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## **Verizon Visiting Professorship in Business Ethics**

# Why Is It So Difficult to Be an Ethical Leader?

**Joanne B. Ciulla**

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November 14, 2017



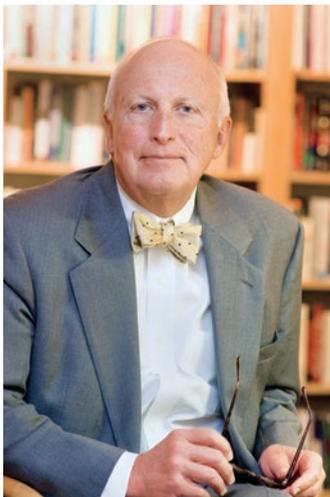
BENTLEY UNIVERSITY is a leader in business education. Centered on education and research in business and related professions, Bentley blends the breadth and technological strength of a university with the values and student focus of a small college. Our undergraduate curriculum combines business study with a strong foundation in the arts and sciences. A broad array of offerings at the Graduate School of Business emphasize the impact of technology on business practice. They include MBA and Master of Science programs, PhD programs in accountancy and business and selected executive programs. The university is located in Waltham, Mass., minutes west of Boston. It enrolls approximately 4,200 full-time undergraduate students and 1,000 graduate and 24 doctoral students.

THE W. MICHAEL HOFFMAN CENTER FOR BUSINESS ETHICS at Bentley University is a nonprofit educational and consulting organization whose vision is a world in which all businesses contribute positively to society through their ethically sound and responsible operations. The center's mission is to provide leadership in the creation of organizational cultures that align effective business performance with ethical business conduct. It endeavors to do so by applying expertise, research, and education and taking a collaborative approach to disseminating best practices. With a vast network of practitioners and scholars and an extensive multimedia library, the center offers an international forum for benchmarking and research in business ethics.

Through educational programs such as the Verizon Visiting Professorship in Business Ethics, the center is helping to educate a new generation of business leaders who understand from the start of their careers the importance of ethics in developing strong business and organizational cultures.

#### COVER PHOTO CREDITS

Left: *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* by Paul Delaroche, 1848, (Wikimedia Commons)  
Right: *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* by Jacques Louis David, 1801, (Wikimedia Commons)



## **W. Michael Hoffman, PhD**

Founder and Executive Director  
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As with many in academia, I do a fair amount of traveling, and for at least two decades, I've noticed that whenever I visit an airport bookstore I can count on finding a trove of hot selling books by the latest business gurus revealing the secrets to great leadership. What I also noticed is that these books generally give woefully little attention to the importance of ethics in leadership. This is puzzling because history has no shortage of examples of despots whose unethical leadership resulted in calamities of historic proportions.

Leadership ethics is something that should concern everyone, and that is why we were so pleased to have Professor Joanne Ciulla as our most recent Verizon Visiting Professor in Business Ethics. Dr. Ciulla is renowned for pioneering the field of leadership ethics. While the focus of her talk was on organizational leaders, her ideas are significant for everyone seeking to live a more honorable life. Things, however, can be more complicated when applying such ideas to businesses, because such leaders will of necessity have an influence that radiates out to their organizations and the broader society affected by their businesses. This fact was painfully evidenced by the economic catastrophe of 2008. There we saw a pervasive failure of ethical leadership across the financial sector, in which countless business leaders demonstrated brilliance in their capacity to make a financial killing and an astonishing insensitivity to the impact of their unethical actions on the broader society.

Dr. Ciulla's lecture — *Why Is It So Difficult to Be an Ethical Leader?* — seems particularly suited for our times, and yet she is raising a question as old as ethics itself. In seeking to respond, she shows the breadth of her scholarship by looking back millennia to the timeless wisdom expressed by ancient Egyptian and Chinese sages and then contextualizing these ideas by connecting them to cutting-edge 21st-century research. Her ideas are encouraging, both because they point to the essential presence of ethics as part of our human nature, and because they show that scholarship can help us to more effectively apply ethics to the task of leading organizations. Business ethics will always find itself in tension with the draw of unfair gain. Dr. Ciulla's talk provides a clear and concise perspective on how and why ethical leadership is the best path for the individual, the organization, and society.

The **Verizon Visiting Professorship in Business Ethics**

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Joanne B. Ciulla delivers the Verizon Lecture in Business Ethics to students, faculty, staff, and friends at Bentley University.



## **Joanne B. Ciulla**

Professor of Leadership Ethics, Department of Management and Global Business, and Research Director, Institute for Ethical Leadership, Rutgers Business School—Newark and New Brunswick

Prior to joining Rutgers, Professor Joanne B. Ciulla was one of the founding faculty of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies (University of Richmond), which was the first liberal arts school of leadership studies in the world. She also had academic appointments at LaSalle University, Harvard Business School, and The Wharton School. Ciulla held the UNESCO Chair in Leadership Studies at the United Nations University in Jordan, and has had visiting appointments at Nyenrode University, University of Melbourne, University of Fort Hare, and Oxford University. A BA, MA, and Ph.D. in philosophy, Dr. Ciulla has dedicated most of her scholarly work to developing the field of leadership ethics and business ethics.

