

How Bad Leadership Happens

BY BARBARA KELLERMAN

I've been struck over the years by the degree to which the study of leadership has evolved slowly but certainly into the study of *good* leadership. The reasons for this sunny but skewed view are multiple, ranging from our ancient proclivity to long for a man—yes, a man—on a white horse to save us from ourselves to our newfound conviction that leadership (*good* leadership) is a skill that can easily be learned to a leadership language in which bad leaders are not even considered leaders but something else altogether. For example, in his seminal book, *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns makes a distinction between leaders and “power wielders.” He writes: “Power wielders may treat people as things. Leaders may not.”

But accentuating the positive and neglecting the negative has costs. Imagine a medical school that purports to teach about good health without teaching about bad health. The fact is that we can no more promote good leadership without studying the pathogenesis of bad leadership than we can promote strong, sturdy bodies without studying the diseases that disable and fell them.

State of Nature

Most of the world's great political philosophers—for example, Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Mill, and Locke—believed that man, humankind, cannot be trusted to behave wisely and well. As a consequence, they were less focused on the issue of how to secure human rights and entitlements than they were on the problem of how people in groups can best be ordered and organized. They argued in favor of what they considered to be essential constraints, whether those of an autocratic regime, or those of a dominant “Prince,” or those of the rule of law.

Even America's founders were not so idealistic as is generally believed. As the *Federalist Papers* testify, when the time came to codify a political system, Alexander Hamilton,

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James Madison, and John Jay made their most forceful argument on behalf of checks and balances. Why? Because they did not trust all of the people all of the time. As Clinton Rossiter observed, the *Federalist Papers* remind us of “both the light and dark sides of human nature—of man’s capacity for reason and justice that makes free government possible, of his capacity for passion and injustice that makes it necessary.”

For those of us with an interest in leadership of any kind, the important readings in political theory are a treasure trove. They remind us—as if we need reminding—that leaders lead and followers follow not out of the kindness of their collective hearts but because it is in their self-interest.

To be sure, it’s easier for us to understand why leaders have an interest in leading than to understand why followers have an interest in following. The rewards of leading tend to be more obvious, and more obviously coveted. They include the many rights and resources typically associated with having power, authority, and influence. And they also include a greater degree of autonomy than is generally available to followers.

The reasons why followers follow are, in comparison, obscure. They are especially obscure when followers follow leaders who are judged, in one or another way, to be bad. But we do have our reasons—our excuses, if you will. At the most general level, they fall into two categories. First, followers follow, even bad leaders, because of their needs as individuals. Second, followers fol-



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low, even bad leaders, because of their needs as members of a group.

At the level of the individual, leaders usually satisfy our most basic human needs for safety, stability, and simplicity. The quest for safety, for self-preservation, is arguably the strongest of these basic needs. This is a point perhaps made most memorably by English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, whose primary concern was how to maintain the public order when those who people the public realm lead lives that are “nasty” and “brutish.” But the point may be said to apply equally to the private realm—that is, to a private sector in which working stiff s feel obliged to go along with bad leaders in order to secure for themselves and their families the necessities of life.

Similarly, we follow because our need for stability usually trumps our need for self-expression. Even bad leaders can provide a sense of order and certainty in a disordered and uncertain world, and even bad leaders can protect against angst, whether for reasons real or imagined. Moreover, to resist leaders openly, to lodge a serious public protest against them, is nearly always to invite confusion and upset. It’s demanding in a way that going along is not.

Finally, we follow the leader because the construct of the leader is itself a manifestation of our preference for simple as opposed to complex explanations for why things happen the way they do. Bill Gates has come to explain and even symbolize the stupendous success of Microsoft, just as Cardinal Bernard Law has come to explain

and even symbolize the corruption and cover-ups that stained the reputation of the Roman Catholic Church. In neither case was a single individual responsible for everything that happened, good or bad. But in both cases it was easier for us to understand a story built around a single main character than it was for us to follow a plot peopled by a cast of thousands.

