

The Favor of the People: What Library Leaders Can Learn from *The Prince*

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Introduction

When people think of a Machiavellian leader, they often think of someone who is duplicitous, unethical, and treacherous; a person who is willing to do whatever it takes to gain and keep power. This idea of Machiavellian leadership comes from an inaccurate and incomplete understanding of Machiavelli's book *The Prince*. While Machiavelli did write such statements as "it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong," (p. 34) and sometimes what a leader should do - the right thing - will lead to his downfall, so it is better to do what needs to be done even if it is immoral or unethical. These approaches to leadership are only a very small part of the book's advice.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469– 1527) was born in Florence, Italy and spent fourteen years as a diplomat before being imprisoned by the Medicis. He wrote *The Prince* during his time in prison, so his negative opinion of human beings might be excused. But his main message throughout *The Prince* is not to do whatever it takes to gain and hold power; rather, his message is to keep the people of your kingdom happy, or at the very least do not make them hate you. To this end he advised, "every prince ought to desire to be considered clement and not cruel." (p. 37) This is much different than the popular opinion about Machiavelli.

By keeping the people happy, a leader secures his position and protects himself from adversity. When people are happy and happy with their leadership, they will be more loyal. In organizational terms, this is called affective commitment, and it does more to reduce turnover, improve satisfaction, and lift morale than almost any other organizational factor. Too many leaders want to curry favor with the nobility - senior university administrators and library boards - but as Machiavelli explains those nobles are few in number, and leaders can easily defend themselves against them, especially when they have gained the loyalty and support of the masses. (p. 21)

The leadership lessons of *The Prince* are just as important to library leaders today as they were to 16th Century Italian leaders. Machiavelli's main point is to keep the people you lead happy, and he describes six ways to do just that: be a good leader and a competent professional, build and maintain relationships with people, stop problems before they start, empower people, have strong values and high standards, and have a vision. This article will briefly explore each of these areas and describe their importance to library leaders.

Be a Good Leader and a Competent Professional

"Therefore, one who becomes a prince through the favour of the people ought to keep them friendly, and this he can easily do seeing they only ask not to be oppressed by him." (p. 22)

To be a good leader, Machiavelli tells us, is to keep the people we lead happy. If they are happy with us and our leadership, then they are more loyal, more engaged, and more apt to create a healthy culture. The first lesson for leaders on how they can keep the people they lead happy - and maybe the most important way - is to be a good leader. Library leaders can be good leaders in several ways, the first of which is to be a competent and experienced librarian. Machiavelli states leaders "who solely by good fortune become princes from being private

citizens have little trouble in rising, but much in keeping atop.” (p. 13) Having good fortune is nice, but the best fortune is to keep the people you lead happy. Librarianship is an applied profession. To be a good leader, you need to know the work of the library. This does not mean you can do all the work in the library, but that you have the experience to understand the work and can have meaningful conversations with librarians and library staff about work issues. Being knowledgeable about the work of the library earns the respect of the librarians and library staff. With a leader they can respect, they are happier than with one they do not respect.

In order to be a good leader, a library leader should study both librarianship and leadership. Machiavelli instructs his readers, “A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline.” (32) In the time *The Prince* was written, a prince’s main duty would have been engaging in war, both to protect his kingdom and expand it. Today’s library leaders are obviously not going to lead a library into battle, but they must study the work of the library and leadership. Personal development is a key factor in success for anybody in any field, this is especially true of leadership. Library leaders ought to ask themselves every day not only how they can become better leaders, but how they can become better librarians. Studying librarianship and leadership will also help library leaders keep up with changes in the profession. Successful leaders focus their “actions according to the spirit of the times.” (p. 58) A library leader needs to know not only the spirit of the times, but anticipate when and how those spirits might change.

A good prince must be a “fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves.” (p. 39) The same is true for library leaders. They need to know who on their campus or in the city or county government are library allies and who are not. They need to know how to advocate for the library in different venues and to different audiences. In short, they need to be political and able to play the game. They need to know how to fight for the library and be able to evade political traps that could cost them and the library dearly. This is difficult for many leaders, not just library leaders. Being politically aware often means having a high level of emotional intelligence, especially empathy. Through the use of empathy a library leader is better able to understand the motivations of others and the political situation of their library and the greater community in which it operates.

Finally, in order to be a good leader, a library leader must assemble a good leadership team. Assembling a leadership team is of “no little importance” (p. 53), and the leadership team is “good or not according to the discrimination of the prince.” (p. 53) The makeup and quality of the leadership team is a direct reflection of the leader. This leadership team provides several critical duties. They represent the library when the dean/director is unable to. Leaders must make sure their leadership teams are good representatives of the library, and both know the library message and can stay on it. The leadership team also helps fill in the leadership gaps of the dean/director and must have a diverse array of skills and abilities on the team. If a library dean/director is detailed oriented, then the leadership team should have someone who is big picture. All factors of effective leadership should be represented on the leadership team.

