as long as he appears to be virtuous to the people.

The leader should be fair yet tough, harshly punishing disloyal subjects to discourage others from engaging in treason. Machiavelli believed that the aristocrats close in stature to the prince posed the greatest threat to his welfare and that the prince had to use cunning and intrigue to keep them off balance. Thus, he warned the leader not to trust his peers. He believed that an effective leader forms alliances of convenience with some enemies to keep more powerful enemies off balance.

Summarizing Chapter 17

At the beginning of Chapter 17 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli purports that there is no doubt that the leader must have compassion. Similar to being generous, compassion is usually admired by everyone. However, Machiavelli warned that a prince must be careful that he does not show compassion indiscriminately. If a prince is too compassionate, and does not adequately punish disloyal subjects, he creates an atmosphere of disorder, since his subjects take the liberty to do what they please—even to the extremes of murder and theft. With this, Machiavelli envisioned that these crimes might harm the entire community, whereas executions harm only the individuals who commit crimes.

Thus, Machiavelli suggested that some degree of cruelty is necessary to maintain order in a particular community. However, the prince must heed the warning of being judicious in terms of his decisions with regards to

cruelty; it should be coupled with critical judgement, humanity and prudence.

At this point, Machiavelli reflected on whether is it better off being feared or being loved. Ideally, a prince should be both loved and feared, but this condition is nearly perfect and difficult to attain. So Machiavelli deemed, when forced to make a choice, it is much better to be feared than loved. This is because men, by nature, are “ ungrateful, fickle, dissembling, anxious to flee danger, and covetous of gain.” This decision is most applicable during times of danger or emergencies, it is easier to break a bond of love when the situation arises, but the fear of punishment is always effective, regardless of the situation.

Yet, Machiavelli reminded that when choosing to generate fear, a prince must be wary to avoid inducing hatred. This is for the reason that the leader must make sure that every move he makes are properly justified and agreeable to majority of his people. Most importantly, leaders should not abuse his authority by taking the property of his subjects or take their women, since these actions are most likely to breed hatred. If a prince must confiscate property, he must make sure he has a convincing reason. With one’s army, however, there is no such thing as too much cruelty. Keeping an army disciplined and united requires cruelty, even inhuman cruelty.

In a nutshell, Chapter 17 of The Prince argues that it is better for a prince to be severe when punishing people rather than merciful because severity through death sentences affects only a few, but it discourages crimes which affects many people. Moreover, Machiavelli ultimately recommended that it

is better to be feared than to be loved. But Machiavelli warned of the prince should avoid being hated, which he can easily accomplish by not taking away the property of his subjects: " people more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their inheritance."

Man of No Virtue

" The man of virtú has no virtue." This statement does adequately describe one of Machiavelli's position in The Prince. Machiavelli can be seen as a supporter of Remigio and Dante, rather than Aristotle. Throughout his treatise, Machiavelli most definitely strives to achieve peace, but he feels that virtue is not necessary. Rather, Machiavelli suggests that peace should be the sole legitimizing factor of a ruler. A good ruler should simply rule by whatever means necessary to achieve peace. A good ruler ignores virtue and must be practical, rather than impractical. The practical ruler is tightfisted, justly cruel, feared and respected, dependent on subjectloyalty, and able to use advisers as tools.

First and foremost, what is the difference between virtú and virtue? A person who is said to possess virtue is commonly seen as a person who is of high moral excellence and upright goodness. Common virtues include prudence, courage, and practicality. Virtues are most often found in people who are seen as good. Virtú, while extremely similar to virtue, is not quite the same thing in terms of Machiavelli's usage of the word. On pages 103 and 104 in Appendix B of The Prince, virtú is defined. It is defined as having various senses, which include, " ability, skill, energy, determination, strength, spiritedness, courage, or prowess." The common reader might

interpret all of these senses as differing aspects of virtue. Also, a good ruler is commonly perceived as having virtue or even virtú. However, Machiavelli had something a little different in mind.

Normally, the term virtú is mostly frequently used synonymously with the term virtue. Machiavelli uses the term a little differently. On page 104, it states that, “Machiavelli’s use of the word has overtones of ‘ruthlessness,’ which is not a characteristic of a good man.” Of course, the word which is being described is virtú. On the same page of Appendix B, virtú is properly defined in Machiavellian terms. It states, “Virtú, then, in this usual sense (or set of senses) denotes qualities that may have been combined with ‘villainy...’” Therefore, Machiavelli is generally arguing that the man of villainy and ruthlessness has no moral excellence and upright goodness. Since good leaders possess virtú, good leaders must thereby be villainous and even nefarious. This can be seen throughout the whole of *The Prince*.