At the level of the group, leaders provide benefits that range from maintaining order to providing cohesion and identity to taking on the collective work. Despite the fact that the last of these tasks is especially important, its significance is not usually appreciated. But, as the great German sociologist Robert Michels pointed out, *all* groups and organizations, even those that place a high value on collective decision-making, develop oligarchic tendencies. Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" states that there will always be leaders because there will always be a need to charge some individuals with getting the group's work done.

Types of Bad Leadership

As my recently published book *Bad Leadership* testifies, I took seriously my own earlier complaint that leadership studies were badly diminished by our fixation on good leadership at the expense of bad leadership. As I put it in an essay titled, "Hitler's Ghost: A Manifesto," for us to "learn leadership without learning Hitler is to whistle in the dark."

But what became clear as I began to look at bad leadership in depth was that it is more richly textured than the simple divide between good and evil would seem to

suggest. Rather, bad leadership is like good leadership: It is an exchange relationship that is complex and multifaceted and that, among other things, manifests itself in different forms for different reasons.

At the most basic level, bad leadership divides into two categories: bad as in *ineffective* and bad as in *unethical*. This distinction is not, I hasten to add, a theoretical construct. Look around you and you will find that all bad leadership falls into one, or sometimes both, of these categories.

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Ineffective leadership may be conceived of quite simply: It is leadership that has failed to produce the desired change. For reasons that include missing traits, weak skills, strategies badly conceived, and tactics badly employed, ineffective leadership falls short of its intention. Unethical leadership, in contrast, is about right and wrong. Unethical leadership can be effective leadership, just as ineffective leadership can be ethical. But unethical leadership cannot make even the most basic claim to decency and

good conduct, and so the leadership process is defiled.

But if this most basic division—in which bad leadership is ineffective, or unethical, or both—is necessary to understand the nature of the beast, it is not sufficient. After looking at hundreds of contemporary cases of bad leadership, cases that involved bad leaders and bad followers in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, and in groups and organizations both at home and abroad, I found that examples of bad leadership reflected seven different patterns of bad behavior. Generally they fall along a continuum that ranges from ineffective to unethical:

- *Incompetent leadership*: The leader and at least some followers lack the will and skill (or both) to sustain effective action. With regard to at least one important leadership challenge, they fail to create positive change.
- *Rigid leadership*: The leader and at least some followers are stiff and unyielding. Although they may be competent, they are unable or unwilling to adapt to new ideas, new information, or changing times.
- *Intemperate leadership*: The leader lacks self-control and is aided and abetted by followers who are unwilling or unable to intervene effectively.
- *Callous leadership*: The leader and at least some followers are uncaring or unkind. Ignored or discounted are the needs, wants, and wishes of most members of the group or organization, especially subordinates.
- *Corrupt leadership*: The leader and at least some followers lie, cheat, or steal. To a degree that exceeds the norm, they put self-interest ahead of the public interest.
- *Insular leadership*: The leader and at least some followers minimize or disregard the health and welfare of the “other,” that is, of those outside the group or organization for which they are directly responsible.
- *Evil leadership*: The leader and at least some followers commit atrocities. They use pain as an instrument of power. The harm done to men, women, and children is severe rather than slight, and it can be physical, psychological, or both.

Note that this is emphatically not a typology of bad leaders, but rather of bad leadership. As I use it—indeed as it was used by Max Weber in his classic typol-

ogy of traditional, rational, and charismatic leadership—the word *type* does not mean personality type. Instead, it refers to a set of behaviors that resulted in (unwanted) change of some sort, and that engaged both the leader and at least some followers.

The Web

That followers matter is a presumption now widely shared. Still, even scholars of leadership tend to exaggerate the importance of leaders and diminish the importance of followers.

Moreover, it is often assumed that one size fits all—that what applies to leaders and followers in one situation applies as well to leaders and followers in another situation. While in theory we know this to be ridiculous, in practice we play down the significance of context just as we play down the significance of followers.

