

Leadership Lessons from Machiavelli Enhanced with Strategic Orchestration

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the fascinating similarities that can be found between the Renaissance era and nowadays. In both moments in time, the ways of doing of the era before, were no longer valid for the new challenges the world was having at that moment, and completely new solutions were required. There is an analysis of the Renaissance and Machiavelli and his leadership learnings about appearance, influence, honor and self-ambition, gloria or public recognition, structure and flexibility and about chaos as a trigger for change. Study on modern leaders like Barack Obama and Steve Jobs shows that there are important similarities between their leadership styles and Machiavelli's learnings. However, where Machiavelli leaned on hierarchical power, modern leaders need to enhance his learnings with an orchestrated leadership style rather based upon Influence than power, more suitable for today's environment. Nowadays, like at the beginning of the Renaissance, we appear to be again in a chaos situation marking a turning point to a new era, the transition to which demands increased flexibility carefully balanced with existing and new structures, until a new status-quo is created.

Key words

Leadership, chaos, Obama, Jobs, flexibility, orchestration, influence.

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1. Introduction

When comparing the Renaissance era in which Machiavelli wrote his master piece “The Prince”, with nowadays, several similarities in the leadership style and in the business challenges can be found. A relation with the complexity theory and chaos can also be acknowledged both when reading either Machiavelli’s Prince and when observing some current leaders like Barack Obama or Steve Jobs.

In recent years, some traditional leadership theories have been based on an existence characterized by order and predictability (Bjartveit, 2005). A state of order and structured world, where everything is expected to happen in an organized and linear way.

In the absence of the said order and predictability, everything would be spinning out of control, creating the state of chaos, as the complexity theory (Bjartveit, 2005) describes. Between these two states, we find an area of limited stability, where order and chaos coexist, that is the real world state, in which a not highly-ordered existence full of goals and milestones to be measured, to which most theories apply, nor a completely chaotic state, but something in between. This is referred as “the edge of chaos”. It describes how a system, that has been driven toward chaos by deviation, will tend to self-correct and move back towards equilibrium (Bjartveit, 2005).

Leaders today have to be able not only to live in disequilibrium, but also to generate it. Risk, uncertainty, ambiguity and ignorance are everywhere (Osorio, 2010), and leaders have to use it to achieve their objectives. Only through natural or provoked chaos can a situation change (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010). Therefore, new leaders must be trained to do so, in order to be able to fight chaos and even to generate it in order to create a new status-quo.

When reading the classics from the Renaissance, you come across several references that describe very well this transitional state of chaos and uncertainty. It is a key factor any modern leader should take into consideration when resolving a problem or heading for a new challenge, admitting it as a natural stage to go through.

Also nowadays, at the turning point to a new era, and until then, we have to coexist with uncertainty and ambiguity in all aspects of business and life. We have to balance structure with flexibility, be agile, and understand that in periods of change a leader’s power can only be executed through a leadership model based upon Influence (Ruelas-Gossi & Sull, 2006), instead of hierarchical power.

From the Renaissance, “The Prince” from Machiavelli is a top reference in leadership with a lot of learnings that are still applicable today. On top of that, nowadays there are additional challenges, which require collaboration and networking in order to strategically orchestrate all our relationships, externally to assembly the best possible business solution and internally to lead the network of partners. The power is no longer in the firm, or executive leader, but in the network, which make us enhance the leadership lessons of Machiavelli’s Prince with an orchestrated leadership approach to lead through influence in the new network environment.

2. A Relevant Leadership Example of the Renaissance: “Il Principe” di Niccolò Machiavelli

In 1513, Niccolò Machiavelli, a 16th century Florentine diplomat and bureaucrat, presents his master book “The Prince” a political landscape where order and chaos coexist, with further

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similarities with the complexity and chaos theory, a treatise on ruling successfully through the pragmatic exercise of power. Machiavelli began writing “The Prince” (Machiavelli, 1991) as a step-by-step guide for all “Princes” –i.e. leaders–, specifically thinking of Lorenzo di Medici at the time, to maximize and maintain their power. Since then and until today, his lessons and guidance have been followed by thousands of leaders in the world. As a humanist writer, Machiavelli connoted many implications about the human condition in “The Prince”, that suggested that humans are eternally disposed to certain, unavoidable natures. Because Machiavelli had no concern for morality, but rather counseled ruthless pragmatism, his name has become a synonym for cunning political manipulation and deceit. However, Machiavelli’s clear-eyed understanding of human nature and political behavior, has made his work a world classic.