Throughout *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that in order to be an excellent ruler, one must possess virtú. Virtue is definitely not necessary under a Machiavellian form of rule. According to Machiavelli, a good ruler is one who is in control and will do whatever is necessary to be successful. The most notable examples can be found in chapters fifteen through twenty-three.

In chapter 15 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli gives his first argument as to why rulers should be ruthless. On page 55, Machiavelli states, “Yet one should not be troubled about becoming notorious for those vices without which it is difficult to preserve one’s power...” On the same page, Machiavelli goes on to write, “...doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one’s ruin,

whereas doing other things that seem vicious may strengthen one's position and cause one to flourish." Essentially, Machiavelli is saying that a superb ruler should not worry about possessing virtue. A proper ruler should have no problem with making friends with vice, so long as in doing so the ruler is being practical and successful. After all, there is no reason to be ruthless without practicality. The only reason for a lack of practicality would be sheer and blatant ignorance.

In chapter sixteen of *The Prince*, Machiavelli goes on to write that a good ruler should not be overly generous. On page 57, Machiavelli states that the charitable ruler will rule while, "...being despised and hated; and generosity will lead to both." This emphasizes the fact that a tight-fisted ruler will be more popular, and thereby, the better ruler. A ruler who is parsimonious will have money when it is necessary. Machiavelli stresses this on page 56. Rulers who do not waste their money on building projects, artistic patronage, or friendly gifts, will have plenty of money when it is needed, say when a rival state rises up to attack. A ruler who is tight-fisted also would not need to tax his subjects as much as a generous ruler. A generous ruler would need constant high taxes due to his lavish expenditure or open-handedness. Of course, generosity is a virtue; and in order to possess virtue, and hence, a good ruler, generosity must be left in the dirt. Therefore, the man who is tight-fisted has no virtue.

Machiavelli's next argument as to why the ruler of virtue can have no virtue comes in the next chapter, that is, chapter seventeen. When comparing the cruel and feared ruler to the merciful and loved ruler, the cruel and feared

ruler is the exceedingly better ruler. After all, Machiavelli states on page 59, "...it is much safer to be feared than loved." Cruelty is needed to maintain order. If a ruler is cruel to simply those who disobey the law, the lawbreakers alone will suffer. Hence, the people under the ruler will learn not to break the law, due to fear of punishment. Therefore, peaceful order will surely ensue. However, if he is excessively kind and lets public order break down, everyone suffers from the increase in the excess of subsequent robbery, murder, rape, etc. Cruelty is most definitely not a virtue; so therefore, Machiavelli agrees again that the man of virtú lacks any virtue.

Next, on page 64 of chapter nineteen, Machiavelli argues that a ruler becomes despised when he acquires the reputation of being, "...inconstant, frivolous, effeminate, pusillanimous and irresolute: a ruler must avoid contempt as if it were a reef." In order for a ruler to stay in the people's favor, he must become none of these. Rather, a good ruler would constantly try to be the opposite of these. Thus, a good ruler must be usual and accepted, determined and motivated, masculine and rugged, dauntless and courageous, and resolute and unequivocal.

If these qualities are necessary for the best possible ruler, that ruler should have no problem in trying to attain and maintain these qualities. Again, the ruler should not bother with virtue. Rather, he or she should attempt whatever in their power is necessary to achieve and preserve these qualities. Also, although some people may view these qualities as virtuous, they are still to be attained through whatever means necessary. This is a

quality of a man of virtú. Virtue must be placed aside while attempting to gain these qualities.

Following this argument comes one which involves the importance of a fortress. On page 76, Machiavelli states, "...I criticize anyone who relies upon fortresses, and does not worry about incurring the hatred of the people." Despite the great importance of military power, a ruler who bases his rule on building fortresses to intimidate and threaten his subjects cannot rule securely. The subjects would simply not tolerate it. More than likely, they would look for assistance elsewhere, such as a foreign power, and overthrow the ruler. Therefore, the single best fortress that a ruler can have is the loyalty of his or her subjects.

Without subject loyalty a ruler is useless. In order to maintain subject loyalty, a ruler must be good. In order to be a good ruler he or she must be feared by the subjects, as well as be cruel and tight-fisted. Again, this emphasizes the fact that the best possible ruler can possess no virtue.

