

Introduction

The value of great leaders seems to be an unquestioned assumption. Just a few minutes of browsing in the business section of a bookstore or scrolling through Amazon.com uncovers texts that promise to define great leadership, identify great leaders, and reveal what traits correlate with great leadership and what behaviors turn someone into a great leader. Many academic and popular press articles identify what attributes distinguish good leaders from great leaders, with the underlying assumption that it is better to be a great leader than a good one.

We make the *prima facie* assumption that being a leader requires skills and abilities and that, as noted by Festinger (1954, p. 124), “There is a unidirectional drive upward,” which would motivate someone to improve their abilities in order to be a better leader. Further, and by extension, we assume that followers and other organization members would appreciate a leader who strives to be exceptional. In other words, an individual will always prefer to be a better leader than one who is less accomplished. Similarly, people prefer to follow a superior rather than lesser leader.

The premise of this Element is that greatness has hidden costs, which people usually overlook. We believe that this blind spot is fundamental to our intuitive beliefs about leadership. In fact, we go so far as to say that the human tendency to see only the benefits of great leadership, while ignoring the hazard of great leadership, represents the *fundamental leadership error*.

The fundamental leadership error involves two related misconceptions. The first is the belief that, regardless of the criteria used to define greatness, it is always better to have a great leader relative to a good one. The second is the assumption that a leader’s goodness or greatness stems from their internal characteristics. The name and basis of the fundamental leadership error pay homage to social psychology’s *fundamental attribution error*, which describes how people overestimate the role of dispositions – as opposed to situations – in influencing behavior (Ross, 1977). Thomas Carlyle’s (1841) great man theory of leadership (now termed “great person theory”) is an example of the fundamental error of ascribing dispositional or even genetic greatness to leaders who are probably not deserving of such elevated status.

In a way, this Element saddles the reader with a conundrum. Given the plethora of material devoted to striving to be a better leader and the dearth of books and articles that promise to make their readers *less* accomplished leaders, it would seem counterproductive to argue that in some instances people should *not* strive to become a great leader or that followers should not prefer great leaders. We would never advocate for mediocrity or less-than-effective leadership. However, we do wish to shed light on the hidden hazard of great

leadership. Using up-to-date research from leadership studies, psychology, and sociology, we will explain why great leaders, great leadership, or even the quest for great leadership can sometimes lead to harmful consequences for the leaders themselves, their followers and constituents, their organizations and institutions, and larger society as a whole. We will frame our discussion of why these harmful consequences can occur in terms of the seven deadly sins of pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust, which are often listed in descending order, from the most destructive to the least. In other words, we will explore the counterintuitive idea that there is a hazard posed by great leaders. Much like the warning label on a pack of cigarettes, we caution that great leadership can be hazardous for an organization's health.

Examining the possible downside of great leaders is a novel task. A Google Scholar search for the exact term “great leader” obtained 55,300 hits in October 2022. In contrast, a search for the term “hazard of a great leader” uncovered exactly zero matches and we also found no evidence for variations such as “hazard posed by a great leader.” A search on Google revealed similar omissions. A Google search for “great leader” found 15,800,000 hits, whereas “hazard of a great leader” and “downside of great leadership” found zero.

John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, commonly known as Lord Acton, was a nineteenth-century English author, historian, and politician. Although Acton served in the House of Commons and wrote notable political essays, people best remember him for a statement he penned in the Acton–Creighton correspondence, reprinted in the volume *Essays on Freedom and Power*, selected and introduced by Gertrude Himmelfarb and published in 1949: “Power tends to corrupt,” wrote Acton, “and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Acton, 1949, p. 364). In the century and a half since they were written, Acton's words have achieved the status of iconic wisdom, serving as a cautionary tale for any leader holding on to the naïve belief that they are immune to power's nefarious influence.

Often overlooked is the next provocative sentence that Lord Acton wrote in his letter to the bishop: “Great men are almost always bad men.” He added, “even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it” (p. 364). The “great people are bad people” paradox can be resolved by understanding the human tendency to gravitate toward committing one or more of the *seven deadly sins*. This collection of transgressions was first described by the philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Often listed in descending order, from most destructive to least destructive, the seven sins are *pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust*.

