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Now Available! Exclusive New Benefit for HBR Subscribers: Online access to the past eleven issues of HBR! Simply select the issue you want to access from the drop down menu above. **This Month: Inside the Mind of the Leader** Most of us know what great leadership looks like from the outside. But what about from the inside? In this special issue of HBR, we delve into the psychology of leadership—from emotional intelligence to Freud—to reveal a deeper understanding of effective leadership.

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Warren G. Bennis

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The next issue of HBR online will post on the 1st of the month.

The Seven Ages of the Leader

Each stage of leadership brings new crises and challenges. They're wrenching—but knowing what to expect can help you get through them.

by **Warren G. Bennis**

My initial plunge into leadership came during World War II. I was a lieutenant in the infantry, 19 years old, and scared out of my wits. My orders were to assume command of a platoon on the front lines in Belgium. I arrived in the middle of the night, when most of the men were asleep. The platoon had taken up residence in a bombed-out shell of a house. I was led into the kitchen by the platoon's runner, and he offered me a bench to sleep on. Instead, I put my sleeping bag on the floor, next to the rest of the men. Not that I slept. I lay awake all night, listening to the bombs explode. I was as green as can be and knew little about command—or the world, for that matter. When the others in the house began to stir, I heard one sergeant ask another, "Who's that?" "That's our new platoon leader," the man answered. And the sergeant said, "Good. We can use him."

Without realizing it, without having any idea what was the right thing to do, I had made a good first move. My entry had been low-key. I hadn't come in with my new commission blazing. In fact, I pretended to go to sleep on the floor. As a result, without drawing attention to myself, I learned something important about the men I would be leading. I learned that they needed me—or, at least, they needed the person they would subsequently teach me to be. And teach me they did. Over the next few weeks in Belgium, my men, who had already seen combat, kept me alive. They also taught me how to lead, often by example. The sergeant who had greeted my arrival with approval became my lifeline, quite literally, teaching me such essential skills as how to ride through a war zone without getting blown up.

While few business leaders need worry about being blown up, my experience in Belgium was in many ways typical of first leadership experiences anywhere. I was coming into an existing organization where emotions ran high, relationships had been established, and the members of the organization harbored expectations of me that I was not yet fully aware of. My new followers were watching me, to see if and how I would measure up. Every new leader faces the misgivings, misperceptions, and the personal needs and agendas of those who are to be led. To underestimate the importance of your first moves is to invite disaster. The critical entry is one of a number of passages—each of which has an element of personal crisis—that every leader must go through at some point in the course of a career. Business school doesn't prepare you for these crises, and they can be utterly wrenching. But they offer powerful lessons as well.

Shakespeare, who seems to have learned more every time I read him, spoke of the seven ages of man. A leader's life has seven ages as well, and, in many ways, they parallel those Shakespeare describes in *As You Like It*. To paraphrase, these stages can be described as infant, schoolboy, lover, soldier, general, statesman, and sage. One way to learn about leadership is to look at each of these developmental stages and consider the issues and crises that are typical of each.

Major changes in the first six months will inevitably be perceived as arbitrary, autocratic, and unfair, as much for their timing as for their content.

I can't offer advice on how to avoid these crises because many are inevitable. Nor would I necessarily recommend that you avoid them, since dealing with the challenges of each stage prepares you for the next. But knowing what to expect can help the leader survive and, with luck, come through stronger and more confident. And so first to the leader on the verge—Shakespeare's infant, "mewling...in the nurse's arms."

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WRITTEN BY

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The Infant Executive

For the young man or woman on the brink of becoming a leader, the world that lies ahead is a mysterious, even frightening place. Few resort to mewling, but many wish they had the corporate equivalent of a nurse, someone to help them solve problems and ease the painful transition. Instead, the fortunate neophyte leader has a mentor, a concept that has its origins in Greek mythology. When Odysseus was about to go off to war, the goddess Athena created Mentor to watch over the hero's beloved son, Telemachus. The fact that Mentor had the attributes of both man and woman hints at the richness and complexity of the relationship, suggesting a deeper bond than that of teacher and student. In the real world, unfortunately, goddesses don't intervene and mentors seldom materialize on their own. While the popular view of mentors is that they seek out younger people to encourage and champion, in fact the reverse is more often true. The best mentors are usually recruited, and one mark of a future leader is the ability to identify, woo, and win the mentors who will change his or her life.

When Robert Thomas and I interviewed two generations of leaders for our book, *Geeks and Geezers*, we met a remarkable young real-estate and Internet entrepreneur, Michael Klein, who had recruited his first mentor when he was only four or five years old, as Robert and I wrote in our *Harvard Business Review* article, "Crucibles of Leadership." His guide was his grandfather, Max Klein, who was responsible for the paint-by-numbers craze that swept America in the 1950s and 1960s. The fad made Klein rich, but none of his children had the least interest in that business or any other. But little Michael did, and Max jumped at the chance to coach and counsel him, often in the course of long telephone conversations that continued until a few weeks before Max died. In effect, the older man served as a first-rate business school of one for his grandson, who became a multimillionaire while still in his teens.

It may feel strange to seek a mentor even before you have the job, but it's a good habit to develop early on. I was recruited as a mentor years ago while in the hospital for several weeks following a "coronary event." There, I had a remarkable nurse who seemed to anticipate my every need. We spent hours together, often talking late into the night. He told me of his ambition to become a doctor, although no one in his family in South Central Los Angeles had ever been to college. I was won over by his character and drive, as well as by the superb care he gave me. When he was ready to go to medical school, I did all I could to help, from putting him in touch with appropriate administrators to giving him a glowing recommendation. He had recruited me as skillfully as any executive headhunter and made me one of the first members of the team he needed to change his life. The message for the "infant executive"? Recruit a team to back you up; you may feel lonely in your first top job, but you won't be totally unsupported.

