



## **Virtues, Vices and Leadership: Negotiating Ethical Conundrums for Leaders in Higher Education in Health and Social Care**

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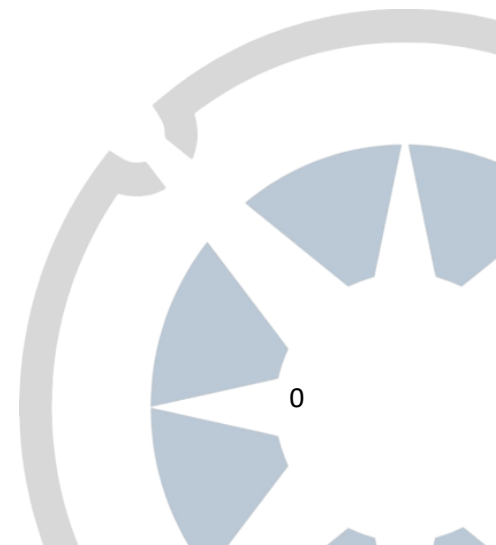
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# **Virtues, Vices and Leadership: Negotiating Ethical Conundrums for Leaders in Higher Education in Health and Social Care**

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## **Summary**

In this paper, we reflect on a scenario from the business sector which focusses on a leader's response to an under-performing senior team member: 'I'm sorry that the organisation has failed you'. We consider the implications of transposing the scenario to a professional education context in health and social care, offering two reflective commentaries from different perspectives. The first commentary considers the scenario in relation to theories of leadership and discusses how the seemingly Machiavellian response of the leader might be justified, drawing on insights from philosophers Iris Murdoch and Geoffrey Warnock. The second commentary discusses the significance of context and motivation in undertaking virtue ethical analyses and interpretations, and the importance of cultivating and deploying practical wisdom as a guard against formulaic and 'easy' approaches to leadership.

## **Introduction**

While the protagonist in the scenario offered in the next section is a business leader, our interest in this paper is leadership in the higher education sector in health and social care. This field covers a range of professions, such as nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, social work and social care. People taking on leadership roles in this context might be programme leaders, senior administrators and heads of departments, faculties or research centres. They may also be lecturers or researchers who lead by example, modelling good practice.

Several features of the professional education context add extra layers of complexity to being a good leader, but for the purpose of this paper we will highlight one. Students and health and social care practitioners have expectations that both the teachers and leaders in higher education should mirror the espoused values or virtues of the health and social care professions themselves (such as compassion, respect, honesty, social justice). These professions are often described as 'value-based', meaning that their core purpose or rationale is strongly normative (to promote health and social well-being). This is common to other human services professions (such as teaching, which promotes education) but often the claims made about the health and social care professions (sometimes called 'caring professions') are stronger and significantly influence professional identity and self-image. In justifying their actions and views, health and social care professionals often refer to their values.

## **A scenario: 'I'm sorry that the organisation has failed you'**

Some years ago, one of the authors of this paper attended an inter-disciplinary leadership course in her role as a higher education leader in health and social care. The scenario outlined below is a brief summary of an episode from this course that

provoked 'moral unease' amongst course participants and stayed in the mind of this paper's co-author as exemplifying an ethical conundrum for university leaders in health and social care:

One of the speakers was a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) from the business sector. The CEO, whom we will call Mona, described how one of her senior colleagues, Terry, was seriously under-performing. Despite several efforts to tackle this, his under-performance continued. Mona recounted how she arranged to meet with Terry. She began the conversation with an apology: 'I am sorry that the organisation has failed you'. The conversation progressed to a financial offer to compensate Terry for the organisation's failure and confirmation that a reference would be forthcoming when he applied elsewhere for another position.

There was a good deal of moral unease amongst the leadership course participants, who comprised people in leadership positions in many different sectors: from higher education to business, the charitable sector and health and social care. Surely such practices were unethical, indicative of a leader's lack of integrity in failing to communicate honestly with an employee and a willingness to support the move of an ineffective – or incompetent – colleague to another organisation? Or was Mona's approach – however Machiavellian it might seem - not just pragmatic, but also ethical in so far as a leader's primary responsibility is to safeguard the interests of their own organisation?