A “prince” is nowadays regarded as an old fashioned governing body, more often found in less developed countries. However, there is another kind of definition of a “prince”, according to Machiavelli: in Machiavelli’s terms, a “prince” is anyone that has power. And the book “The Prince” itself, has been variously described as one of the best handbooks in time to analyze the role of the political elite. Fast-forward five hundred years, Lorenzo di Medici could be well possible replaced by any current leader to analyze his or her political success through the theoretical lens of “The Prince”. Examples of Today’s Princes and his similarities in behavior with many of Machiavelli’s Renaissance lessons will be analyze further in this article. First, a short overview on some of Machiavelli’s most known statements will be very insightful and revealing, in addition to analyzing his relation with chaos and change.

Machiavelli stated explaining that “Appearances matter” (Machiavelli, 1991, pp. 70-71), so does your reputation. “Try always to keep both polished and look for opportunities to show yourself off”. “Everybody sees what you appear to be, few feel what you are”.

Machiavelli also taught that “the end justifies the means” (Machiavelli, 1991, pp. 72-73). If a leader is convinced his “end” is good, any “means” necessary to achieve that end are permitted. Machiavelli continued: “Men shrink less from offending one who inspires love than one who inspires fear”. “It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both” (Machiavelli, 1991, pp. 66-69). “For injuries ought to be done all at one time, so that, being tasted less, they offend less; benefits ought to be given little by little, so that the flavour of them may last longer” (Machiavelli, 1991, pp. 9-11). Machiavelli also explained how people are inclined to believe lies from their leaders, and the leader’s disregard of his promise. “The promise given was a necessity of the past: the word broken is a necessity of the present” (Machiavelli, 1991, pp. 71-72).

Machiavelli promised “change”, in order to defeat the establishment or to change the game creating chaos that could lead to a new establishment, and instructed a leader on how to treat his opponents. “Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times” (Machiavelli, 1991, pp. 100-102). “One change always leaves the way open for the establishment of others”.

Machiavelli also talks about Fortuna, the area of partial instability that exists between an ordered existence and chaos (Bjartveit, 2005). “Those who solely by good fortune become princes from being private citizens have little trouble in rising, but much in keeping atop; they have not difficulties on the way up, because they fly, but they have many when they reach the summit” (Machiavelli, 1991, pp. 25-26).

Fortuna enriches our lives with chaos (Bjartveit, 2005). She is the mistress of half our actions, but leaves the other half under our control. If you take her as your companion, she might abandon you. Unpredictability is inevitable whenever power or change is implemented.

Being virtuous means being able both to fight according to the laws and with force

A leader must be able to restore order and bring Fortuna under control, by managing chaos, tailoring their actions to the situation. However, the most important quality for a leader, besides dealing with Fortuna –unpredictability– in chaos situations, is to survive and behave honorably in a complex and political environment –Virtù (Machiavelli, 1991)–, where men often pursue their own interest –human Ambizione–, often to the detriment of others. To be virtuous does not mean being a picture of virtue. It means being both human and beast. *L'uomo e la bestia* (Machiavelli, 1991). There are two ways of fighting: one according to the laws and the other with force. The first one is suited to man, the second to animals; because the first is often not sufficient, a prince must resort to the second, if necessary.

2.1. Machiavelli's Lion and the Fox's Metaphors

And which animals should we try to emulate? The lion and the fox (Bjartveit, 2005). The lion because he attacks Fortuna decisively, and the fox because she outsmarts Fortuna (Machiavelli, 1991). The lion embodies courage, no weakness. The importance of self-efficacy, a belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute. Believing that one can accomplish one's goals is enough. The lion defeat Fortuna. The lion represents the opposite to accommodation –Occasione (Machiavelli, 1991). These are the opportunities that sometimes are not easy to recognize. As in the chaos theory, you should take charge of circumstances rather than passively let them shape you. Any leader should be measured by his deeds –vita attiva, not vita contemplative. Delay is worse than death itself. Machiavelli wants leaders that want to achieve something, who have the will and conviction to carry things out to completion.

