

CHAPTER 9

Flawed Leadership: The Coffin Nail of Grand Ventures in Economics, Education, Business, and Politics

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It is tempting, in one's "near-twilight" years, especially after teaching the core principles and policy applications of a fundamental discipline, to offer, as profound, the wisdom settled on. The problem is, I am an economist. Neither I, nor any other honest economist, should contend "economic wisdom" is settled. I shall not even attempt to do so.

Instead, my focus here is on wisdom earned, and learned, in an art which I have observed, practiced, studied, evaluated, and taught over 70 years—the art of leadership. I apply all of that here under the title I submitted, in a moment of introspection, after asking: "What is it that I can submit, from my unique life and career experience, as worthy of note or reflection?" Thus, my title: "Flawed Leadership—the Coffin Nail of Grand Ventures in Economics, Education, Business, and Politics."

I hope the title is intriguing. Yet, I really do not intend to cite example after example of specific economic or education or business or political leaders whose approaches doomed "grand ventures". Instead, I offer a few (neither exhaustive nor definitive) bits of wisdom gleaned from all the things I have done wrong (and observed others doing wrong) and, hopefully, many more I have done right (and observed from the privilege of working for and with some incredibly effective leaders).

I am inspired in this undertaking by two books: First, a text I used in both business and civic leadership courses over many years—*The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, by the late University of Southern California President Steven B. Sample (2002, Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint, San Francisco); and Second, *Leadership*, by Henry Kissinger (2022, Penguin Press, New York).

At the outset, I offer my definition of leadership: "The ability to MOVE identifiable followers to accomplish things they would not otherwise do." Emphasis must be on the action word MOVE. Leaders must be many things: for example, wise, ethical, creative, strategic, inspiring. A great speaker may "inspire" followers. Give me an effective leader who MOVES followers.

Here follow, then, ten "points to ponder" regarding how wise and skilled leaders function effectively to make possible "moving" identifiable followers to accomplish. Fundamentally, effective leaders must:

A. Seek highly competent, driven lieutenants and hire the strongest and most committed staff possible.

Leaders afraid that very strong staff might overpower or overshadow—or leery that very competent staff might "move on to greater opportunity"—make grave mistakes. An effective leader will hire an aide who will tell that leader when he or she is "dead wrong"! A great leader seeks, grooms, delegates to, and builds an effective organization with the best aides and followers

that can be found. A leader whose excellent staff are in great demand is a leader with whom the brightest and best seek to work and serve.

B. Commit to ensuring that staff and followers are “responsive and responsible.”

Long ago, from experience, I discovered the “Dead Organization Syndrome”—where followers exhibit: (1) an inability to say “No”; (2) the unwillingness to say “Yes”; and (3) the undesirability of doing either one. What does that mean? Too many people lack the sense of security to say, “No—I cannot take on that extra task ... I am already overcommitted!” Others avoid situations requiring them to say “Yes” ... and mean it and then show up. An effective leader makes desirable—and then rewards—those who do both. Respecting the trusted aide who is secure enough to convey to the leader that the aide just cannot take on one more challenge effectively—and then absolutely expecting performance from one who does take on “requested commitments”—reward both, making followers both responsive and responsible—and making progress to cure the “Dead Organization Syndrome”.

C. Create a problem surfacing (and preventing) system of open communication (both ways) with followers—but with decision-making and problem-solving that follow and strengthen the chain of command.

Too many “organization specialists” contend that board members or officers should refrain from being eager to talk openly with employees or followers about problems or concerns. Accusations of “meddling” or “micro-managing” tend to stifle the flow of extremely important situational knowledge that, left untended, can derail the soundest effort. Effective leaders at the top of an organization—a college, a firm, a legislative body, or a bureaucracy—must develop and advocate a culture in which any follower may appropriately bring any matter to the attention of the top leader or a lieutenant with authority with the understanding that the problem or challenge will be dealt with by charging the line official responsible with solving or correcting it. The effective leader should never leapfrog over the chain of command to handle the matter but ensure that the responsible lieutenant is held accountable, made more effective, and leaves authority and the organization strengthened in the process. Only such a process also enables effective authority structures to function to effectively MOVE the followers to achieve.

D. Understand fully the changing legal boundaries within which leaders--and their initiatives—must operate.

By the time one grasps the reins of leadership, it might be assumed that the leader knows the laws which pertain. What is often the case, however, is that one never can know exactly what that law means in the current moment. Effective leaders take “legal advice” cautiously. Some even read the pertinent law—or regulation—themselves. Court rulings, bureaucratic regulations, or organizational customs or bylaws may change. Effective leaders must constantly be on guard.

