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Puppet Leadership: An Essay in honor of Gabor Hegyesi

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Dedication

This essay is dedicated to my good friend and colleague, Dr. Gabor Hegyesi, a courageous leader and scholar, who pioneered the rebuilding of the nonprofit sector in Hungary and who has become an international model of the scholar/leader. Gabor both embodies the finer qualities of leadership and understands the terrible implications of dysfunctional leadership.

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Introduction

The literature on leadership is vast, varied and voluminous. Tomes are written on the nature of leadership, great and flawed leaders, styles of leadership, functions of leadership, leadership as a process or as the characteristics of people we label as leaders, and principles and practices of good leadership. Most of this literature is either descriptive or normative. Great biographies document the histories of major individual leaders in the political, business and social realms, while scholarly and trade books describe and prescribe particular modes, styles and methods of leadership such as entrepreneurial leadership, servant leadership, adaptive leadership, transformative leadership, charismatic leadership, male vs. female leadership, strategic leadership, visionary leadership, and so on. Distinctions are made between leadership as the behavior of leaders vs. leadership as a generic process that can be exercised by various kinds of people in different contexts, between leadership and management or administration, and between leadership and authority.

There is little question that much of the literature is insightful, informative and useful. The sheer volume of leadership literature is testimony for the thirst for knowledge about this subject, in the business sector especially but in the public and nonprofit realms as well. Bass's (1990) encyclopedic handbook covers a wide cross-section of the voluminous literature on concepts and theories of leadership, personal attributes of leaders, power and legitimacy, leader and follower relationships, leadership and management, contextual factors affecting leadership, diversity and leadership, and leadership research. Bryson and Crosby (1992) offer a comprehensive framework for leadership in a modern world of power sharing. Ron Heifetz (1994) offers a concept of adaptive leadership that emphasizes learning to mobilize constituencies around acceptable solutions to problems. In a volume on the leader of the future (Hesselbein, Beckhard and Goldsmith, 1996) the editors capture the prescriptions of dozens of thought leaders for successful leadership practice in various contexts. And this just scratches the surface of the leadership literature.

In the Hesselbein, Beckhard and Goldsmith volume, management guru Peter F. Drucker defines a leader simply as “someone who has followers” (p.xii). He goes on to observe that effective leaders do the right things, are not necessarily popular, and produce results. They are highly visible and set examples. And leadership is a responsibility, not a rank, privilege, title or monetary reward. This is a good way to define functional leadership; dysfunctional leadership, by implication, does not meet Drucker’s standards.

While much of the literature documents examples of poor leadership, errors of leadership, or failures in situations calling for leadership, there is a dearth of dispassionate analytical literature on the nature and implications of dysfunctional leadership. While it is untenable to generalize over the vast literature on leadership, it is my distinct impression that the tenor of this literature is largely focused on what constitutes “effective leadership” and on leadership failures that result from departures from principles of good leadership. Largely ignored is the pervasiveness of poor or vacuous leadership, the processes through which leadership positions are filled by unqualified or dysfunctional incumbents, and the consequences of inadequate or misguided leaders. The purpose of this essay is to make a small contribution in this direction by identifying and describing a particular type of leadership pathology – the puppet leader.

What is a puppet leader?

Men of the world such as Gabor Hegyesi who have experienced the hardships of authoritarian regimes, and fought against them, will have no trouble understanding the meaning of puppet leadership. Puppet leaders, as the metaphor implies, are individuals in positions of authority and responsibility who are put in place and controlled by other people in positions of real power. The ubiquity of puppet leadership in authoritarian settings should not be surprising. Dictatorial leaders require loyalty and must be able to delegate authority to individuals who will do their bidding. Sycophants thrive in such an environment. The way to “get ahead” is to satisfy the supreme leader, whether through flattery, implementation of brutal or wrongheaded policies, or simply undermining the positions of other more independent minded colleagues or associates. While we think of

this phenomenon as characteristic of political dictatorships of the left or right, it is also all too common in other bureaucratic settings as well – including corporations and government agencies in democracies and market economies. In these contexts, top leaders may be generally accountable to external sources of authority such as voters, stockholders, customers and citizens, or more specifically to boards of directors and legislatures, but they can nonetheless accumulate great power within their particular realms which is difficult to challenge by subordinates, whistleblowers or other dissonant parties. As a result, those who are appointed by those in power can easily fit the mold of puppet leaders. It takes informed and enlightened leadership at the top to designate independent minded people for leadership positions below, putting competence and creativity above loyalty and compliance.

