

# The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders

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**ABSTRACT.** Reports of ethical violations by upper level managers continue to multiply despite increasing attention being given to ethics by firms and business schools. Much of the analysis of these violations focuses on either these managers' *lack of operational principles* or their willingness to abandon principles in the face of *competitive pressures*. Much of the attention by firms and business schools focuses either on the articulation of operational principles (a deontological approach) or on the training of managers to sort their way through subtle ethical dilemmas in the face of competitive pressure (a utilitarian approach). While valuable, these approaches alone are incomplete.

This paper suggests that many ethical violations by upper managers are the by-product of *success* — not of competitive pressures. Our research suggests that many managers are poorly prepared to deal with success. First, success often allows managers to become *complacent and to lose focus*, diverting attention to things other than the management of their business. Second, success, whether personal or organizational, often leads to *privileged access* to information, people or objects. Third, with success usually comes increasingly *unrestrained control* of organizational resources. And fourth, success can inflate a manager's belief in his or her personal *ability to manipulate outcomes*. Even individuals with a highly developed moral sense can be challenged (tempted?) by the "opportunities" resulting from the convergence of these dynamics. We label the inability to cope with and respond to the by-products of success "the Bathsheba Syndrome," based on the account of the good King David (a story

familiar in a variety of traditions). Recognition of this phenomenon implies that we change or broaden our approach to the teaching of business ethics. It also implies that organizations must re-evaluate and change structures, procedures, and practices which enhance the likelihood of managers falling victim to the Bathsheba Syndrome.

## Introduction

The story of David and Bathsheba is familiar in a variety of traditions. Accounts of King David's life are contained in both the Old Testament and the Torah. These accounts describe a leader with a humble past, a dramatic and rapid rise to power, strong organizational skills, a charismatic personality, an eclectic approach to problem solving, a strategic vision for his people, and a man of high moral character. In his day, he was a man who had it all. He had power, influence, wealth, physical comforts, loyal servants, a strong army, and a growing prosperous country. He was a king. Yet despite both the quality of his life and his moral character, King David was a leader who got caught up in a downward spiral of unethical decisions that had grave consequences for both his personal life and the organization that he was called upon to lead and protect. David's failings as a leader were dramatic even by today's standards and included an affair, the corruption of other leaders, deception, drunkenness, murder, the loss of innocent lives, and a "we beat the system" attitude when he thought he had managed to cover-up his crimes. The good, bright, successful, popular, visionary king, David, was nearly destroyed because he could not control his desire to have something that he knew it was wrong for him to have — Bathsheba.

Was David a leader lacking in principle? All

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accounts indicate that David was a man of strong principle and discernment. Did David abandon principle in the face of tough competitive pressure? At the time of David's indiscretion, he had just finished a series of triumphant campaigns and was riding the crest of success and popularity. Was David's a poor choice in the face of subtle, competing goods? David clearly knew the gravity of the violation he was engaging in and clearly knew the penalty if exposed. How did David, a good, talented, and successful leader get entangled in this downward spiral of events? Could his fall have been prevented? Would our current ethics training have helped David?

David's story appears in our newspapers with increasing frequency. We read of good, respected, successful leaders, men and women of intelligence, talent, and vision who suddenly self-destruct as they reach the apex of their careers. Consider the following four all too familiar composites adapted from recent news accounts:

The CEO of a prominent southern savings & loan is indicted for conspiracy to defraud. In his youth he was a model student and an eagle scout. He has been a prominent member of his church, a spokesman against child abuse, and a man of integrity and conviction according to his friends.

The mayor of large midwestern city is driven from office under accusations of marital infidelity and influence peddling that have enraged his constituency. Of humble Hispanic background, he was considered a rising star, a man who fought for minority rights, a model for minority aspirations, and a person whose life up to that point was beyond reproach.

The hard-working division president of a west coast plastics company was recently dismissed from his job because of gross abuse of his expense account, an affair with his secretary, and rumors of a drug problem. The CEO who fired him stated, "He was one of the brightest and best people I've known, and I've never known him to do anything wrong in his life until just recently. Then he self-destructed."