These princes can lead people and gain their trust and loyalty in their way to acquire nobility and public recognition –Gloria– which is larger than the self and private ambition (Machiavelli, 1991). It is not enough being a lion to succeed. Whoever that knows how to play the fox comes out best and Machiavelli often praises its qualities. It is like a confidence man that reads the social scene well and understand man's fundamental desires and darker sides. Among the main fox-like qualities is the need for manipulation and trickery, and to outwit others. Machiavelli wants foxes that have a few more tricks up their sleeves than lions, to let Fortuna carry on, and wait for her mood to change (Bjartveit, 2005). The fox knows that the world is infinitely more complex than can ever be represented in a matrix. It does not follow a strict plan of attack, it maintains a watchful eye and is prepared to deal with a number of possible eventualities –Fortuna.

3. Strategic Orchestration

Strategic Orchestration is said to be the new paradigm of strategy (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010). According to this model a firm or leader pursues an opportunity not by leveraging strategic power, but by assembling and managing a network of partners (customers, suppliers, competitors, etc.). This is not about pursuing partnerships for their own sake. In traditional strategies, firms or leaders start with what they control and look for ways to leverage it. In strategic orchestration leaders begin with the opportunity and then assemble the required network along with their resources to achieve it. By definition, they can only manage this network with a leadership style based upon influence and not on hierarchical power. The power is no longer in the firm or leader, but in the network. Control is retained as all relationships with the partners have to be strategically orchestrated by the firm or leader, in this model referred to as the orchestrator node.

It is an allocentric approach (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010), which means that it incorporates the various resources in the network. Existing strategy theory has an egocentric approach. The

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power is in the individual firm or leader that exists to create and capture value, focusing solely on opportunities they can seize alone and often at the expense of other players in the value chain. This power is exercised hierarchically. The allocentric orientation allows executives to seize a whole range of opportunities that can only be pursued by a network. As such, unlimited opportunities are there for nowadays leaders to create new value, as long as there is collaboration between the players in the network and the value proposition is orchestrated in a manner that makes it worthwhile for everyone to participate.

The power needs to be exercised through influence and diplomacy (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010). All players have to give and receive. If they don't receive, they will leave the network. The orchestration approach requires a new language. We no longer speak of linear transactional relations between customers and suppliers or employees and supervisors, but rather of players or resources of the network. This network needs to be guided with a light touch, not a heavy hand (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010).

Strategic orchestration requires a shift in how executives deal with partners. They need to come together willingly in order to be able together to create the desired outcome. Leaders often brandish their organization's strategic power to threaten partners into compliance with their wishes. But when value creation depends on partners voluntary participation, leaders can guide a network, but they cannot dictate what partners will do (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010).

Guiding without power requires executives to exercise diplomacy rather than hierarchical power in dealing with their partners. Part of guiding a network is for leaders dealing effectively with communities rather than engaging in bilateral agreements in which they can leverage power. It is not enough to talk of communities, but leaders also have to treat community members as equals and to delegate key decisions to partners. Networks rely on trust and the lead partner in an orchestrated network must build and maintain trust among members through transparent communication to all members and even sometimes by inviting credible third parties to verify that everyone is playing by the same rules (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010).

4. Barack Obama and Steve Jobs as Today's Orchestrating Princes

Since the definition of "Prince" is not limited to time since it clearly states that anyone that has power is a prince (Machiavelli, 1991) according to Machiavelli, then there should be some princes around today.

As described before, there are many leadership lessons from the Renaissance that could be fully applicable today. However, there is a need of enhancing them with an orchestrated, systemic approach in the business solution making and/or in the leadership style to lead the network of partners, based upon influence rather than hierarchical power, as we have also seen from the strategic orchestration learnings.