E. Master *Robert's Rules of Order*—and whatever statutory, bylaw, or constitutional rules govern the deliberative universe (great or small) in which the leader must seek decisions.

Many would-be leaders, seeking the ease of informal meeting and decision-making structures, pooh-pooh the formal deliberative rules. Political leaders look upon the U.S. Constitution in different ways. Even the smallest companies, civic units, or organizations maintain very specific norms for getting things done. The standard tool beyond any rules of operating in an entity's founding documents is *Robert's Rules of Order*-- basic rules for parliamentary procedure (official decision-making) which protect and preserve the rights of the majority, a minority, and the organizational entity itself as decisions are made. Any leader who does not know and follow *Robert's Rules* is destined to have authority endangered or have a noble cause sidetracked or a mission destroyed unnecessarily by a better-informed operator with very contrary motives or objectives.

F. Guard against making uninformed statements supporting unvetted causes, prematurely launching controversial ventures.

A leader must live with the choices announced. Pronouncements made may never be retracted—and can never be forgotten. Just as an egg can never be unscrambled, some actions must be lived with forever. Less than careful leaders, inclined to have no hesitation to make the boldest pronouncements, are sometimes mistaken. They must live with choices made. A less wise leader may contend: "So what if I am wrong? After all, we live in a world where God Forgives." The wise leader, however, knows: "Yes, God forgives, but God does not vote in the next election!"

G. Ignore the long run at the venture's peril; see tomorrow's battle as important as today's.

Many causes, requiring leaders, are battles—against other causes, other leaders, other programs, other solutions. Those other opposing entities seek to win too. The more prominent the issue, the higher the stakes, the more aggressive, or bitter, or nasty the battle. When an effective leader wins, or prevails, great care must be taken to ensure that the "other party"—or opposing cause—does not become a loser. The other side must be allowed to "save face" or at least not be humiliated. Two reasons: (1) Deep bitterness and humiliation make it harder for the winning leader to progress and enact the hard-fought victory successfully; and (2) In tomorrow's battles, the cause or person the leader defeated today may be the ally needed for victory tomorrow.

H. Vaccinate the organization against the plague of unintended consequences.

Constant attention must be on guard and not blindsided by potential for or by totally unexpected eventualities. Such blindness—either because of unrealistic optimism or unquenched zealotry or blatant naïve uninformedness—can derail a monumental achievement in progress or create unwanted and perhaps fatal consequences ahead. "New Math" advocates decades back unexpectedly yielded clerks unable to make change. Coca-Cola's "New Coke" unexpectedly

yielded a boomed demand for Pepsi. Federal Reserve Board, and Treasury, fixation on rock-bottom interest rates to boost demand while COVID shutdowns curtailed supply unexpectedly yielded dramatic inflation surge. Trump and Harris promises to eliminate income tax on tips, if enacted, would unexpectedly yield lower Social Security payments decades hence, since the size of Social Security payments is partially based on income—and tip income will not be recorded.

I. Get all the ducks in a row to ensure that the venture succeeds.

The greatest shortcoming of many creative leaders and conceivers of magnificently monumental ventures is the unmitigated failure of the leader to “Get all the ducks in a row”—to align all the elements necessary to make that venture succeed. No great idea just happens. Even nearly perfect objectives still demand that every possible problem be foreseen, every necessary ally involved, every legal barrier accounted for, every financial asset arranged, and every possible known objection reckoned with. Perhaps the greatest victims of such failure are in higher education. Brilliant scholars often exist within isolated silos. Trustees often fail to grasp the depths of their fiduciary responsibility. Presidents and deans are too often selected for criteria other than their capacity to manage and lead. Disastrous consequences ensue when leaders fail to “get their ducks in a row.”

J. Understand that great leadership today—for today’s challenges—will not be “good enough” for tomorrow.

Effective leadership does not develop naturally—or accidentally. Most great leaders cannot MOVE followers to accomplish without repeated, tested, reevaluated experience. Great wisdom comes when a leader learns, painfully, what does not work and surprisingly what does work effectively. Tomorrow’s challenges may be more formidable, and perhaps tomorrow’s identifiable followers may be wiser, less yielding, more obstinate, and less motivated than those effectively MOVED today. When a leader finishes growing—that leader is DONE!

Conclusion

Recall the definition of leadership presented here: “The ability to MOVE identifiable followers to accomplish things they would not otherwise do.” Many leaders, put to the test, are found wanting. Few actually meet the test. Institutions—from farm organizations, to businesses, to faculties, to the Congress—require effective leaders. Most often they are left wanting. When effective leaders do surface, and are harnessed into action, among dozens of other skills and techniques, they will master and exercise the ten points to ponder registered here.