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(From left) Paul S. McGovern, Manager of Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity, Verizon Communications, Gregory K. Miles, Director, Office of Ethics & Business Conduct, Verizon Communications, Joanne B. Ciulla, PhD, Professor of Leadership Ethics, Rutgers Business School, and W. Michael Hoffman, PhD, founding Executive Director of the Hoffman Center for Business Ethics and Hieken Professor of Business and Professional Ethics at Bentley University

Verizon Visiting Professorship in Business Ethics

# Why Is It So Difficult to Be an Ethical Leader?

**Joanne B. Ciulla**

Professor of Leadership Ethics

Department of Management and Global Business and

Research Director, Institute for Ethical Leadership

Rutgers Business School–Newark and New Brunswick

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Popular books on leadership usually tell us that leaders are inspirational, visionary, courageous, etc. Such books are frequently found in airport bookstores. People like them because they contain common sense or because they are motivational — as in, “you too can be a leader!” I started research on leadership ethics in 1991. At the time, there was very little academic work on the subject. I didn’t find it very interesting to focus on the traits or qualities that ethical leaders should have. Yes, leaders should be honest, caring, fair, just, etc. For me, the really interesting question was “Why is it difficult to be an ethical leader?” I thought that understanding the ethical challenges that are unique

to leadership would help stake out a new interdisciplinary field of applied ethics called leadership ethics.<sup>1</sup> I also believed that it was much more useful to alert aspiring leaders to the ethical challenges of being a leader than to tell them that they should be honest, fair, etc.

In this lecture, I will take an interdisciplinary approach to exploring some of the elements that make ethical behavior difficult for leaders. In general, ethics for leaders are the same as ethics for the rest of us. While the principles are the same, the scope and impact of a leader’s moral behavior are different. When leaders do good, they do *very* good; when they do bad, they do *very* bad.

In leadership, morality and immorality are magnified because their actions often affect more people and have a greater impact than the action of other individuals.<sup>2</sup>

It's only fitting that we consider this iconic painting of Napoleon Bonaparte called *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* by Jacques-Louis David (1801). Now there's a leader! He's seated on a rearing white horse, wearing a red cape, and he is pointing onward and upward.<sup>3</sup> In the background, you see soldiers in their crisp and clean uniforms, a cannon, and a flag. It's a marvelous picture and a good place for us to start thinking about our question, but first, let me tell you about this painting. The painting was a gift to Napoleon from Charles IV of Spain. Charles commissioned the painting to thank Napoleon for crossing the Alps and driving the Austrians out of Italy. When Napoleon saw the design for the painting, he liked it so much that he asked David to



*Napoleon Crossing the Alps* by Jacques Louis David, 1801, 108.3x91.3" (Wikimedia Commons)

paint four more of them. Napoleon refused to sit for the painting because, as he told David, great leaders do not have time to sit for paintings, so David had his son sit on a ladder and pose for it. The painting depicts Napoleon as he and many others like to think of leaders but it certainly isn't a realistic picture of him crossing the Alps.

Arthur George, the 3rd Earl of Onslow, was a kind of Napoleon groupie who collected Napoleon memorabilia. He liked David's painting but he wanted his own realistic depiction of the event, so he commissioned Paul Delaroche to paint *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps*. Delaroche was also a Napoleon fan who wanted to depict Napoleon as a humble but brilliant man who rose up to become a great leader. Delaroche's painting shows Napoleon wearing a drab brown jacket and riding a mule. Unlike David's painting, there is snow on the ground and the mountain that looms behind him. In it, you see soldiers behind Napoleon who are bundled-up in layers of scarves against the cold and a soldier guiding Napoleon's mule. Like many pictures of Napoleon, this one portrays Napoleon with his hand inside of his coat.<sup>4</sup> This was common pose in 18th and 19th-century portraiture and photography.<sup>5</sup> One can find "hand-in-waistcoat" photos of many leaders during that period such as George Washington, Karl Marx, and General William Tecumseh Sherman. The posture was meant to signify humility, dignity, and strength — a very different image of a leader from David's man on a white horse. Delaroche's painting pays homage to some of the moral qualities we want in leaders — people who are willing to work hard and make sacrifices to serve our interests. Yet, the question then and now is: "Who do you imagine as your leader, the man in the red cape on a white horse or the man



Bonaparte Crossing the Alps by Paul Delaroche, 1848, 114x87" (Wikimedia Commons)

in a brown jacket on a mule?" There is something to recommend in both models. One of the bold, invincible, charismatic leader and the other of a humble, hardworking, self-sacrificing leader. There are cultural differences in which model people prefer in their leaders. I remember I was giving a talk in Denmark and afterwards, a member of the audience said, "you Americans like your leaders to be like movie stars. In Denmark, we like our leaders to be bland and gray — we just want them to go to work every day and do their job for us." The two pictures of Napoleon explain a lot about how people in democracies and organizations choose their leaders. Their hearts and heads often pull them in opposite directions.

## Leaders and Their Followers

Whether leaders are charismatic or more mundane, no one is a leader without followers, and followers often influence their leaders. One of my favorite short stories for illustrating the negative influence of followers is George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*. It's about a British police officer in colonial Burma where the locals despise the British. One day, an elephant in heat runs wild in the bazaar and kills a "coolie." They notify the police officer who does not want to kill the elephant. However, a huge crowd gathers and they want him to kill the elephant, in part, for entertainment, and in part, so they could take the elephant meat. Under pressure from the crowd, the British officer eventually kills the elephant and it dies a long and painful death. He says, "I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly." He reflects that he was not the leader but "an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind."<sup>6</sup> The police officer said he was forced to kill the elephant or risk not looking like a leader. Leaders can behave badly when followers force them to live up to the image of what leaders and followers think a leader should be and do.

