Do personality disorders compromise leadership?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the behavior of leaders in the political and corporate sector and concludes that a modicum of personality disorder is a prerequisite to success. Narcissism and lack of empathy often preclude effective leadership, as many examples of autocratic and immoral leaders demonstrate. But despite their apparent sociopathy, great leaders overcome their personality defects by invoking their passion, courage, and patience. Resilience, adaptability, and agility are additional leadership virtues. Good leaders engage their followers, who propel them forward towards their vision and the realization of their mission.

Introduction

Personality disorders often preclude effective leadership, as many examples of autocratic and immoral leaders demonstrate. The leadership literature posits that narcissism, paranoia, Machiavellian behavior, and other antisocial personality disorders are leadership aberrations.

Although personality disorders may preclude effective leadership, many good leaders transcend this paradigm. Great leaders overcome their personality defects by invoking passion, courage, patience, and the collaboration of followers.

This paper reviews current theories of leadership and proposes a model that explains why leaders succeed and fail.

Historical citations

The apology for leadership personality aberrations dates back at least to Socrates and his endorsement of the noble lie as an important leadership strategy. And his stance is echoed by 15th Century statesman Niccolò Machiavelli. In his magnum opus *The Prince*, he advises his client, Cesare Borgia, to use power as a tool, noting that the cultivation of fear is more important for leaders than the cultivation of love[1]. Conquer by force, he tells him. Commit all your crimes against the people at the start of the regime. Be both a lion – strong and ruthless – and a fox – sly and duplicitous.

Many toxic leaders do succumb to personality disorders[2]. Yet the literature on personality disorders assumes that disorders like narcissism are liabilities for a leader. The popular personality instruments like MBTI, the Enneagram and the Leadership Circle have little correlation with leadership behavior. And they ignore or underemphasize the importance of power. The absence of power renders a leader impotent, but too much power indeed may corrupt the leader. Political scientist James MacGregor Burns asks "Can we subdue the voracious, crafty and inescapable beast of power[3]?"

Toxic leaders often act from misguided values and culture, as described by Philip Zimbardo's Lucifer effect[4]. Zimbardo explains the behavior of participants in the infamous 2003 Abu Ghraib incident by not only their disposition, but also the situation and the system in which they belonged. Other toxic leaders simply exhibit akrasia, weakness of will. Or they may have isolated themselves from reality. Or they may have developed delusions about their omniscience, omnipotence, or invulnerability.

The role of followers and the community

Effective leaders need to build a community. Yet followers often resist. Psychologist Wilfred Bion's work at Tavistock notes that the work agenda of the organization is often subverted by the behavior of the followers[5]. Leaders need to be sensitive to several conditions that may inhibit or compromise their attempts to achieve community. To begin with, hidden agendas may exist that detract from the community's overt agenda. According to Bion, every group has both an overt agenda— the task that needs to be carried out—and a hidden agenda that exists at a deeper, latent level. These hidden agendas conspire to create a basic assumption group (BAG). The work group seeks to complete one or more

explicit tasks. In contrast, the BAG focuses inwardly on the members' wishes, fears, and fantasies. Bion identifies these four distinct BAGs:

Dependency. This group's hidden agenda is to derive security and protection from the leader. The group may behave with stupidity and ineptness in the hope that the leader will deliver them from their plight. If the leader fails (as he or she inevitably must), the group becomes hostile and deposes the leader.

Fight or Flight. The hidden agenda of this group is to survive by either fighting or fleeing from the task. Leaders of groups concerned with flight usually minimize the importance of the task.

Pairing. For individuals in this BAG, the hidden agenda is to bond together to provide intellectual or emotional support to one another. The group fantasizes that a savior will be born to help the group complete its task.

Oneness. In this hidden agenda, the members of the group seek union with a powerful external force or cause outside the group as a path to survival.

Since a group never exhausts its basic assumption, leaders may choose consciously to use the primal forces that generate the assumption. Most churches, for example, build upon the dependency assumption. Military and business organizations often motivate their members via the fight assumption.

A second obstacle to building a community may arise from the temptation for members of the community to act in their own self-interest. Leaders then face the challenge reconciling such self-interest with the greater needs of the community. Economist Adam Smith introduced the notion that an individual who tends only to his own gain will also promote the public interest[6]. He believed that they would be led, as if by an invisible hand, to achieve the best good for all. But in many situations this appears not to be the case, for individuals reaching rational decisions based on self-interest unwittingly conspire to damage the welfare of the system.