4.1. Barack Obama

One of the men, amongst others, with most power in the recent past, has been Barack Obama when having been the President of the United States of America. In many of his actions, that we will be illustrating, we could recognize many Prince's type behaviors according to the Machiavellian theory. Obama has also lead the US in an era of change and chaos, where many of the Machiavellian principles could be seen in his behavior.

Sometimes there is the question if Barack Obama (Spolisci, 2012; Cohen, 2009) could be a nowadays Machiavellian Prince? Indeed, there are several of Machiavellian patterns that might

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be observed in Obama's behavior: Appearance and ambiguity seem to have been his hallmarks. In foreign affairs, no one is sure whether he was a dove or a hawk. You might find him the same appearing for the cameras on the White House lawn, characteristically casual, just like one of the Main Street Americans that he represented with his beautiful wife and children. At the same time, American drones have attacked Pakistan, from which only 10 were able to hit their target, killing 14 al-Qaeda leaders, besides 687 innocent civilians.

Machiavelli simply enunciates plainly what most governments prefer to keep secret. "Everybody sees what you appear to be, few ones feel what you are" (Machiavelli, 1991, p. 70). The enigma that was Barack Obama, could not be better summed up. Some conservative political commentators in the US have also made the connection, claiming to find in Obama the charisma Machiavelli called *Virtù*, a man who exhibits a "confidence so much more than human that he can attain all he desires". A man that behaves and acts honorably. And indeed, Obama has impressed many with his inspirational chant "Yes, we can" (Cohen, 2009). Machiavelli intends the Prince's *virtu* to be a tool to forge public-spirited communitarism out of rivalry, division and selfishness.

Machiavelli states how praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his word and to live by integrity and not by deceit; nevertheless, he also explains, the need for a prince to disregard given promises. This is also seen in examples of our times, where princes who have accomplished great deeds were not able to keep all promises... they have surpassed those who laid their foundations upon "loyalty", in order to achieve their ends, and have disregarded their promises. If comparing this with Obama it is so convincing, since he too, was able during his mandate to achieve round 400 accomplishments from the 500 goals he had (PCTC, 2017). There were of course some of his campaign promises like closing Guantanamo, forcing every employer to give paid sick leave, etc. (Spolisci, 2012), that he couldn't achieve, not because he didn't want so, but because he has seen himself forced to that by political circumstances, which have made him negotiate and orchestrate every single political goal.

He was a democrat President with a majority republican Congress. Americans seem to prefer the balance of power between the two branches of government facilitated by having elected officials from different parties control the Congress and the White House. Contrary to popular belief, most of the time in modern political history (post 1945) the same political party does not control the White House, the Senate and the House of Representatives (Gill, 2017). This makes it very challenging to any president in such a circumstance to achieve his campaign goals. Obama has shown an incredible ability to execute his strategic power with a leadership style based upon Influence, orchestrating with the republican party in the congress in order to achieve as many as possible of the presidential goals for his mandate. Even with the obstacles, especially the Republican Congress, this President has left behind a wonderful legacy (Von Drehle, 2016).

We would understand Obama better if when realizing that once having achieved power –on the way eschewing "unworthy" tactics– a next step for him would be to lead people and gain their trust and loyalty to intent on achieving *Gloria* – the public recognition (Cohen, 2009), that is larger and last longer than the self and private ambition of *Ambizione*, as an opposite to *Virtù* (Machiavelli, 1991).

Due to the fact that Machiavelli is not known for his human style, President Obama preferred to present himself as a not Machiavellian Prince (Spolisci, 2012). Nevertheless, the Machiavellian principles observed in Obama's leadership style are too obvious to be ignored. However, he must be praised for his orchestrated leadership style lead by Influence rather than hierarchical power as demanded by today's environment.

**The power
in a network
can only
be exercised
through
influence
and diplomacy**

Another case of today's princes is Steve Jobs, the founder, owner and evangelist of Apple, one of the most advanced design technology company of the last decades.

