

# What's New is Old and What's Old is Relevant – Moral and Ethical Aspects of Leadership

A. C. Macris & Larry Reiter



## Introduction

“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.

Air Force cheating scandals, Navy contract fraud, and Army sexual misconduct, gambling, and alcohol cases have all prompted a recent Secretary of Defense to appoint a senior general officer as an “ethics czar” with a mandate for planning and executing appropriate ethics training at every level of command.

The Military is certainly not the only place we are seeing breakdowns in ethics. One only needs to look at a newspaper or watch the news on television to find stories of questionable ethical behavior at local, national and international levels. Maybe we need an “ethics czar” for the world. Of course, no ethics czar can fix an endemic problem. The problem can only be fixed by those who are involved in the problem. For this and at least the next article, we are going to look at the ethical dilemma. Is this a current day problem? The answer is no and it goes way back in history. To set the stage we are going to go back to the 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.

### Look Into Antiquity

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. The politicians of his time, he believed, were corrupt and no longer possessed the virtuous character that had been the main attribute of Romans in the earlier days of Roman history. This loss of virtue was, he believed, the cause of the Republic's difficulties. He hoped that the leaders of Rome, especially in the Senate, would listen to his pleas to renew the Republic. This could only happen if the Roman elite chose to improve their characters and place commitments to individual virtue and social stability ahead of their desires for fame, wealth, and power. Having done this, the elite would enact legislation that would force others to adhere to similar standards, and the Republic would flourish once again. Whether this belief shows an admirable commitment to the principles of virtue and nobility or a blindness to the nature of the exceedingly turbulent and violent politics of his time, or perhaps both, is impossible to say with certainty. *(excerpted from Internet encyclopedia of Philosophy, A Peered-Review Academic Resource.)*

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

1. Understanding and acknowledging 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 – Cardinal Virtues = wisdom, justice, courage and temperance.

Philip Freeman, a former professor of classics at Luther College claims Cicero's formula is as relevant in today's fractured political climate as it was during the rockiest days of the Roman Empire. Professor Freeman states:

“In politics,” he writes, “it is irresponsible to hold an unwavering position when circumstances are always evolving and good men change their minds. Clinging to the same opinion no matter the cost has never been considered a virtue among statesmen.”

Cicero knew first-hand from his years in Roman government that there was nothing more destructive to a state than political leaders who refused to work together. He had watched helplessly as the conservatives in the senate refused to consider any of Caesar's reforms simply because they despised the man.

**EDUCATION, ETHICAL BEHAVIOR, AND GOOD LEADERSHIP ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED IN ANTIQUITY, AND THEY CONTINUE TO BE FOR TODAY'S LEADERS.**

### Current Perspective

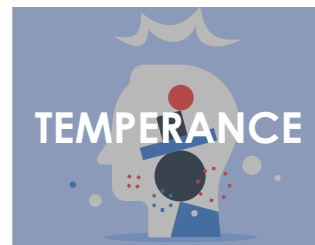
Our goal with UPDATE has been to discuss the many and varied aspects of how to achieve effective leadership in businesses, non-profits, government agencies and religious institutions. It would seem that wanting to be an effective leader should be a no-brainer. Why wouldn't any leader want to be effective and find ways to improve their effectiveness and pass that on to the future generations of leaders? Yet, we review annual studies from DDI and other respected sources, which show that trust in leadership continues to be stagnant or even in decline. Periodically the headlines report stories of inadequate or failed leadership. This continues to have us scratching our heads and wondering why something so apparently obvious is, in reality, not so obvious. It appears common sense is not so common.



For the past 15 or 20 years, we see a decline in the morals and ethics of leaders in business, government and religious institutions. We feel it is time to offer some thoughts on this decline. Is it just among our leaders, is it society in general, or is it society based on examples from our leaders? Regardless of the cause, it is time to look at this decline and offer ideas on how to right the ship and make morals and ethics rise to the top of the list of important issues that must be addressed despite the efforts to ‘regulate’ out of this malaise.

Our goal is not to focus on any one area – government leaders or religious leaders or business leaders but to take a broader look at the decline. We may refer to specific issues, but only in the context of, looking more at the broader aspects of the malaise. We take no position politically and use political examples only to present a look at something that is endemic to a much broader problem.