The historic depredation of the village commons reflects this seductive dynamic. The commons in the 18th century was a pasture open for grazing to all the livestock owned by the members of the village. The sharing system worked for centuries, because the pasture could support as many sheep as the villagers owned. But eventually a villager asks himself, "Why not add one more sheep to my herd?" He reasons that he will receive all the benefit, while the village as a whole must share the consequences of overgrazing. Each villager reasons similarly and thus commits to a strategy that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. "Ruin is the destination towards which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all[7]."

For any leader, this illustrates the infamous "free rider" quandary—what to do, for example, with the passenger who rides the subway without paying, on the grounds that one more free ride will not make a difference. Or the individual who adds a little more pollution to the atmosphere, or continues to fish for endangered species, or picks the fragile wildflower along the alpine trail. Free riders take all the benefit but provide nothing in return.

In contemporary game theory, the tragedy of the commons appears as the Prisoner's Dilemma, first formulated in 1950 by consultant Albert Tucker[8]. Guards isolate two partners in crime, offering each reduced sentences if they will turn state's evidence and implicate their partner. If both inform, they each serve two years. If neither informs, they each serve one year. If only one informs, the guards set him free, while his partner gets a three-year sentence. Rational self-interest supports a strategy of "inform", for the sentence will be either two years or freedom; failure to inform will yield a sentence of either three years or one year. And yet if both prisoners endorse this logic, they maximize their combined served time (four years).

The Prisoner's Dilemma is a specialized case of the more general two-person, non-cooperative, non-zero-sum game. Mathematician John F. Nash demonstrated in 1950 that all such games have a rational solution (the Nash equilibrium)[9]. But in the troublesome Prisoner's Dilemma, a better outcome is achieved by apparently non-rational behavior, and leaders need to formulate policies to address this paradox.

In the corporate world, the analog of inform/do not inform is compete/collaborate. Logic again appeals to support the compete option. Yet, as in the Prisoner's Dilemma, a better outcome ensues when both parties cooperate—most obviously when transactions must be repeated.

Game theorist Robert Axelrod's computer simulation shows that a Tit-for-Tac strategy works best in the long run, because the shadow of future outcomes falls heavily on today's decisions[10]. In this strategy, a player cooperates so long as his opponent does, but retaliates immediately if the other player fails to cooperate. The complete tactical plan for Tit-for-Tat is the following:

1) Be nice (do not defect first) and be forgiving.
2) Reciprocate immediately; be provocable.
3) Do not be envious. In a non-zero-sum game, you do not have to do better than the others to do well yourself, particularly in a game with many players. For example, a successful relationship with a supplier entails that both you and the supplier be profitable. If you try to reduce the supplier's profit by not paying his or her bills, he or she will ultimately retaliate by reducing service or quality—or not delivering at all! The right strategy in a cooperative world requires that you both do well.
4) Do not be too clever. Negotiating strategies that are random or devious or too complex will confuse the other party, who may then conclude that you are unresponsive to his or her needs.

Leaders may be tempted to eschew collaboration in the case of a single private transaction. But if they must engage in repeated transactions, collaboration pays off. And even when only a single transaction takes place, their reputations will pursue them into the future.

A similar dilemma occurs when many individuals attempt to work together. They have the option of being noble (cooperating) or selfish (not cooperating). If they act nobly, they help others at their own expense. If they are selfish, they help themselves at others' expense. In this latter case, if their behavior is public, it damages their reputations, and they

may suffer long-term consequences. On the village commons, everyone knows—they need only count the herd. But what if decisions and behaviors are private, i.e., if no one knows what decisions have been made? In the long run, a strategy of alliance with other organizations can pay rich dividends to all of the partners.

Leadership attitude and style

The genesis of a leadership style is the leader's attitude[11]. If they perceive their role to be structural, with the organization as a machine, they prize rationality. If a human relations perspective rules, the leader will treat the organization as a social network and value emotional intelligence. Political leaders often treat the organization and its environment as a combat – and therefore regard power as essential for survival. Some leaders may view the entire leadership exercise as theater – and reward creativity.