### **Commentary 1: Ann Gallagher**

A response to this scenario led me to reflect on the implications of different leadership approaches in my area of practice, as head of a university department, directed towards excellence in health and social care via educational and research activities. The scenario also led me to reflect on aspects of leadership that are too seldom discussed, that is, the virtues – and vices – leaders need reflect on to negotiate conundrums or clashes between business and care oriented priorities. The scenario led me also to consider more deeply what is meant when a leader is criticised as being 'Machiavellian'.

### ***Leadership – meaning and perspectives***

The leadership literature is legion and the increasing number of perspectives on leadership is potentially overwhelming. It has been estimated that, between 1989 and 2013, over 20,000 books with 'leadership' in the title were published (Gini and Green, 2013). Many more books and papers (empirical and philosophical) have been published since then, including in relation to health and social care practice and higher education.

The many flavours of leadership, detailed in the literature, may leave leaders floundering. Which is the most appropriate style for realms of practice which, for example, relate to health and social care and higher education? Is a 'pick and mix' approach defensible? Need a leader commit to one type of leadership?

Readers will, most likely, be aware of *autocratic*, *democratic* and *laissez-faire* styles of leadership, which date back to 1939. Other named styles of leadership include: *transactional*, *transformational*, *situational*, *mindful*, *delegative*, *participative*, *compassionate*, *wonder-inspired* and *authentic* leadership, to list but a selection.

Authentic leadership and wonder-inspired leadership are of particular interest and relevance to the scenario. Authentic leaders are said to be those individuals who are:

... deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character (Avolio et al., 2004, p. 4).

Wonder-inspired leadership is a more recent leadership approach, as described by Hansen and Jørgensen (2021). It is derived from – and inspired by - the creation of a Wonder Lab and 'wonder-based dialogues', whereby a facilitator guides participants through 'moments of Rhetoric, Dialectic, Dialogue, Meeting and Action' within five spaces (p.959). Wonder-inspired leadership is enabled through a model comprising 10 lessons or insights and is underpinned by virtues of curiosity, slow, authenticity and inclusion.

### ***Leadership and virtue ethics: some conundrums***

In the context of philosophy and virtue ethics, interrogation of the meaning and implications of 'authenticity' and ethicality leads to conundrums for leaders. How, for example, is authentic leadership impacted when the sharing of facts may undermine the dignity and privacy of individuals and organisations? Do leaders, as in the scenario about Mona and Terry, have licence to lie to protect individuals and organisations? Might it be acceptable, in response to a balancing of benevolence and non-malevolence, to be dishonest? Need leaders include, as part of their leadership repertoire, vices such as dishonesty and manipulation, to achieve their ends? Which perspectives on 'human nature' should underpin leaders' decision-making regarding virtues, vices and actions most likely to achieve the vision aspired to?

### ***Back to Machiavelli***

Niccolò Machiavelli was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1469 and entered Italian politics in 1498 in the service of Florentine Standard-bearer, Piero Soderino, until the latter's republic was overthrown by the Medici. This resulted in Machiavelli losing his position and being imprisoned for his republican sympathies (Machiavelli, 2005 edition). *The Prince* was written in 1513 but not published until after Machiavelli's death in 1532. Although not his only publication, it is his best known. The label 'Machiavellian' is often attached to leaders whose behaviour is considered to be ethically sub-optimal, for example: self-interested, unethical, manipulative, exploitative, vicious or duplicitous.

Extracts from *The Prince* that appear to have most resonance with unethical labels and with leadership and virtues relate, most particularly, to a suggestion that the work is to be understood:

as a text that teaches the prince to follow the virtues that would bring him security and honour and, if necessary, abandon those that would surely cause him to lose his state and be condemned to perennial infamy. To explain the point, he resorts to the well-known rhetorical device of redescribing as vices the actions that other theorists on state matters qualify as virtues, but which in fact lead to the loss of the state, then redefines as virtues those actions that are considered to be vices, but which lead to the state's preservation...virtues and vices are neighbours...(Introduction to Machiavelli's *The Prince* (2005 edition) by Maurizio Viroli, Professor of Politics at Princeton, p.xxxi).

