

MICHAEL JINKINS AND DEBORAH BRADSHAW JINKINS

# The Character of Leadership

POLITICAL REALISM AND PUBLIC VIRTUE IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

## KEY CONCEPTS

- Three barriers to effective leadership in nonprofit organizations include idealism, the quest for utopian institutions and naïve optimism
- Nonprofit leaders need find the appropriate balance between idealism and reality in order to succeed in their mission.
- In order to be successful, leaders must develop an intuitive sense for the organization they lead and the people they serve.

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## Rethinking Good Leadership in Light of a Fresh Encounter with Machiavelli

Leadership in any organization is unavoidably subject to conflict both within the conscience of the leader and in relation to people inside and outside the organization. In their book, *The Character of Leadership: Political Realism and Public Virtue in Nonprofit Organizations*, authors Michael Jenkins and Deborah Bradshaw Jenkins offer a unique and refreshing guide for leaders of nonprofit organizations seeking to develop responsible leadership skills in light of organizational dysfunction, and idealistic tendencies.

The author's unique approach of modeling contemporary scenarios of leadership debacles in reference to the teaching of Machiavelli provides the reader with a realistic and theoretical understanding of the complexities and challenges of leadership. Furthermore, this method encourages the reader to engage their own skills of critical self-reflection in order to evaluate their values, assumptions and challenge them to learn

### If Only....

Often when faced with difficult situations it is easy for us to forgo reality and engage in thoughts of "if only"; for instance, *if only* our staff would recognize the implications of their actions on the reputation of our business...

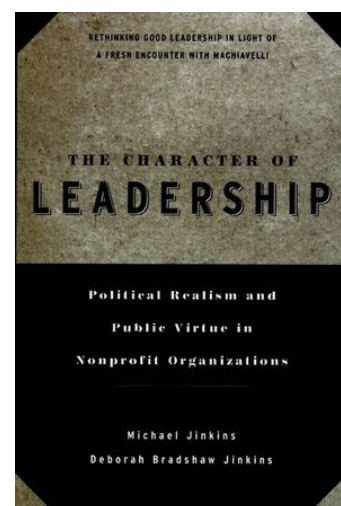
When we find ourselves engaged in this sort of internal dialogue we are entertaining utopian thinking and this works against our ability to accomplish our goals as leaders. —both for our own internal satisfaction and for the organizations and people we lead. Therefore it is imperative to focus on the situation at hand— our current reality— and how we can go about accomplishing our goals. We need to take reality into account. This does not mean that we must abandon our values, goals and ideals. We just need to be realistic.

from the mistakes and successes of others.

The contents of this book is divided between four sections. In Part I, the authors reflect upon Machiavelli's approach for training a Renaissance prince in relevance to developing contemporary leaders, highlighting importance of disciplined self-reflection, and the necessity of healthy skepticism toward others.

In Part II, the authors provide an overview of organizational culture and the necessity for leaders to develop and contribute to the values, goals and mission of the organization in light of regional and global realities.

The authors dedicate Part III to the topic of character and public virtue. Each chapter in this section is dedicated to a element of virtue which Machiavelli held to



The essential characteristic of good leadership: integrity, courage, flexibility, talent and prudence.

Part IV provides a recipe for leaders of nonprofit organizations to develop political skill and addresses the question of what skills a politically realistic leader must possess.



**"What would it mean for leaders to concentrate on how things actually worked in their organizations rather than basing decisions and strategies on how things ought to work?"**

In order to achieve our goals, we need to take reality into account:

- Conflict is the norm in the real world
- Deals get cut every day
- Nothing stays ‘fixed’ for long
- Far-reaching, universal solutions elude us
- Black and white issues are few and far between
- Tactics compete for the upper hand over strategy
- Ambiguous grey dominates the horizon



*“We need to learn from Machiavelli to take a clear eyed look at the world around us...we can not gain what we need from reflection if we are afraid of offending those whom we study”  
(p. 30)*

# Learning from Experience

## We’re Not Past the Past

Machiavelli teaches a respect for disciplined reflection on past and present experience— *the unexamined life is not worth living*. Machiavelli demonstrates to his prince (and us) that learning from the past is necessary for our survival in the future. The leader who wants to understand what is happening in his or her organization can learn a great deal by observing and reflecting on the experiences of other leaders.

## Exercising a Hermeneutic of Suspicion— Second Guessing

### What We Are Told

As leaders, it is imperative to be attentive and open to the teachings of history, cultural queues and societal values in order to acquire all the information necessary to lead an organization.