4.2. Steve Jobs

Steve Jobs, some called him an innovation genius while others called him crazy. He has been part of the change era in the human relation and behaviour with technology. In the words of Camina (2014) and many others, Jobs was a game changer who not only revolutionized the personal computer, music and cellular phone industry, but changed the way people interacted with technology and the world in which they live in. Bridging the gap between the realm of technology and mainstream Americans, Jobs was able to appeal to the general public with his compelling ideas and renowned knack for knowing what the people want, not necessarily what the people need.

Steve Jobs has been active part of that change, going to field to observe how the people were using his products and other technological gadgets to gain the necessary insight. Later, based on these insights and following his fantastic vision and intuition, he has developed in-house revolutionary orchestrated or systemic solutions to serve the users most latent needs. If for something is known Apple is for their innovative iPod and all the other related technology solutions. All these solutions have one common characteristic: they all are orchestrated solutions, in what Apple has clearly been the orchestrator node.

The iPod's success depended not on hardware and software alone, but on the cooperation of record labels and producers of complementary products such as speakers and carrying cases, only made possible through the assembling and orchestration of business partners.

Apple's renaissance began when the newly returned Steve Jobs reframed the company as the hub of a digital lifestyle, rather than a computer maker that had to do everything itself (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010). From its inception, Apple has aimed to deliver a seamless experience to users, but in the Macintosh era the company tried to do everything itself. With the iPod (and later the iPhone and iPad), Apple has continued to value ease of use but achieved it by stitching together an ecosystem of content providers (singers through iTunes) and accessory makers, including competitors (screens from Samsung) that provide customers with simplicity and a unique value proposition that could not have been achieved on their own (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010).

Besides his orchestration skills to articulate a complete new value proposition to the market, where Apple was the orchestrator node, we can observe several aspects of Steve Jobs' personality that show many similarities with a Machiavellian prince. How was Steve Jobs able to get so many employees, customers, partners and competitors to see his vision and buy into his ideas? Steve Jobs leadership style was said to be, at points, very cruel (Camina, 2014). He was by no means a "nice guy" when it came to leading Apple. It is well-known that Steve Jobs (Camina, 2014) could be arrogant, dictatorial and mean-spirited. Yet he was a great leader. This leadership style Jobs used, holds many stark similarities to the leadership style detailed in "The Prince". He would scream at his employees faces: "you guys have no idea what you are doing" or "everything you've done in your life is shit" to either prove his point or motivate them to work (Camina, 2014). By doing this, Jobs was always voicing his opinion and making sure the people within the company knew who was the boss. Both Jobs and Machiavelli believed that in order to be successful and accomplish their goals they could not act very kindly. It is an easy connection with Machiavelli's words many centuries ago: "It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both" (Machiavelli, 1991, pp. 66-67).

All players in an orchestrated network must give and receive, otherwise they will leave the network

There can be found similarities between Steve Jobs' form of "governing" and Machiavelli's theory of being cruel within reason. An additional similar aspect was the question of leading the people in a certain way, to gain their loyalty and trust to intend on achieving Gloria (Machiavelli, 1991), the public recognition that is larger and last longer than the private ambition and perpetuates in time your work. Jobs would scream at his employees and partners and even make personal attacks. So, why did these people continued to work with him? Machiavelli has explored the notion of winning the trust of your "followers" and making them loyal to you, while intending to achieve Gloria, the public desired recognition, that will help perpetuate his work in time, and Jobs was quite good mastering this. Indeed, Jobs has created a system of workers that believed in the mission of Apple. His "followers" loyalty was invested in his cause (Camina, 2014), the company, and not in him as a person or a boss.

Another relevant connection between Jobs and Machiavelli is the idea of "change" and constantly overthrowing the status quo. Machiavelli promised "change", in order to defeat the establishment or to change the game creating chaos that could lead to a new establishment, and instructed a leader on how to treat his opponents (Machiavelli, 1991). Apple has always been years ahead of the game, creating disequilibrium –chaos– (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010), as a mean to change the game. In some way, Steve Jobs has achieved changing the way society interacts with technology with all his advanced innovations, orchestrating all necessary business partners of the digital ecosystem.