Clearly puppet leadership is a problem in authoritarian settings. However, the implication in these cases is that a change of regime is fundamentally what is needed. Of concern here, however, is that puppet leadership is alive and well in non-authoritarian regime settings too, where it can be extremely damaging. The selection of political leaders in a democracy and the appointment of academic leaders in universities are two contexts where the phenomenon is highly problematic, because these are settings in which the characteristics of effective leaders that Drucker identifies – doing the right things, getting results, and assuming responsibility rather than just seeking reward – are most critical for institutional and societal success.

Conditions for Puppet Leadership

Puppet leadership in a democratic or academic setting entails two fundamental elements: *string-pullers*, i.e., powerful groups or individuals wishing to control the actions and decisions of an incumbent to a particular leadership position without being perceived as doing so, and *puppet* candidates willing to perform under those conditions in that leadership position.

The motivations of string-pullers are diverse. In politics, of course, powerful interest groups from business and industry, groups of particular ideological persuasions, or other

social or economic interests, want to hold sway over important public officials such as legislators, governors or presidents. They can form coalitions that gain control of political parties and economic resources necessary to get elected. However, they cannot be seen as controlling because that would undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process and the credibility of their candidates. What they seek are sufficiently compliant candidates who will do their bidding in exchange for the means to achieve and maintain office. In academia, string-pullers are somewhat less pervasive. Powerful community interests can sometimes exert control on boards of trustees to appoint presidents they can control. Similarly, factions within the political establishment at the state level (in the U.S.) can control the appointments of presidents and chancellors in state colleges and universities, sometimes with intent to impose a particular political agenda on the university. However, good practice requires that appointees have the competence, knowledge, integrity, managerial skill and independence of mind to carry out the mandates of their positions effectively and in good faith. These are what most appointing bodies will look for, and what electorates in a democracy should be seeking. Sometimes, however, those in power lose sight of this standard in pursuing their narrower interests.

It should not be surprising that “the powers that be” should seek to appoint institutional leaders sympathetic to their agendas. Nor is it inappropriate for accountability to be demanded by such interests, through legitimate channels such as legislatures, boards of trustees, or boards of regents. The problem of puppet leadership comes about when interests other than organizational success dominate the string-pullers and candidates emerge who pander to them. The motivations for such pandering can be several-fold. Some puppet leader candidates violate Drucker’s stricture by valuing the rewards more than the responsibilities. Others are fearful that they might not fare well in an open and objective competition based on merit. With fewer alternatives to “get ahead” and fewer fall-back options if they fail, these puppet candidates are compliant and more willing to do what is necessary to gain and stay in office. Job security can be a big factor. So can psychological security if achieving a certain status is necessary to satisfy the candidate’s sense of self worth. An insecure puppet leader can be a very worrisome and dangerous individual once in office.

Cases in Point

It is always controversial to cite particular examples in public leadership situations.

There will always be differences of opinion and difficulties in proving anything.

Hopefully the reader will find merit in the concept of puppet leadership and associate the phenomenon with his or her own examples, even if there is no agreement on the cases discussed here. Since, politics is a matter of public record, the author feels no hesitancy in citing political examples. However, academic examples are a different story; here I will describe, in generic, unidentifiable terms, some real cases which I have observed at close hand. The intent is to illustrate the concept and to suggest the corrosive nature of the problem. There is no intention here to identify, shame, or punish any individual or institution, though hopefully this discussion will encourage learning by anyone having experienced the situations described.

In the realm of U.S. politics, candidates for public office are often at risk of becoming instruments of special interests. One need only examine the thousands of “earmarked” budget allocations, pork-barrel projects, campaign financing loop holes, and political appointments in federal, state and local governments, to appreciate the potential scope of cooptation of public officials. Still, politicians who navigate the minefields of political support do not necessarily become puppets of their supporting factions. Many prove to be fine leaders with their own philosophies, visions, points of view and ways of making decisions. Others are more like blank slates willing to do what is necessary to get elected, or actors fronting for the power brokers responsible for their success.

