

Book Review

Al Gini & Ronald M. Green

Ten Virtues of Outstanding Leaders: Leadership and Character

New York: Wiley, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

George Bernard Shaw said somewhere that “Kings are not born: they are made by artificial hallucination.” That may be true of inherited monarchies, but what about self-made sovereigns who may win their supremacy through combat or cunning? What about rulers who go by other names and who may even gain their spot atop the hierarchy by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote. And what about non-governmental leaders such as executives in the public or private sector, senior military officers, college deans or, for that matter, presidents of local service, suburban book or elegant wine-tasting clubs?

The assumption that organizational efficacy depends on clear distinctions between the rulers and the ruled and well-defined chains of command connecting the leaders and the led is so ingrained in modern society that to question, much less to deny, its inevitability is to risk being predissed as a joker with dangerous anarchistic tendencies.

Though there have been ample additions to the literature, the classic text on the subject was written a century ago. Robert Michels study, *Political Parties* (1915), expressed the sentiment well. There was, he said, an “iron law of oligarchy” that governed all enduring organizations regardless of the personal preferences and philosophies of their members. Michels did not study massive corporations or authoritarian establishments where it could be assumed that power would be exerted firmly and directly from the top down. He looked instead at the internal workings of the German Social Democratic Party, a socialist enterprise where the values of democracy and equality were almost universally and sometimes intensely endorsed. He found therein the basis for a claim of a universal tendency.

“Tactical and technical” necessities, he insisted, required an asymmetric division of labour in the interest of effectiveness. Democracy and equality were fine principles; but, especially, large organizations demanded that decisions be made efficiently and authoritatively if any significant practical goals were to be achieved. Michels started out as an anarcho-syndicalist; he migrated to Mussolini’s fascist movement. Circumstances change; so do people.

Today, even tender-hearted democrats who might once have spoken about “participatory democracy” and expressed a desire to involve people in the decisions that affected their lives no longer seem depressed by the dominance of leaders. “Yes, we can!” they shouted back at candidate Obama with the anonymity of the audience substituting for civic action.

Admiration, inspiration and emulation all partially describe the relationship between electors and their representatives. The adjective “charismatic” (now reduced to a common trait among people possessing “popularity” or “celebrity”) has become a term of adulation and affirmation. Meanwhile, more experimental, experiential, adventuresome, open and playful approaches to administrative and political projects seem strangely obsolete. The neoliberal agenda with its emphasis on instrumental corporate values of efficiency and productivity combine with a commitment to human resource management that

specifically undermines or jettisons notions of institutional loyalty and long-term commitment. Market mechanisms dominate and vibrant civic life is transformed into a network of virtual friends and an algorithm of consumer choice. In such a world, leadership can be quietly transformed into tyranny as the victims are seduced into complicity in their own domination. Welcome to big data analytics.

Gini and Green, meantime, take the general principle of hierarchy as an organizational necessity and the practice of visible leadership as a structural inevitability, and then they go on to insert the venerable concept of virtue into the scenario. They are not the first to do so, but they press the idea further than most who have celebrated the singular achievements of great women and men. Unlike other self-help books for aspirant autocrats, they are not content to provide a “how to” guide to personal triumph; instead, they try to connect or even to conflate private triumph with public good.

Perhaps “good timing” is what it’s all about after all.

Good leaders, they say, inspire followers to mimic their virtues and do more as well; people in authority act as role models, not merely for success, but for ethical behaviour as well. Such leaders, we are told, achieve positions of power because of their superior character; they are exemplars of all the qualities that are and should be admired, not least a living commitment to use their righteousness in the service of others.

As the title indicates, Gini and Green have distilled greatness into ten signature virtues. Upon inspection, I am not certain that all of them are actually virtues in any recognizable philosophical sense. To me, virtues must involve elements of moral probity, but they are seldom merely tactical, much less accidental. So, while I prepared to go along with: deep honesty, moral courage, moral vision, compassion and care, fairness, intellectual excellence, creative thinking, aesthetic sensitivity and deep selflessness, I wonder about “good timing.”

