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# AMERICAN Educator

The Professional Journal  
of the American  
Federation of Teachers  
Volume 5, No. 4,  
Winter 1981

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Subscriptions: \$1.30 of AFT members' annual dues are designated for American Educator; \$2.50 per year for nonmembers.

Signed articles and advertisements do not necessarily represent the viewpoints or policies of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO.

American Educator cannot assume responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

American Educator is published quarterly by the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, 11 Dupont Circle, NW, Washington, DC 20036.

Telephone: 202/797-4400.

Second-class postage paid at Washington, DC.

General advertising office  
11 Dupont Circle, NW  
Washington, DC 20036

American Educator is produced with the assistance of members of Local 2, Office and Professional Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, and members of AFT Staff Union. Composition and printing are done in 100 percent union shops.

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Postmaster: Please send Form 3579 to American Educator, 11 Dupont Circle, NW, Washington, DC 20036.



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# THE PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP

BY JAMES BOND STOCKDALE

IN MOST educational institutions, leadership is addressed as a part of courses dealing with values, tradition, sociology, or management. In one sense, that is the way it must be, for leadership is not a true discipline. It has no body of distinctive literature, no recognized spokesmen or established authorities, and no unique assumptions. Yet, the importance of leadership in all sectors of our society has never been greater, and I believe that there are some teachable and learnable truths that underpin good leadership.

Several years ago, I introduced a course at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, entitled "Foundations of Moral Obligation," which was designed for a group of successful midcareer military officers and civilian government executives of comparable responsibilities. It seemed to me that the mentality of our military leaders, indeed, the mentality of the bulk of both military and civilian midlevel executives in the Pentagon, was becoming largely that of pedestrian functionaries. That is harmless enough as long as "business as usual" and "bureaucratic procedure" continue to be the order of the day. But my experience at sea, first-hand observations on the battle scene as the Vietnam War started, and revelations in prison camp drove home to me the fact that such a mind-set breeds disaster when the unexpected occurs, when it becomes necessary to steer an institution into uncharted waters. Moreover, I believe that every factor that prompted me to originate this course is equal-

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*Vice Adm. James Bond Stockdale, who was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1976, was the ranking prisoner of war in Hanoi for eight years, four of which he spent in solitary confinement. Since his retirement from active duty for combat wounds, he has been a college professor and a college president; he is now a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University in California.*

ly applicable to the civilian sector of our population. Throughout society, we need people who are bored with "business as usual" but who are also imaginative, educated, and eager to handle the unexpected.

The single most important foundation for any leadership course is history. That discipline gives perspective to the problems of the present and drives home the point that there is little new under the sun. Without familiarity with the yardstick of four thousand years of recorded history, busy people, particularly busy opportunists, have a tendency to view their dilemmas as unique and so unprecedented that they deserve to make exceptions to law, custom, or morality in their own favor to solve their problems. We can all think of several disastrous consequences of this short-sighted dodge within the last decade.

That our problems should be held against the light and wisdom of the past was a major premise of my course. Classic thinkers conceived disciplines and bodies of thought that mankind has used profitably over the centuries to solve problems. To ignore this fund of wisdom is the epitome of vanity.

Of course, on a day-to-day basis, some people get along well enough by leaving considerations about right actions to their intuition. In the highly structured bureaucratic environments so prevalent today, there is a temptation to let personal standards go at that. The exponential rise in the flow of communication, particularly of the printed word within organizations—the directives, the programmatic blueprints, the acronyms and the ever-new buzzwords—tends to deaden the moral sensibilities of the best of us. The way of life on the treadmill gives one a false sense of security that values will be issued by "the system" whenever the need arises.

In the military, for example, the fortunes of war have a way of throwing commanders into new decision-making territory where there is no one to issue philosophic survival kits. This can be a shocking

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ballgame. The usual considerations of conformity and bureaucratic "ass covering" are quickly replaced by new considerations. Can the orders that have been issued be obeyed, and is the issuer willing to carry them out himself in order to set an example? Is the leader willing to commit himself to the full consequences implicit in his policies? Is it possible that, as Winston Churchill once warned, the "middle road" could lead straight to disaster? Indeed, the twists of politics, economics, and social revolution might thrust leaders in all fields out on a similar limb with similar considerations. I think any leadership course should proceed from this angle.

Philosophy is an equally logical discipline from which to draw insights into leadership. In my view, the approach of using trendy psychological chitchat case-study sessions usually leaves the class in a welter of relativism. Current literature tells me that the social sciences have not yet outgrown the ideology of relativism, an "egalitarianism of ideas," which most philosophers have long since questioned. If one leads men into battle committed to the idea that each value judgment is as good as the next, he's in for trouble. Thus, the discipline founded by Socrates, that is, a discipline committed to the position that there is such a thing as central, objective truth and that what is "just" transcends self-interest, provides a sensible contrast to much of today's management and leadership literature. It is this type of philosophy and "ultimate-situation" literature that I recommend.