We consider how human vulnerability to the seven deadly sins – in conjunction with social-psychological processes related to group processes and the relationship between leaders and followers – makes it possible for a great leader to become a hazard to himself or herself, followers, the organization as a whole, and the larger society in which the organization is embedded. These sins can operate on leaders themselves, followers, or even members outside of the organization.

The hazard posed by great leaders is different from destructive leadership. According to Einarsen, Aasland, and Skogstad (2007, p. 208, emphasis in original), *destructive leadership* is defined as “*The systematic and repeated behaviour by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organisation by undermining and/or sabotaging the organisation’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates.*” Destructive leadership is often defined by terms such as “abusive supervisors,” “bullies,” and “toxic leaders.”

In contrast, the hazard posed by great leadership is conceptualized as positive behaviors or characteristics that have unintended negative consequences. Leadership, it turns out, is packed with paradox (Bolden, Witzel, & Linacre, 2016). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *paradox* as “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true.”¹ Paradoxes are truths that hang upside down to get our attention. Great leaders who ignore the paradoxes of leadership are, by definition, not great leaders and are in fact a hazard to themselves and to their followers.

The most obvious limitation of great leader worship has come clearly into public view through recent revelations about corporate misconduct at the leadership levels. As Fuqua and Newman (2004, pp. 151–152) noted, “Preoccupations with CEOs, their philosophies, personal characteristics, and so forth, reflect a general social attitude in our culture that defers great influence to a very small group of individuals. The full social cost of this model over the past decade is not likely to be realized for several years.”

Great leadership can make a positive difference. It helps create positive outcomes on scales both large and small. Ernest Shackleton’s leadership of the crew of *Endurance* after it was trapped and crushed in an ice floe off Antarctica in 1915 saved all hands. Against much conventional wisdom, Clara Barton organized women nurses to aid Union soldiers during the American Civil War and became known as the Angel of the Battlefield. Martin Luther King Jr. became the foremost leader of the nonviolent struggle for civil rights for African Americans from 1955

¹ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780198609810.001.0001/acref-9780198609810-e-5221>

until his assassination in 1968. His efforts culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Traditional views of leadership have emphasized the importance of individual traits that facilitate someone acting as an influential leader. Other, related approaches recognize that certain behaviors (as opposed to underlying traits that motivate those behaviors) are associated with great leadership. Both of these frameworks implicitly assume that it is always better to have more – rather than less – of a desired attribute.

The *romance of leadership* (Bligh, Kohles, & Pillai, 2011) is an implicit leadership theory (Felfe & Petersen, 2007) that focuses on the tendency to attribute an extensive role to the influence of leaders with regard to the success or failure of an organization (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). Emrich (1999, p. 992) explored people's implicit theories of leadership and noted "numerous studies, all of which indicate that leadership is as much (or more) an idea in the minds of followers as a reality of leaders themselves." As such, the romance of leadership is an "inherently subjectivistic, social constructionist view" (Meindl, 1995, p. 339). According to Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985, p. 79), "It appears that as observers of and as participants in organizations, we may have developed highly romanticized, heroic views of leadership – what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives."

Proponents of the romance of leadership concept have challenged whether leaders have a meaningful effect on organization outcomes. If the leader is seen as successful, people who score high in the tendency to romance leadership are more inclined to approve a project even in the face of information that suggests the likelihood of success is low (Felfe & Petersen, 2007). Although a minority opinion is that leadership does not matter to the success of an organization (Pfeffer, 1977), as noted by Alvesson (2019, p. 39), "the large majority is more or less strongly celebratory of leaders and leadership. Leadership researchers (and practitioners) may have seen too many Hollywood and Disneyland films and/or are too strongly influenced by religion rather than social science."

A number of reasons explain why a belief in the importance of leaders persists. One is that leaders are given credit for success and are blamed for failure, even if their performance is influenced by factors beyond their control, such as economic downturns or historical events. A second reason is that implicit theories of leadership often attribute leaders with the potential for great influence. A third reason is that someone who appears to be a successful leader may be the beneficiary of several instances of good fortune. As such, what is actually luck is interpreted as leadership acumen. Finally, the media tends to romanticize leaders and further contributes to their being perceived as important influences.