Each of us carries around an implicit theory of leadership. For some, leaders mirror their hopes, fears, identities, and aspirations. There is a substantial body of literature on people's perceptions of leaders and the qualities that they attribute to them. James R. Meindl, et al. studied what they call, "the romance of leadership."<sup>7</sup> They argue that the romance and mystery of leadership sustain followers and gets them to work towards common goals yet it also creates unrealistic images and expectations of

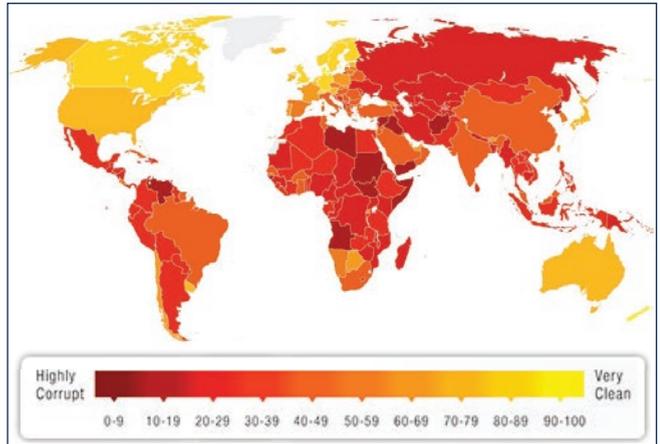
leaders. One such expectation is that leaders have more control over outcomes than they actually do, which explains one of the most distinctive aspects of ethics and leadership. Unlike ordinary people, we hold leaders responsible for things that they do not do. For example, if someone in a company causes a deadly accident, there is a sense in which the CEO is responsible, even though she did not know about it and had nothing to do with it.

We expect leaders to take responsibility — that’s part of the job. *Taking* responsibility is different from actually *being* responsible. Leaders who *take* responsibility are praised or blamed for what their organizations do. The issue of moral agency is also interesting when we consider the role of context and luck in leadership. Some leaders are fortunate because of the social-historical context that they are in and the fact that their initiatives turn out well for them. Others are unlucky because a hurricane, accident, or other unforeseeable events ruin their best-laid plans. Rarely do we regard someone as a great leader when they cannot get anything done, even if the reason for their failure is due to conditions beyond their control.

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## Responsibility and Trust

Leaders are not only supposed to take responsibility, they are also supposed to act in the interests of others. We don’t put people in leadership roles to serve their own interests. Transparency International offers us a nice, straightforward definition of corruption that also describes one kind of bad leader: “The use of entrusted power



Transparency International’s 2017 Corruption Perception Index Map

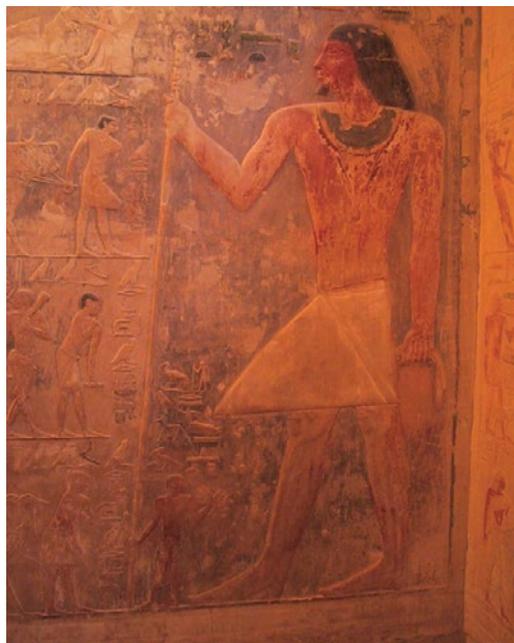
for personal gain.”<sup>8</sup> Every year Transparency International does a survey of most of the countries in the world and creates what they call a “Corruption Perceptions Index” or CPI (right).

If you look at their color-coded map for any year, you get a kind of snapshot of the state of ethics in the world, and I would argue, perceptions of the state of leadership in the world.<sup>9</sup> The most ethical countries on the map are in pale yellow and the least ethical countries are red. There is always far more red than yellow on the map. When we look at the map, we see that the yellow countries tend to be wealthy democracies and the red ones are poor countries, some of which are failed states.

The map seems to support the idea that it is indeed difficult to be an ethical leader but it also raises some interesting questions: Would better leaders have made a difference in these countries? Are these countries poor because they are corrupt, or are they corrupt because they are poor? Obviously, there are a number of complex variables at play here, such as natural and human resources, history, and social institutions, etc. However, it is worth pondering whether a country in

today's world would be destitute for long if it had ethical leaders and who developed and supported ethical social institutions. Unethical leaders often fail to build viable and lasting civil society institutions. It is also the case that followers who are destitute and poorly educated are sometimes less able to influence the moral behavior of their leaders. One might argue that in today's world a poor country with ethical leaders in business and government might be better placed to receive aid, investment, and assistance than one that has unethical leaders. However, today, ethical leaders of poor, uncorrupt countries are few and far between.