A prominent religious leader is forced to resign from his national office after growing a small organization into a successful national one. He has worked as a missionary overseas in a third world country, set up soup kitchens for the poor, worked hard to help people deal with addictions, and he has fallen because of fraud and tax evasion.

These are stories of modern day Davids. These stories are currently found on the front pages of the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* several times each week. It may be that the transgressions of our leaders are simply more newsworthy than in the past. It may be that the likelihood of detection is greater than it ever has been. It is also possible that such transgressions by our leaders occur with greater frequency than in the past. Whatever the reason, this publicity has focused a great deal of attention on the need for ethics training in business, in government, and in the schools which are churning out our would-be Davids.

There seems, however, to be a gap between the violations of which we read and the corrective measures which we are taking. After nearly a decade of concern about professional ethics and professional ethics training, it is time to examine some of our assumptions and to ask if we are attacking the core or the periphery of the professional ethics problem.

### **The current focus of the professional ethics discussion**

The popular press and at times the academic literature has far too quickly suggested that today's organizational leadership either lacks ethical standards (Andrews, 1989; Carr, 1970; Longenecker, 1985; Molander, 1987; Pitt and Abratt, 1986) or is willing to abandon ethical standards in the face of economic/competitive pressures (Gellerman, 1986; Hosmer, 1987; Levinson, 1988). In ethics training programs and in business schools we have far too quickly assumed that lack of standards or abandonment of standards in the face of competitive pressure are the key issues that need to be addressed in changing the ethical climate of business.

While competitive pressure certainly, at times, leads some leaders to abandon principle and take questionable actions which they believe serve some sort of utilitarian "greater good," we believe this analysis is terribly overused. In fact, one of the major purposes of this paper is to de-bunk the notion that the ethical failure of our leaders is largely due to lack of principle and/or the tough competitive climate of the 80s and 90s. Rather, we would like to suggest that many of the violations we have witnessed in recent years are the result of success and lack of

preparedness in dealing with personal and organizational success. While our society places a high priority on being successful, some strongly suggest that little if any attention is placed on preparing people to deal with the trials and dilemmas associated with success (LaBier, 1986). Do ethics training programs and business schools prepare individuals for success and its trappings?

The profile of business ethics has been raised considerably in recent years because of highly publicized indiscretions by some of our most respected and admired leaders in business and government. Business ethics training, consulting, and research has itself become big business because of this publicity. Courses proliferate. Training programs proliferate. Research and publications proliferate. But is the attention missing the mark? Much of our attention in this proliferation has focused on subtle ethical dilemmas — delicate situations in which careful deliberation is needed to untangle competing obligations and claims. Our focus has also been on helping managers to articulate and adhere to operational principles in the face of competitive or organizational pressures (Nielsen, 1987; Waters *et al.*, 1986).

Yet, examine the list of improprieties which has stirred this activity: substance abuse, sexual impropriety, tax evasion, insider trading, fraud, conflict of interest, perjury, patronage, diversion of resources, influence peddling, conspiracy to defraud. The specifics of the cases that have come before us rarely involve subtlety. They are usually gross violations which the actors know are wrong while in the act of perpetration. They are obvious breaches which the actors know would be condemned if revealed.

Likewise, look at the list of men and women who have fallen victim to these violations. Very often they are not individuals sitting in the middle of a competitive pressure cooker, making miscalculations in the heat of battle. Nor are they necessarily “destructive achievers” (Kelly, 1988), individuals devoid of operational principles who have climbed to the top in brutal pursuit of personal achievement. Far too often the leaders who have been accused and convicted of violations are men and women of generally strong principle who have built careers based more on service than self-gratification.

In short, too many of the perpetrators of the violations we have recently witnessed are men and women of strong personal integrity and intelligence

— men and women who have climbed the ladder through hard work and “keeping their noses clean.” But just at the moment of seemingly “having it all,” they have thrown it all away by engaging in an activity which is wrong, which they know is wrong, which they know would lead to their downfall if discovered, and which they mistakenly believe they have the power to conceal. This, in essence, is what we have labelled the “Bathsheba Syndrome.” The syndrome is so named to recall one of its first recorded occurrences — when the good and successful King David of Israel, believing he could cover up his impropriety, took Bathsheba to his bed while her husband was off in battle.