Ronald Reagan was our first actor president. He was basically good at reading scripts and projecting an affable and friendly image – able to communicate effectively with citizens in this way. He did have a conservative philosophy and agenda but also a reputation for intellectual laziness and an affinity for just playing the part of the president rather than actively shaping a program, developing consensus and establishing a direction and vision for the future. It was not clear how much he was actually in command, although recent publication of his correspondence reveals some depth of understanding and commitment to issues of war and peace and other concerns. On the other hand, his

“acting” in Mississippi and Bittberg seemed to have revealed a certain lack of awareness of how he was being used. As such, Reagan may qualify as a puppet leader, first as governor of California and later as president, representing business and conservative interests behind the scenes.

George W. Bush is probably a better example. With no demonstrable success in his career, he was propelled to the presidency through influence of his powerful family and his attachment to political conservatism, especially from the Christian right. To balance the ticket in compensation for Bush’s inexperience, Dick Cheney was selected and elected as Vice President. A conservative Supreme Court decided the election in Bush’s favor in 2000, in a situation where he had lost the popular vote. He was reelected to a second term, with the same interests behind him, effectively using his first term to pursue their right wing agenda and turn the federal government over to similar minded appointees.

Bush ran on a vacuous platform of “compassionate conservatism” and international disengagement, but his actions reflected that of the Christian right, pro-business and neo-conservative forces that put him in office, under the orchestration of Karl Rove, the strategic thinker behind this coalition. Cheney has often been depicted as the power behind the throne (the string puller), having teamed with Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, in their pro-democracy, neo-conservative agenda to remake the Middle East. The attacks of 9/11 provided the opportunity for the latter to steamroll their agenda, and only after the debacle in Iraq became apparent were some of the strings controlled by this group severed. Bush seems to have dangled tenuously ever since.

The puppet leadership problem went much deeper into the Bush presidency than just the top office. Sycophants and party hacks were appointed to cabinet and sub-cabinet posts throughout the government, competent U.S. attorneys were replaced in the Justice Department by party loyalists, independent minded cabinet appointees were led to resign and important agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency were denied the resources to carry out their work effectively. In

effect, puppet leaders of major agencies of the federal government were fully controlled by the administration's political interests and led to pursue political agendas rather than lead their agencies on the important issues of the day. Meanwhile, President Bush himself remained the puppet "in charge".

In the academy, problems of puppet leadership are perhaps not so earthshaking but they can be just as vexing to faculty and students seeking to achieve excellence within their institutions. Here are some examples:

Case 1: A dean of a small school within a large public research university was unpopular with his junior faculty and was not meeting the expectations of the provost. He was an affable individual, a good teacher but not a researcher or fund raiser. He was, however, well connected politically to the governor's office. He tolerated extensive consulting on the part of his senior faculty and left a large portion of the burden for committee work, teaching and research on promising junior faculty. A recommendation by a committee evaluating his reappointment suggested another candidate, but this was overturned with influence from the state capitol. Several junior faculty members subsequently resigned. The dean later lost the general support of his faculty and university administration and was replaced after a national search. In this case, the dean was neither incompetent nor badly intentioned, but he clearly valued his position over the welfare of the school and was willing to do what ever was necessarily to keep his job. Ultimately he was also left dangling when some of the strings broke.

Case 2: The tenured faculty director of an interdisciplinary academic center in a private university who had built a strong program over an eight year period resigned after multiple conflicts with the board of deans to whom he reported. The conflicts focused on differing interests of the sponsoring schools as they related to the mission of the center. A national search was conducted to find a new director. Given the difficult governance situation of the center, relatively few candidates applied for the position. One qualified candidate came for an interview but expressed reservations about the position. A second candidate with experience running another center, but without strong academic

credentials, accepted the position on a contract without faculty tenure. This candidate was a convenient choice for the governing deans because they could more easily control his decisions and operate the center for the benefit of their schools. The new director, although familiar with the field of work, was highly dependent on the deans for his employment and on collaborating faculty for academic legitimacy within the university. His tenure lasted five years and was terminated after his first contract. While the center survived his term in office, several of its important program initiatives did not. With little leverage and no compelling vision of his own, the director was having his strings pulled constantly without much room to provide leadership.