5. Conclusion

In these tough economic times that the world's economy is undergoing, there are still people that behave as if everything continues the same, without realizing that circumstances have changed dramatically and old challenges need brand new solutions. The natural resistance to change and the difficulty to adapt to new circumstances will determine the new set of leaders. As seen in the Barack Obama and Steve Jobs examples before, there are many leadership lessons from the Renaissance that are fully applicable today. However, there is a need of enhancing them with an orchestrated, systemic approach in the solution making and in the leadership style to lead the network of partners.

The current world economic, political and social situation is complex. So, the first step to accomplish, is to look for a piece of stability within the current instability, fortuna, that co-exists between the former ordered existence from the past decade and the current chaos of today (Bjartveit, 2005). To succeed, leaders must learn to coexist naturally in ambiguity, uncertainty, ignorance and risk (Osorio, 2010). Reality is complex and there are no simple answers. The poor economic situation, we are in, is a result of many not honorable behaviors, lead by self-ambition –Ambizione–, the opposite from Virtù (Machiavelli, 1991). Every day we know in the media from new cases of corruption at corporate, local, regional or national level. Still today, and apparently believing they can continue doing the same, leaders go on exhausting in their own interest, without too many scruples, up to the last reminiscent of wealth of the corporate organizations or public bodies they are serving to, leaving them in a terrible pauper state. Leaders today are extremely well prepared for their jobs. There is no worry on that side. They have just to invest in their personal behavior to really change the game and create a new environment with based on solid ethical and honorable foundations.

So, in order to stand and survive this changing age, at a time with the difficulty that already encompasses the daily business performance, new leaders have to be lions, with courage to withstand this transition time, believing in their own capabilities (Machiavelli, 1991) and always being active to catch any possible opportunity, occasione, that may appear to help them

The end of the current economic crisis will become the starting point of a new world's status quo

progress (Machiavelli, 1991). In every economic crisis, there are opportunities bubbling in the air, but one must be attentive, in order not let them pass by. They cannot forget the fox-qualities, to use manipulation at the same time as avoiding it on themselves. The fox knows that reality is a lot more complex than theory. So, new leaders have to have a watchful eye on everything to catch and prevent any possible eventuality –fortuna (Bjartveit, 2005).

As it happened in the Renaissance time, the end of the current economic crisis, can be the turning and starting point for a new world's status quo. The challenge of today's leaders is to lead on the edge of chaos, balancing between structure and flexibility. This is the realm of Fortuna (Bjartveit, 2005), where the sense of controlling the situation is probably just an illusion and the only way for leaders to manage their internal and external relationships, is to know how to use and exercise power with an orchestrated leadership style based upon Influence. No longer can modern leaders count on traditional power execution as in the past decades. Especially, when talking of orchestrated products or solutions, e.g. iPod family, where a whole ecosystem has been organized and orchestrated, or orchestrated relationships, e.g. 400 approved decrees in Obama's time, having a republican Senat and having to negotiate every decision. In strategic orchestration the power is no longer in the firm (Ruelas-Gossi & Sull, 2006) or in the leading person, but in the network, that needs to be leaded. This can only be done through influence, not through hierarchical power. Partnership, negotiation and flexibility are key. It requires a shift in how executives deal with partners. When value creation depends on partners' voluntary participation, firms and leaders can influence the partners and guide the network, but they cannot dictate what partners will do (Sull & Ruelas-Gossi, 2010).

Many of the challenges leaders today are facing, did also happened in the Renaissance time when new rules were needed, after they stated it was no longer possible to continue doing the same way as in the Middle Age, as business and life in general had dramatically changed. Nowadays, leaders have similar challenges with the advantage of the lessons learned from the Renaissance, that just need to be enhanced with an orchestrated leadership approach as the best way to achieve long lasting, unique and successful solutions.

Leaders today have the responsibility and the privilege of having the opportunity, aided by modern technology, to create a New Renaissance Age, that aim to be reference and inspiration for future eras, as the Renaissance has been for them. Will new orchestrated business models arise in many diversified areas? Or new leadership examples find a rich environment to grow? A fascinating era is about to begin.

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