In summary, three assumptions have penetrated much of our discussion of business and professional ethics during the past decade:

1. Today’s professionals lack personal operational principles and standards of conduct. We have addressed this lack through personal moral development and the development of professional and company codes of conduct.
2. In today’s complex, fast-paced, high-tech world, professionals are faced with a variety of subtle ethical dilemmas in which they must carefully discern rights, obligations, and competing goods. We have to address this situation by providing professionals with tools and models of ethical decision making, most notably utilitarian models.
3. In the face of tough competitive, economic, or strategic pressure during the 1980s and 1990s, many managers have abandoned personal principles for organizational purposes. We have tried to address this through the development of the organization as a moral environment.

There is a certain rationality to the above assumptions, and while the above listed approaches are, to an extent, valuable, they are certainly incomplete and the assumptions are possibly flawed. The business community bristles at the assumption that they are generally of low moral character, and as was mentioned, many of those leaders accused of violations are people of fairly high principles. Few of the violations that have focused attention on professional ethics have involved subtlety, and few of the violations have occurred in the face of heavy competitive pressure.

We suggest instead that many of the ethics violations we have witnessed in recent years result from a ready willingness to abandon personal principle —

not so much a matter of ethics as of virtue and lack of fortitude and courage. Further, we suggest that principle is abandoned more often in the wake of success than it is in the face of competitive pressure. It seems vitally important that we ask how success and ethical failure are related. Lord Acton long ago gave us the quip about power corrupting, and Will and Ariel Durant more recently refined Acton's comments in their statement, "Power dement's even more than it corrupts, lowering the guard of foresight and raising the haste of action." But we still must understand how success and/or power corrupt, and why they corrupt some but not others.

Going back to the story of King David, we will examine some of the dynamics of success which may lead to ethical failure. We will point to four potential by-products of success which may cause many leaders to fall into ethical violation. First, personal and organizational success often allows leaders to become complacent and lose strategic focus, diverting attention to things other than the management of their organization. Second, success often leads to privileged access to information, people, or objects. Third, success often leads to unrestrained control of organizational resources. Fourth, success can inflate a leader's belief in his or her personal ability to manipulate or control outcomes. Even individuals with a highly developed moral sense can be challenged (tempted?) by the "opportunities" resulting from the convergence of these four dynamics.

### The story of David and Bathsheba

Most individuals are at least vaguely familiar with the story of David and Bathsheba, but we would especially like to point out some of the details leading up to David's violation and point out how in many ways the story of David and Bathsheba is paradigmatic for many of the ethical failures of successful leaders which we witness today. How did David, a good, talented, and successful leader, get entangled in this downward spiral of events? The scriptural accounts provide some insight, and offer food for thought for today's leaders.

*David loses strategic focus in success.* The story of David and Bathsheba begins by noting that David is not where he is supposed to be, doing what he is sup-

posed to be doing. His recent successes in battle have apparently left David complacent — complacent that his overall strategy did not need revision for the time being and complacent that his subordinates were capable of executing the current strategy on their own. Instead of leading his troops into battle as was his role as king, he stayed home, leaving the direction of his troops during critical battles to his right hand man, Joab. David was apparently comfortable that Joab would be able to handle things.

How often today we see executives lead their organizations to the top of the competitive heap, displaying exceptional courage, energy, and leadership, only then to put their organizations on autopilot, kick-back, and indulge themselves for all of the sacrifices they have made along the way. Their set-up for ethical failure begins by not being where they are supposed to be. Not only does this expose the leader to potential conflict, but by not being with the troops through a time of crisis and competition, it opens the door to questionable ethical behavior by subordinates.

David's failure of leadership is certainly not that he delegated (though the accounts indicate that it was a king's duty to be with his troops in battle). Rather, David delegated and then ignored what was happening. He did not give supervision to Joab. In addition, David seemed to be delegating not out of a sense of necessity but out of a sense of self-indulgence. That is, David was delegating not because he needed to free time for other duties, but because he wanted more time for leisure (the accounts indicate that David was just rising from bed as evening came). David may have felt he needed or deserved a break after his earlier conquests; it is interesting that he did not feel his troops also needed or deserved to share in this break.

