

‘How to transcend the paradox of developing virtuous leadership?’

Virtuous leadership is a paradigm of ethical leadership characterized by integrity, empathy, humility, and a commitment to the common good. It encompasses a set of virtues such as honesty, compassion, courage, and authenticity, guiding leaders to make ethical decisions and inspire others to follow suit.

This sounds to us working in the field of leadership like a leadership that is very desirable and probably in all circumstances and contexts. But maybe this is just an academic or intellectual favour. We now see at the same time in observing the practice of leadership and especially public leadership, that has big impact on leadership views in general, the opposite.

Statement 1: Virtuous leadership is currently threatened, both in corporate and political contexts

Corporate Context

Virtuous leadership faces various threats in today's complex and rapidly changing world. Some of the key threats to virtuous leadership include:

1. **Short-Termism and Profit Maximization:** In an era driven by quarterly financial results and short-term gains, there is often pressure on leaders to prioritize immediate profits over long-term sustainability and ethical considerations. This focus on short-term outcomes can lead to unethical behavior, disregard for stakeholders' interests, and a lack of investment in the common good.
2. **Lack of Ethical Role Models:** The absence of ethical role models in leadership positions can undermine efforts to cultivate virtuous leadership within organizations. When leaders prioritize self-interest, exploit power for personal gain, or engage in unethical behavior, it sets a harmful precedent for others and erodes trust in leadership.
3. **Ethical Blind Spots and Cognitive Biases:** Leaders may be susceptible to cognitive biases and ethical blind spots that cloud their judgment and decision-making processes. Factors such as overconfidence, groupthink, and moral disengagement can lead leaders to justify unethical behavior or overlook its consequences, posing a threat to virtuous leadership.
4. **Pressure to Compromise Values:** In competitive environments or situations of organizational pressure, leaders may face temptations to compromise their values and principles in pursuit of success or survival. The fear of failure, desire for recognition, or adherence to organizational norms can exert significant pressure on leaders to deviate from virtuous behavior.
5. **Ethical Dilemmas and Complex Decision-Making:** Leaders often confront ethical dilemmas and complex decision-making scenarios that challenge their commitment to virtuous leadership. Balancing competing interests, navigating conflicting values, and addressing moral ambiguity require courage, integrity, and moral reasoning skills, which may be lacking or underdeveloped in some leaders.
6. **Crisis Situations and Uncertainty:** During times of crisis or uncertainty, such as economic downturns, natural disasters, or global pandemics, leaders may face heightened pressures and demands that test their ethical resilience and integrity. The

urgency to respond quickly, coupled with ambiguous information and competing priorities, can create fertile ground for ethical lapses and misconduct.

7. **Lack of Accountability and Transparency:** In environments characterized by weak governance structures, limited oversight, or a culture of secrecy, leaders may operate with impunity and disregard ethical standards. The absence of accountability mechanisms and transparency measures can foster a climate of unethical behavior and erode trust in leadership.

Political Context

Virtuous leadership in the political context faces numerous threats that can undermine the integrity, trustworthiness, and effectiveness of leaders. Some of the key threats to virtuous leadership in politics include:

1. **Partisan Polarization:** Political leaders may prioritize partisan interests over the common good, leading to divisiveness, gridlock, and a lack of cooperation. The intense polarization prevalent in many political systems can hinder leaders' ability to collaborate, compromise, and make decisions in the best interest of society as a whole.
2. **Corruption and Self-Interest:** The temptation for political leaders to prioritize personal gain, financial enrichment, or the interests of special interests over the welfare of the public can lead to corruption and ethical misconduct. Scandals involving bribery, embezzlement, or abuse of power erode trust in government institutions and undermine the legitimacy of political leadership.
3. **Lack of Transparency and Accountability:** In environments characterized by limited transparency and accountability mechanisms, political leaders may operate with impunity and disregard ethical standards. The absence of checks and balances can foster a culture of secrecy, favoritism, and cronyism, allowing corruption to thrive unchecked.
4. **Manipulation and Propaganda:** Political leaders may engage in manipulation tactics, misinformation campaigns, and propaganda efforts to sway public opinion, undermine dissent, or maintain power. The spread of false information, divisive rhetoric, and fearmongering can erode trust in democratic institutions and fuel societal polarization.
5. **Ethical Dilemmas and Moral Compromises:** Political leaders often confront ethical dilemmas and moral compromises in their decision-making processes. Balancing competing interests, navigating conflicting values, and addressing complex policy issues require moral courage, integrity, and a commitment to ethical principles, which may be undermined by political pressures and considerations.
6. **Crisis Exploitation:** During times of crisis, such as natural disasters, economic downturns, or public health emergencies, political leaders may exploit the situation for personal or political gain. The urgency to respond to crises can create opportunities for leaders to consolidate power, enact controversial policies, or evade accountability under the guise of emergency measures.
7. **Erosion of Democratic Norms:** The erosion of democratic norms, such as respect for the rule of law, freedom of speech, and the independence of the judiciary, poses a significant threat to virtuous leadership in politics. Leaders who disregard democratic principles and institutions undermine the foundations of democratic governance and jeopardize the rights and freedoms of citizens.