Ethical leaders can be more effective because people trust them. Trust is the most difficult to obtain but most powerful currency of the leader/follower relationship. What I find most fascinating about the study of leadership is the fact



*Ptah-Hotep, relief from his tomb, located in Necropolis of Saqqara, Memphis (UNESCO World Heritage List, 1979), Egypt. Photo courtesy of Joanne B. Ciulla.*

that throughout history and across cultures, we find that people want the same moral qualities in their leaders. One of the oldest treatises on leadership is by the great Egyptian sage, Ptah-Hotep. Writing between 2500-2200 BCE on papyrus and in cursive hieratic script, it is one of the oldest paper books in the world. Ptah-Hotep also seems to be a man who appreciates the many ethical challenges of leadership, starting with trust. He writes:

"If you are a man who leads,  
Who controls the affairs of the many,  
Seek out every beneficent deed,  
That your conduct may be blameless...  
If you are among the people,  
Gain supporters through being trusted;  
The trusted man who does not vent his  
belly's speech,  
He will himself become a leader."<sup>10</sup>

Ptah-Hotep then goes on to talk about a leader's obligation to protect the public interest.

"If you are employed in the larit storehouse, stand or sit rather than walk about. Lay down rules for yourself from the first: not to absent yourself even when weariness overtakes you. Keep an eye on him who enters announcing that what he asks is secret; what is entrusted to you is above appreciation, and all contrary argument is a matter to be rejected. He is a god who penetrates into a place where no relaxation of the rules is made for the privileged."<sup>11</sup>

And then he cautions leaders to not let themselves become arrogant.

"If you have become great after having been little, if you have become rich after having been poor, when you are

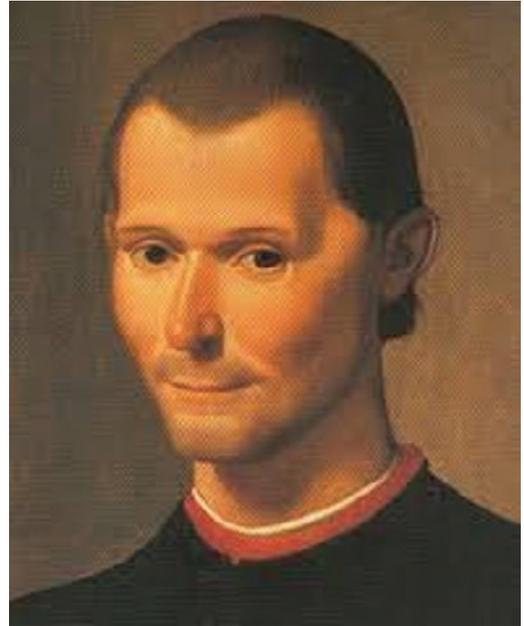
at the head of the city, know how not to take advantage of the fact that you have reached the first rank, harden not your heart because of your elevation; you are only the administrator, the prefect, of the provisions which belong to Ptah. Put not behind you the neighbor who is like you; be unto him as a companion."<sup>12</sup>

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## Ethics and Effectiveness

We expect leaders to be ethical and effective at doing their jobs. Some leaders are ethical but not very effective, while others are effective but not very ethical.<sup>13</sup> Leaders sometimes carry a heavy burden of responsibility for getting results, which may make it tempting and even justifiable to use unethical means to achieve their goals. Niccolò Machiavelli grappled with this problem in *The Prince*. Machiavelli realized that there are situations in which a leader cannot be both ethical and effective. For example, he notes, “If a ruler who wants always to act honorably is surrounded by many unscrupulous men, his downfall is inevitable.”<sup>14</sup> We may consider a leader who acts honorably in this situation naive or incompetent. Machiavelli says that leaders must learn how “not to be good” because sometimes behaving ethically confers harm on both leaders and followers. So, because of the scope (i.e., lives of citizens in the city-states) and the stakes of leadership (i.e., war, death, loss of property), there are cases where lying, failing to keep promises, or making a deal with the devil, may be more ethical than acting honorably.

We usually dismiss “the ends justifying the means” as immoral; however, even leaders in more commonplace



Partial portrait of Niccolò Machiavelli by Santi di Tito (Wikimedia Commons)

occupations than Machiavelli’s Prince face situations where this justification, while morally questionable, characterizes their best course of action. Herein lies the problem: In what kinds of situations do the ends justify the means? Moreover, when does this become an excuse for actions that are expedient and generally unethical? How does a leader keep from becoming a kind of misguided utilitarian — who is willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done for the greatest happiness of his or her followers or organization? When does this kind of justification become a habit? All of these questions illustrate why being a leader can be dangerous to one’s moral health.

Philosophers discuss some of these dangers in “the dirty hands problem.” Echoing Machiavelli, Michael Walzer tells us that no leader leads innocently.<sup>15</sup> The job of most leaders is inherently utilitarian in that they have to look after

the greatest good for the whole of their organization, etc. Yet, we tend to judge the moral character of leaders in terms of their virtues and commitment to moral principles. At some point, most leaders confront tensions between their ethical principles and the obligations that they have to their followers and/or organizations. When a leader's moral obligation to prevent harm to followers or their organization can only be filled by doing something unethical, she faces a dilemma because there is no morally satisfactory solution. While we cannot expect moral purity from leaders (or anyone for that matter), we hope that when leaders have to dirty their hands, they feel dirty. Leaders need to have a strong sense of guilt and moral disgust about dirty hands decisions. Otherwise, they may find it difficult to resist the temptation to take shortcuts and rationalize bad behavior in the name of expedience or the greatest good.