*David's success leads to privileged access.* As was mentioned, David's leisure allowed him the opportunity, literally, to look around. He was not focused on organizational decision making. Instead, his lack of pre-occupation allowed him to see things he otherwise wouldn't have noticed. Second, his privileged position, high atop the roof of the palace, allowed him to see things that were sheltered to those at lower levels. It would have been clear to someone at a lower level that violation of Bathsheba's privacy was wrong, for they would have somehow had to

circumvent the wall that separated her bath from public view. It was easy, however, for David to forget that it was not his right to view this beautiful woman at bath. His privileged vantage point was designed to give him a perspective — a view — that would help him lead his people, not a view that would feed his self-indulgence. By this point, David's lack of involvement in the leadership combined with his privileged position, allowed him to shift his focus to the satisfaction of personal wants.

Many of the scandals we have witnessed in recent years have evolved from privileged access to information, people and objects and from leaders' apparent inability to understand that their privileged position is supposed to give them a perspective from which they can more effectively lead — not from which they can more effectively satisfy personal wants.

*David's success leads to control of resources and inflated belief in personal ability to control outcomes.* The story of David and Bathsheba unfolds through a degenerative progression of indulgence and cover-up. As the story of David and Bathsheba develops, David sends servants to investigate who this beautiful woman was that he saw from his roof. When he found that she was not only married, but married to one of his officers, he knew it would be a grave offense to take her to his bed. Yet, her husband was off in battle, and the servants, knowing the consequences, could certainly be counted on for silence. David sends for Bathsheba, sleeps with her, and she become pregnant.

In the hopes of covering this violation, David brings Bathsheba's husband in from the battlefield under the false pretense of finding out the state of battle. After months in the field, he hopes Uriah will sleep with his wife, but noble Uriah decides it would be inappropriate while his comrades are still in battle. David then gets Uriah drunk in the hope that he will sleep with his wife, but he doesn't. Finally, David gives Uriah a message to carry back to Joab, the commander of the battle. The message is Uriah's death sentence — it tells Joab to send Uriah to the front of the fiercest battle and then withdraw, leaving Uriah and other innocents to die. After Uriah's death, David sent word to Joab not to let what had just happened seem evil in his sight. Smug in his cover-up, David then took Bathsheba into his

house as his wife. It was the prophet Nathan, an outsider to the events, who finally exposed David.

David, in short, chose to do something he knew was clearly wrong in the firm belief that through his personal power and control over resources he could cover up. David's inflated, self-confident belief in his own personal ability to manipulate the outcome of this story is probably representative of the attitude of many of today's professionally trained managers of business. Trained in attitude and technique to "get things done" and "make things happen," today's business school graduates often possess a dangerously inflated self-confidence. Reinforced by success, given increasing control of resources, and subjected to decreasing levels of supervision, these managers too often stumble as they move into leadership roles.

### Success as an antecedent to ethical failure

We have outlined four by-products of success — loss of strategic focus, privileged access, control of resources, and inflated belief in ability to manipulate outcomes — and we have looked at the dynamics of these by-products in the life of David. We have noted that privileged access and control of resources are, when kept within reason, positive, justified, strategic perquisites of success. Privileged access is essential for comprehensive strategic vision. Control of resources is necessary for the execution of strategy.

On the other hand, we have suggested that the other two by-products — loss of strategic focus and inflated belief in personal ability to control outcomes — are essentially negative. Further, we suggest (as shown in Figure 1) that privileged access and inflated belief in personal ability are primarily personal issues, while control of resources and loss of strategic focus are primarily organizational issues.

We suggest that several explosive combinations can be found within this matrix. First, when loss of strategic focus is coupled with privileged access, the door is opened for real abuse of some of the personal perquisites associated with success. Position and status are suddenly used to promote non-strategic, non-organizational purposes. An even more explosive combination occurs when control of resources is coupled with an inflated belief in personal ability to manipulate outcomes.

	Positive/Benefit	Negative/Disadvantage
Personal Level	<b>Privileged Access</b>  Position Influence Status Rewards/Perks Recognition Latitude Associations Access	<b>Inflated Belief in Personal Ability</b>  Emotionally Expansive Unablanced Personal Life Inflated Ego Isolation Stress Transference Emptiness Fear of Failure
Organizational Level	<b>Control of Resources</b>  No Direct Supervision Ability to Influence Ability to set Agenda Control Over Decision Making	<b>Loss of Strategic Focus</b>  Org on Autopilot Delegation without Supervision Strategic Complacency Neglect of Strategy

Fig. 1. Possible outcomes experienced by successful leaders.