If our purpose is to stimulate and develop virtuous leadership, and again, who can be against it, we certainly need to know how to challenge these threats and put an extra effort in developing this kind of leadership. The good news is that leadership is especially about this. It is about leading people the way towards challenges they didn't think they could handle or even did not think about. These trends and influences create just that context for leaders to lead the way in fighting them.

Working definition

For the discussion it is good to have a working definition of virtuous leadership. My proposal: Virtuous leadership is a leadership style rooted in ethical principles and values, where leaders prioritize the welfare of their followers and stakeholders above personal gain.

It involves embodying virtues such as integrity, compassion, humility, and courage, and demonstrating ethical decision-making in all aspects of leadership. Virtuous leaders inspire trust, foster a culture of inclusivity and accountability, and strive to create positive impacts on individuals, organizations, and society as a whole.

Paths of Leadership Development

Developing Virtuous Leadership could be along the following paths, following many theories about and practices of leadership development:

1. **Self-Reflection and Values Clarification:** Encourage leaders to engage in self-reflection and clarify their core values and principles. By understanding their personal ethical compass, leaders can align their actions with virtuous ideals and serve as authentic role models for others.
2. **Emotional Intelligence Development:** Cultivate emotional intelligence skills among leaders to enhance their ability to understand and empathize with others. Emphasize the importance of empathy, active listening, and interpersonal communication in building trusting relationships and fostering a supportive organizational culture.
3. **Moral Reasoning and Ethical Decision-Making Training:** Provide training and workshops on moral reasoning and ethical decision-making to equip leaders with the tools and frameworks needed to navigate complex ethical dilemmas. Encourage critical thinking and ethical reflection to guide leaders in making principled choices that uphold integrity and respect for stakeholders.
4. **Role Modeling and Mentorship:** Foster a culture of mentorship and peer support, where experienced leaders serve as mentors to emerging leaders. Encourage mentorship relationships based on virtuous principles, where mentors exemplify ethical behavior and provide guidance and support in navigating ethical challenges.
5. **Accountability and Transparency:** Establish clear expectations for ethical behavior and hold leaders accountable for upholding virtuous principles. Implement mechanisms for transparency and accountability, such as ethical codes of conduct, whistleblower protections, and regular ethical audits, to ensure adherence to ethical standards throughout the organization.
6. **Recognition and Reward Systems:** Recognize and reward virtuous behavior and ethical leadership through formal recognition programs and incentives. Celebrate examples of integrity, compassion, and courage demonstrated by leaders and employees, reinforcing the importance of virtuous leadership in driving organizational success.

Statement 2 (main discussion): there is a fundamental paradox between the concept of 'virtuous leadership' and the current organizational approach to leadership development

A fundamental paradox arises when wanting to work with these kinds of classic programs of leadership development, while at the same time acknowledging that it is an intrinsic demand of the whole concept of this leadership, that it must be at the same time be spontaneous and authentic. Virtuous leadership is characterized by qualities such as integrity, empathy, humility, and authenticity, which are deeply ingrained in one's character and are often expressed instinctively and authentically.

On one hand, it seems obvious, conscious development efforts are necessary to foster virtuous leadership within individuals and organizations. Self-reflection, values clarification, and skill development are essential components of this process. On the other hand, the very essence of virtuous leadership lies in its authenticity and spontaneity. Genuine virtue emerges from a deep-rooted commitment to ethical principles and a sincere desire to serve the common good. Leaders who embody virtuous qualities naturally inspire trust, empathy, and respect among their followers. Their actions are not driven by external rewards or the desire for recognition but stem from a genuine concern for others and a steadfast adherence to their values.

Maybe we must learn from the old wisdom of the Chinese philosophy of Daoism around their concept of Wu Wei or effortless acting. It handles the same paradox, because it is about the wisdom to 'go with the flow' or 'to know instinctively what to do in this situation' and also about 'not wanting too much'. The paradox of it is nicely summarized in the title of a book of Edward Slingerland "Trying Not to Try: The Art and Science of Spontaneity," Slingerland explores the paradoxical nature of achieving success and fulfillment through this concept of wu-wei. Drawing upon both Eastern philosophy and modern psychology, Slingerland examines how individuals can cultivate a state of spontaneous, unselfconscious flow by relinquishing conscious control and striving for harmony with the natural flow of events. Slingerland argues that by letting go of the desire to control outcomes and surrendering to the rhythm of the present moment, individuals can tap into their innate creativity, intuition, and wisdom to lead more fulfilling lives.

This seems like a fundamental other way of thinking than we now see in the deliberate and managerial approaches to leadership development, which in my view doesn't fit with the concept of 'virtuous leadership', as outlined before.

Conclusion:

Developing virtuous leadership is a multifaceted endeavor requiring a combination of self-awareness, skill development, organizational support, and cultural alignment. In many contexts of corporate and political life this kind of leadership is now threatened and certainly not spontaneously rewarded and supported. We have to look to new ways of selecting and developing this kind of leadership, but the fundamental nature of many 'leadership programs' maybe working against us. We need to invent leadership development again.