Case 3: After two failed external searches a professional school within a private university decided to make an internal appointment from its own faculty. Several senior faculty were both qualified and willing to take the position, though there was no internal consensus around any one of them. These candidates were passed over when the president and provost of the university decided to gamble on a young faculty member who had just received tenure, although many advised against it, given her inexperience and relatively undistinguished academic record. Others championed her, given the potential symbolic benefits of appointing a young, minority female to the post and the support of the school's major donor who was won over by her cheery persona. Once the appointment was made, faculty rallied behind the new dean and tried to support her. However, she apparently felt intimidated by certain senior faculty, drew a small in-group of friends around her and began to alienate others in the school outside her circle. As a neophyte, however, she pleased university administration and other deans with her desire to learn the ropes and follow their lead in matters affecting the school and its relationships to other parts of the university. She also seemed to take well to her role as a face to the community and fund raiser for the school. Overall, however, her reputation as an overambitious but shallow and self-serving academic administrator, with mediocre academic credentials, worsened over time. It did not help her cause when university administration pressured the school's faculty to promote her to full professor so that she would have the status to deal with faculty and other university leaders on more level basis. Over the course of her five year term, relationships wore thin, the school drifted

without a vision, disaffected faculty left for other institutions, and tensions within the school grew. Her tenure was celebrated with a big send-off party when she received an offer from another institution, which seemed to please everyone.

Consequences of Puppet Leadership

The basic problem of puppet leadership is that it is not really true leadership at all – in Drucker’s sense of doing the right things, getting results, and assuming responsibility. Rather it is an instrumental kind of leadership, with such leaders behaving as agents rather than principals, and pursuing actions and decisions designed to ensure their own organizational survival, often at the expense of the organization’s mission and goals. Moreover, puppet leaders can be extremely damaging to the organization if their string pullers have agendas in conflict with the organization’s best interests, and if they are appointed for their compliance rather than their competence. Puppet leaders often do not have the requisite substantive knowledge or managerial competence to do the job. Moreover, they are often adept at survival skills that can sap an organization’s vitality by squelching independence, creative thinking and dissent, turning away competent but disaffected parties, and responding to misguided panderers. Worse yet, their support from powerful string pullers can turn to arrogance, further damaging internal relations, sometimes in vicious ways because they act out their own insecurities by knocking down others with stronger reputations.

More to the point, puppet leaders are often journeymen, undistinguished by their substantive contributions to their fields of service and lacking in vision for the future. This is not to say that journeymen cannot be good leaders, or must necessarily attain leadership positions through the puppet scenario. And even puppet leaders can grow by exhibiting respect for their more accomplished peers, diversifying their external sources of legitimacy, and building a base of internal support to countermand the pressures they endure from their string pullers. Indeed, organizational environments change and even string pullers come and go. This gives an insightful puppet the opportunity to develop into a real leader - call this the Pinocchio effect! However, this is a risky scenario given the initial and often enduring asymmetry of power in the puppeteer/puppet relationship

and the strong incentives puppets face to do the bidding of their controllers rather than to build power and vision from within.

Related Concepts

The imagery of puppet leadership brings to mind other leadership-related organizational phenomena from which it should be distinguished or associated. One parallel concept is that of the “figurehead” leader. The figurehead leader often plays an important and symbolic, frequently unifying and diplomatic role in an organization or a polity. If the figurehead president, king or queen, understands the role, he or she can be very constructive and serve without pretense of having substantial power or authority. Moreover, he or she can often rise above the more parochial interests of those in power, rather than be controlled by them. This contrasts with the puppet who has a need to be considered the leader, is indebted to those who hold power, and is often incapable of finding his or her own voice or source of legitimacy.

The phenomenon of puppet leadership also raises the issue of delegation and accountability. In most organizations, every leader, even the CEO, is accountable to someone or some governing body, and it is appropriate for leaders at every level to delegate work and require accountability for the performance of that work. Settings differ, of course, in the degree to which discretion is permitted or encouraged on the part of subordinates to be leaders in their own right - establishing a vision, setting direction, solving problems, gathering support and implementing decision choices. Certainly in democracies, academia and other complex modern settings, discretion and the basic qualities of leadership are commonly valued as an important part of the organizational culture as well as intrinsically required for achieving effectiveness. The difference between a puppet leader and an authentic leader with respect to delegation and accountability is that the latter will be able to articulate and defend an independent point of view and course of action within reasonable bounds of discretion, negotiate for the best possible outcome and be willing to leave that position of leadership if agreement cannot be reached with those to whom he or she reports. In contrast, the puppet leader

will follow the signals and perhaps dictates of her or his bosses and follow whatever course of action best satisfies them.

