

JULY 2025

## 3,200 Years and Lessons Not Learned – Why It's So Difficult to Move the Needle

A. C. Macris & Larry Reiter



The Trojan Horse was a giant, hollow, wooden horse used by the Greeks to infiltrate the city of Troy and win the Trojan War, a key event in Greek mythology. The Greeks hid soldiers inside the horse and tricked the Trojans into bringing it into their city, ultimately leading to the Greeks' victory.

The Trojan Horse symbolizes deception and infiltration, often serving as a metaphor for situations where something seemingly harmless is employed to gain an advantage or inflict harm.

The Greeks, unable to directly breach the city's walls, constructed a massive wooden horse as a seemingly harmless offering to the gods, secretly hiding Greek soldiers inside its belly. The Trojans, believing it to be a peace offering, brought the horse inside their city, unaware of the concealed threat. Later, under the cover of darkness, the Greek soldiers emerged from the horse and opened the city gates for the main Greek army, leading to the city's downfall.

The Trojan Horse is now a well-known metaphor for any deceptive act or strategy that invites an adversary into a secure location, typically with the intent of undermining or exploiting the trusted target.

The Trojans willingly accepted the wooden horse because of several factors, including their belief that it was a peace offering from the Greeks after a long siege, their desire to end the war, and their misunderstanding of a warning against trusting the Greeks. They saw the horse as a victory trophy and a gift to the gods, remaining unaware of the hidden Greek soldiers inside.



TROY CIRCA 1184 BC, QATAR CIRCA 2025 AD

This is not the first time we've delved into ancient history to explore leadership issues. The following excerpt is from our February 2020, our UPDATE article titled, "What Is New Is Old and What Is Old Is Relevant – Moral and Ethical Leadership."

"The more things change, the more they look like ancient Greece and Rome. Not long ago, the Associated Press highlighted a burgeoning ethics problem in the U.S. military, which has seen the number of officers dismissed for misconduct triple over the last three years.

The Air Force cheating scandals, Navy contract fraud, and Army cases of sexual misconduct, gambling, and alcohol have all led a recent Secretary of Defense to appoint a senior general officer as an "ethics czar" responsible for planning and implementing appropriate ethics training at every level of command.

The military is certainly not the only place where we witness breakdowns in ethics. One only needs to glance at a newspaper or watch the news on television to find stories of questionable ethical behavior at local, national, and international levels. Perhaps we need an "ethics czar" for the world. Of course, no ethics czar can resolve an endemic problem. The issue can only be addressed by those involved in the problem.

For this article (February 2020) and at least the next one (see our May 2020 article, "Truth & Trust Essential for Authentic Leadership"), we will explore the ethical dilemma. Is this a contemporary issue? The answer is no; it dates back in history. To set the stage, we will revisit ancient Rome and the classics.

But why turn to the classics? Although modern states seem to place emphasis on individual liberty over collective virtue, it is easy to see how individualism defers to the common good in an effective military, where soldiers live together, fight together, and too often die together. Collective well-being takes precedence over individuality because the mission—and likely sacrifices—demand it. Ancient thinkers excelled at not only defining that collective virtue, but also at explaining how to orient oneself to it.

What's more, both Plato and Cicero wrote during periods of societal atrophy. They saw the ruling philosopher as necessary to stemming the decay of their respective constitutions. This may not be particularly interesting to the military officer (or the business leader) who has no inclination toward either philosophy or ruling a state. It becomes more intriguing, however, when one understands that the moral strength of the philosopher makes him a better leader. Like Plato, Cicero recognized the corroding tendencies of power, and he believed that arresting such corrosion required "true philosophic greatness of spirit [and] the moral goodness to which Nature most aspires."

The above was excerpted from an article by Todd Hertling, a U.S. Army officer and a former Assistant Professor in American politics at the United States Military Academy. We believe one can change the word 'military' to almost any aspect of leadership/business/ governance in our world today. In addition, if you follow UPDATE, over the past 20 plus years, we specifically stay away from political issues and discussions. We recognize the topic of ethics and morals bridges all aspects of our lives and we cannot ignore or sidestep some of the compelling dynamics bombarding the news feeds today, but our intention is not to focus on one segment of the issue but look at it holistically.

Cicero subordinated philosophy to politics, so it should not surprise us to discover that his philosophy had a political purpose: the defense, and if possible, the improvement, of the Roman Republic.