Put another way, to teach a roomful of students—whether undergraduates or graduate students or adults seeking to have a

greater personal and professional impact—a set of leadership skills is probably less effective than we would like to imagine. As my close look at bad leadership confirmed, leadership is a web in which three separate and distinct strands—the leader, the followers, and the context—are inextricably tangled. My study of leaders as diverse as Mary Meeker, the discredited stock analyst known as the Queen of the Internet, Serbian strongman Radovan Karadzic, former *New York Times* managing editor Howell Raines, sadistic cult leader David Koresh, former Washington, D.C., mayor and crack addict Marion Barry Jr., and Leona Helmsley, the convicted hotel executive, only served to

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How Leaders, and Followers, Can Increase the Probability of Good Leadership and Decrease the Probability of Bad Leadership

FOR LEADERS . . .

- Limit your tenure. When leaders remain in positions of power for too long, they acquire bad habits.
- Share power. When power is centralized, it's likely to be misused—or abused.
- Get real. Stay real. Virtually every bad leader is, to a degree, out of touch with reality.
- Compensate for your weaknesses. Leaders should surround themselves with those who know most about what they know least.
- Stay balanced. Leaders who have a healthy personal life are

more likely than their workaholic counterparts to have a healthy professional life.

- Be reflective. Virtually every one of the great writers on leadership emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge, self-control, and good habits.

FOR FOLLOWERS . . .

- Empower yourself. People who think themselves followers don't think themselves powerful. But they—we—are. Or, more accurately, they, we, can be.
- Be loyal to the whole and not to any single individual. When followers put the interests of

the leader ahead of the interests of the group, the group's in trouble.

- Be skeptical. Leaders are not gods. They should be awarded no more, and no less, than the loyalty they earn.
- Be a watchdog. Ignorance is not bliss.
- Take a stand. Pliant boards, craven aides, scared subordinates, submissive underlings, and passive bystanders are as much to blame for bad leadership as are bad leaders.
- Find allies. In numbers there is strength.

confirm that it's impossible to separate one from the other, to separate leaders from those who follow them and from the specifics of the situation in which their stories unfold.

So, it's impossible to teach about, learn about, leadership without teaching about, learning about, followership. And it is impossible to teach or learn about either leadership or followership without teaching and learning about the context in which both are necessarily embedded.

Does this mean it's impossible for people to learn something about how to be a good leader? Not at all. But I

would argue that it's impossible for anyone to learn how to be a good leader without at the same time learning how to be a good follower. And I would further argue that this particular learning experience will be significantly enhanced if it takes into account the specifics of the situation in which change is supposed to take place.

Stopping or Slowing Bad Leadership

While context matters, my study of bad leadership suggests this universal truth: Leaders cannot do harm without followers who enable them. Al Dunlap,

former chairman of the Sunbeam Corporation, could not have been so outrageously callous had he not been surrounded by deferential aides, a pliant board, and complacent stockholders, all of whom let him get away with being bad. Andrew Fastow, Enron's onetime chief financial officer, could not have been so egregiously corrupt had his schemes not been given full and active support by a small cast of characters, both within the company and outside it. And President Bill Clinton could not have ignored the genocide in Rwanda had key members of his foreign policy team, or key members of the House and Senate, or at least some of his key constituents, taken the time and trouble to lodge loud protests.

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One could plausibly argue that the fact that there's blame to go around is heartening. For what soon becomes clear is that stopping or slowing bad leadership is possible at many points in the process. And what soon becomes clear is that stopping or slowing bad leadership is a responsibility that can be, that should be, widely shared.

Bad leadership is a social disease with damaging and sometimes even deadly consequences. Yet for reasons that defy logic, as well as our own experience, we typically stick our heads in the sand, hoping that if we ignore it, bad leadership will go away. But count on it: in those situations in which no one lifts a finger to stop it, or at least to slow it once it starts, bad leadership will persist. ■