*“Openness to data must be tempered by skepticism, by critical judgment, and the willingness to make tough choices about how we hear and receive data, so that the acquisition of information can lead to the wise exercise of power” (p.29)*

Under the theorem of hermeneutic suspicion the leader engages in process of internal questioning to authenticate the validity of the information by asking questions like

- Why are they telling me this now?
- Whose interests does it serve for this message to be accepted as factual?
- Whose power is enhanced by this version of history?



*“The effective leader is the one who learns the lessons of history and goes to school on the experiences of others so as to survive long enough to put a program into effect” (p. 57)*

## The Perils of the Unarmed Prophet

Why is it that some leaders have capacity to linger in the minds and hearts of their followers for generations, while others simply fade away? Machiavelli contends that the success of a leader to guide an organization over the long haul is based upon their capacity to inspire and maintain trust. It is the power of words, the demonstration of respect for persons, and a sensitivity to injustice combined with the conviction that impotence is not a virtue and that power can and must be used for good. The access to and capacity to use coercive power has little effect here. For example, Martin Luther King believed that through struggle and cost great ends can be achieved, and forced the idea that politics is only as good as the people advancing it. He was strategically equipped with economic power generated by thousands of supporters; electoral power that began with the fight for the rights of all citizens to vote;

associational power that grew out of King’s political and social connections and informational power which brought together vast bodies of knowledge to form the basis of the movement. In addition, he possessed rhetorical power and referent power through his own charisma. The combination of these power sources and his capacity to redefine power in a positive terms provided him with the amour necessary to achieve political greatness. Leaders must remember that power is reciprocal, and governance systems are equipped with systems of checks and balances. Leaders incapable of managing power and finding an appropriate balance of power will suffer defeat, absolutely.



## The Problem with Mercenaries

Nonprofit organizations rely

primarily on the efforts of volunteers to carry out the mission of the organization. These 'mercenaries' have the power to potentially undermine the integrity and inner life of an organization. If compensation, name development, and self-promotion are the primary incentive for relationship with the organization, the relationship remains very weak. Machiavelli offers a solution to this dilemma: those whom are promoted to leadership must have shared values with the organization and be invested in the organization's mission and goals. Compensation is important, although it

can not be the primary motivation for affiliation. Second, Machiavelli advises that those who participate in the organization as members, constituents and volunteers must develop a sense of belonging and duty to one another and the organization.

Those who participate in an organization as members, constituents and volunteers must be bound to the organization by a web of relationships. They must give personal reasons to care about the future success of the organization. They must become the organization" (p. 48)

## Foreseeing the Unforeseeable

Nonprofit leaders are continually faced with the reality of uncertainty and crisis given the organizational dependency on external funding arrangements (which could be discontinued at any time) and the reliance on philanthropic workers who may not be committed to the organization. How leaders manage their organizations through these uncertainties will be evidenced by

the cohesion of the organization. However, the one thing that separates good from great leaders is the extent to which the great leaders are able to foresee the unforeseeable and therefore are empowered to deal with the unexpected (49).

Reflecting on history, and learning from the experience of other organizations can help us in this endeavor. However, sometimes crisis,

sabotage and opposition can happen for reasons beyond our control. Sometimes the things that cause us to not to recognize crisis is due to an intense emotional investment in believing that the world is a rational place and people are inherently good. The effective leader is the one who learns from the history of others, is courageous to hear criticism and 'willing to stay the course'.

"The effective leader is the one who learns the lessons of history and goes to school on the experiences of others so as to survive long enough to put a program into effect" (p. 57)

## Developing a Sense of Smell

"One of the most bedevilling and frustrating predicaments we can find ourselves in occurs when we mistake the functioning in an organization according to a set of rules without realizing that this institution does not follow these rules"

Machiavelli wrote that good leaders must "acquire a sense of smell" for leadership, the intuitive sense for what kind of an organization they are leading, what that organization understands itself to be, and where it wants to go". Developing this sense depends on the willingness of the leader to be open to hear the truth, and be sensitive to the cultural context in the willingness to

recognize, accept and accommodate the "entire web of invisible assumptions and values that constitute a culture's identity".

Discerning what type of organization one serves is key for all leaders. Leaders must work to understand the political and structural aspects of the organization's culture and assess their own core values

with those of the organization. Are they leading a principality or a republic? Furthermore, leaders need to understand how members within the organization view themselves in relation to the principles of the organization.

# Nurturing Character for Realistic Leadership

## VIRTUE REDEFINED

*“ It is by the habit of doing precisely those acts of virtue that are beyond our comfort zone that we become more virtuous”*  
(p. 105)

**How do you stand for integrity?**

Machiavelli maintains that the acquisition of skills is irrelevant unless the leader acquires the appropriate qualities of character, or what he defines as “virtu”.