Included in the reading list for a leadership course, for example, could be Plato's *Dialogues*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Immanuel Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Albert Camus' *The Plague*, Joseph Conrad's "Typhoon," and Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat."

ONE OF the most productive results of my course was the development of a framework that focused on universal principles that are broad enough to handle most situations and specific enough to describe much of what the leaders will experience. This allows the teacher to draw on many different disciplines and fields of study—literature, history, art, science—to illustrate these principles. The level of instruction can be tailored to the students' needs, their familiarity with the material, and general academic acumen. Ten principles that I have listed below evolved during the several times that I taught the course and have come about as a result of study and experience rather than course planning. The fundamental presumption is that the student will eventually reach the same conclusions on his own without being pushed or manipulated. These principles, distilled from many sources, may come in an infinite number of variations, but I believe that they are valid under all conditions, in peace, war, behind the desk in the heart of a corporation, or in the cockpit of a jet fighter.

*Principle 1. You are your brother's keeper.* In an environment in which people are trying to manipulate others—be it prison, a rigid hierarchical organization, or a bloated bureaucracy—there is always the temptation to better your own position by thinking only

about yourself. Yet, sooner or later, it becomes clear that the greatest good for you and your fellow "inmates," the key to happiness, self-respect, and survival lies in submerging your individual instincts for self-preservation for the greater common denominator of universal solidarity.

The opportunist may make significant short-term gains by walking over his fellow workers, by taking credit for their good work, or by superficial theatrics. But for each time he loses faith with his peers, he forfeits some of his self-respect. As the nineteenth-century Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt wrote, "Honor is often what remains after faith, love, and hope are lost." Hanging together, watching out for the other guy, can become a great source of strength.

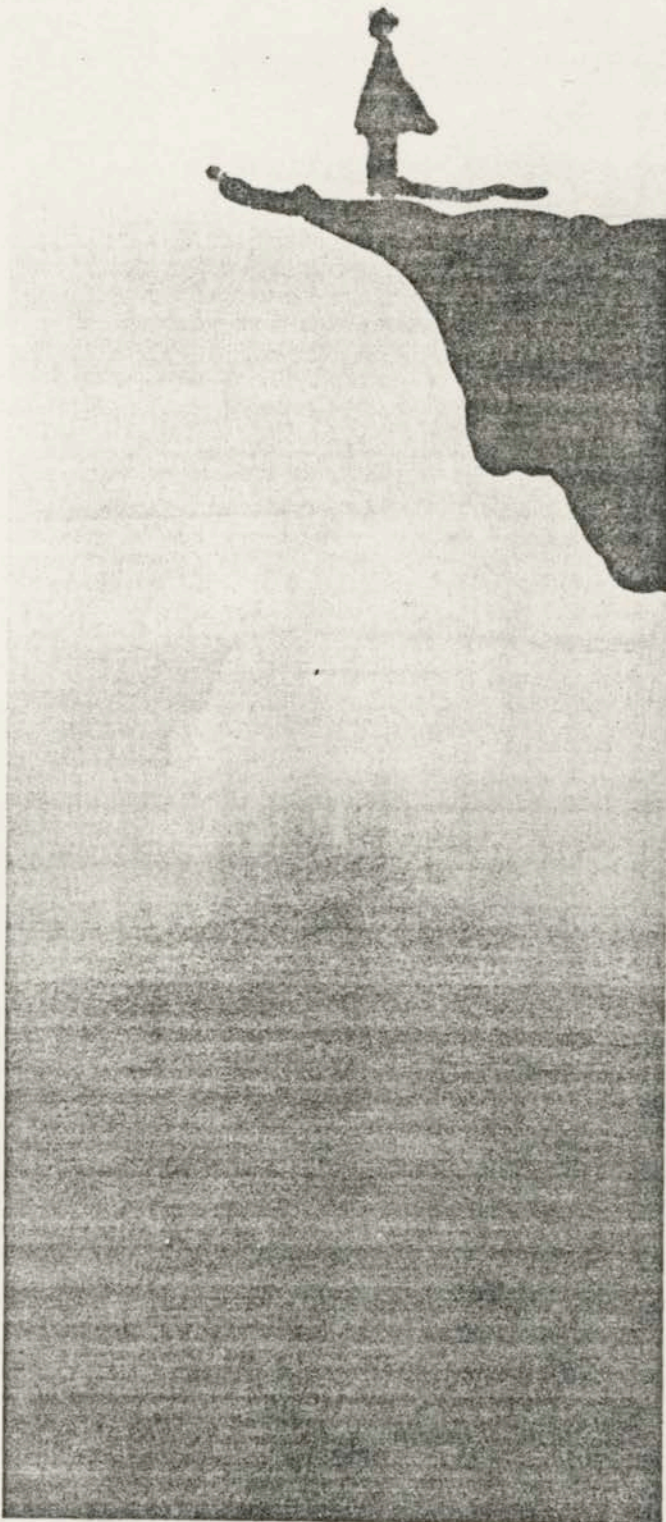
*Principle 2. Life is not fair.* The existence of evil in the world has produced one of the oldest problems that humankind has pondered; man has had a most difficult time accommodating it. There is no moral economy in this universe in which virtue is rewarded and evil punished. To become unglued when you first discover this hardest lesson of life, particularly when you are under pressure, is to flirt with danger. Life's silver lining is a creation of the optimist, and under pressure, the optimist is a hazard to navigation.