### The dark side of success

Success is the goal of every leader – both personal success and organizational success. Very often the two are intimately intertwined. Paradoxically, embedded in success may be the very seeds that could lead to the downfall of both the leader and the organization.

On a *personal* level the *benefits* of success to a leader are obvious to even the casual observer. Greater power and influence, increased status, a heightened sense of personal achievement, greater rewards and perks, and more personal latitude on the job are all by-products that come to leaders who can make things happen in their organization. We have summed all of these under the heading “privileged access.” When a leader has proven him or herself to the organization, a host of *organizational* benefits tend to accompany this status. Leaders are granted greater control of resources and decision processes; they have increased access to information, people, and things; they are permitted to set their own agendas and have every worker’s dream come true – no direct supervision. The combination of

personal and organizational benefits that accompany success are indeed the very reasons all of us want to be successful. In a nutshell, success leads to increasing levels of power, influence, rewards, status, and control. None of these should in and of themselves be seen as negative.

Less readily apparent is the personal “dark side” of success – a side that is only recently being addressed by executive psychologists and is still seldom talked about (Blotnick, 1987). When leaders climb the organizational ladder and appear to have it all, they are confronted with a host of negatives that affect them on a very personal level. These negatives come in a variety of shapes and forms and affect leaders differently. The negatives of success may not appear to be obvious to most of us, but they nonetheless come with the territory of successful leadership. Collectively, they might be labeled as factors that are associated with an unbalanced personal life and a loss of touch with reality (Berglas, 1986). In this paper we have focused on one of their major manifestations: an inflated sense of personal ability (and sometimes desire) to manipulate outcomes.

Literature on executive psychology describes a

variety of negative dynamics associated with success. Successful leaders can often become emotionally expansive, which is to say that their appetite for success, thrills, gratification, and control becomes insatiable (Blotnick, 1987). Thus they lose their ability to be satisfied with their current status and they desire more of everything. Secondly, they can experience personal isolation and a lack of intimacy in their lives. Inability to share their problems and long hours away from home can cause leaders to be isolated from their families and friends, losing a valuable source of personal balance (Berglas, 1986). In addition, leaders find themselves without peers at work and can find making friends at work difficult. Many of these leaders literally lose touch with reality (Kets de Vries, 1989).

Furthermore, the status can bring with it increased stress and, at times, the fear of failure which can cause a leader to experience extreme levels of anxiety. It is one thing to make it to the top, but many leaders are not prepared for what it takes to stay there (Kelly, 1988). At the same time leaders can experience the "emptiness syndrome" — after working hard for years and finally "making it," they take a step back and ask themselves "is this all there is to success?" (Berglas, 1986). They have success, but they don't experience it in a meaningful way on a personal level which can cause them to seek other ways to satisfy their needs (LaBier, 1986).

Many times all of this simply adds up to an inflated sense of ego. This egocentricity can cause the leader to become abrasive, close-minded, disrespectful, and prone to extreme displays of negative emotion, all of which are warning signs along the road to megalomania (or the "I am the center of the universe phenomenon") (Blotnick, 1987).

We are not suggesting that all successful leaders fall prey to these negatives that are frequently associated with success, but rather want to make the case that success can bring with it some very negative emotional baggage. When we couple these negatives that affect leaders on a very personal basis with the organizational benefits of success discussed earlier, they create a rather potent combination for unethical behavior on the part of the successful leader. When we combine extreme organizational autonomy and control with a personal emotional state that is possibly inflated, isolated, or emotionally expansive, it is not hard to see how successful leaders

frequently make unethical choices which not only harm them personally but contain the potential to destroy or severely damage the organizations they are responsible for protecting (Gellerman, 1985).

In the case of King David, we see both of these propensities in operation. We see a leader with complete free rein and a man who was apparently more concerned with personal gratification (at this particular moment in time) than with the responsibilities of being an effective leader. David clearly believed in his own ability to cover-up his wrongdoing. And as was addressed at length earlier in this paper, we also saw in David the explosive combination of privileged access combined with a loss of focus. David's inability to handle the by-products of success left him extremely vulnerable to ethical failure.