A final argument is brought forth in chapters twenty-two and twenty-three. On page 80, Machiavelli states, "The choosing of ministers is a very important matter for a ruler: whether or not they are good depends on whether he is shrewd or not." A prince needs able advisers. If the ruler chooses wise advisers, the subjects of the ruler will take him or her to be wise as well. Also, just like the subjects of the rulers, advisers should also be loyal and fearful of the ruler. The ruler must act the same way towards his advisers as he or she does to the subjects. This will show the people that they are no different from the advisers. No jealousy would ensue and no

rights would be violated. Although, there was no specific rule regarding rights at the time, the subjects would no doubt at least feel inferior. Thus, rule would be maintained by *virtú* and not by virtue, as was previously stated, because cruelty is needed to maintain peace.

Machiavelli goes on in chapter twenty-three to describe more specifically how a ruler is to properly use his or her advisors. After a ruler has taken advice from the advisor, he must make up his own mind about policy decisions. A good ruler should not accept unsolicited advice, and he or she should not let the advisers talk the ruler into constantly changing his mind. This would show everyone that the ruler possesses poor qualities of a ruler. The ruler must rule, not the advisors. Again, the ruler must do this by whatever means necessary. Thus, *virtú* is again favored above virtue.

Ultimately, in Machiavellian terms, the man of *virtú* most definitely does not possess virtue. The man of *virtú*, or the good ruler, must be cruel, feared, tightfisted, reliant on subject allegiance, and able to use advisors as tools. The man of virtue would never be any of these. Therefore, the man of virtue would not make a good ruler. Therefore, Machiavelli definitely does not agree with Aristotle in his opinion that virtue can legitimize a ruler. Rather, Machiavelli agrees with Remigio and Dante, in that peace can be substituted for virtue. So long as peace is achieved, a ruler is successful and good. Peace, through whatever means necessary, is solely legitimizing.

Conclusion

Some leaders nowadays are still taking their cues from Machiavelli's proposition in Chapter 17 of *The Prince*, believe that fear is more reliable

than love as a means of influencing people. It is true that if someone hates and fears you, his or her behavior may be quite predictable. If you have the allies to back up your threats, it may not be necessary for you to get along with the people you work with. But power in public bureaucracy is often a temporary thing, like powerlessness. Yesterday's powerless subordinate may be tomorrow's powerful boss.

Machiavelli proposed that it is better to be more feared than loved. You can lead by the force of high moral example. History and experience have proven that it could be done. But it's risky, because people are fickle, and they will abandon you at the first sign of failure. Fear is much more reliable, and lasts longer. Once you show that you are capable of dealing out terrible punishment to your enemies, your power will be far greater.

In closer analysis, Machiavelli's proposition is somewhat more troublesome to apply in today's hierarchy. At present, it is unusual for any leader to have authority over every aspect of his or her job or status. For example, a supervisor might need the help of the personnel office, if he wants to hire someone. You need the help of the budget staff if you must obtain certain resources and need to move money from one cost center to another. Organizations operate informally, as well as through a formal hierarchy. In order to get things done, you must sometimes exchange favors and information.

Thus, the effectiveness of a leader in any organization will be a direct reflection of his or her ability to get along with people. You will find it easier to get your work done if people want to help you because they like you or

even because they feel sorry for you. If you are feared or hated, you may get cooperation when people have no choice, but the minute you turn your back, your colleagues will find a thousand ways to undermine your attitude.

Working in organizations or leading a community involves a series of exchanges rather than power relationships. Like the rest of society, organizations are more complex in the twenty-first century. As organizations change, downsize, and modernize, complexity does not decrease because organizations increase their use of advanced technology and knowledge. Machiavelli's proposal that leaders should better be "feared than loved" would be definitely inappropriate and dangerous, if applied in our time. Just think about the people you step on as you climb up the career ladder might very well see you again on your way down the ladder. Effective leaders should take the long term perspective in considering their strategies.

Aggressive leadership does not require you to disregard the feelings of subordinates or co-workers. Leaders who are committed to the long term perspective usually become quite skilled at influencing people and at stroking key individuals within the organization. Thus, as Machiavelli's proposition might have some good points, it could not be well applicable, if we consider the fast-changing times that, more often than not, frown upon leaders who lash out fear on their people.

Works Cited

Machiavelli, N. *The Prince*. (Anthony Grafton, Introduction; George Bull, trans.). London: Penguin Classics, 1999.