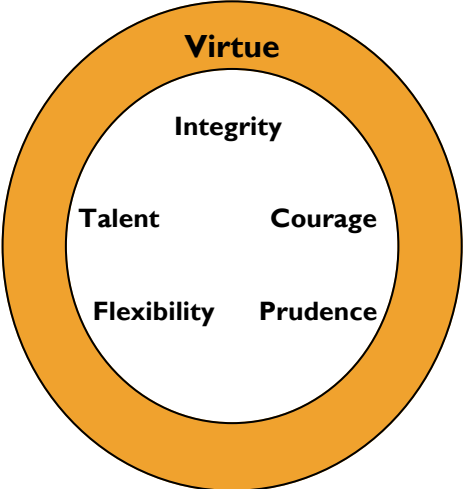
Individual virtue and character are a product of social, historical, and educational construct. Machiavelli contents that virtue and character may be taught and reformed. Further, virtue is a social construct which we hold

in relation to others in the community. Therefore, this means that when it comes to the leader’s character, virtue is public. The leader’s character is defined and shaped and required to hold to certain values by the leader’s engagement and with responsibility for community (106).

Machiavelli’s definition of virtue is complex and consists of five es-

sential elements: integrity, courage, talent, prudence, and flexibility. All elements of virtue are considered equal, and a leader is tasked with matching these elements to leadership situations/crisis as required. For instance, staff morale may suffer at an organization because of inflexible leadership. In order to address this issue, the leader of the organization must exercise flexible leadership.

**Integrity:** means wholeness, completeness and entirety (114). Integrity is a challenge to every leader as they face balancing the diverse interest and values associated with our pluralistic society and the values and mission of the organization they lead. Integrity is premised on two key fundamentals (1) in order to gain public trust, leaders must never set the goals of an organization on their own. (2) Diversity and plurality are non-negotiable. Leaders must respect the values and perspectives of persons from various backgrounds within the organization and negotiate a consensus. Poor leadership attempts to homogenize these various and divergent voices. Good leadership cultivates discordant plurality for the sake and good of society (116). Integrity requires leaders to be aware of the reality of the situations they face. Leaders must be willing to see the truth and speak the truth. This requires the leader to exemplify courage.



**Courage:** is the willingness to face the truth, to respond to concerns in a reasoned manner and to develop strategies that achieve the goals of the organization. A leader’s courage is the organization’s most vital resource in dealing with crisis (123). Leaders exemplify courage by not disappearing in the face of crisis. They meet the situation head on, they seek the truth and are able to redefine the crisis as an opportunity to learn.

**Flexibility:** The capacity to assist organizations to become adaptable is the essence and ultimate challenge of leadership. Flexibility is the capacity to adapt to “ Those who have no backbone and so bend to every way are not leaders. But the leader who never bends will be broken. Great leadership finds a balance” (125).

**Talent:** is the human capacity to respond creatively to and function in our environment (131) . Talent may be developed and leaders of organizations must seek to encourage the advancement of talent within the organization by inviting members to discover problems, present hypothesis, invest time in curiosity and explain their ideas in the context to trust and mutual respect.

**Prudence:** is characterized by balanced, considered reflection; even in the face of conflict. Prudence walks the line between caution and courage (138). Prudent leaders have the capacity to learn from mistakes, and predict and interpret the consequences of actions .

# Developing Political Skills for Nonprofit Leaders



**What are the skills a politically realistic leader must possess in order to combine pragmatism with values and actually get things done?**

- ✓ **Develop Competence**
- ✓ **Make Connections**
- ✓ **Build Leadership Teams**
- ✓ **Deal with Sabotage and**



**Collegial consultation is a valuable practice for both introverts and extroverts.**

**Develop Competence:** Political competence is based on the leader's capacity to gain power over external events; aptitude to bring order to crisis; assist the organization to adapt to change; and a critical sense of self in relation to the organization. In addition, competent leaders need to possess a strong appreciation for clarity in regard to information, intention, direction and reflection. Leaders who wish to develop competence skills benefit from mentorship.

**Make Connections:** Building and fostering relationships with others is an important nonprofit leader because they provide an important source of support and conduit for information sharing which is necessary to achieve organizational goals. Leaders can increase their interaction with and connections to others by developing a strategy to target their contacts, making time for networking engagements, and following up. However, by enlisting external groups to support ideas and initiatives, leaders of nonprofit organizations must be willing to compromise.