The Schoolboy, with Shining Face

The first leadership experience is an agonizing education. It's like parenting, in that nothing else in life fully prepares you to be responsible, to a greater or lesser degree, for other people's well-being. Worse, you have to learn how to do the job in public, subjected to unsettling scrutiny of your every word and act, a situation that's profoundly unnerving for all but that minority of people who truly crave the spotlight. Like it or not, as a new leader you are always onstage, and everything about you is fair game for comment, criticism, and interpretation (or misinterpretation). Your dress, your spouse, your table manners, your diction, your wit, your friends, your children, your children's table manners—all will be inspected, dissected, and judged.

And nothing is more intense than the attention paid to your initial words and deeds, as any first-time presidential candidate can tell you. It's said of psychotherapy that the first ten minutes between doctor and patient are the most critical, and studies show that friendships formed by college students during orientation are the most enduring. Social psychologists have found that we base our judgments of people on extremely thin slices of behavior. We decide whether we are in sync or out of tune with another person in as little as two seconds.

So it is with leaders and organizations. Your first acts will win people over or they will turn people against you, sometimes permanently. And those initial acts may have a long-lasting effect on how the group performs. It is, therefore, almost always best for the novice to make a low-key entry. This buys you time to gather information and to develop relationships wisely. It gives you an opportunity to learn the culture of the organization and to benefit from the wisdom of those who are already there. A quiet entry allows the others in the group to demonstrate what they know. And it allows you to establish that you are open to the contributions of others. It shows them that you are a leader, not a

dictator.

In retrospect, I realize that officer-candidate school had prepared me for my small triumph in that roofless house in Belgium. Even as the officers tried to cram all the survival skills we would need into four months of training, they told us again and again that the combat-seasoned men under our command would be our real teachers, at least at first. The same holds true in any organization. In the beginning, especially, your most talented, most seasoned, most decent followers will be the ones that keep you alive.

When Steve Sample became president of the University of Southern California in the early 1990s, he did a masterful job of easing in. He went to the campus incognito at least twice, and during one of those visits he attended a football game and spoke to faculty members and students who didn't know who he was. Those visits gave him a feel for the campus as it really was, not how the most assertive of his constituents wanted him to see it. And during his first six months, he did not make a single high-profile decision. He knew that the important things to be done could be deferred until the faculty, staff, and students were more comfortable with him and their relationships were more stable. Major changes in the first six months will inevitably be perceived as arbitrary, autocratic, and unfair, as much for their timing as for their content.

However, it is worth noting that, no matter what your first actions are, you can influence other people's image of you only to a limited extent. The people who will be working under your leadership will have formed an opinion about you by the time you walk into the office, even if they have never met you. They may love you, they may hate you, they may trust you or distrust you, but they've probably taken a stand, and their position may have very little to do with who you actually are. The leader often becomes a screen onto which followers project their own fantasies about power and relationships. To some degree, all leaders are created out of the needs, wants, fears, and longings of those who follow them. Events that predate your arrival will also shape followers' view of you. In an organization that's been through a crisis—several rounds of layoffs, say—people are liable to assume that you're there to clean house again and may respond with either open hostility or flattery in the hopes of keeping their jobs. Others may see you as their savior because of the bad leadership of your predecessor. Your first challenge is to try not to take your new followers' assessments too personally. The second—and far trickier—challenge is to embrace the fact that certain elements of their assessments may be accurate, even if they put you in an unflattering light.

The Lover, with a Woeful Ballad

Shakespeare described man in his third age "sighing like furnace," something many leaders find themselves doing as they struggle with the tsunami of problems every organization presents. For the leader who has come up through the ranks, one of the toughest is how to relate to former peers who now report to you.

Shakespeare painted a compelling portrait of the problem in *Henry IV, Part II*. Before Prince Hal becomes Henry V, his relationship with the aging rogue Falstaff is that of student and fellow hell-raiser. For all Falstaff's excesses, he is often Hal's wise teacher, helping the future king see beyond the cloistered, narrow education traditionally afforded a prince to glimpse what his future subjects feel, think, and need. But when it comes time for Hal to assume his royal responsibilities, he rejects Falstaff, despite their having shared a sea of ale and the sound of "the chimes at midnight." Henry doesn't invite Falstaff to his coronation, and he pointedly tells the ribald knight, "I know thee not, old man."

Today's leaders would instantly recognize the young king's predicament. It's difficult to set boundaries and fine-tune your working relationships with former cronies. Most organizations, with the exception of the military, maintain the fiction that they are at least semidemocracies, however autocratic they are in fact. As a modern leader, you don't have the option of telling the person with whom you once shared a pod and lunchtime confidences that you know her not. But relationships inevitably change when a person is promoted from within the ranks. You may no longer be able to speak openly as you once did, and your friends may feel awkward around you or resent you. They may perceive you as lording your position over them when you're just behaving as a leader should.

One mark of a future leader is the ability to identify, woo, and win the mentors who will change his or her life.