## What's Old is Still Relevant – Examining Cicero's Cardinal Virtues



**Wisdom** – There is a story in the Bible that speaks of Solomon, a young man who, after God offered him anything his heart desired, he requested wisdom. The Webster's Unabridged Dictionary defines wisdom as "knowledge, and the capacity to make due use of it." The other characterization is; 'Understanding and acknowledging truth.' In today's world understanding and acknowledging truth is a moving target. Truth is a moving target. Is there such a thing as absolute truth, legal truth and/or ethical truth? What is absolute truth? Has the world become so complex that absolute truths no longer exist, or as a society are we hiding behind the complexity aspect to not see absolute truth? If we accept the definition of wisdom, then knowledge and the capacity to use it, can lead to truth. The problem in a social media world is that we seek immediate gratification and information regardless of its accuracy. Gaining the requisite knowledge and then possessing the capacity to apply that knowledge takes time. So much is moving at digital speed that wisdom is illusive leading to confusion and in essence digressing from attaining truth. The other aspect of wisdom is how to attain it. Solomon obviously recognized the importance of wisdom, but felt it beyond his ability to gain it on his own. For a leader to seek wisdom takes not just knowledge but self-discipline, introspection and humility.

**Justice** – can be defined as the morally fair and right state of everything. To have justice as a person's character trait means that they are just and treat everyone the same, or how they would like to be treated (*Wiktionary*). Once again, we see reference to "do unto others as we would have others do unto us." (*The Sermon on the Mount*). Cicero refers to justice as "Maintaining good fellowship with men, giving to everyone his due and keeping faith in contracts and promises." Ancient Greek philosophers Plato, in his work *The Republic*, and Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, set out early theories of justice.

This term also brings with it many complications. Justice according to the law (procedural justice), or justice according to ethical behavior and a moral compass (social justice). In our modern world there appears to be a tendency to feel that if an action or behavior is within the procedural law then it is acceptable and all right. So now we get into the question of legally acceptable and/or ethical or morally acceptable.

Let us look at it from a leadership effectiveness perspective. Justice according to the law is one aspect and any leader should ensure he or she and their organization comply with the laws within their country, region, etc. In a perfect world, this is why organizations have either lawyers on staff or relationships with appropriate law firms depending on the type of law. When it comes to social justice things are not so clear-cut. In an attempt to assure and monitor ethical behaviors, many companies have positions and perhaps departments dedicated to social justice. This may also be a way of defining organizational culture also. The point here is the leadership sets the moral compass, becomes the role model, and establishes the norms, and ethical behavior. Conflicts arise when both procedural and social justice become muddled between the two and within each or when leaders either shirk or ignore justice.

**Courage** – Greatness and strength of a lofty and unconquered mind. As with Justice, Courage is not a simplistic concept, particularly in the context of ethics. A bit of research reveals several perspectives on courage. In the leadership context, once again there are two types identified: Physical courage and moral courage. Most people can easily understand the concept of physical courage as taking action in the face of perceived or actual physical danger. This is battlefield courage, heroic courage evidenced by extraordinary acts on behalf of others. Moral courage is quite different; it is a virtue when we choose to do good, especially when that is most difficult. Courage most demands our respect when it incurs risk without selfish motivation. Courage is moral strength in the face of danger (not necessarily physical danger). Courage is most virtuous when combined with knowledge, wisdom, and opinion.

David Anderson, a consulting professional states that; "Many times, we have the choice to exercise moral Courage when no one else knows about it. Moral Courage is very much a private matter between God and us. We are the only two who know our motives. When we choose Integrity and do the right thing, without a selfish incentive, we have acted with moral Courage."

Leadership and courage can be synonymous because there is no leadership without courage. To be exact, we believe in both aspects of courage – physical and moral. In today's world, we might suggest that moral courage is one of a leader's greatest challenges. Moral courage involves replacing one's own motives and interests



with matters of the greater good or the moral high road rather than using procedural justice as justification for one's actions. This is important in establishing the moral compass of a leader's organization. *[We define Moral Compass as: a natural feeling that makes people know what is right and wrong and how they should behave, or a person's ability to judge what is right and wrong and act accordingly.]* When a recognizably responsible moral compass exists, it becomes the culture of an organization. In contrast, with an inconsistent or unidentifiable moral direction, internal conflicts result within the organization. This becomes an important issue when individuals within an organization are required to follow directives that conflict with their moral value system. Certainly it is not a definitive situation, but we believe most people recognize an aberrant moral compass, making compliance extremely stressful.

The challenge leadership is facing today is the dilemma between procedural justice and moral courage. The default is procedural justice. In some cases, moral courage is stepchild to procedural justice and in many cases, moral courage becomes a minor factor or not even recognized. Likewise, there are cases where even procedural justice is misinterpreted, making for even more chaos.

**Temperance** – Temperance is defined as moderation or voluntary self-restraint<sup>1</sup>. It is typically described in terms of what an individual voluntarily refrains from doing<sup>2</sup>. This includes restraint from retaliation in the form of non-violence and forgiveness, restraint from arrogance in the form of humility and modesty, restraint from excesses such as extravagant luxury or splurging now in the form of prudence, and restraint from excessive anger or craving for something in the form of calmness and self-control<sup>2</sup>.

“Temperance has been described as a virtue by religious thinkers, philosophers, and more recently, psychologists, particularly in the positive psychology movement. In classical iconography, the virtue is often depicted as a woman holding two vessels transferring water from one to another. It is one of the cardinal virtues in western thought found in Greek philosophy and Christianity, as well as eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.”