One consequence of distinguishing between leader and follower roles is that among followers, as noted by Einola and Alvesson (2021, p. 856), “The follower role is embraced as limited, narrow and subordinated to the leader in terms of initiative, responsibility, influencing and work activity. There is little thinking about the entire picture.” As such, they suggest that “leadership may be a double-edged sword, where trust in leadership may simultaneously trigger respect and good relations as well as processes of immaturization” (p. 860). In other words, trust in a great leader – mediated by the deadly sin of sloth – may make followers – like children – less hardworking and less ambitious.

Skepticism about leader effectiveness can take two forms. In one instance, it is possible that, although leaders do influence organizational outcomes, the inherent superiority of one leader in comparison to another will be overrated. The strong, and more controversial, form challenges the notion that leaders have any influence at all on organizational outcomes.

One reason that the identity of a specific leader may not be important is that leaders and their impact are effectively more homogeneous than might initially be assumed. One explanation is that leaders typically self-select to assume or be nominated for a leadership role. As such, there may be a restricted range of candidates (with a corresponding limited range of attributes) to take on a leadership role. Further, constraints on leaders may limit their range of possible behaviors. These constraints may be internal and stem from within the organization; they may also be external and can include government regulations as well as the perspectives of opinion leaders. Leaders can also vary in the degree they tailor their leadership style to the needs of individual followers, i.e., are they heterogeneous or homogeneous in their treatment of followers (Klein & House, 1995)?

The very belief in the concept of a great leader can interfere with the quality of leadership by reducing the perceived value of leader development. Almost by definition, great leaders do not require further training or education. Additionally, a belief in great leadership can undermine the potential effectiveness of someone who is merely good. In other words, with leadership, it is important to avoid letting the search for the great be the enemy of satisfaction with the good.

1 The Challenge of Defining “Greatness”

To explore the hazard posed by a great leader, we need to define what we mean by both a great leader and a hazard. Defining a great leader is not an easy task. As noted by Horner (1997, p. 275), “Is there a clear, single profile that exists for a great leader? Most likely there is not.” For example, Al-Nasour and Najm (2020) identified six elements of excellent leadership: possessing a strategic

vision, influencing others, serving as a moral role model, maintaining external relations, achieving business success, and developing pathways for future leaders to emerge. One problem of being a great leader is that it may require balancing competing or contradictory goals or attributes. For example, outstanding leadership can be viewed in terms of possessing both humility and fierce resolve (Xu et al., 2019). The paradox of authentic leadership involves the trade-off between matching words and deeds and appearing relatable (Goffee & Jones, 2005).

The belief in great leaders is associated with the ongoing debate over whether great leaders are “born” or “made.” The innate approach was advocated by Carlyle (1841) in his “great person” explanation for heroism. Carlyle argued that certain individuals possessed qualities such as intelligence, wisdom, and goodness that made them destined for greatness (Spector, 2016). The disparity between the income earned by the average employee and a CEO is consistent with implicit beliefs in a great person theory of leadership (Koehn, 2014).

According to an analysis by von Hippel (2018), income disparities are *not* caused by disparities in innate abilities but are rather the result of beliefs about innate disparities in abilities. When the gap between the rich and the poor first appeared, people psychologically justified the gap by judging the rich to be inherently superior to the poor. A belief that greatness is innate also fits with an essentialist approach that minimizes the role of socialization and prior experience in developing exceptional leaders. Certain disciplines such as sociology tend to be hostile to essentialist approaches because people view them as reifying class and status differences (Fuchs, 2001).

Greatness in leadership must surely involve the wisdom to map out highly challenging ethical goals and ethical means to achieve them. Moreover, leaders must be able to persuade followers and mobilize them to act toward those goals. Thus, we define a great leader in terms of the three dimensions of competence, morality, and charisma. Competence is required to achieve a goal. Morality is necessary to ensure that the goals sought achieve the greater good. Charisma is needed because leaders must be able to motivate others – followers – to work toward the vision described by a leader. These three dimensions are distinct but correlated. Our definition of greatness builds on work relevant to understanding heroism. Virtue and competence are core dimensions of heroism (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Goethals & Allison, 2012). Charisma is an important attribute of heroism, and although fame is not necessary to define someone as heroic (Goethals & Allison, in press), it is often the case that heroes become famous.