I know of a young executive, let's call her Marjorie, who was recently promoted from

middle management to head of the marketing department at a pharmaceutical company. One of three internal candidates for the job, she was close friends with the other two. Marjorie had already distinguished herself within the company, so it was no surprise that she got the promotion, even though she was the youngest and least experienced of the three. But the transition was much more difficult than she had anticipated. Her friends were envious. She would sometimes find herself in the awkward situation of attending an executive meeting at which one of her friends was criticized and then going straight to lunch with her. The new executive missed being able to share what she knew with her friends, and she missed their support. Her fellow executives had a more authoritarian style than she did, and some even advised her to drop her old friends, which she had no intention of doing. Her compromise was to try to divide her time between her new peers and her old. The transition was still hard, but she made a good early move: She had frank conversations with her friends, during which she asked them how they were feeling and assured them their friendships were important to her and would continue.

However tough it was for Marjorie, she had the advantage of knowing the organization and its players. The challenge for the newcomer is knowing who to listen to and who to trust. Leaders new to an organization are swamped with claims on their time and attention. Often, the person who makes the most noise is the neediest person in the group and the one you have to be most wary of, a lesson I learned more than 50 years ago from the renowned psychiatrist Wilfred Bion. At the time, Bion was doing pioneering work in the new practice of group psychotherapy. He warned his students: Focusing your attention on the most clamorous of your followers will not only anger and alienate the healthier among them. It will distract you from working with the entire group on what actually matters, accomplishing a common mission.

Knowing *what* to pay attention to is just as important—and just as difficult. In their efforts to effect change, leaders coming into new organizations are often thwarted by an unconscious conspiracy to preserve the status quo. Problem after problem will be dumped in your lap—plenty of new ones and a bulging archive of issues left unresolved by previous administrations—and responding to them all ensures that you will never have time to pursue your own agenda. When I arrived at the University of Cincinnati as president I was totally unprepared for the volume of issues that found their way to my desk, starting with the 150 pieces of mail I typically had to respond to each day. The cumulative effect of handling each of these small matters was to keep me from addressing what was truly important: articulating a vision for the university and persuading the rest of the community to embrace it as their own. It is at this stage that an inability to delegate effectively can be disastrous.

Newcomer or not, almost all leaders find themselves at some point in the position of having to ask others to leave the organization—firing them, to put it bluntly. This is always a painful task, if only because it usually devastates the person being let go and because the timing is never opportune. Facing you across the desk always seems to be the employee who's just delivered triplets or bought an expensive house. There's little available to guide leaders on how to do this awful business in a humane way; only remember that you have people's emotional lives in your hands in such circumstances as surely as any surgeon or lover does.

The Bearded Soldier

Over time, leaders grow comfortable with the role. This comfort brings confidence and conviction, but it also can snap the connection between leader and followers. Two things can happen as a result: Leaders may forget the true impact of their words and actions, and they may assume that what they are hearing from followers is what needs to be heard.

While the first words and actions of leaders are the most closely attended to, the scrutiny never really ends. Followers continue to pay close attention to even the most offhand remark, and the more effective the leader is the more careful he or she must be, because followers may implement an idea that was little more than a passing thought. Forget this and you may find yourself in some less dramatic version of the situation King Henry II did when he muttered, of Thomas à Becket, "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" and four of his nobles promptly went out and murdered the cleric. Many modern-day Henrys have mused along the lines of, "We should be looking at our technology strategy," only to be confronted a few months later with thick PowerPoint presentations and a hefty consulting bill.

Followers don't tell leaders everything. I know of an executive I'll call Christine who had a close working relationship with the rest of her group. The department hummed along productively until the day one of her top performers, Joseph, showed up at her door,

looking uncomfortable. He told her he'd been offered a job at another company and was planning to take it. The timing was terrible; the group was headed toward a major product launch. And Christine was stunned, because she and Joseph were friends and he had never expressed dissatisfaction with his position or the company. Why hadn't he told her he wanted a new opportunity? She would have created a job especially for him, and she told him as much. Unfortunately, it was too late. The fact is, however close Christine and Joseph were, she was still in charge, and few employees tell their bosses when they've talked to a headhunter. And because Christine and Joseph liked each other and had fun working together, she'd assumed he was satisfied.

A second challenge for leaders in their ascendancy is to nurture those people whose stars may shine as brightly as—or even brighter than—the leaders' own. In many ways, this is the real test of character for a leader. Many people cannot resist using a leadership position to thwart competition. I heard recently about an executive who had been well liked by his bosses and peers until he was promoted to head a division. Then those under him began to grumble about his management style, and it wasn't just sour grapes. His latest promotion had been a stretch, and he may have felt, for the first time in his career, vulnerable. Shortly thereafter, his employees began to notice that he was taking credit for their ideas and was bad-mouthing some of them behind their backs. When confronted about his behavior, he seemed genuinely surprised and protested that he was doing no such thing. Perhaps he was unconsciously trying to sabotage those under him to prop himself up. But those who reported to him began to leave, one by one. After a year, his reputation was such that nobody wanted to work with him, and he was asked to leave.

In contrast, authentic leaders are generous. They're human and may experience the occasional pang at watching someone accomplish something they cannot. But they are always willing—even anxious—to hire people who are better than they are, in part because they know that highly talented underlings can help them shine. Many of the greatest leaders of our times, including the Manhattan Project's J. Robert Oppenheimer, Xerox PARC's Bob Taylor, and even Walt Disney, had healthy enough egos to surround themselves with people who had the potential to steal their jobs.