The most important duty of a leadership team is to provide counsel to the dean/director. In this regard, library leaders must do two crucial things. One, they must explain to the leadership team telling “the truth does not offend.” (p. 54) Not only does this keep “flatterers” at bay, but it also allows leaders to hear important and sometimes painful information. When library leaders learn they have not been told the truth, they must “let [their] anger be felt.” (p. 54) Two, library leaders must be “a constant inquirer, and afterwards a patient listener concerning the things of which he inquired.” (p. 54) If library leaders ask for honest advice, then they must listen to it and act on it. This also means library leaders have enough knowledge and awareness to understand what they do not know and enough confidence to ask for that information.

Build and Maintain Relationships

One of the crucial ways library leaders can make those in their library happy is to build relationships with them. This is tricky to do, however. For some deans/directors, their library is too big to build relationships with everyone in the library. Instead, they should focus on building relationships with their direct reports and mentoring and coaching them to build relationships with their direct reports and so on. The point of building relationships is to build community and trust which will support innovation and collaboration in the library. But relationships should not be built only with those people whom leaders already have good standing. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli declares an enemy “ought to either be well treated or crushed.” (p. 4) Machiavelli’s point is leaders either need to destroy an enemy so terribly they will not be able to be a problem again, or they need to treat them so well they will never want to be a problem again. Enemies is a strong word for a library, but every library has its share of disgruntled, unhappy, and dissatisfied employees. One of the best things library leaders can do is to build relationships with those librarians and library staff as well as members of the larger community who are in some way dissatisfied with the library. They may not be successful, but when they are those relationships help make the library a more functional organization.

When a prince acquires new territory, Machiavelli advises the best thing they can do to hold on to those lands is “go and reside there.” (p. 4) By becoming part of the new population, they make themselves known and learn the customs and culture of the people. This helps the new prince be accepted as a ruler. For library leaders to build relationships, they need to be visible. They need to be out and about in their library - and on their campus and community - to build those important relationships. Library leaders need to be approachable. They need to be human and allow others to get to know them. Both of these require emotional intelligence. To be approachable, library leaders need to be open to and aware of others. They also need to manage their emotions. If they fly off in a rage one time but are cool and collected another, then people will be afraid to approach them because they do not know what response they will get. The openness and awareness of emotional intelligence is also important in allowing others to get to know a library leader. The farther removed a librarian or staff member is from a library leader, the less human the library leader feels to them. By humanizing themselves through sharing of hobbies, telling of family stories, and discussion of a shared love of cats (or dogs or rabbits or snakes), a library leader becomes more human and more approachable.

Machiavelli advises any current or would be prince to “follow the paths beaten by great men.” (p. 11) For library leaders this means getting a mentor, especially in leadership areas that are not your strengths, but it also means to be a mentor. No better way exists to build a relationship than to be a mentor to someone. Finally, in order to make people happy, a leader should “entertain the people with festivals and spectacles at convenient seasons of the year.” (p. 52) Library leaders need to celebrate not only the work of the library but the people of the library as well. The most important resource of a library is its people, and they should be celebrated for all that they do for the library.

Stop Problems before They Start

While getting to know people during library parties is fun and easily makes people happy, sometimes library leaders need to take action that will not only make them uncomfortable but will most likely upset others in the short term. This has to be done because this action taken now will actually make people happier and the library run better in the long term. Machiavelli writes,

all prudent princes...have to regard not only present troubles, but also future ones, for which they must prepare with every energy, because, when foreseen, it is easy to remedy them; but if you wait until they approach, the medicine is no longer in time because the malady has become incurable; but in the course of time, not having been either detected or treated in the beginning, it becomes easy to detect but difficult to cure.” (p. 5-6)

Put simply, good library leaders need to take action and be aggressive in order to stop small problems before they become big problems. One of the worst ideas a library leader can have is, “The problem will take care of itself.” They rarely do. And if library leaders wait until they have to take action, then the problem is big, complex, and has made a lot of people unhappy not just in the present but for the foreseeable future. So library leaders need to take action to stop problems not only when they are small but through empathy and big picture thinking anticipate and stop problems before they start. While it might seem a lot for library leaders to anticipate and correct problems before they start, Machiavelli warns, “if he who rules a principality cannot recognize evils until they are upon him, he is not truly wise.” (p. 32)

This is another benefit to library leaders for being approachable, visible, and having relationships with librarians and library staff: leaders are more likely to have people come to them with problems and seek mutually beneficial solutions. Machiavelli states, “a prince ought to live amongst his people in such a way that no unexpected circumstances, whether of good or evil, shall make him change.” (p. 21) By being out and about in the library, library leaders can learn what is happening in the library long before it makes it to their office at which time it will be too late.