Many studies of leadership show that good leadership is associated with having a particular personality profile along the five dimensions of the Big Five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The five factors are often

referred to by the acronym OCEAN, with each letter representing, in turn, openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Openness to experience is sometimes referred to as intellect and is related to knowing and being open enough to make good decisions. Conscientiousness supports self-regulation and therefore ethical behavior. Conscientiousness and agreeableness are related to ethical leadership (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011). Extraversion and agreeableness contribute to being willing and able to engage with potential followers. With neuroticism, a low score indicates high emotional stability, predicting good leadership. Stability (the absence of neuroticism) helps with perseverance and steadiness of emotional outlook during stressful leadership moments. It helps great leaders keep on an even keel.

In one extension of the Big Five literature, the HEXACO model of personality adds an honesty–humility dimension, which includes qualities such as modesty, sincerity, fairness, and avoiding greed (Ashton & Lee, 2007). This added dimension supports ethical behavior and effective interaction with potential followers.

Great leadership is the accomplishment of morally commendable and difficult objectives by leaders and their followers. In other words, great leadership is accomplished by possessing and acting in accord with the opposite traits of the seven deadly sins. Traits such as humility, conscientiousness, and agreeableness are counterpoints to sins like pride, wrath, greed, and sloth.

While there can be endless hair-splitting debate about whether things done by past leaders and followers were exceedingly difficult or entirely ethical, we are confident that we can identify examples of leaders who fully meet the standards of morality and competence. Jimmy Carter’s leadership in producing the Camp David Accords between the United States, Egypt, and Israel in 1978 can be considered an example of great leadership, even if Carter’s overall performance as president is not considered great. At the time, the Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin said that Carter had “worked harder than our forefathers did in Egypt in building the pyramids.” That agreement, despite numerous challenges, has resulted in peace between Israel and Egypt for more than forty years.

Leadership Mismatches

Defining great leadership as both effective and ethical raises questions about how we should regard leadership that is effective but not ethical or ethical but not effective. Should we call effective, competent leadership that accomplishes immoral or unethical goals “great leadership?” We contend that great leadership requires the *accomplishment* of difficult goals. The prominent leadership

scholar James MacGregor Burns wrote that leadership is “*measured by the degree of production of intended effects*” and that the test of “leadership is the degree of *actual accomplishment* of the promised change” (Burns, 1978, p. 22, emphasis in original).

We need also to ask whether cases in which a leader and some followers make heroic efforts for a moral cause against great odds but fail to accomplish their goals constitute great leadership. Such leadership is ethical but not effective. Families of children and teenagers killed in school shootings have mobilized to achieve the banning of assault weapons, a goal most Americans think makes sense, but they have not succeeded.

Franco (2017) has argued that “heroic failure” is *not* a failed effort to show great leadership. Rather, it is not making any effort at all. Bystanders who do nothing to help someone in an emergency are showing both failed leadership and heroic failure. For this reason, the heroism activist Matt Langdon has said that the opposite of a “hero” is not a “villain”; it is a bystander. Leadership, and great leadership in particular, is an activity, not a silent intention.

In examining great leadership, it is helpful to understand its opposite, namely bad leadership. In her aptly named book *Bad Leadership*, Barbara Kellerman (2004) discusses three types of ineffective leadership and four types of unethical leadership. Ineffective leadership includes the categories of incompetent, rigid, and intemperate. Unethical leadership types include callous, corrupt, insular, and evil. These categories certainly map onto the seven deadly sins.

Effective leadership, especially great leadership, generally requires the antithesis of all three kinds of ineffective leadership. Leading greatly demands competence, flexibility, and self-control. Great leadership in wartime often illustrates exceptionally effective leadership marked by those three qualities. Although great leadership is associated with the opposite of the seven deadly sins, as we will show, the temptation produced by the seven deadly sins can influence leaders and followers to act in ways that undermine leadership effectiveness. Further, the abilities and opportunities afforded by great leadership may make it easier for the seven deadly sins to do their malevolent work.

Kellerman’s typology of unethical leadership suggests that morally commendable leadership must be honest rather than corrupt, caring of followers rather than callous, and mindful of the greater good as well as the needs of the in-group. Being ethically or morally commendable in all of these ways is a tall order. For example, sometimes what is good for one’s followers, the in-group, does not benefit the greater good. Kellerman offers the example of President Bill Clinton’s nonintervention into the Rwanda genocide as immoral leadership because it was, in her terms, insular. Yet nonintervention arguably saved American lives. But leadership that is ethical on all four dimensions does happen. Clara Barton’s

leadership noted in the Introduction was clearly ethical: honest, caring, helpful to humanity generally and not just her followers, and the opposite of evil. And it qualifies as great leadership because it was effective as well as ethical.