The General, Full of Wise Saws

One of the greatest challenges a leader faces at the height of his or her career is not simply allowing people to speak the truth but actually being able to hear it. Once again, Shakespeare proves instructive. In *Julius Caesar*, that brilliant study of failed management, Caesar goes to the forum on the ides of March apparently unaware that he will die there. How could he not have known that something dreadful was going to happen on that inauspicious day? The soothsayer warns him to "beware the ides of March." There are signs of impending evil that any superstitious Roman would have been able to read, including an owl hooting during the day and a lion running through the streets. And then there is the awful dream that makes Calpurnia, Caesar's loving wife, beg him to stay home. She dreams that his statue gushed blood like a fountain with a hundred spouts. Shouldn't that have been clear enough for a military genius used to amassing and evaluating intelligence? If not, consider that Artemidorus, a teacher in Rome, actually writes down the names of the conspirators and tries three times to thrust the note of alarm into Caesar's hand, the last time seconds before Brutus and the gang fall upon him.

Caesar's deafness is caused as much by arrogance as anything else, and he is hardly the only leader to be so afflicted. Like many CEOs and other leaders, movie mogul Darryl F. Zanuck was notorious for his unwillingness to hear unpleasant truths. He was said to bark, "Don't say yes until I finish talking!" which no doubt stifled many a difference of opinion. A more current example can be seen in Howell Raines, the deposed executive editor of the *New York Times*. Among the many ways he blocked the flow of information upward was to limit the pool of people he championed and, thus, the number of people he listened to. Raines was notorious for having a small A-list of stars and a large B-list made up of everyone else. Even if Raines's division of the staff had been fair, which it certainly was not in the case of now-disgraced reporter Jayson Blair, the two-tier system was unwise and ultimately a career ender for Raines. He had so alienated the vast majority of people in the newsroom who knew what Blair was up to that they didn't even bother to warn him of the train wreck ahead, and he refused to believe the few who did speak up. The attitude of Raines and his managing editor, Gerald Boyd, was that their way was the only way. When a distinguished reporter dared to point out an error Boyd had made, Boyd literally handed him a coin and told him to call the *Los Angeles Times* about a job. The reporter promptly did, quitting the *New York Times* for the West Coast paper.

But the episode most clearly recalls Caesar's situation in that Raines seemed genuinely surprised when he was forced out in the summer of 2003. He had no doubt read Ken Auletta's lengthy profile of him that ran in the *New Yorker* in 2002, showing that Raines was widely perceived as arrogant. And he should have been a good enough newsman to be able to tell the difference between acceptance and angry silence on the part of those who worked for him. Arrogance kept Raines from building the alliances and coalitions that every leader needs. When Blair's journalistic crimes and misdemeanors came to light, there weren't enough people on the A-list to save Raines's professional life. Authentic leaders, by contrast, don't have what people in the Middle East called "tired ears." Their egos are not so fragile that they are unable to bear the truth, however harsh—not because they are saints but because it is the surest way to succeed and survive.

The real test of character for a leader is to nurture those people whose stars may shine as brightly as—or even brighter than—the leader's own.

I've mentioned the wisdom of avoiding major change in the early months in a new position. At this stage, the challenge is different, because leaders further along in their careers are frequently brought in with a specific mandate to bring about change, and their actions have a direct and immediate impact on an organization's long-term fortunes. Hesitation can be disastrous. However, you still need to understand the mood and motivations of the people already in the company before taking action.

I wish I'd understood that when I arrived at the University of Cincinnati in 1971 with a mandate to transform the university from a local institution into a state one—a goal that was by no means widely shared among the faculty or, for that matter, the citizens of Cincinnati. One longtime university board member had warned me to keep a low profile until I had a better grasp of the conservative community and the people in it were more comfortable with me. I chose to ignore his wise counsel, believing that broad exposure of the university and, by extension, myself would benefit my cause. As a result, I accepted an invitation to host a weekly television show. Worse, the title of the show was *Bennis!* The exclamation point still makes me cringe. I might have been perceived as an arrogant outsider come to save the provinces under any circumstances, but *Bennis!* guaranteed that I would be viewed that way. That perception (all but indelible, as early perceptions tend to be) made it much harder to realize my vision for the university.

The corporate world is filled with stories of leaders who failed to achieve greatness because they failed to understand the context they were working in or get the support of their underlings. Look at Durk Jager, who lasted less than a year and a half at Procter & Gamble. Critics accused him of trying to change the company too much, too fast. But what Jager couldn't do was sell his vision of a transformed P&G to its staff and other stakeholders. His very able successor, A.G. Lafley, seemed at first to back off from Jager's commitment to "stretch and speed," but in fact Lafley has been able to bring about change every bit as radical as any Jager spoke of, including going outside the company for new ideas, a reversal of P&G's traditional "invented here" philosophy. How did Lafley manage? "I didn't attack," he told *BusinessWeek*. "I avoided saying P&G people are bad...I preserved the core of the culture and pulled people where I wanted to go. I enrolled them in change. I didn't tell them."

Another model for doing it right is Carly Fiorina. She took over Hewlett-Packard with at least three strikes against her—she was a woman, she was an outsider, and she wasn't an engineer. And the person who chose to battle her was none other than the son of a company founder and thus tradition incarnate—Walter Hewlett. But Fiorina cleverly honored the company's illustrious past, even as she prepared for change, including the merger with Compaq. Her first annual report included a vision statement that starts with the word "Invent," paying homage to the pioneering spirit that created HP while simultaneously rewriting the "rules of the garage." She also appreciated the gravity of the threat presented by Walter Hewlett and systematically buttressed her support among the other members of her board. When the moment came, the majority of the members took action and removed Hewlett from the HP board. Time will tell how successful the Compaq deal will be, but Dr. Bion would have given Fiorina an A. She didn't overreact to Walter Hewlett—she didn't attack him, nor did she spend too much time trying to address his concerns. Instead, she stayed her course and kept the focus of all her stakeholders on what was truly important.