Today, the statement that "life is not fair" draws ridicule, but it is nevertheless true. For an interpretation of a good man's defeat, I prefer the original poem of the Book of Job—the way it was before some ancient revisionist historian spliced on a happy ending. The story of Job goes a long way toward explaining the "Why me?" of failure. The story starts by establishing that Job was the most honorable of men. He then lost all his goods and his reputation. His wife badgered him to admit his sins, but he knew that he had made no errors. Here was a man who came to unexplained and unjustified grief without the solace of reason or logic. To handle tragedy may, indeed, be the mark of an educated man or woman, for one of the principal goals of education must be to prepare people for failure.

*Principle 3. Duty comes before defiance.* At his trial, Socrates made the point that he owed it to Athens not to disillusion the citizens about its laws. If in doubt, he would defy the system only as an exception, only when he was positive it was evil. "I will never do what I know to be evil or shrink in fear from what I do not know to be good or evil," he said. A comparison of Socrates' approach to conscience in Plato's *Dialogues* with that of Thoreau in his essay *Civil Disobedience* is in order here.

*Principle 4. Compulsion and free will can coexist.* Aristotle laid down the law on this one. To say, "I spilled my guts because I was being tortured" is never an adequate explanation. To what degree were you incapacitated? How much information did you give? Whom else did you endanger by providing information? These questions must be answered. Aristotle would say the same to the man who says, "I stole the money because my kids were starving." More information is required before the act is justified.

*Principle 5. Every man can be more than he is.* Contrasting potentiality and act, Aristotle taught that every living thing strives to grow and flourish, aiming toward its particular end or good. Goethe once wrote



that you limit a person's potential by appealing to what he is and that, rather, you must appeal to what he might be. Aristotle pointed out that persuasion is one of the primary responsibilities of any leader and categorized the methods of approach as appeal to reason (logos), appeal to emotion (pathos), and the appeal of the good character of the leader (ethos). Particularly in areas where there is no certain answer, ethos is the most persuasive.

*Principle 6. Freedom and absolute equality are a trade-off.* If you push individual freedom to the limit, you lose equality; if you subordinate every social value to equality, you lose freedom. The "leveling of America" type of equality contradicts our national, and even our Western, heritage. A growing ideology of relativism that tolerates, even honors, a lack of discrimination in thought has convinced too many people that they are good simply because they are. Their slogan, says author Lionel Trilling, is "Every man a christ," the motto of what Tom Wolfe calls the "me generation."

*Principle 7. People do not like to be programmed.* You can't force people to do what you think is good for them; you cannot persuade them to act in their own self-interest all of the time. A good leader appreciates contrariness.

Like the main character in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, some men all of the time and all men some of the time knowingly will do what is clearly to their disadvantage if only because they do not like to be suffocated by carrot-and-stick coercion. "I will not be a piano key; I will not bow to the tyranny of reason." This is a plea that any good leader understands.

*Principle 8. Living in harmonious "ant heaps" is contrary to man's nature.* This is straight out of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* and Dostoevsky's story about the Grand Inquisitor from *The Brothers Karamazov*. Life makes sense only when the element of freedom is included in the mix.

*Principle 9. The self-discipline of stoicism has everyday applications.* The lessons in *Enchiridion* by the Stoic philosopher Epictetus may come hard to the martini-drinking fighter pilot or the swinging executive with all the right contacts, but the Stoic's strong medicine is worth taking. Take it from one who knows how unexpectedly you can be trapped in a web of adversity, suffering, and cruelty, taken in an evil net, as the birds are caught in the snare, as the Biblical verse says.

*Principle 10. Moral responsibility cannot be escaped.* Whether you are a geneticist trying to unlock the secrets of life and its creation or a bureaucrat attempting to manipulate a nation's views of itself—pro or con—you cannot use your profession as a shield from responsibility for your actions. A person is the sum of his deeds, and the responsibility for them rests squarely on his own shoulders.

**W**ITH THESE principles in mind, what, then, makes good leaders? First, we all need to be moralists—not posturers who exhort men to be good  
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## PRINCIPLES OF LEADERSHIP (Continued from page 15)

but thinkers who elucidate what is good. This requires first a clear idea of right and wrong and the integrity to stand behind your assessment of any situation.