Minor flaws may not interfere with the successful discharge of the leader's role. We can learn a great deal about leadership, however, by examining what causes leaders to lose their way. A primary source of errant leadership behavior is pride and arrogance, which encourages leaders to lose touch with reality and changing times. Not a few leaders exhibit a pathology of narcissism.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, such leaders display a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy[12]. Sinful pride causes many saints to become Lucifers. Historian Barbara Tuchman provides some cogent examples of the resulting leadership folly[13]:

Why did the Trojan rulers drag that suspicious-look ng wooden horse inside their walls despite every reason to suspect a Greek trick? Why did successive ministries of George III insist on coercing rather than conciliating the American Colonies, though repeatedly advised by many counselors that the harm done must be greater than any possible gain? Why did Charles XII and Napoleon and successively Hitler invade Russia despite the disasters incurred by each predecessor? Why did Montezuma, master of fierce and eager armies and of a city of 300,000 succumb passively to a party of several hundred alien invaders, even after they had shown themselves all too obviously human beings, not gods? Why does American business insist on "growth" when it is demonstrably using up the three basics of life on our planet—land, water, and unpolluted air?

These leaders, and many like them, know what is best but refuse to do it. Overcome by pleasure, fear, love, hate, or passion, they lead their trusting followers down the road to perdition. As the Greek myths have also shown us, hubris leads to tragedy. Icarus, escaping from Crete on artificial wings constructed from feathers by his father Daedalus, ignored the warnings not to fly too close to the sun. When the wax on his wings melted, he plummeted into the Aegean Sea.

Literary analogies are easy to invoke. Consider, for example, the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba in which King David takes advantage of his privileged position to seduce Bathsheba. This illustrates the Bathsheba Syndrome: toxic leadership enabled by privileged access to information and resources, producing a distorted view of power[14]. King David loses focus in success, his

success leads to privileged access, he controls resources, leading to an inflated belief in his ability to control outcomes (Donald Trump)

Many corporate executives appear to have acquired an overdeveloped expectation of entitlement, as exemplified by Jack Welch of General Electric. His board forced Welch to relinquish a variety of extravagant personal perks after he retired, while the Justice Department sent Dennis Kozlowski at Tyco to prison for grand larceny, conspiracy, and falsifying corporate records.

Narcissistic leaders often take advantage of others to achieve their own ends. They believe that their uniqueness excuses them from the ethical codes that bind others. They relish the pleasure of power and are overtaken with a lust for more. They crave glory: success plus recognition.

Power corrupts them, and absolute power corrupts them absolutely. Power is the prerequisite to effective leadership, although misuse of power often produces ineffective leaders. Power is amplified by trust, and trust is amplified by familiarity, self-confidence, willingness to risk, mutuality, and receptivity. But the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DCM) and other sources of psychological and psychiatric theory omit mention of power as an important motivating element in the behavior of either good or toxic leaders.

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche contends that power (*Wille zur Macht)* is man's principal driving force[15], perhaps confirming Thomas Hobbes belief that the lifelong "perpetual and restless desire is a fundamental human property." As a result, Hobbes tells us in the Leviathan, life without government would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short[16]."

John Stuart Mill: The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will is to prevent harm to others[17].

Leadership pathology

In his exhaustive review of the field Clive Roland Boddy reports that the key defining characteristics of organization psychopaths include a lack of conscience and an inability to experience the feelings of others[18]. These psychopaths constitute approximately one percent of the population. But because of their charm and networking skills, they have a "knack of getting employed and climbing the organizational hierarchy." Yet narcissistic leaders often sacrifice empathy in pursuit of their goals.

Socrates proposed centuries ago the concept of akrasia, or weakness of will. If one judges an action to be the best course of action, why would a person choose anything else? Socrates concluded that "no one goes willingly towards the bad." But our intuition and personal experience suggest otherwise. Sometimes our appetites appear to overwhelm us (why not take one more bite of the apple?) Or in other cases we find it easy to place just one more bet on the game or postpone an important task one more day. And cognitive dissonance may delude us into embracing less attractive alternatives.

Moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt offers a simple explanation for why a person who knows the right course of action nonetheless appears to freely choose the wrong path: he cites the influence of "first-order desires" that interfere with the fulfillment of "higher-order desires." These higher-order desires reflect

our true needs; those who fail to honor these desires run the risk of behaving recklessly. Frankfurt's concept of volitional conflicts merits the leader's attention. Frankfurt notes the prevalence of second order desires (I want to abstain, finish my assignment) from first order desires (need a drink or a toke).