The problem of puppet leadership is also usefully examined from the perspective of the string pullers. In particular, one can argue that loyalty serves a useful function in organizations, providing assurance to those in command that their intentions will be followed as well as confidence in those to whom authority has been delegated. All leaders must exhibit some level of loyalty to those to whom they report, to establish a reasonable level of mutual trust and to engender the confidence they need to move their own agendas forward. Authentic and puppet leaders will practice loyalty at different levels, however. To the puppet leader, loyalty come first, since so much is owed to the string pullers. To the authentic leader, loyalty must be measured and balanced with other concerns about independence, self-respect and following a path that one considers best for the organization.

Moreover, loyalty can be dynamic. Initial loyalties can grow stronger or weaker over time. A puppet leader who grows in confidence and competence, in a setting where the string pullers may be more benign or may come and go over time, may abandon blind loyalty for a moderated version. Alternatively, relatively weak but authentic leaders in a relatively hostile organizational environment may be beaten into submission over time, choosing to survive through loyalty rather than exercise the qualities of true leadership, in effect becoming puppets. Relatedly, puppet leaders who themselves have subordinates are likely to insist on strong loyalty from them, as a measure of protection for themselves.

Preventive and Coping Strategies

What can institutions do to guard against the pathologies of puppet-leadership? The best strategy is to avoid the appointment of puppet leaders. In the democratic context, transparency and information dissemination are the strongest medicines. Candidates for office need to be vetted not only for their skills, knowledge and qualifications vis-à-vis alternative candidates but they need to be investigated for their connections and obligations to string pullers. To whom do they owe their success and to whom would

they defer once appointed? Has their own “success” been a result of belonging to factions or interest groups with an agenda that they would be obligated to promote once in office? Are they strong enough, and sufficiently knowledgeable and competent to stand on their own, or are they overly dependent on those groups for their direction, information and survival? Are they tolerant of alternative points of view, and is there evidence of learning and independence of thought in their careers?

In the academic setting, similar questions can be asked. In addition, the issue of job security often arises. An individual with tenure and a solid academic record, or a history of employment in responsible positions outside the university, is more likely to be able to exert independent and thoughtful leadership than someone who is a career academic administrator or run of the mill scholar with few options. The old saw that it is best to appoint someone who doesn't need or necessarily even want the job, contains considerable truth in this domain. Leaders in this context need to feel comfortable with taking risks and making creative choices that could lead to their administrative demise.

There are fewer options once a puppet leader is in place. It is first useful to recognize who is pulling the strings and why the puppet leader is vulnerable to their pressures. Second, it makes sense to offer to work with the individual so that internal relationships are built that can modulate if not counteract the pressures of the string pullers. To some extent this kind of approach works to everyone's advantage. In a democracy and in academia, even puppets attached to determined string-pullers require credibility and the ability to project an impression that they are standing on their own legs. If this approach works out over time, puppet leaders can become Pinocchios. More likely, however, it will be necessary to wait things out, as puppet leaders have a tendency to self-destruct, to diminish their credibility over the time, or to lose their support as the string-pullers change or move on.

Conclusion

While it is well understood that there are good and bad leaders, and lots of examples where more informed or insightful leadership would have led to better outcomes, the

organizational literature has focused less on pathology than on best practices or conceptual frameworks for enlightened leadership or healthy leadership processes. The present paper suggests that examining the underbelly of leadership, in the political, academic and other organizational arenas, can be important not only for recognizing the roots of difficult and unproductive leadership situations but also developing preventive and coping strategies in such circumstances.

Puppet leadership is one area of leadership pathology that could benefit from further inquiry. A series of cases studies in different leadership contexts would be a good place to start. How do incompetent or unqualified individuals get appointed to leadership positions? How can the path to leadership be strengthened so that future leaders are subject to meaningful testing and learning along the way? How can puppet leaders be distanced from their string pullers and helped to become Pinocchios? How can the string pullers be exposed and disenfranchised when they push in unproductive directions? What systems might allow reason to supersede power and ideology in the selection of future leaders? Is puppet leadership pervasive or relatively uncommon, or is there really a spectrum that runs from competent, independent minded leaders to those who are self-serving and purely instrumental for those who have put them in place?

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare wrote:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;

He was undoubtedly correct, though we expect more of leaders than just to play the parts arranged for them. Leadership does come with strings attached, but without freedom of action and an internal guidance system leaders become puppets – making for good theatre but poor performance.

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