The Morality of Great Leaders

It is possible to distinguish between a descriptive and normative definition of morality (Gert & Gert, 2020). A descriptive definition focuses on codes of conduct that people actually live by; in contrast, a normative definition focuses on codes of conduct that would be advanced by rational people with regard to how they should live their lives. Different groups can put forward distinct and sometimes incompatible codes of conduct (Luco, 2014). Great leaders possess the acumen to navigate these differences.

There are five foundational concerns for morality (Graham et al., 2013). These involve the well-being of others, fairness, loyalty to one's group, respect for the social order and hierarchical relationships, and concerns about physical and spiritual purity. The political left in the United States tends to value the first two of these moral foundations (well-being and fairness), whereas the political right tends to value all five. Great leaders find a way to value, empower, and unite both ends of the spectrum. The sins of envy and wrath are clearly opposed to encouraging the well-being of others.

McGuire (1973) suggested that the opposite of a great truth is also a great truth. Similarly, it is possible that the opposite of a virtue is an opposing virtue (as opposed to a vice). A virtue conflict operates when the pursuit of one virtue may conflict with the ability to satisfy an alternative virtue (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). As noted by Allison and Goethals (2016), countries wage war against each other, with each side proclaiming the moral upper hand. Great leaders help their followers balance the rich complexity and paradoxical nature of moral differences among their constituents.

The Competence of Great Leaders

Broadly defined, *competence* refers to an individual's ability to interact effectively with the environment (White, 1959). Effective leadership involves the ability to motivate and coordinate followers to complete tasks, to achieve performance goals, and to mediate between an organization and the larger environment. Leader competence involves intelligence, decisiveness, being hardworking, and possessing the relevant qualifications (Sturm, Vera, & Crossan, 2017). Leaders can possess competencies across cognitive, emotional, or social domains (Boyatzis, 2011). Sins such as sloth and gluttony operate in direct opposition to attributes that would lead to competence. Specific leader

attributes may be more effective in one setting in comparison to another (Peters, Hartke, & Pohlmann, 1985).

Great leadership certainly depends on intelligence that is relevant to the challenges leaders face in mobilizing followers and the challenges leaders and followers face together in accomplishing their common goals. Two important perspectives on intelligence are helpful in understanding the role of intelligence. Horn and Cattell (1966) distinguished between fluid and crystallized intelligence. *Fluid* intelligence is the ability to reason and process information, as well as the capacity to learn new things. *Crystallized* intelligence is what we have learned and what we know from our experience.

In his book *The Mask of Command*, the military historian John Keegan (1987) describes knowing and seeing as crucial to wise action in battle. Knowing is essentially crystallized intelligence about factors such as the physical landscape, resources available to both one's own forces and the enemy's, and the personal qualities and capacities of enemy commanders and their forces. Seeing is the ability to take in what is happening in the moment on the field of battle and make good decisions based on the unfolding events. It clearly involves fluid intelligence that uses the relevant knowledge or crystallized intelligence. Great leadership depends on the intelligence to make good decisions, both in planning and in adapting as events evolve. Both crystallized and fluid intelligence are traits needed for great leadership.

A second perspective on intelligence that helps understand how cognitive capacities support competent leadership comes from Howard Gardner's (1983) *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Gardner (1993, p. 6) views intelligence as associated with "the ability to solve problems, or fashion products that are of consequence in a particular cultural setting or community." For us, it is a leader's capacity to find solutions to difficult challenges facing followers in specific situations.

Recent research finds that decision-making competence, certainly a quality key to competent leadership, depends on motivation and emotion regulation (Bruine de Bruin, Parker, & Fischhoff, 2020). Motivation and emotional regulation involve self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Reeves, 2005). They also require perceiving, understanding, using, and managing emotions, both in oneself and in others (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). Thus, leader effectiveness depends on the ability to regulate oneself, including the ability to maintain high levels of motivation, as well as the ability to perceive oneself and others accurately and with enough understanding of followers' emotions to use emotional appeals to engage and mobilize them.

We suggest that being too competent – defined in terms of intelligence, decisiveness, emotional regulation, and being hardworking – can, paradoxically,