Cicero explored the character of statesmen. He professed a four-part rubric:

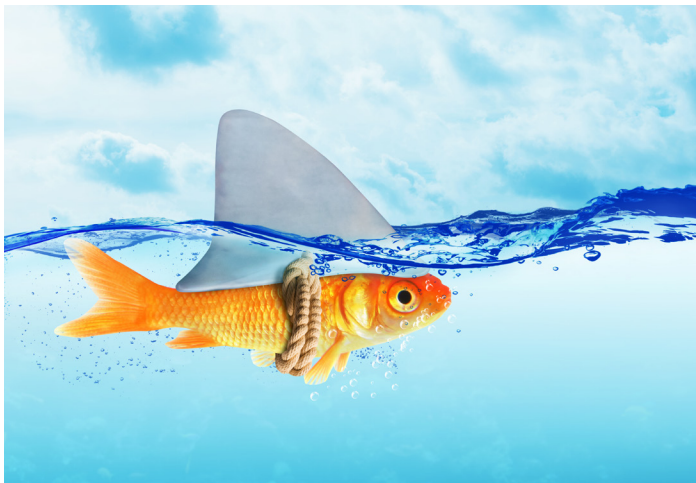
1. Understanding and acknowledging the truth
2. Maintaining good fellowship with men, giving to everyone his due, and keeping faith in contracts and promises
3. Greatness and strength of a lofty and unconquered mind, and
4. The order and measure that constitute moderation and temperance.

In short, the Cardinal Virtues = wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance."

For the past 15 to 20 years, we have observed a decline in the morals and ethics of leaders in business, government, and religious institutions. This decline has been gradual and, in many cases, has gone unnoticed by the public or perhaps has had little impact on the unaffected population. What we are witnessing today is a stark deterioration of the value system, and interestingly, we believe it is having a significant impact on leadership and overall societal behavior.

Adding to Cicero's rubric, we are suggesting the following as related to leadership:

- Ego versus ethics
- Greed versus ethics
- Lust for power versus servant leadership
- Lowering the bar on the impact of leaders as role models
- Narcissism; characterized by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, a need for excessive admiration, a lack of empathy, the exploitation of others, and a belief in one's uniqueness, at any cost.



As stated in previous issues of UPDATE, we follow global leadership studies conducted by reputable organizations. Over the years, we have observed a lack of notable improvement in the overall quality of leadership. This is a complex issue, but without a higher standard to aim for, it becomes a more challenging endeavor. What stands out in the constant bombardment of news and instantaneous information is a general lowering of standards or norms.

Take a close look at many of our politicians today and in recent years. If you analyze them critically, they are likely 0 for 4 in Cicero's rubric and probably 0 for 5 in our leadership rubric above. Unfortunately, ethics seem to be a foreign concept for so many of them. It starts at the top! If our key national leaders behave unethically and often illegally, what can we expect state and local leaders to adopt as acceptable behavior? We submit that it permeates our daily lives. A personal example from one of your authors: I have observed this total disregard for rules and ethical behavior manifest even in the governing board of a large homeowners' association. Board members who committed to following ethical rules continually disregard them and act in their personal interests rather than in the interest of the homeowner collective. When confronted with these ethical violations, the reaction is, "OK, you caught me – what are you going to do about it?" They look at national leaders who escape facing consequences for violating rules and laws and think, "It must be OK for me to do that also."

We observe similar behavior in our business leaders: a disregard for the ethical treatment of employees, customers, and the environment. This is, at the very least, a disturbing trend. As the saying goes, if people ignore history, history is bound to repeat itself. In the last issue of UPDATE, we discussed "Chainsaw Al" Dunlap and Jack Welch, and how their significant negative impacts on the industry seem to be resurfacing. The Trojan Horse = a "free" airplane?

How can we create positive change in our society? What must happen for people to rise up and demand ethical behavior from our leaders? Is it too much to expect elected officials to act in everyone's best interest rather than their own? Is it unreasonable to expect business leaders to consider not just the bottom line but also the employees who drive the business and the environment, so we can leave a healthier planet for our grandchildren and their grandchildren? There are no easy answers to these questions, but are we wrong to ask them?

We are not trying to take a political stand, but rather to advocate for society and to make the world a better place. Are we like Don Quixote, jousting at a windmill? We hope not. Our goal is to encourage people to think critically about the current state of our leaders and society and to oppose the downward spiral we have witnessed over the last decade or two. Leadership is under attack!