

THE FUEL OF LEADERSHIP AFFLICTION: PART 2

Jumping right back into the fuel of leadership affliction, we are finishing our discussion on unchecked power. No, the mere possession of power does not necessarily lead to its abuse.

While power doesn't necessarily corrupt, it does, to Barber's point, reveal the contours of a leader's character. Lincoln observed,

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

As the old proverb goes,

"If you wish to know what a man is, place him in authority."

There is no more stringent test of a person's character than the possession of power.

POWER REVEALS THE DEPTH OF OUR MOTIVATION.

For those in emotional deficit or prone to destructive narcissism, power draws the worst out of the leader, as it provides the leader the unfettered opportunity to gratify his or her impulses and self-centered passions at the expense of others and at times, the entire organization.

Researcher Joanne Ciulla asserts that leadership is morality and immorality magnified. As Richard Nixon famously noted,

"It (the presidency) is not a finishing school. It is a magnifying glass."

Nixon knew from firsthand experience—as did the public from the sad record of Watergate—that the exercise of top leadership puts the leader's moral judgments on display, for better or worse. The public spotlight makes the leader's moral strength more obvious and his or her moral weakness more glaring.

THERE IS SIMPLY NO MORALLY NEUTRAL GROUND WHEN IT COMES TO THE USE OF POWER.

Leaders employ power to contribute to the welfare and progress of the organization or to its weakening. Leaders abuse power in the service of self-interest, or they rise above self-interest and infuse the organization with moral strength to serve the greater good.

The Age-old Question: Who Should Lead? Knowing that greed, self-centeredness, and the lust for power infect the human heart, and that the will to power is typically cloaked in the purest of motives and noblest of causes, political philosopher John Locke framed what he called, "the issue of the ages."

"The great question which in all ages, has disturbed mankind, and brought on them the greatest part of those mischiefs which have ruined cities, depopulated countries, and disordered the peace of the world, has been, not whether there be power in the world, nor whence it came, but who should have it" (italics mine)."

Who should possess power? Plato believed,

"Only he that does not seek power is fit to hold it."

But, sadly, history demonstrates an alternative answer—those proud enough to believe power is their right and strong enough to secure it and expand it. First century Roman historian Tacitus gives voice to this perspective, "The gods are on the side of the stronger." Napoleon agreed. "God is on the side of the army with the biggest guns."

But not all concur. American historian and educator Charles Beard got it about right. He said his lifetime of study could be summed up in one sentence.

Whom the gods would destroy, they first make drunk with power."

SUMMARY

As I affirmed in my first blog, not every top leader is power-hungry or corrupt. Many, thankfully, are not. The critical factor that differentiates sound and constructive leaders from afflicted leaders is the leader's motive for power and use of power once attained. Emotionally mature individuals and constructive narcissists use power to serve others and build the organization. Emotionally immature leaders and destructive narcissists seek power to bolster their self-regard and serve self-interest.

As I close the first section of this series, I think it is helpful to affirm that power does indeed tend to corrupt individuals; especially those whose pursuit of power is rooted in emotional deficit or destructive narcissism. Power delights and fascinates them. Once in the possession of power, they use what power they have to protect and expand their power. Of course, the lust for power rooted in emotional deficit will never be satisfied.

Power is an intoxicant, perverting the purest of hearts, as alcohol blurs the keenest of minds.

Which brings us back to the observation of Charles Beard, "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make drunk with power." Understanding the fuel of leadership affliction and its relationship to power can help us realize what types of leaders we want to be in our circle of influence.

LOOKING AHEAD.

Part Two of this series explores six all-too-common top leadership afflictions. As we will see, each affliction is an expression of the toxic mix of emotional immaturity, destructive narcissism, and access to power.

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