This ethical failure cost David dearly: the death of the child he bore with Bathsheba; the loss of his commander, Joab, who would later betray him; internal strife and conflict in his household for years to come; the loss of respect in his kingdom that led to future leadership problems; the loss of valuable fighting men and morale among his troops; and extreme personal guilt that he was continually forced to live with. All of these dynamics created even less balance in David's life. David was finally confronted with his ethical failure by the prophet Nathan (who was in this case the equivalent of a modern day whistle-blower) who led David to realize that his cover-up had been a failure. Even kings who fail to provide ethical leadership are eventually found out.

Whenever a modern leader falls prey to the Bathsheba Syndrome they are knowingly setting themselves and their organizations up for a fall whether they believe it or not. The lessons from David's sad experience are obvious:

1. Leaders are in their positions to focus on doing what is right for their organization's short-term and long-term success. This can't happen if they aren't where they are supposed to be, doing what they are supposed to be doing.
2. There will always be temptations that come in a variety of shapes and forms that will tempt leaders to make decisions they know they shouldn't make. With success will come additional ethical trials.
3. Perpetrating an unethical act is a personal, conscious choice on the part of the leader that frequently

places a greater emphasis on personal gratification rather than on the organization's needs.

4. It is difficult if not impossible to partake in unethical behavior without implicating and/or involving others in the organization.

5. Attempts to cover-up unethical practices can have dire organizational consequences including innocent people getting hurt, power being abused, trust being violated, other individuals being corrupted, and the diversion of needed resources.

6. Not getting caught initially can produce self-delusion and increase the likelihood of future unethical behavior.

7. Getting caught can destroy the leader, the organization, innocent people, and everything the leader has spent his/her life working for.

## Conclusions

In closing, some advice to successful leaders is warranted. First, it could happen to you. David was an intelligent, principled individual. So, too, are many of your colleagues that you read about in the paper these days. It is not simply the unprincipled and those under competitive pressure who fall victim to ethical violation. Stand forewarned of David's painful experience and read the papers for constant reminders that the chances of being caught have never been greater. Second, realize that living a balanced life reduces the likelihood of the negatives of success causing you to lose touch with reality (Blotnick, 1987). Family, relationships, and interests other than work must all be cultivated for long-term success to be meaningful. Third, understand that your primary function is to provide strategic direction and leadership at all levels. Avoid becoming complacent with strategic direction and current performance. Strategic direction is never "set," no matter how successful. The privilege and status that has been granted to you is designed to enhance your strategic vision. It is not simply reward for a job already accomplished. Likewise, control of organizational resources has been given to you so that you can execute strategy — not to feed personal gratification. Fourth, build an ethical team of managers around you who will inspire you to lead by example and who will challenge or comfort you when you need either (Nielsen, 1987). Finally, ethical leadership is simply part of good leadership and requires

focus, the appropriate use of resources, trust, effective decision making, and provision of model behavior that is worth following. Once it is lost it is difficult if not impossible to regain.

Several observations are also in order for boards of directors and others responsible for overseeing organizational leaders. First, board involvement should include concern for the leader's personal/psychological balance. Support for the leader's psychological well-being can be displayed via forced vacations, outside activities, and periodic visits to counselors and/or psychologists to help the leader keep both feet firmly planted on the ground. Second, boards should erect guard-rails (Andrews, 1989). Detection is the primary factor that deters unethical behavior. Organizations should thus make prudent use of such devices as regularly scheduled audits of critical organizational decision processes and resources. Organizations should also consider the use of ombudsmen for employees who might be willing to uncover unethical acts. Third, boards must clearly establish and implement ethical codes of conduct for organizational leaders and take steps to regularly heighten both the awareness and compliance with such standards. Clearly even successful leaders need both the input, direction, and support of a governing body to be prevented from falling into the dark side of success.

Finally, for those engaged in business ethics training we suggest a broadened understanding of why leaders/managers sometimes abandon their own principles. Do we too quickly focus on the maintenance of ethical behavior in the face of competitive pressure? