

Leadership Lessons from Shakespeare

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Abstract. The paper proposes that literature can be a rich resource for leadership training as it offer an in depth insight into the workings of a leader's mind like how no other resource whether a case study, biographical or autobiographical writing cannot offer. The paper studies the how Shakespeare's classical plays of Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and King Lear offer valuable lessons to corporate leaders today.

Keywords: Leadership, Literature, Shakespeare, Caesar, Julius Caesar, Macbeth

1 Introduction

Leadership is a complex construct. Eastwood(1998) says that precise definition of leadership is difficult although we think we know it when we see it. Sample (2002) expresses similar difficulty and says, leadership is elusive and tricky...hard to define in a way satisfactory to everyone. But despite it being complex, there have been attempts to define it. Shaw (2005) believes leadership is a process using persuasion and set by example thereby others are motivated to act, which describes what leadership does but not what it is.

John P. Kotter (1998) defines leadership as the most fundamental, about changes. What leaders do is create the systems and organizations that managers need, and, eventually, elevate them up to a whole new level or ... change in some basic ways to take advantage of new opportunities. —. Peter Druker, father of modern management defines leadership as, Leadership is the lifting of a man's vision to higher sights, the raising of a man's performance to a higher standard, the building of a man's personality beyond its normal limitations. (Drucker, 2004. pg. 108). Gary Yukl (2006) defines leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 8). Peter Northouse (2010) defines

leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal”.

These definitions establish the following: Leadership involves influencing others; it happens within the context of a group and happens in order to achieve a goal; leadership is to influence the group to achieve that goal.

Teaching leadership has become the most important training modules in a variety of courses whether for an industry, military, academia, or online. Many methods are used to teach leadership, including analysis of leadership characteristics and styles, case studies, biographical studies, autobiographical writing, and storytelling (Albert & Vadla, 2009; Doo, 2005; Pillai & Stites-Doe, 2003; Sample, 2002; Shaw, K. A., 2005). But literature is not used as a source of valuable leadership lessons as often as the other resources such as case studies or biographical studies. But Joseph Badaracco on the basis of his years of teaching leadership, in an interview, speaking of how literature is best suited for leadership lessons and training modules, states that “what makes literature so valuable in the classroom is that it helps students really get inside individuals who are making decisions. It helps them see things as these people in the stories actually see them. And that's because the inner life of the characters is imagined and described, in many cases, by brilliant writers whose sense of how people really think and how they really work have been tested by time over decades or even centuries.” Badaracco goes on to say that “you could describe what fiction does particularly well is it introduces people to ethical complexities. And some of the complexities are around the ethical principles. Others are more emotional, psychological around things involving self-discipline, focus. They really see the large, complex, sometimes messy sphere of things that are genuinely ethical.” Similarly, Jim Collins, well known business consultant and the famous author of the best-seller, “Good to Great” also believes that ““Executives should read fewer management books. I don't mean that reading is a waste of their time; on the contrary, they should read more. The question is what to read. My own view is that only one book in twenty should be a business book... More importantly, outstanding leaders and thinkers often get their best insights by reading outside their primary field ”.

So, it is now becoming evident that more and more management writers are recommending the use of classics of English literature as a source to gain insight into the

working of a leader's mind. This paper will examine one of the most perennial source of learning – the Shakespeare's works that help us to know what the great master thinks of being a leader.

2. **Julius Caesar:**

The story of *Julius Caesar* is about an assassination of dictator of Rome. The play's central theme is a debate on whether the conspirators who assassinated Caesar were right or wrong. In the play, there were eight conspirators – all members of the noble class- who included Marcus Brutus, Cassius, Casca, Trebonius, Decius Brutus, Metellus Cimber, Cinna, and Caius Ligarius got involved in conspiracy. The question that is relevant to leadership is that why did so many noble men revolt against Caesar? And to generalize the question, when do subordinates revolt against their leader? The answer to this lies in one of the well known management books written by William Cohen, one of the first graduate students of Peter Drucker's executive MBA programme, *Drucker on Leadership* (2010) where he writes in a section called "Seven Deadly Sins of Leadership" the Sin of Pride is the worst. Cohen writes that "the problem comes when leaders believe themselves so special that ordinary rules no longer apply. Generalized pride—as opposed to being proud of specific things—is the most serious leadership sin because it can lead to the other six. Sometimes even the perception of what the leader does while committing this sin will make things far worse" (p. 87).

So, although Caesar was an excellent leader with great military prowess, he had one unpardonable flaw and that was his dictatorial streak, his haughtiness and pride, which challenged the democracy of Rome. Caesar had come to believe that he was extra-ordinary, which is seen on when Caesar says:

*The gods do this in shame of cowardice:
Caesar should be a beast without a heart,
If he should stay at home to-day for fear.
No, Caesar shall not: danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he:
We are two lions litter'd in one day,
And I the elder and more terrible:
And Caesar shall go forth.*

This quality of Caesar is what makes his subordinate revolt against him. Alan Axelrod points out in his book *Julius Caesar CEO (2012)* “if language is any measure, Julius Caesar set a cross-cultural, panhistorical standard of leadership. Not long after he was assassinated, the name “Caesar” became a synonym for ruler” (p. 2). And, when somebody assumes such absolute power and is lost in his power-dom, then many like him find their fate in death.