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## Self-Interest

For Plato, one challenge to ethical leadership stems from the fact that behaving justly is not always in a leader's self-interest. While Plato believes that leadership requires a person to sacrifice his or her immediate self-interests, he did not require them to be altruists. In Book I of *The Republic*, he writes:

"In a city of good men, if it came into being, the citizens would fight in order not to rule.... There it would be clear that anyone who is really a true ruler doesn't by nature seek his own advantage but that of his subjects. And everyone, knowing this, would rather be benefited by others than take the trouble to benefit them."<sup>16</sup>

Plato acknowledges the stress, hard work, and what is sometimes the thankless job of being a moral leader. For instance, if you are a just leader, your friends and family may be angry with you for not giving them special favors. A just leader will lose sleep over what we would call "dirty hands" problems, and will often have to sacrifice his or her own interests for those of followers. Plato doesn't think that ethical people lead because they are altruistic; he tells us (with a bit of a twinkle in his eye) that they lead out of fear of punishment:

"Now the greatest punishment, if one isn't willing to rule, is to be ruled by someone worse than oneself. And I think it is fear of this that makes decent people rule when they do."<sup>17</sup>

Plato's comment sheds light on why we often feel more comfortable with people who are reluctant to lead than with those who are eager to do so. Today, as in the past, we worry that people who are too keen to lead want the power and position for themselves or that they do not fully understand the enormous responsibilities of leadership. Some psychologists explain this concern in terms of personalized and socialized power.<sup>18</sup> In other words, we worry that people who aggressively pursue leadership might use the power of the position for their interests and not the interests of their constituents or organizations. Plato understands that being an ethical leader is difficult work. Being fair makes people angry when they want special favors and the leader refuses to comply. Sometimes my students think I'm not fair because I won't let them hand their papers in later than the rest of the class. In the end, Plato argues that it is in everyone's best interest to be just because just people are happier and lead better lives than unjust people.<sup>19</sup>

## Self-Control, Ego, and Success

Eastern philosophers, such as Lao Tzu and Confucius, reiterate the need for leaders to have self-control, which is required for humility. Lao Tzu points out that:

"He who stands on his tiptoe is not steady. He who strides cannot maintain the pace. He who makes a show is not enlightened. He who is self-righteous is not respected. He who boasts achieves nothing. He who brags will not endure."<sup>20</sup>

Confucius connects self-mastery with ethical and effective leadership:

"If a man [the ruler] can for one day master himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will return to humanity.<sup>21</sup> If a ruler sets himself right, he will be followed without his command. If he does not set himself right, even his commands will not be obeyed."<sup>22</sup>

Self-mastery is an important part of ethics, but it can be a particular challenge for leaders. Leaders are usually treated with deference by subordinates and often receive special perks and privileges. Some leaders surround themselves with what Ptah-Hotep calls "a concert of praise." They can easily begin to feel like they are special and exceptions to the law and rules of morality.<sup>23</sup> Since leaders possess power and influence, they usually have access to resources and staff available to do their bidding. Sometimes leaders become isolated from their followers and lose perspective on who they are and where they fit in the order of things.

Success may also amplify the potential for a leader's ethical failure. Dean Ludwig

and Clinton Longenecker call the moral failure of successful leaders the "Bathsheba Syndrome," after the biblical story of King David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12). King David is portrayed as a successful leader.<sup>24</sup> We first meet him as a young shepherd who goes on to become a great leader who is favored by God. Then, we come to the story of David and Bathsheba. It begins with David home from the front and taking a stroll around his palace. From his vantage point on the palace roof, he sees the beautiful Bathsheba bathing. He asks his servants to bring Bathsheba to him. The king



A portrait of Confucius by the Ming dynasty artist Qiu Ying c. 1494–1552 (Wikimedia Commons)

seduces Bathsheba and she gets pregnant. This is a problem because Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, is one of David's best generals. King David tries to cover up his immoral behavior by calling Uriah home. When Uriah returns, to King David's dismay, he does not stay with his wife. When the king asks why, Uriah responds:

"...my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and drink, and lie with my wife? As you live and your soul lives, I will not do such a thing (2 Samuel 11.11)."<sup>25</sup>

Uriah refuses to cooperate because of his moral obligations as a leader. He demonstrates his responsibility to and solidarity with his men who are camping in a field. It is a nice way of commenting on what King David should have been doing rather than seducing Bathsheba. King David then escalates his attempt at a cover-up by calling in another general named Joab and ordering him to arrange for Uriah and his men to be killed on the battlefield. In the end, the prophet Nathan blows the whistle on King David and God punishes David.

As Clinton and Longenecker observe, the Bathsheba Syndrome repeats itself again and again in history. First, when leaders become successful, they often become isolated, out of touch, and lose their strategic focus. David should have been thinking about running the war, not watching Bathsheba bathe. Since he is used to winning all of his battles, he has either lost interest or does not think he needs to be at the front or think much about it. As a result, he is literally and figuratively looking in the wrong place. This is why we worry about leaders who do things like cheat on their spouses. Even if adultery is irrelevant to his job,

occurs during personal time, and takes place in a culture where people do not consider it immoral, it is still a problem if it distracts a leader from paying sufficient attention to his obligations.<sup>26</sup> Here we see one way in which ethics is intertwined with leader effectiveness.