Some of the most notorious extracts from *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 2005) include:

For there is such a distance between how one lives and how one ought to live, that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation. A man who wishes to profess goodness at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good. Therefore, it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge or not to use it according to necessity...carefully taking everything into account, he will discover that something which appears to be a virtue, if pursued, will result in his ruin; while some other thing which seems to be a vice, if pursued, will secure his safety and well-being (XV p.53 & 54).

Regarding role emulation, an accepted strategy to support the development of virtue, Machiavelli writes:

...a wise man should always enter those paths trodden by great men, and imitate those who have been most excellent, so that *if one's own virtue does not match theirs, at least it will have the smell of it* (VI p.20).

There is much to discuss in relation to *The Prince* regarding implications for leadership in our troubled times. However, it is necessary to make explicit some of the caveats and conundrums that scholars of his work have posited: how serious is the Prince? Is it satirical? And, importantly, how is it to be contextualised in relation to Machiavelli's education and experience in 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy?

An interesting revelation in the Introduction to the 2005 edition of the book, is that Machiavelli 'copied out' Lucretius' work *On the Nature of Things* which included a 'disconsolate and realistic view of man's condition', described by Maurizio Viroli as follows:

Far from being the master of the universe, man is in fact the victim of nature and of fortune. Man is born naked and bawling. Alone among the animals, he is capable of astonishing cruelty against his fellow human beings. Yet no other creature has such an enormous desire to live and such a thirst for – and need of – the eternal and the infinite (p. ix-x).

This insight is a reminder that there is 'no theory from nowhere' and that philosophical and political perspectives emerge from social and historical contexts, from personal and professional experience and from our education.

From where, then, do – and should – contemporary theorists of human nature, leadership and ethics derive their insights? In particular, what are some of the insights that underpin perspectives on leadership and explanations for the ways these are enacted in health and social care practice and education?

### ***The object of morality?***

It would be presumptuous, if not arrogant, to prescribe one or more approaches as sufficient to provide a plausible perspective on human nature and the moral life. However, there are two such approaches which have proven helpful to me in negotiating leadership conundrums. These are to be found in Geoffrey Warnock's (1971) *The Object of Morality* and Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970).

Geoffrey Warnock (1971, pp. 12-26) argues that the object of morality is to counter limitations in rationality and sympathy and to respond to the reality of humans (often?) in competition with each other. For Warnock, 'rationality' includes good deliberation and decision-making, taking account of long-term implications, while 'sympathy' entails concern for the wants and needs of others beyond oneself or immediate circle. Warnock's account of the object of morality provides insights helpful to leaders, who may benefit from intensifying their thoughtfulness and expanding their sympathies. So, too, Iris Murdoch's (1970, pp. 17-24) discussion of M & D, in which she describes a process of relooking – or reframing – enabling a woman to see her daughter-in-law in a more positive light, can be very helpful for a leader faced with a team member presenting challenges. The imperative for a leader to look, as Murdoch says, 'with a just and loving eye' will rarely be inappropriate.

### ***Concluding comments: The leader's conundrums and considerations of virtues and vices...***

The scenario depicting a leader who reframed a situation in, what appears to be, a dishonest manner, 'the organisation has failed you', and then volunteered a reference to enable the passing on an ineffective or incompetent employee to another organisation, may indeed appear to be a demonstration of vice rather than virtue. However, on taking a close and *slow look*, as entailed by 'wonder-inspired leadership', the leader's approach may be defensible.

An awareness of limitations of rationality and sympathy as described by Warnock (1971) should inspire leaders to work harder – internally – to empathise with the predicament of the seemingly failing employee. It may be that the employee could flourish in another environment. It may be that when CEO, Mona, looks with a 'just and loving eye' as proposed by Iris Murdoch, she becomes aware of Terry's vulnerability. It may be that she is an authentic leader, one who sees that Terry's recruitment to the particular role was an error. If she chooses to engage with 'wonder-inspired leadership' Mona will, most likely, become aware of factors that inhibit Terry's performance and recognise his talents which would be best applied in another work context.