3. Macbeth:

In *Macbeth*, the central character, Macbeth, s Scottish Thane, is shown having a combination of weaknesses of both that of Caesar, with his haughtiness and pride and the corruption of uncontrolled ambition. In these two weaknesses, Macbeth murders Duncan, the King of Scotland. And after assuming the throne, he becomes paranoid with his desire to maintain his crown and becomes power hungry. And, in this unscrupulous desire to be a king, breaks all moral codes and standards. And he becomes a tyrant. This makes Macbeth’s own army distrust him and he is eventually assassinated. This is a wonderful play from which valuable lessons on leadership can be drawn. First, Macbeth, in the beginning of the play is a charismatic personality. He is loved by all, in fact Duncan, the King of Scotland gives him a rare honour of visiting his house. But somehow, leadership theorists have been wary of this charisma as a quality of a leader. “The desire for charisma is a political death wish. What matters is not charisma. What matters is whether the leader leads in the right direction or misleads.” (Drucker, 2004. pg. 50). Drucker has warned leader from his quality of charisma. He says charisma is not important for leaders, what is needed for a leader is his sense of responsibility, accountability, and transparency. Drucker gives the examples of three most charismatic leaders of the world of twentieth century, Stalin, Mao, and Hitler and says that their charisma did not save them “misleading people”. One of the first and foremost lessons to be learnt from Macbeth is that charisma is not sufficient to be a leader. One needs an innate sense of morality and a responsibility to empower others and to give one’s followers the right direction, which Macbeth did not have, and hence failed as a leader.

Second thing, that Shakespeare is pointing out is that Macbeth stooped lower and lower in his desire to hold on to power. He knew no difference between innocent children or women when it came to squashing people who oppose him.

Messenger :Bless you, fair dame! I am not to you known,
Though in your state of honour I am perfect.
I doubt some danger does approach you nearly:
If you will take a homely man's advice,
Be not found here; hence, with your little ones.
To fright you thus, methinks, I am too savage;
To do worse to you were fell cruelty,
Which is too nigh your person. Heaven preserve you!
I dare abide no longer.

Exit

LADY MACDUFF: Whither should I fly?
I have done no harm. But I remember now
I am in this earthly world; where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly: why then, alas,
Do I put up that womanly defence,
To say I have done no harm?

Enter Murderers

What are these faces?

First Murderer

Where is your husband?

LADY MACDUFF: I hope, in no place so unsanctified
Where such as thou mayst find him.

First Murderer

He's a traitor.

Son: Thou liest, thou shag-hair'd villain!

First Murderer: What, you egg!

Stabbing him

Young fry of treachery!

A leader failure lies in his desire to hold on to power no matter what! This is a weakness. A leader must not be attached to the power of his position. He must be willing to let go of his power and position as the time and need demands.

4. King Lear:

Although Shakespeare was not a political poet, yet he knew the human dynamics of politics and wrote about the personal weaknesses of rulers that made way to their own downfall and often to the bloody destruction of the empires they governed. Story of King Lear, is again a story of an old king who decides to give his kingdom on the basis of how his daughters – Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia express their love for him:

KING LEAR: Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.

Give me the map there. Know that we have divided

In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent

To shake all cares and business from our age;

Conferring them on younger strengths, while we

Unburthen'd crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,

And you, our no less loving son of Albany,

We have this hour a constant will to publish

Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife

May be prevented now. The princes, France and Burgundy,

Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,

Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,

And here are to be answer'd. Tell me, my daughters,--

Since now we will divest us both of rule,

Interest of territory, cares of state,--
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge. Goneril,
Our eldest-born, speak first.

And what follows this is the irreparable damage to his kingdom, king, and his daughters. The greatest fault of a leader is to give in to flattery. Flattery is one of the worst manipulation that a leader can buy into. Here in the case of King Lear, he is inviting his daughters to flatter him and to base his decision of dividing his kingdom on the basis of their flattery. This is an unpardonable sin for a leader. Everyone has the innate weakness to listen to flattery, but a leader needs to be careful in dealing with flattery. If a leader were to place his decisions on flattery then there will be death of a leader.

5. Conclusion:

Leadership deals with people. Leadership training must equip leaders with knowledge and insight on the common failings of a leader. And Shakespeare's plays provide a valuable resource for learning about leadership. Whether it is Julius Caesar's pride or Macbeth's ambition, or Lear's foolishness it teaches leaders valuable lessons on leadership. And these works help a leader to be better equipped to deal with the present and plan the future.

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