Second, because power leads to privileged access and control over resources, leaders have more opportunities to indulge themselves and, hence, they need more willpower to resist doing so. When leaders have been successful for a long time, they may think that after all of their sacrifices and hard work, they deserve a "treat" so they self-reward, perhaps by using the corporate jet to go on a vacation. Third, successful leaders sometimes develop an inflated belief in their ability to control outcomes. People who have been successful at everything they do may start thinking they can outsmart everyone else.

The most striking thing about leaders who get themselves in trouble is that the cover-ups are often worse than the crime — murder is worse than adultery. Often, leaders most abuse their power, position, and followers in the cover-up — King David commands another general, Joab, to lead Bathsheba's husband to his death. Lastly, sometimes success makes leaders arrogant about their ability to hide what they did from the public. When President Bill Clinton was caught philandering with Monica Lewinsky, he went on television and lied about it. The public supported him during the scandal in part because, up to that point, he was an effective leader. However, they quickly withdrew their support when they discovered that Clinton lied to them. Whistle-blowers such as Nathan in King David's case call a leader's bluff and demand that he or she be held to the same moral standards as everyone else. When this happens in Bible

stories and elsewhere, all hell breaks loose.

As a case study on leadership, the David and Bathsheba story illustrates the moral fragility of otherwise good people when they hold leadership positions. It serves as a cautionary tale about dangers of success and the lengths to which people will go to keep from losing reputation and power. What is most interesting about the Bathsheba Syndrome is that it is difficult to predict who will fall prey to it. It afflicts previously moral people, such as King David, who only manifest it after they become successful. We can't always tell how even the most virtuous person will respond to situations in various contexts and circumstances.<sup>27</sup> The story of David also raises the question of how long someone can be an ethical and effective leader. What can organizations do to keep their leaders fresh and deter them from becoming morally and functionally complacent? Human nature is not always consistent and the conditions that surround the role and context of a leader offer their own brand of temptation.

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## Compassion, Care, and Saints

I'll conclude with a brief look at compassion, care, and moral perfection. The central moral concept in Buddhist ethics is compassion. I started this talk with the idea of ethics and effectiveness and this comment by the Dalai Lama reflects on how a Buddhist sees the relationship between compassion and knowledge. His comment speaks to the reason why it is so important to teach business ethics and have ethics and the humanities in every educational program:

"When we bring up our children to have knowledge without compassion,

their attitude towards others is likely to be a mixture of envy of those in positions above them, aggressive competitiveness towards their peers, and scorn for those less fortunate. This leads to a propensity toward greed, presumption, excess, and very quickly to loss of happiness."<sup>28</sup>

Having the skills and knowledge for leadership without understanding the ethical challenges and obligations that come with it, will not work because leadership without ethics is difficult to obtain and/or sustain. Furthermore, as the Dalai Lama, Plato, Aristotle, and many other philosophers note, ethical behavior is a necessary part of a happy life. My students are often surprised by this because some people think of ethics as restrictions that keep them from doing what they want to do, not as something that is important for happiness.

Let us turn now to care. Among the seven deadly sins, the outlier to vices such as greed and envy is the sin of sloth. Sloth means much more than being lazy, it is also the vice of not caring. One might argue that care, like responsibility, is a fundamental part of being a leader. Leaders have to care because care also means paying attention to what they are supposed to do and being attentive to followers and the events around them. I turn to the story of Nero to talk about the role of care in leadership because Nero is the poster boy for not caring. You probably all know the expression "Nero fiddled while Rome burned." (Well, Nero didn't actually fiddle because the fiddle had not yet been invented, but he probably played a cithara.) The story behind this expression is that when Rome caught on fire in 64AD, Nero took to a stage in his palace and wrote and sang a song about the fire. It's one of the silliest stories in

history and ancient historians loved writing about it. The point of the story, and the expression that we still use today, is that Nero was a self-centered leader who did not care about his people, many of whom died or lost everything. Today, we use the expression to talk about leaders and others who are doing something trivial (fiddling around) or not attending to their obligations.<sup>29</sup>

Lastly, I conclude with a look at Nelson Mandela because he represents the rare case of a leader with a saintly image. As we have seen, the idea of a mythical leader on a white horse is very attractive and so is the image of a leader as a saintly martyr. These romantic ideas of leadership contribute to the ethical challenges for leaders of self-interest, ego, and self-control. One of the things I discovered in my research on Mandela was that he was bothered by the fact that some people thought of him as a saint.<sup>30</sup> In one of the last essays he published before he became too physically and mentally frail to write, he said:

"One issue that deeply worried me in prison was the false image that I unwittingly projected to the outside world, of being regarded as a saint. I never was one, even on the basis of an earthly definition of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying."<sup>31</sup>

Mandela had become such an iconic leader that he no longer felt that people knew who he really was. He even denies that he is, what most of us are, "a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying." We are all fallible and when we put fallible human beings in leadership roles, we shouldn't expect moral perfection. Most leaders can't live up to that and most followers will eventually be disappointed. That is why it is important to forgive leaders



*Nelson Mandela in Johannesburg on 13 May 2008*  
(Wikimedia Commons)

when they fail but only if they show us that they can learn and, as Mandela says, be "sinners who keep on trying." In this lecture, I have outlined some of the reasons why it is difficult to be an ethical leader and as you can see, they all tend to stem from the strengths and weaknesses that are a part of our common humanity.