The Statesman, with Spectacles on Nose

Shakespeare's sixth age covers the years in which a leader's power begins to wane. But far from being the buffoon suggested by Shakespeare's description of a "lean and

slipped pantaloons," the leader in this stage is often hard at work preparing to pass on his or her wisdom in the interest of the organization. The leader may also be called upon to play important interim roles, bolstered by the knowledge and perception that come with age and experience and without the sometimes distracting ambition that characterizes early career.

One of the gratifying roles that people in late career can play is the leadership equivalent of a pinch hitter. When *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., needed someone to stop the bleeding at the newspaper after the Blair debacle, he invited Howell Raines's predecessor, Joseph Lelyveld, to serve as interim editor. The widely respected journalist was an ideal choice, one who was immediately able to apply a career's worth of experience to the newspaper's crisis and whose tenure was unsullied by any desire to keep the job for the long term.

Consider, too, the head of a government agency who had chosen to retire from his leadership position because he had accomplished all his goals and was tired of the politics associated with his job. When an overseas office needed an interim leader, he was willing to step into the job and postpone retirement. He was able to perform an even better job than a younger person might have, not only because he brought a lifetime's worth of knowledge and experience but also because he didn't have to waste time engaging in the political machinations often needed to advance a career.

The Sage, Second Childishness

As I've pointed out, mentoring has tremendous value to a young executive. The value accrues to the mentor as well. Mentoring is one of the great joys of a mature career, the professional equivalent of having grandchildren. It is at this time that the drive to prepare the next generation for leadership becomes a palpable ache. I wrote earlier of my relationship with a young nurse who had ambitions to become a doctor. Clearly, the young man benefited from our relationship, but so did I. I learned about the true nature of mentoring, about its inevitable reciprocity and the fact that finding and cementing a relationship with a mentor is not a form of fawning but the initiation of a valuable relationship for both individuals. My respect for my former nurse only grew over the years. When he graduated near the top of his class from the University of Southern California Medical School, I was there to watch.

When you mentor, you know that what you have achieved will not be lost, that you are leaving a professional legacy for future generations. Just as my nurse clearly stood to benefit from our relationship, entrepreneur Michael Klein was indebted to his grandfather, Max. But imagine the joy Max must have felt at being able to share the wisdom he acquired over a lifetime as a creative businessman. The reciprocal benefits of such bonds are profound, amounting to much more than warm feelings on both sides. Mentoring isn't a simple exchange of information. Neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky lived among wild baboons and found that alliances between old and young apes were an effective strategy for survival. Older males that affiliated with younger males lived longer, healthier lives than their unallied peers. Whether ape or human, individuals in a mentoring relationship exchange invaluable, often subtle information. The elder partner stays plugged into an ever-changing world, while the younger partner can observe what does and doesn't work as the elder partner negotiates the tricky terrain of aging.

When we compared older and younger leaders for *Geeks and Geezers*, we found that the ruling quality of leaders, adaptive capacity, is what allows true leaders to make the nimble decisions that bring success. Adaptive capacity is also what allows some people to transcend the setbacks and losses that come with age and to reinvent themselves again and again. Shakespeare called the final age of man "second childishness." But for those fortunate enough to keep their health, and even for those not as fortunate, age today is neither end nor oblivion. Rather, it is the joyous rediscovery of childhood at its best. It is waking up each morning ready to devour the world, full of hope and promise. It lacks nothing but the tawdrier forms of ambition that make less sense as each day passes.

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When Followers Become Toxic

Few leaders realize how susceptible they are to their followers' influence. A good set of values, some trusted friends, and a little paranoia can prevent them from being led astray.

by **Lynn R. Offermann**

Douglas MacArthur once said, "A general is just as good or just as bad as the troops under his command make him." Almost as he made that remark, his country's president was proving the point. For in late 1961, John F. Kennedy, bowing to pressure from his advisers, agreed to the escalation of American intervention in Vietnam. Among the advisers pressuring him was the senior author of a report recommending military intervention. And that adviser's trusted friend—an American general—was chosen by the president to lead the new U.S. command in Saigon. Given his loyalties, the general wanted to make sure things looked good on the surface, so he stifled evidence from the field about potential setbacks and obstacles in Vietnam, making it tough for the president to discern the truth.

That, according to author and journalist David Halberstam, was how President Kennedy and his advisers led the United States into Vietnam. The story starkly illustrates just how easily, and with the best of intentions, loyal and able followers can get their leaders into trouble. If an accomplished politician like Kennedy could be misled in this way, it's no surprise that today's business leaders often fall into the same trap. No matter who we are, we are all influenced by those around us. Some of us are leaders, but we are *all* followers. Indeed, Ken Lay, the disgraced ex-chairman of Enron, may not be entirely wrong in blaming unscrupulous subordinates and advisers for his company's demise. As an executive coach to senior leaders in a variety of industries for more than 20 years, I've seen firsthand just how easily followers can derail executive careers.

