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A Leadership Question

By Sophia Dao

Is it better to be feared or loved? Machiavelli asked this centuries ago and came to a conclusion that “it is much safer to be feared than loved.”¹ No modern leaders would publicly agree with Machiavelli, but we all know of leaders who, through their actions, buy into this philosophy.

Let's consider Machiavelli's reasoning. His first premise is that people are “ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous. ...” His second premise is that people “have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.”

Given the above two premises, Machiavelli concludes that people love “according to their own will” and fear “according to that of the prince.” Thus, a wise prince, or leader, “should establish himself on that which is in his own control and not in that of others.”

Let's check the first premise, which asserts that people are cowards and would betray you to save their own behind. This

is a statement of opinion, not of fact. Nevertheless, if you really believe this, you are entitled to your opinion.

Let's check the second premise, which states that fear trumps love when it comes to expected outcome of human behaviors. This is, in fact, psychologically sound, since it is well-established that people are more responsive to pain than to pleasure.

If you accept the above premises, is it logical to conclude that it's better to be feared than loved? I think so. That's why it's not surprising that many leaders in the past adopted this militaristic style of leaderships.

However, modern leaders need to consider another premise, which is that people can choose their leaders. Political leaders can get voted out of office (unless they are dictators). Business leaders can lose their best employees to competitors if they don't treat them well. The Machiavellian conclusion is no longer valid in light of this new reality. The Machiavellian leadership style no longer works.

So, is it better to be loved, then? Not always. When I was a new manager, I tried really hard to be liked by my staff. When



someone didn't seem to like me, I asked myself: “What am I doing wrong?” This seemingly innocent question became a destructive force that eroded my confidence and effectiveness as a manager, until someone told me to snap out of it and accept the fact that there will always be someone who doesn't like me. I still think that self-reflection is a good habit for leaders to have, but self-blaming, and the obsession with being liked, can be destructive.

I believe that it's better to be respected. In business, love is a luxury—but respect is a necessity. Respect is inspired by competence, personal character, and a strong work ethic. Those are traits that make good leaders—things that last. Love, on the other hand, is inconsistent and subjective, which shouldn't be relied upon as a foundation on which to build an organization.

As human beings, we all want to be loved, and we sometimes fantasize being feared. In a professional setting, however, we should work on gaining the respect of our employees and colleagues. Everything else is just a luxury or a fantasy. ■

ENDNOTE

¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Ann Arbor: J.W. Edwards, Inc., 2006), pages 76–78.



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