Empower People

In order to make the library happy, library leaders need to empower the librarians and library staff. Library leaders need to give them the freedom to innovate, try new services, explore new solutions to old problems, and most importantly the freedom and safety to fail. Machiavelli knew this when he wrote, “he who would keep a city accustomed to freedom will hold it more easily by the means of its own citizens than in any other way.” (p. 10) His advice here is to not take away people’s freedom in order to tighten your rule. This will only cause a leader to swiftly and more easily fall. Instead, people need to have their freedom. Leaders need to treat people with dignity and respect, like they are adults capable of making their own decisions (because they are). Weak leaders fear this freedom will be used against them, but strong library leaders know this freedom will build trust and support throughout the library. Library leaders become more powerful when they give power to others.

Have Strong Values and High Standards

To be a good library leader, have a well-functioning library, and make librarians and library staff happy, library leaders must emulate the clever archers who, “designing to hit the mark which yet appears too far distant, and knowing the limits to which the strength of their bow attains, take aim much higher than the mark...[and] with the aid of so high an aim to hit the mark they wish to reach.” (p. 11)

Library leaders need to set their standards high, both for themselves and for those who work in the library. At first glance, this might seem like the opposite way to make people happy. Setting low standards and letting everybody skate by on the bare minimum of work would seem to be the real way to make employees happy, but in truth people like to be challenged (within reason) and to grow and develop both personally and professionally. Setting high standards

allows them to grow and inspires and motivates those in the library, which is a hallmark of transformational leaders. The best way to reach your goal is to aim higher than you want to go.

The foundation for these high standards needs to be a strong value system. Machiavelli explains a leader “who has established himself as above, who can command, and is a man of courage, undismayed in adversity, who does not fail in other qualifications, and who, by his resolution and energy, keeps the whole people encouraged” is a leader who “has laid his foundations well.” (p. 22) Values guide everything good library leaders do from where to allocate funds to how to build a collection to what services the library offers to how to treat people. A strong value system that is consistently used to guide personal and professional decisions keeps a library leader from being thought of as “contemptible” and “considered fickle.” (p. 41) A library leader with strong values demonstrates “his judgments are irrevocable, and maintain himself in such reputation that no one can hope either to deceive him or to get round him.” (p. 41) Being guided by values also makes a library leader a role model known for “setting a fine example.” (p. 50)

Library leaders need to use their standards and values to overcome obstacles and persevere. Machiavelli states, “princes become great when they overcome the difficulties and obstacles by which they are confronted.” (p. 48) Each obstacle overcome, each difficulty bested makes a leader stronger, better, and more knowledgeable. Leaders then use their improved strength, ability, and knowledge to overcome the next, more daunting challenge. To quit on a vision or in the middle of a change process is demoralizing to everyone in the library. Library leaders also need to take responsibility for their actions. Good leaders must never blame “fortune for the loss of their principalities after so many years’ possession, but rather their own sloth.” (p. 56) Library leaders need to take responsibility for everything that happens in the library. This not only improves trust with both librarians and library staff and university administration or county or city governments, but it also inspires everyone in the library to take responsibility.

Have a Vision

“And it ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.” (p. 12)

Change. How many library leaders have been undone by failure to successfully lead change? Librarians and library staff are often unfairly regarded as reluctant to change, but this is not true. All human beings are averse to change because change brings with it the unknown, but humans can and do change all the time when they know the change - no matter how much uncertainty it brings - is for the better. People who quit smoking, drinking, or drugging, who start a new life in another city across the country, or who leave abusive relationships all made tough changes, but they were encouraged, motivated, inspired, and fueled by the knowledge their current life was not beneficial to them and they needed to change. Machiavelli understood this when he wrote, “a powerful and courageous prince will overcome all such difficulties by giving at one time hope to his subjects that the evil will not be for long.” (p. 24) If library leaders want to be successful not just in change but in leading their libraries, then they must have a vision for the future of the library. This vision gives hope, it explains the important and much needed “why” of organizational change, it builds community and unity in the library, and makes people happy by giving them hope for the future. All good library leaders must have a vision for the library and successfully share that vision.

Conclusion

The Prince by Niccolò Machiavelli is as relevant to leaders today as it was when it was written in the 16th Century. The main message of Machiavelli is to keep the people you lead happy. This runs counter to the incomplete and superficial understanding many people have of Machiavelli. *The Prince* describes six ways to keep people happy: be a good leader and a competent professional, build and maintain relationships with people, stop problems before they start, empower people, have strong values and high standards, and have a vision. One final thought from Machiavelli, library leaders should enjoy their work and do all they can for their libraries because “a prince may be seen happy today and ruined tomorrow without having shown any change of disposition or character.” (p. 57) Leadership is fragile, and you never know when you will no longer have the great privilege of leading others.

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Reference

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