Thank you.

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# Q&A

Below are highlights from the question-and-answer session with Professor Joanne B. Ciulla and Bentley University students, faculty, staff, and guests.

**QUESTION:** *What ethical principles drive your life on a daily basis?*

**JOANNE CIULLA:** That's a nice easy question! I spent 42 years teaching ethics, so I really do appreciate that we really have to be able to forgive people and to forgive ourselves because we all make huge mistakes. We sometimes forget that you may forgive yourself, but you don't forgive other people for mistakes that they make. That's why I like Mandela's point so much. What Mandela is saying is that, yes, we can be weak and highly fallible, but at the same time, we can also learn and try to be better. I think most people do try to be better and, granted,

there is a handful of people who never learn, but most people do try to be better. We have to appreciate that about people. In today's world, it's become a bit nasty because there isn't a lot of forgiveness around, and people don't talk about forgiveness much in organizations. Organizational forgiveness is really interesting; people are just fired or cut off when they make one mistake. We have to have some acceptance of mistakes as long as people are willing to revise themselves and learn. Because, like it or not, most of us learn what we know about ethics from those times where we do something and then think, "I'll never do that again," or "Man, that was really awful!" So,

conscience is a really important part of ethics for me.

**QUESTION:** *I love the idea of ethics versus effectiveness that you spoke of. However, at the organizational level, it's often ethics versus economics. It is the pressures for economic performance that bump up against ethics. Would you speak on that a bit?*

**JOANNE CIULLA:** You are highlighting the ethics v. effectiveness problem, and it sounds very neat and tidy. The problem is that the devil's in the details in terms of what is meant by effectiveness. In organizations, it might be economics, but the question is how to understanding how the economics is actually related to the ethics. Our friend Norman Bowie used to like to talk about the hedonist paradox, which is if you woke up tomorrow morning and decided that every single thing you were going to do that day was going to give you maximum pleasure, you probably wouldn't have a very fun day. It sounds good up front. Similarly, if everything a business did was to maximize profit, I suspect that in a rather short amount of time, it wouldn't be making any profits. I think the same goes with ethics, if you over-focus on it, there are all sorts of things that are going to eventually intervene to actually keep you from reaching that goal.

**QUESTION:** *This is perhaps a more trivial example, but ESPN journalist, Colin Cowherd, recently wrote about the differences between Tom Brady and Peyton Manning and their leadership styles. He points out that Tom Brady doesn't necessarily try to relate to the public and his followers, whereas Peyton Manning does. For example, Tom Brady appears in expensive sponsorships for cars and \$5,000 mattresses whereas Peyton Manning's deals with pizza and insurance. Do you find any truth*

*to the idea that effective or ineffective leadership is a function of how "relatable" the leader is?*

**JOANNE CIULLA:** There are lots of leadership styles and a lot of the literature is often too simplistic, suggesting that to be a good leader you have to do this, that, and the other thing. But, I think no matter what your style is, you have to be conscious of what kind of relationship you are making with other people because nobody's a leader without followers, period. There are a lot of people who think they're leaders who have no followers. However, nobody is a leader without followers. I think the question is, can we make a case that each of them — Tom Brady and Peyton Manning — have a kind of relationship with their followers? What is that relationship? Are the followers satisfied with that relationship?" Years ago, I used to give an assignment to my students called "Track a Leader." They would have to pick a leader anywhere in the world and track them in the news for several months. One of my students came to me and asked if he could track a baseball player who hit a lot of home runs but was taking performance-enhancing drugs. I think it was Barry Bonds. I said, "Is he a leader?" The student replied, "He's really good at hitting home runs. He is a leader on his team." I said, "What does that mean to be a leader on the team?" Does being a leader mean you are good at something? Are movie stars leaders? Are spokespersons leaders? One of the big issues in leadership is actually defining what it actually is. The first thing you always look for is who are the followers? What kind of followers? Justin Bieber has fans. The relationship he has with followers is very different from the relationship that a regular leader might have with followers. Celebrities have