**Building Leadership Teams:** Teams are built on confidence and confidence requires both trust in the character and competence of colleagues. One of the most frequent mistakes people make when they decide to move toward a team leadership model in their organization is to confuse a general feeling of supportiveness with actual team work. In nonprofit organizations, each position has its role, its own responsibilities, and its own authority appropriate to carrying out those responsibilities. (160). *The role of the leader is to make sure that the roles of particular team members fit their passion.*

**Dealing with Sabotage and Opposition:** Sabotage and opposition are a natural part of the development and growth of an organization. If you want to lead, you have to:

- Accept the reality of sabotage and resistance
- Plan to be surprised by resistance
- Learn to deal with outside and internal criticisms
- Respond positively to the incidence, articulate the mission of the organization clearly and keep your organizational house in order
- Do not get bogged down in the details of every attack. It will drain you.

The leader's ability to respond appropriately, after careful and balanced reflection is essential. While good leadership is sensitive to criticism, the good leader must also be efficient in the task of sorting through criticism to discern which comment requires immediate attention, which needs further reflection before making a response, and which should simply be ignored.

Some leaders deal with sabotage and opposition by engaging in collegial consultations in which pairs of leaders regularly meet to reflect upon specific aspects of their leadership to gain perspective. This process is incredibly valuable for introverts, who tend to cut themselves off from crucial conversations and reflections of others. This process is also valuable for extroverts whose informal approach to processing information tends to ignore the critical reflections and insights of others (187).

# Passion is Not Enough



## Critical Evaluation

*“Reality is shaped by our perception. Often the political leader who claims to be ‘just being realistic’ is simply too cowardly or incompetent to risk shaping a new possibility” (p.193)*

Authors Jinkins and Bradshaw Jinkins present a healthy multiplicity of thought provoking case studies that challenges the reader to reflect and evaluate their practice of leadership in light of their inner values, ideals and their conceptualization of what it means to lead and what makes a “good leader”.

The question they pose at the beginning of the book, “Can political knowhow and altruistic values comfortably coexist in a nonprofits setting?” and the answer, as demonstrated through the theoretic presented and sound argument found in this volumes, is ‘yes they can’. The importance of approaching situations and crisis with a healthy scepticism, and the creativity to and receptiveness of organizational norms and the ability to engage with and build strong teams best serves all leaders.

However, passion is not enough. Leaders need to face realities and develop a keen sense for discerning the organizations they lead, the people whom follow and that sometimes the hardest path is the one best travelled.

Indeed, this book is a very worthwhile volume not only for those interest in the study of leadership in nonprofit organizations but for scholars engaged in the general study of organization behavioural theories, academics, political theorists and business leaders. Overall, this piece is an excellent collection of theories, case studies and personal narratives highlighting the many complexities of associated with leadership in the nonprofit sector. The strength of this book lie in the diversity of considerations and the analytical observations given to the issue of the importance of political keening, forming teams, and recognizing and developing inner strengths. At times, the pace of the book is slow and somewhat laboured, as in the chapter on authenticity and duplicity, and often the arguments are somewhat utopian in nature. While few readers will agree with every argument, *The Character of Leadership: Political Realism and Public Virtue in the Nonprofit Sector*, makes a valuable and timely contribution to the study of leadership.

***“Good leaders lead. They listen. They convince. They learn from others, but they also persuade. They enlighten, and make things imaginable that others thought impossible. Their vision is not simply their own private dream; their vision emerges as the crystallisation of hopes and yearnings of people, the insights and concerns of an organization”***

# About the Authors

**Michael Jinkins** is academic dean and professor of pastoral theology at Austin Presbyterian Church, USA. Jinkins has served churches in Scotland and Texas. He has authored more than 100 papers, articles and reviews and was a founding member of the Academy of Religious Leadership. From 2001-2006 Jinkins was the associate editor and board member of the Journal of Religious Leadership.

**Deborah Bradshaw Jinkins** has served more than twenty years in public education as teacher, principal, grant monitor, and accountability and compliance monitor of school district effectiveness. Currently she is the founding principal of “Not Your Ordinary School”, in Austin, Texas.

"To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable."

## Expert Review...

*“Every leader will find this book a richly rewarding read. It legitimizes power and challenges leaders to embrace it and use it in their service to society”*

**Paul Hersey, President, Centre for Leadership Studies**

*“The Jinkinses have cut through much of the wishful thinking that floods our leadership discussions. In this remarkable example of practical humanities scholarship, they have dusted off a great political thinker and put him to the test to illuminate our realities”*

**James Wind, President, The Alban Institute**