Nonetheless, having adumbrated this inventory of moral qualities, we are treated to ten examples of great leadership which provide illustrations of each virtue in turn. The choices are fairly predictable, though a trifle worrisome. Charles de Gaulle, for example, wins the prize for “good timing” and Steve Jobs gets the nod for “aesthetic sensibility.” Oprah Winfrey heads the “care and compassion list” and Franklin Delano Roosevelt scores for “intellectual excellence” as a reward for promoting the atomic bomb. What most of the choices demonstrate to me is relentless and often ruthless self-promotion, not least in the case of Winston Churchill who is billed as an exemplar of “moral judgement *and* moral vision—a designation that might have surprised the British miners in the 1926 General Strike or Mohandas Gandhi almost any old time.

We can, of course, have reasonable disagreements about what counts as a virtue and debate endlessly the question of which historical figure most aptly exemplifies the preferred quality in question. It would, therefore, be churlish of me to obsess about such matters. Instead, I’d like to offer a couple more general comments.

There is, I think something slightly odious about this enterprise in the very first place. Gini and Green do not claim that *all* successful leaders are righteous, just and honourable men (though nine out of ten are definitely *men*). They acknowledge that there are bad leaders and bad followers as well. It should come as no surprise that Adolph Hitler is tagged as a bad leader. Borrowing from Barbara Kellerman (2004), they say that bad leadership is incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular and

evil. Quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brilliant German theologian who perished in a Nazi concentration camp less than a month before VE day, they say that a bad leader is one who “makes an idol of himself and ... mocks God.”

The authors, of course, have only the most edifying reasons for producing yet another book on leadership. “As Aristotle argued,” they tell us, “we need examples.” So, in addition to those mentioned above, they roll out Abe Lincoln as the incarnation of “moral courage.” His life and the others are depicted, they say, because “learning virtues is very much a matter of habit and imitation. By holding up these paragons of virtue,” they conclude, “we aim to provide a useful tool for enhancing excellence in organizations.” So, there we have it. It turns out that the purpose of this exercise is more to build a training program for Human Resources departments than to promote a set of qualities that are ennobling in themselves. Perhaps “good timing” is what it’s all about after all.

Speaking of timing, about ninety years ago, D. H. Lawrence wrote a very funny book. It was a serious work of literary criticism, but it was hilarious all the same. I read it for the first time in 1967 and it left me convulsed in laughter. Whenever I feel a little glum, I return to it and am immediately repaired. Lawrence wrote about the likes of James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman. He was at his caustic best as he skewered the pomposity and pretentiousness of the very best of American writers. My favourite chapter dealt with Benjamin Franklin and Franklin’s own fatuous list of virtues. Lawrence doesn’t mock God, but he certainly carves up snuff-coloured Ben Franklin. After “Poor Richard” conceived and published his catalogue of virtues, which he closed by encouraging his readers to imitate Jesus and Socrates, I concluded that such lists had reached their apotheosis. There was simply no need to come up with another one. “Old Binjum” had said it all. And, after Lawrence dissected him and tossed the remaining scraps of the self-satisfied maximizer into history’s great composter, there was no further need to rebut such projects.

Gini and Green left me a little glum, so I picked up my now well-thumbed copy of Lawrence. I suggest that, glum or not, you do too. And, unless you are organizing an administrative retreat or, perhaps, a full-scale evacuation and are therefore occupying a comedy-free zone, I heartily recommend that you skip the *Ten Virtues of Outstanding Leaders: Leadership and Character* and go straight to Lawrence. Edgar Allan Poe is treated with proper respect, but you won’t have to read or recall Nathaniel Hawthorne to get the jokes. Lawrence’s acerbic wit reveals his subjects fully as he wields his scalpel with such skill that fans of Gini and Green won’t even feel the blade.

About the Reviewer

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