How does it happen? In the following pages, I draw both on my experience as a consultant and executive coach and on decades of research in organizational psychology to describe when and why leaders become vulnerable to being led astray by their followers. In some cases, as the Kennedy story illustrates, effective leaders can end up making poor decisions because able and well-meaning followers are united and persuasive about a course of action. This is a particular problem for leaders who attract and empower strong followers; these leaders need to become more skeptical and set boundaries. At other times, leaders get into trouble because they are surrounded by followers who fool them with flattery and isolate them from uncomfortable realities. Charismatic leaders, who are most susceptible to this problem, need to make an extra effort to unearth disagreement and to find followers who are not afraid to pose hard questions. Charismatic or not, all leaders run the risk of delegating to unscrupulous followers. There's probably little they can do to completely guard against a determined corporate lingo, but leaders who communicate and live a positive set of values will find themselves better protected.

When the Majority Rules

Although many leaders pride themselves on their willingness to take unpopular stands, research has consistently demonstrated that most people—including leaders—prefer conformity to controversy. And the pressure to conform rises with the degree of agreement among those around you. Even if widespread agreement doesn't actually exist, the very appearance of it can be hard to resist.

People tend to be what psychologists call "cognitive misers," preferring the shortcuts of automatic thinking over considered examination.

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WRITTEN BY

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It's worth noting that the participants conformed without any pressure from the fake respondents. Indeed, the fake respondents were strangers whom the participants were unlikely to see ever again. In workplace situations where continued interactions are expected and where there may be concern about possible loss of face, one would reasonably expect conformity to be even more marked. What's more, most business decisions are urgent, complex, and ambiguous, which encourages people to depend on the views of others. We should hardly be surprised, therefore, to find that the ethical and capable individuals who served on the boards of companies like WorldCom and Enron turned "into credulous, compliant apparatchiks more focused on maintaining collegiality than maximizing long-term profitability," as the *Washington Post* put it.

What happens is that leaders faced with a united opposition can start to question their own judgment. And they should question themselves—the reason that unanimity is such a powerful influencing force is simply that the majority often is right. In general, research shows that using social proof—what others think or do—to determine our behavior leads us to make fewer mistakes than opposing the majority view does. But as even the smartest leaders have had to learn the hard way, the majority can be spectacularly wrong.

One reason that even well-informed experts so often follow the crowd is that people by nature tend to be what psychologists call "cognitive misers," preferring the shortcuts of automatic thinking over considered examination. These shortcuts can help us to process information more quickly but can also lead to monumental errors. For instance, product designers may assume that if they like a product, everyone will. Yet the flop of Dell's Olympic line of desktop and workstation computers taught managers there that products must appeal to more than the company's own technically savvy workforce. As Michael Dell put it, "We had gone ahead and created a product that was, for all intents and purposes, technology for technology's sake rather than technology for the customer's sake."

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In such public forums, it falls to the leader to push followers to examine their opinions more closely. Alfred P. Sloan, the former chairman of GM, understood this very well. He once said at the close of an executive meeting: "Gentlemen, I take it we are all in complete agreement on the decision here. I propose we postpone further discussion until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about."

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Joining the Opposition

Fooled by Flattery

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For their part, followers think that being on the boss's good side gives them some measure of job security. To an extent, they're probably right; even a recent *Forbes* guide to surviving office parties recommends: "Try to ingratiate yourself. In this market, people are hired and kept at their companies for their personal skills." Indeed, a recent study indicated that successful ingratiators gained a 5% edge over other employees in performance evaluations. This kind of margin by itself won't get someone ahead, but in a competitive market, it might well tip the scale toward one of two people up for a promotion.

Everyone loves a sincere compliment, but those who already think highly of themselves are most susceptible to flattery's charms. In particular, leaders predisposed toward narcissism may find their narcissistic tendencies pushed to unhealthy levels when they are given heavy doses of follower ingratiation. Gratuitous ingratiation can create a subtle shift in a leader's attitude toward power. Instead of viewing power as something to be used in the service of the organization, clients, and stakeholders, the leader treats it as a tool to further personal interests, sometimes at the expense of others in and outside the organization. This happens as a leader starts to truly believe his press and comes to feel more entitled to privileges than others. People often cite Jack Welch's retirement deal as an example of executive entitlement gone haywire. The resulting furor drew public scorn for a longstanding corporate icon.

But one of the most serious problems for leaders who invite flattery is that they insulate themselves from the bad news they need to know. In her memoir, Nancy Reagan relates how then-Vice President George Bush approached her with concerns about Chief of Staff Donald Regan. Mrs. Reagan said she wished he'd tell her husband, but Bush replied that it was not his role to do so. "That's exactly your role," she snapped. Yet followers who have witnessed the killing of previous messengers of unwelcome news will be unlikely to volunteer for the role. Samuel Goldwyn's words resonate strongly: "I want you to tell me exactly what's wrong with me and with MGM even if it means losing your job." As more staff ingratiate or hold back criticism, the perception of staff unanimity, often at the expense of the organization's health, increases as well.

The rare individual who won't join an ingratiating inner circle of followers is typically seen as a bad apple by both the leader and her peers. Even when this perception problem is acknowledged, it is tough to fix. Despite widespread publicity after the 1986 space shuttle *Challenger* disaster about the dangers of failing to attend to negative news, NASA is once again facing charges of having downplayed possible liftoff problems just before the *Columbia* disaster. In both cases, engineers allegedly did not inform senior NASA executives of safety concerns; they either withheld information or presented it in ways that diminished its importance or feasibility. Obviously, this tendency to withhold information is not limited to government agencies. Bill Ford, the new CEO of Ford Motor Company, believes that isolation at the top has been a big problem at Ford—a problem he has spent considerable time trying to rectify by a variety of means, including forcing debate and discussion among executives and having informal, impromptu discussions with employees at all levels.