Integrity is one of those words that many people keep in that desk drawer labeled "too hard." It is not a topic for the dinner table or the cocktail party. When supported with education, one's integrity can give him something to rely on when his perspective seems to blur, when rules and principles seem to waver, and when he is faced with hard choices of right and wrong. To urge people to develop it is not a statement of piety but of practical advice. Anyone who has lived in a severe extortion environment realizes that the potential weapon of the adversary is his manipulation of his victim's shame. A clear conscience is one's only protection.

When we are down to the wire and the choices are limited, there is something in all of us that prefers to work with loyal, steadfast plodders rather than devious geniuses. A disciplined life will encourage a commitment to a personal code of conduct, and from good habits a strength of character and resolve will grow. This is the solid foundation by which good is made clear—by action and by example. A moralist can make conscious what lies unconscious among his followers, lifting them out of their everyday selves and into their better selves.

Also, there are times when our leaders must be jurists, when decisions will be based solely on their ideas of fairness, their knowledge of the people who will be affected, and their strength of character. There may be times when there won't be a textbook solution to go by. I'm not talking about petty legalistic arbitration or controls, but about hard decisions with seemingly endless complications. As jurists, our leaders will be writing "law," and that is a weighty responsibility. When they need the courage to withstand the inclination to duck a problem or hand it off, they must realize that it is necessary to take it head on. One note of caution, however: Many "laws" necessarily will be unpopular, but they must never be unjust. Moreover, the leader must never write a law that cannot be obeyed. The job of a jurist is to guide others, not to put them in a "catch-22" position in which they are forced to choose between conflicting alternatives.

**O**UR LEADERS will discover also that part of their duty will involve teaching. Every great leader I have known has been a great teacher, able to give those around him a sense of perspective and to set the moral, social, and motivational climate among his followers. This is not easy; it takes wisdom and discipline and requires both the sensitivity to perceive philosophic disarray in your charges and the knowledge of how to put things in order. A leader must aspire to a strength, compassion, and a conviction several octaves above that required by society in general.

Glib, cerebral, and detached people can get by in positions of authority until the pressure is on. But

when the crunch develops, people cling to those they know they can trust—those who are not detached, but involved—and those who have consciences, who can repent, who do not dodge unpleasantness, and who can mete out punishment and look their charges in the eye as they do it. In difficult situations, the leader with the heart, not the soft heart, not the bleeding heart, but the Old Testament heart, the hard heart, comes in to his own.

Another duty of a leader is to be a steward. This requires tending the flock—"washing their feet," as well as cracking the whip. It takes compassion to realize that all men are not of the same mold. Stewardship requires knowledge and character and heart to boost others and show them the way. Civil War historian Douglas Southall Freeman described his formula for stewardship when he said that you have to know your stuff to be a man and to take care of your men. In John Ruskin's words, such a process is "painful, continual, and difficult...to be done by kindness, by waiting, by warning, by precept, by praise, but above all, by example."

One final aspect of leadership is the frequent need to be a philosopher, able to understand and to explain the lack of moral economy in this universe. To say that is not to encourage resignation to fate but to acknowledge the need for forethought about how to cope with undeserved reverses. Just as the leader is expected to handle fear with courage, so also should we expect him to handle failure with emotional stability, or, as Plato might say, with endurance of the soul. This is not to say a leader should be a "good loser"; what he needs is the ability to meet personal defeat without succumbing to emotional paralysis and withdrawal and without lashing out at scapegoats or inventing escapist solutions.

**H**UMANS SEEM to have an inborn need to believe that virtue will be rewarded and evil punished on this earth. When they come face to face with the fact that it is not so, they often take it hard and erratically. Faced with monstrous ingratitude from his children, King Lear found solace in insanity; the German people, swamped with merciless economic hardships, sought solace in Nazism. Aristotle had a name for the Greek drama about good men with a flaw who come to an unjustified bad end—*tragedy*. The control of tragedy in this sense is the job of the leader, indeed, the job of leadership education.

The only way I know to handle failure is to gain a historical perspective, to think about those who have lived successfully with failure in our religious and classical past. A verse from the book of Ecclesiastes says it well: "I returned and saw that the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise nor riches to men of understanding, nor favors to men of skill, but time and chance happeneth to them all." The test of our future leaders' merit may well not lie in "hanging in there" when the light at the end of the tunnel is expected but rather in their persistence and continued performance of duty when there is no possibility that the light will ever show up. □

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## FILMS

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- The Yearling*
- The Emigrants*
- Brian's Song*
- The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*
- Tom Brown's School Days*
- Goodbye, Mr. Chips*
- Blackboard Jungle*
- To Sir, With Love*
- Breaker Morant*