Aristotle calls it the “golden mean,” which explains that virtue is found firmly in the middle, between excess and deficiency. Excess and desires are synonymous with discontent and dissatisfaction. They're a self-defeating impulse.

Epictetus said, “Curb your desire — don't set your heart on so many things and you will get what you need.” Moreover, Seneca said, “You ask what is the proper limit to a person's wealth. First, having what is essential, and second, having what is enough.”

Temperance is the knowledge that abundance comes from having what is essential. The Stoics often used temperance interchangeably with “self-control.” Self-control, not just towards material goods, but self-control, harmony, and good discipline always—in pleasure

or pain, admiration or contempt, failure or triumph. Temperance is guarded against extremes, not relying on the fleetingness of pleasure for happiness nor allowing the fleetingness of pain to destroy it.

*Daily Stoic – Ancient Wisdom for everyday Life*

### A story About Cicero

“Once, in spring of the year 63 B.C. the Roman Consul met a sunrise as always during his walk in Senate outskirts. The face of the dignitary was hidden by a hood sinking in the darkness and was almost invisible before the sun rose over a colonnade of the powerful public body. The grandee walked along a cobblestone road thoughtfully accompanied by several servants and sometimes seemed to be speaking to himself. So early morning was the time of fruitful activity for active Romans of that historical period and there were many people communicating with each other quietly on the Senate Square. However, as soon as golden sunshine filled the outskirts with a bright light, the slow quiet conversations transformed into noisy debatable hubbub as if on command! Everything was as usual: Rome reveled in its democratic way of life, impulsiveness and omniscience of citizens! Never the less this day wasn't destined to become ordinary. Unexpectedly the space of senate square was cut through by the loud shout: Stop, you scoundrel! The corpulent patrician in a snow-white toga with a gold brocade border rent the air incredibly loudly. This indignation was directed to the quickly fleeing young plebeian who had stolen a hardly filled purse from a belt of the rich man a second earlier.



Finally, the fat patrician's angry appeals were heard and the thief was captured by guards on the opposite side of the area and was beaten by sticks. By the moment the Consul has reached the scene, the guilty young man was hardly alive... – That's enough! – exclaimed the Consul, throwing up his hands. At this moment, the hood fled from his head and everyone saw Mark Tullius Cicero.

He is already humiliated and taught enough by our contempt and physical suffering. Further continuation of a punishment will disgrace us more than him! Cicero looked round the curious crowd, looked at the robbed patrician and continued – and the really regrettable thing, citizens of Rome, is that now robbery isn't

only widespread on markets and in dark lanes, but also on the square in front of the Senate!

There are always a great number of patricians, their servants and guards here. This means that even being in idle prosperity we don't see the obvious problem: the despair of the poor is already capable to overcome fear before the authority! The worst politician's disease is pride and it should be treated with sticks too! Crowd growled, but the speaker stopped its indignation with the resolute gesture and announced a verdict – Release the young man and pay him 10 denarius from city treasury for starting his own business. Let pleb believe in justice and prudence of the Republic! And for senators, magistrates and other officials present here is my advice: "Temperance is a cure for vice and a way to reasonable decisions..."

*International Academy of Science and Higher Education (IASHE, London, UK)*

### **Why are morals and ethics important?**

What does this have to do with leadership? Everything. The messages are clear. We've written about entitlement, self-discipline and servant leadership. We've alluded to the importance of humility

in leadership. Leadership is a privilege, it's a responsibility, it's servitude and it's humility. It's not entitlement; it's not above the law or accepted social behavior; it is not seeking self-gain and being self-serving. Leadership is setting an example, being the moral compass of those being led. Cicero and other greats of antiquity set the framework thousands of years ago: wisdom, justice, courage and temperance. Perhaps our leadership development should focus on those four cardinal virtues and maybe we will begin moving the needle toward more effective leadership globally. There are positive examples – the problem is they tend to be few and far between on the world stage. Perhaps there are more enlightened leaders of smaller organizations and entities that don't make the newsfeeds. We certainly hope so. Crafting a leadership development strategy that weaves the cardinal virtues into the necessary skills and knowledge is attainable, but takes commitment and hard work and a recognition that things must change. More on this in following issues. What's new is old and what's old is still very relevant.

1. Green, Joel (2011). *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic. p. 769. ISBN 978-0-8010-3406-
2. Schwarzer, Ralf (2012). *Personality, human development, and culture: international perspectives on psychological science*. Hove: Psychology. pp. 127–129. ISBN 978-0-415-65080-9



PO Box 535  
Mystic, CT 06355  
(860) 572-0043

[www.themacrisgroup.com](http://www.themacrisgroup.com) • [acmpc@acmacris.com](mailto:acmpc@acmacris.com)