So how might Mona argue against the charge that she is, rather, a Machiavellian leader? Although some of the arguments in *The Prince* seem anathema to a virtue ethicist, this work reminds us that the frameworks of meaning which underpin a

leader's actions should be made explicit and reflected on. It reminds us also that the moral life is complex, as are the humans engaged with in health and social care practice and education. In addition to, at times, being ineffective and perhaps resistant to change, humans have a diverse range of talents. They are also vulnerable and, sometimes, fragile. Leaders have a responsibility to – as far as possible – preserve the dignity of team members and to provide opportunities for them to do better and to flourish.

I suggest that the next time someone suggests that you – or someone else – is being 'Machiavellian' in demonstrating what appears to be a vice rather than a virtue, the label is challenged and provides an opening to interrogate the complexity and ambiguity of everyday conundrums with a renewed emphasis on benevolence and non-malevolence. Whereas it may be argued that Mona's response could be characterised as that of a 'misleader' (Gini and Green 2013) and indicative of vice, it may also be countered that she is preserving Terry's dignity and opening up a conversation which enables him to reflect on roles and work context that are more appropriate for his interests and talents. It might also be argued that the organisation's recruitment and selection processes may, indeed, have failed Terry. A 'slow' approach to ethics is required here.

## **Commentary 2: Sarah Banks**

Although tantalisingly brief, this scenario is usefully provocative. It encapsulates aspects of current leadership and management strategies and styles with which we are all familiar – either from personal experience or news reports. The story of the person who leaves their job with a pay-off, who may have acted incompetently, unethically or was disturbing the organisation in other ways, is a familiar one. It is an 'easy', although expensive, solution to a problem that avoids more lengthy negotiations or legal adjudications. In this scenario, Mona's statements that precede and follow the offer of a pay-out raise particular ethical issues in that they add what most readers would regard as elements of dishonesty and disingenuousness to the 'easiness' of the pay-out.

It is not stated in the scenario what message Mona was trying to convey to the participants on the leadership course. However, given she was a CEO invited as a speaker, it seems likely that the approach she described was designed to serve as an example of an effective approach to leadership that might be emulated by others. However, course participants are reported as feeling 'moral unease' and questioning whether Mona's approach was, in fact, 'unethical'. Did 'safeguarding the organisation' (if indeed that is what Mona's response aimed to do) trump being honest with Terry and any future employer who offered him a job?

### ***From practical ease to moral unease***

What is it about this scenario that might cause 'moral unease'? Based on my reading of Mona's approach, it illustrates a particular type of dishonesty. It goes beyond 'being economical with the truth', which might entail Mona omitting to detail many aspects of Terry's under-performance. It goes beyond a simple 'white lie' – a harmless or trivial

falsehood told so as not to upset someone. Rather, it entails creating a specially designed narrative (a fabrication) that bears no relation to what Mona really believes or thinks, with the express purpose of enabling Terry to leave easily with the minimum of fuss. It is the apparent **ease** with which Mona says 'I'm sorry the organisation has failed you', followed by the offer of a payment and reference, that perhaps created the sense of **unease** in many of the audience members who were not from the business sector. Mona's response was too easy, almost formulaic, and, above all, disingenuous (pretending to have less concern about Terry's under-performance than she really did).

On this reading of the scenario, we might assume that Mona is not prepared to make the effort to have a difficult conversation - an approach that precludes Terry from learning about how to improve his performance, or from defending/explaining himself. In this sense it could also be characterised as disrespectful in that she is not treating Terry as a person worthy, or perhaps capable, of being told the truth or allowed or able to offer a response.