In dealing with ingratiation, leaders need to begin by reflecting on how they respond to both flattery and criticism. In considering a follower's advice or opinion, ask yourself if you would respond differently if a staff member you disliked made the same comment, and why. Are followers really free to voice their honest assessments, or are they jumped on whenever they deviate from your opinions? Bill Ford makes a point of thanking people whom he has overruled because he wants them to know that their honesty is appreciated. One simple test of whether you're getting the feedback you need is to count how many employees challenge you at your next staff meeting. As Steven Kerr, chief learning officer of Goldman Sachs, says: "If you're not taking flak, you're not over the target."

Organizational mechanisms can also help. Greater exposure to external feedback from clients, well-run 360-degree feedback programs, and executive coaching may be more likely to reveal the full truth. It's hard to lead from a pedestal; open channels of communication can keep a leader far better grounded.

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In his book *You're Too Kind*, journalist Richard Stengel gives an account of flattery through the ages, noting that "the history of how ministers have used flattery to control leaders did not begin with Henry Kissinger's relentless and unctuous toadying to Richard Nixon.... Cardinal Richelieu was a famous user of flattery...and he was a famous sucker for it himself." Stengel argues that corporate VPs who suck up to their bosses are no different than the less powerful chimpanzees who subordinate themselves to more powerful ones in the animal world. Though it may feel great at the time, stroking a leader's ego too much, and protecting him or her from needed information, can have negative consequences for both the leader and the organization. It's worth remembering the words of cartoonist Hank Ketchum: "Flattery is like chewing gum. Enjoy it, but don't swallow it."

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Powers Behind the Throne

Caught between the Scylla of follower unanimity and the Charybdis of flattery, leaders might be tempted to keep their followers at a distance. But in today's world, this is simply not an option. CEOs of major firms cannot know everything about their own organizations. In coaching senior executives, I often hear them lamenting that they don't have full knowledge of what's happening in their companies. They report sleepless nights because they've been forced to make decisions based on incomplete information. They must rely on others for full, accurate, and unbiased input as well as for many operational decisions.

From the follower's point of view, this presents wonderful opportunities. He can learn and practice new skills as the leader relies on him more and more, and he may be presented with new opportunities for advancement and reward. At the same time, however, it opens the door for the occasional follower who uses his newfound power to serve his own interests more than the company's.

So how can leaders guard against that problem? They can begin by keeping ethical values and corporate vision front and center when delegating and monitoring work. Only then can they be certain that followers have a clear framework and boundaries for their actions. As Baxter CEO Harry Kraemer says, the key to ensuring that followers do the right thing is "open communication of values...over and over and over again."

Six Ways to Counter Wayward Influences

Leaders can also protect themselves and their companies by setting good examples. Followers—especially ingratiation—tend to model themselves after their leaders. Thus, straightforward leaders are less likely to be manipulated than manipulative leaders are. And a leader who is seen to condone or encourage unethical behavior will almost certainly get unethical behavior in his ranks. Take the case of former WorldCom CEO Bernie Ebbers, who allegedly ridiculed attempts to institute a corporate code of conduct as a waste of time even as he pressed his followers to deliver double-digit growth. He shouldn't have been surprised to find that junior WorldCom executives cooked the books or at least turned a blind eye when others did.

Although competency is generally a good basis on which to grant followers greater influence, leaders need to avoid letting followers influence them based on competency alone. As W. Michael Blumenthal, former chairman and CEO of Unisys, once said, "When did I make my greatest hiring mistakes? When I put intelligence and energy ahead of morality." The danger here is that astute but unscrupulous followers can find ways of pushing their leaders in unethical directions and may even use the leader's stated values against him. Suggestions like "I know you like saving money, so you'll love the idea

of...," followed by a shady proposal, force leaders into the position of having to choose between eating their words and accepting the proposal.

At the end of the day, leaders have to rely on their instincts about people. Fortunately, there is good news in this respect. Research by psychologist Robert Zajonc suggests that we process information both affectively and cognitively and that we experience our feeling toward something a split second before we intellectualize it. If leaders are attentive, therefore, they may be able to tune in to a fleeting feeling that something is not quite right or that they are being manipulated before they rationalize and accept what they would be better off rejecting. For example, one tactic favored by manipulative followers is to create a false sense of urgency to rush the leader into an uninformed decision. Recognizing that you're being pushed too fast and reserving judgment for a time may save you from an action you may regret.

It's not only the people you delegate to that you have to watch, it's also *what* you delegate. Clearly, leaders can never delegate their own responsibilities without peril. Smart leaders understand that even well-intentioned followers have their own ambitions and may try to usurp tasks that properly belong to their leaders. Harry Stonecipher, now CEO of Boeing, likes to point to the great polar explorer Ernest Shackleton as an example of a leader who knew what responsibilities he could and couldn't afford to delegate. Stranded on an ice pack and crossing 800 miles of stormy seas in an open boat, Shackleton knew the deadly consequences of dissension and therefore focused his attention on preserving his team's unity. He was happy to delegate many essential tasks to subordinates, even putting one man in charge of 22 others at a camp while he sailed off with the remainder of the crew to get assistance. But the one task he reserved for himself was the management of malcontents, whom he kept close by at all times. Amazingly, the entire crew survived the more than 15-month ordeal in fairly good health, and eight members even joined Shackleton on a subsequent expedition.

One simple test of whether you're getting the feedback you need is to count how many employees challenge you at your next staff meeting.

• • •

By understanding how followers are capable of influencing them, top executives can improve their leadership skills. They can choose to lead by steadfastly refusing to fall prey to manipulative forces and try to guide the way toward more open and appropriate communications.