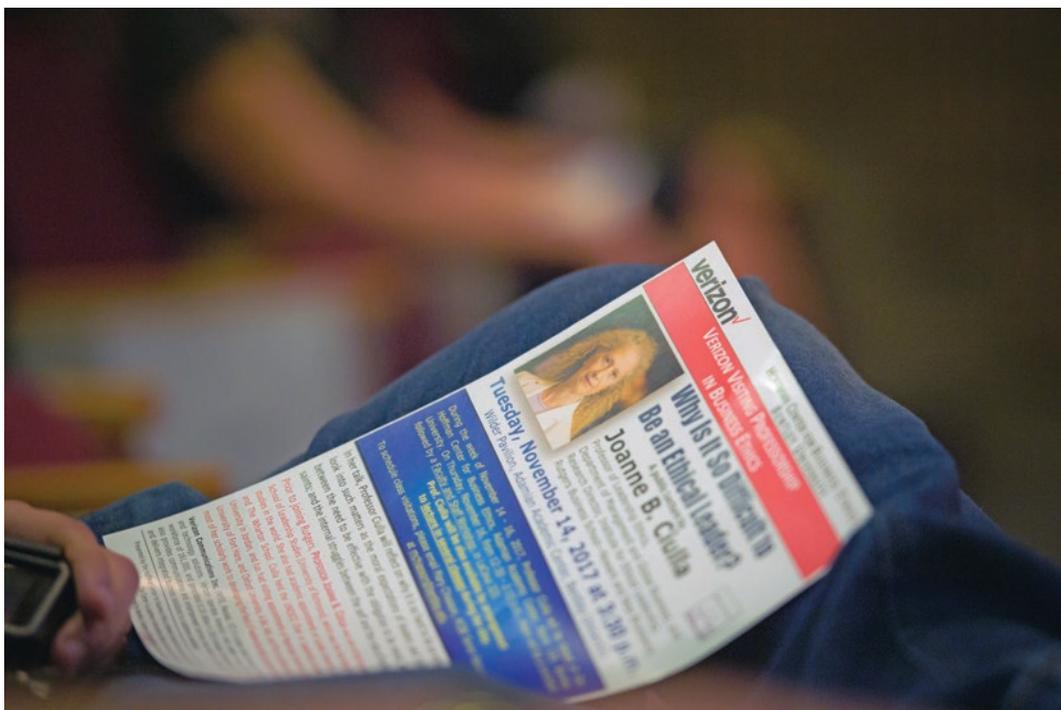
influence, and one of the things leaders have is power and influence. They have influence but it's a somewhat different kind because usually, a leader is working with people towards a common goal. If this person's a leader on the team and does things with them, then I think you can make a case. If not, it just means they have a lot of fans.

**QUESTION:** *Whom do you consider a good ethical leader who is alive today?*

**JOANNE CIULLA:** I think right now in the world today, probably one of the most solid leaders is Angela Merkel. She's also the most powerful woman in the world and the most powerful leader in Europe. Let's go back to the pictures of Napoleon and she's the one on the donkey. She's not flashy. She gets the job done, and she has to be incredibly clever. She's taken moral stands that are really unpopular regarding both the financial crisis in Europe and with immigration. Yet, she's managed to win. The woman's brilliant. However, she's not that first image we saw of Napoleon with the red cape. It's very, very interesting. Now culturally, there are differences with Northern Europeans in terms of their perceptions of leaders. Maybe something awful will happen with her, but she's probably the leader I most admire today.

**QUESTION:** *You mentioned charisma earlier and I think that sometimes we think that a leader has to be charismatic. However, as Bob Solomon wrote in your book, it's not charisma that defines an ethical leader. You can be charismatic and be quite evil, like Hitler. Would you agree that the ethical leader is really someone who creates the opportunity for others to lead themselves morally?*

**JOANNE CIULLA:** Absolutely. We have models like servant leadership, but I don't think that really captures what you're saying. I think the idea of an ethical leader is one who brings out the leadership in everyone else. For example, Lao Tzu has a famous saying about leadership. He says, "The best leaders are merely known by their followers." If you think of really good organizational leaders, they don't have to be standing in front of their people, they're all doing their job, and they're making good decisions. To me, that's the ultimate. James MacGregor Burns's transforming leadership — not transformational but transforming — is all about that. He says it's a two-way dialogue about values and goals between leaders and followers that elevates them to the point where ideally you could have the withering away of the leader. You shouldn't actually need them in front of people, except for key moments. Essentially, this is the whole notion of empowerment. There has been lots of writing in business about empowerment. The problem with empowerment is that in many places people just can't give up their authority in organizations. They empower people only so far, but then they stop them. I wrote an article called, "Leadership and the Problem of Bogus Empowerment." You see it sometimes in universities and organizations where they say, okay, we're going to empower the employees to do all those things. Yet, they don't give them the resources to do them and they don't give them the final decision on whether or not they're done. The question is what's the empowerment of that? Is it just pretending to empower people instead of really doing it? And, of course, that leads to cynicism.



**QUESTION:** *I'm taking two ethics based courses. Whenever one of my professors introduces one of these tough ethical dilemmas, I can't help but think that no matter what I choose it's going to benefit one party to the detriment of another. You can deem something unethical or ethical based on which perspective you take. Do you have any advice for navigating those difficult ethical dilemmas when you could easily deem something ethical or unethical just based on which perspective you look at it from?*

**JOANNE CIULLA:** Sounds like you're giving me a dilemma. First of all, there's a difference between an ethical problem and an ethical dilemma. An ethical dilemma is exactly as you describe it: where no matter what you choose something bad is going to happen. I call it "Sophie's Choice." If you ever saw the movie, *Sophie's Choice*, in it, a

concentration camp doctor forces Sophie to choose which one of her two children she will hand over to be killed. You have to know that's a no-win question. Most problems in life are not dilemmas — that's the good news. The ethical dilemmas that most people face, I like to think of the way I face those dilemmas as, "The Book of Me." I'm going to make this awful choice and both of them are awful. Which one do I want to be a part of who I am? Because every choice you make in ethics constitutes what you are as a human being. You make that choice, and it's terrible. But in life, sometimes we do have to make terrible choices and we do everything we can to make them in the best way possible. I think that's what's really important. Because when facing questions like which child should be killed, there's no answer to that. We do the best we can and that's all you can say about those unsolvable problems.





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