Is this approach characteristic of a good leader? Is this a model that those leadership course participants who were leaders in professional education in the health and social care sector should follow if Terry was, for example, an Associate Professor in Nursing or Social Work? Is it a model we might teach to students learning about leadership in the health and social care field? We do not know in what ways Terry had under-performed. But under-performance in the caring professions very often has impacts on the users of services, who may be sick, anxious or in other ways vulnerable. Incompetence can have serious consequences, so should neither be ignored nor condoned. And above all, for professions in the health and social care field, building trusting and respectful relationships in their practice is vital, and dishonesty undermines both trust and respect. The approach described by Mona, if adopted as standard practice, seems counter to professional values, as well as likely to lead to a poor organisational culture. As Munday (2023, p. 53) comments, based on his experience of leadership in the police, 'honesty is the key to create an environment and culture of mutual trust and respect'. Arguably leaders in higher education, who serve as role models for professionals in formation, should not engage in practices that contradict the stated values of their profession.

On this reading of the scenario it is doubtful whether Mona would be judged as demonstrating characteristics of 'authentic' leadership, particularly the 'relational transparency' (showing one's true self, being direct and open) that lies at the heart of the standard accounts of this style (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Ferrero et al, 2023). There may be occasions when being dishonest is the right course of action, but this is not because dishonesty is a virtue. It is because in balancing and integrating the virtues at stake in any situation, other virtues may be given more weight than honesty.

### ***Phronetic or formulaic leadership?***

In neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, is the overarching intellectual virtue that balances the other virtues, enabling us to do the right thing in the right place at the right time for the right reasons (Banks and Gallagher, 2009, pp. 72-95; Banks, 2018; Kristjánsson et al., 2021; Kristjánsson and Fowers, 2022). It is a



complex virtue, components of which include reasoning, work on the emotions, moral perception, imagination and a vision for human/ecological flourishing. It requires considerable effort, skill and rehearsal. The practice of practical wisdom is also premised on the other virtues of the moral agent (such as respectfulness, compassion, honesty). It is important to be alert to what Aquinas calls 'counterfeit forms of practical wisdom', which include the vices of 'cunning or craftiness, guile and fraud' (Ferrero et al., 2023, p. 75). All too often these vices are depicted as virtues (in Machiavellian style) of leaders and infuse organisational cultures. Arguably cunning and craftiness that are unchecked by honesty do not make for good leaders in any setting, but especially not in health and social care.

In virtue ethics the motivation of the moral agent, along with details of the particular context, are crucial in making an ethical evaluation. However, in this scenario, we do not know whether Mona tailored her response to Terry carefully and wisely, bearing in mind her knowledge of him and his situation (as explored in Commentary 1) or whether she simply decided to apply her own or the company's formula used in cases when it is in the company's interests to encourage people to leave. If it was a tailored response, Mona might argue she was being compassionate towards Terry, and felt that honesty about his poor performance would be unkind and knock his confidence in seeking a job elsewhere (imagine he had recently experienced a difficult divorce and was facing money problems). On a virtue ethical analysis, we might say she deployed her practical wisdom to balance the virtues of compassion and honesty, with compassion being given more weight in this situation. On the other hand, if it was a formulaic response, chosen as the line of least resistance in cases like this, when using a dishonest narrative seems to work, we might see this a failure on Mona's part to do the hard work associated with practical wisdom, allowing dishonesty to prevail by default. As McKenna (2023) points out, leadership is a complex field, full of paradoxes and dilemmas arising from conflicting and incommensurable responsibilities. Simply following set formulae, codes or rules is often impossible, undesirable and does not make for good leadership.

***Concluding comments: beware the false promise of the easy fix***

As these two commentaries show, many interpretations and evaluations can be given of one scenario. Even with fuller details of the context and motivations of key actors, readers will come to different conclusions about the virtues, vices and leadership approaches that can be discovered within the scenario, and which of these are to be cultivated or criticised. What analysis of this scenario highlights for me is the importance of questioning the easy options, of asking what kind of leader I want to be/should be and what it means for the values of my organisation and for the flourishing of society if either fabrication or openness are cultivated as leadership qualities. Taking a virtue-based approach to ethics in professional life means making an effort to put our moral selves under the spotlight, viewing our attributes and actions from different angles and in different lights, trying out alternative lenses and frames. It means being vigilant to the false promises of the easy fix and alert to feelings of moral unease.

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