Followers, for their part, can better understand their power to inappropriately influence leaders. Once they recognize the danger they pose to their leaders—and ultimately to themselves—ingratiators may come to realize that isolating leaders from reality can be as costly to themselves as to the company's shareholders. Realizing the value of dissent may force followers to take more care in forming and promoting their opinions.

Understanding that some tasks are best left to a leader may help followers to know where to stop and leaders to know what not to give away. In the final analysis, honest followers have just as great an investment in unmasking manipulative colleagues as their leaders do.

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One of the most striking pieces of evidence for this was a series of experiments conducted in the 1950s by psychologist Solomon Asch. Asch showed participants a vertical line and then asked them to judge which of three other lines was most similar in length to the test line. Participants who made judgments on their own chose the correct answer 99% of the time. Yet when other participants answered as part of a group in which fake respondents had been coached to pick a particular incorrect line, almost three-quarters of the unknowing participants made at least one wrong choice and one-third of them conformed to the group choice half the time.

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Joining the Opposition



Sidebar **R0401E_A** (Located at the end of this article)

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It’s worth remembering the words of cartoonist Hank Ketchum: “Flattery is like chewing gum. Enjoy it, but don’t swallow it.”

Powers Behind the Throne

Caught between the Scylla of follower unanimity and the Charybdis of flattery, leaders might be tempted to keep their followers at a distance. But in today’s world, this is simply not an option. CEOs of major firms cannot know everything about their own organizations. In coaching senior executives, I often hear them lamenting that they don’t have full knowledge of what’s happening in their companies. They report sleepless nights because they’ve been forced to make decisions based on incomplete information. They must rely on others for full, accurate, and unbiased input as well as for many operational decisions.

From the follower’s point of view, this presents wonderful opportunities. He can learn and practice new skills as the leader relies on him more and more, and he may be presented with new opportunities for advancement and reward. At the same time, however, it opens the door for the occasional follower who uses his newfound power to serve his own interests more than the company’s.

So how can leaders guard against that problem? They can begin by keeping ethical values and corporate vision front and center when delegating and monitoring work. Only then can they be certain that followers have a clear framework and boundaries for their actions. As Baxter CEO Harry Kraemer says, the key to ensuring that followers do the right thing is “open communication of values...over and over and over again.”



Six Ways to Counter Wayward Influences
Sidebar **R0401E_B** (Located at the end of this article)



Leaders can also protect themselves and their companies by setting good examples. Followers—especially ingratulators—tend to model themselves after their leaders. Thus, straightforward leaders are less likely to be manipulated than manipulative leaders are. And a leader who is seen to condone or encourage unethical behavior will almost certainly get unethical behavior in his ranks. Take the case of former WorldCom CEO

Bernie Ebbers, who allegedly ridiculed attempts to institute a corporate code of conduct as a waste of time even as he pressed his followers to deliver double-digit growth. He shouldn't have been surprised to find that junior WorldCom executives cooked the books or at least turned a blind eye when others did.

Although competency is generally a good basis on which to grant followers greater influence, leaders need to avoid letting followers influence them based on competency alone. As W. Michael Blumenthal, former chairman and CEO of Unisys, once said, "When did I make my greatest hiring mistakes? When I put intelligence and energy ahead of morality." The danger here is that astute but unscrupulous followers can find ways of pushing their leaders in unethical directions and may even use the leader's stated values against him. Suggestions like "I know you like saving money, so you'll love the idea of..." followed by a shady proposal, force leaders into the position of having to choose between eating their words and accepting the proposal.

At the end of the day, leaders have to rely on their instincts about people. Fortunately, there is good news in this respect. Research by psychologist Robert Zajonc suggests that we process information both affectively and cognitively and that we experience our feeling toward something a split second before we intellectualize it. If leaders are attentive, therefore, they may be able to tune in to a fleeting feeling that something is not quite right or that they are being manipulated before they rationalize and accept what they would be better off rejecting. For example, one tactic favored by manipulative followers is to create a false sense of urgency to rush the leader into an uninformed decision. Recognizing that you're being pushed too fast and reserving judgment for a time may save you from an action you may regret.

It's not only the people you delegate to that you have to watch, it's also *what* you delegate. Clearly, leaders can never delegate their own responsibilities without peril. Smart leaders understand that even well-intentioned followers have their own ambitions and may try to usurp tasks that properly belong to their leaders. Harry Stonecipher, now CEO of Boeing, likes to point to the great polar explorer Ernest Shackleton as an example of a leader who knew what responsibilities he could and couldn't afford to delegate. Stranded on an ice pack and crossing 800 miles of stormy seas in an open boat, Shackleton knew the deadly consequences of dissension and therefore focused his attention on preserving his team's unity. He was happy to delegate many essential tasks to subordinates, even putting one man in charge of 22 others at a camp while he sailed off with the remainder of the crew to get assistance. But the one task he reserved for himself was the management of malcontents, whom he kept close by at all times. Amazingly, the entire crew survived the more than 15-month ordeal in fairly good health, and eight members even joined Shackleton on a subsequent expedition.

One simple test of whether you're getting the feedback you need is to count how many employees challenge you at your next staff meeting.

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By understanding how followers are capable of influencing them, top executives can improve their leadership skills. They can choose to lead by steadfastly refusing to fall prey to manipulative forces and try to guide the way toward more open and appropriate communications.

Followers, for their part, can better understand their power to inappropriately influence leaders. Once they recognize the danger they pose to their leaders—and ultimately to