An equally plausible rationale for akrasia or incontinent behavior is that we fall prey to a lapse in judgment. In doing so we temporarily believe that the worse course of action is better because we have not evaluated fully all the implications and consequences of our actions but have inadvertently sub-optimized[19]. Some leaders simply choose their own interests above all else; they consciously act in ways that serve their own purposes with Machiavelli as their mentor.

Economist Adam Smith concluded that individuals who attend to only their own gain would in fact promote the public interest[20]. They would be led, as if by an invisible hand, to achieve the best good for all. Were Smith a witness to recent history, he might well revise his opinion, for it seems clear that individuals who make decisions based only on self-interest may unwittingly damage the welfare of the system. As Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, "All men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power[21]".

Perhaps former UnitedHealth Group chief executive William McGuire fell into this trap when he greedily backdated millions of dollars of incentive stock options. McGuire was a free rider – a man who takes a little more (a free ride on the bus) on the assumption that it won't matter, and no one will notice. After the UnitedHealth board forced McGuire to resign in October 2006, the firm began the painful process of restating its financial statements, and its market value plummeted.

Some leaders resist facing the facts. Among the many historical examples are Procter & Gamble's denial of toxicity in its Rely Tampons, Perrier's rejection of evidence that its bottled water contained benzene, and Coca Cola's refusal to accept responsibility for illness caused by contaminated Cokes drunk by schoolchildren in Belgium.

Executives in the Big Three of the US automobile industry have blundered before, but even today, as Toyota and other foreign manufacturers seize market share, the leaders of Ford, GM, and Chrysler grumble about an undervalued yen, high costs of materials, and excessive health care costs. They appear unable to conceive of any scenario that would allow them to surmount these burdens. (How about a better car?)

Deficiencies of perspective are a common corollary. Leaders who emphasize short-term performance (earnings per share this year) may well compromise long-term performance and survival. They often exhibit "risk myopia"; they place greater focus on imminent crises while ignoring longer-term potential cataclysm until it's too late. And often leaders are reluctant to accept change – the possibility that new technologies or shifts in consumer needs dictate a change in corporate policy and strategy.

In any organization, followers can have as much influence on a leader as does a leader on the followers. Followers often abdicate responsibility and become sycophants or toadies. Leaders and followers often share a *folie à deux*, a collective madness that allows

each side to accept uncritically common goals and behavior. Lackeys surround the leader, lie, tell him what he wants to hear.

Max Fisher reminds us that faith in a strong leader serves strong psychological needs, particularly in times of crisis, when they seek solace in the idea of national unity[22]. This may well explain in part the stability of dictatorships who govern 50 of the world's 195 countries. And in times of great peril citizens often seek scapegoats for the failure of their leaders; outrage toward a perceived common enemy or out-group can be a powerful unifying factor.

When leaders are charged with misfeasance or malfeasance, the role of followers often doesn't get the attention it deserves. But followers always share culpability for their leader's misdeeds, often as a result of their crimes of obedience. As Barbara Kellerman notes, followers seek safety, certainty, and self-preservation[23]. And Mark Slouka observes caustically that power and fame still impress the majority of us today (The race of man loves a lord!)[24].

Recent examples of toxic leaders include Elizabeth Holmes of Theranos and Jeffrey Skilling of Enron both convicted of fraud. Earlier examples of toxic leadership are numerous: Al Dunlap (chainsaw Al) at Sunbeam and numerous VW executives in the diesel emission fraud case. Lord Acton reminds us: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you superadd the tendency of the certainty of corruption by authority[25]."

Yet we underestimate the importance of power and the potential correlation with alleged personality defects. Researchers assert that the traits imbedded in the dark triad are defects[26]. Ironically, it is these very traits that may be crucial to the realization of effective leadership. Effective leaders appreciate that little can be achieved without the application of power. Leaders who lack power seek more assets, more territory, more followers.

Conclusions

Many good leaders exhibit personality disorders. Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, and John D. Rockefeller were exceptionally productive. In modern times, some narcissistic CEOs have bold visions, attract devoted followers, and inspire their organizations to accomplish great things[27]. As examples we admire Steve Jobs at Apple and Elon Musk at Space-X as leaders consumed by pursuit of their specific vision. They moved forward with passion, courage (they took risks) and patience (did not expect immediate results).

These are the findings from our history of leadership success and failure:
• Effective leaders often exhibit personality disorders.
• A leader can overcome the handicap of personality disorders by committing to a vision with passion, courage, and patience[28].
• Leader character is critical, but good leadership may require a modicum of sociopathy.
• The collaboration of followers is an essential component of leadership success.

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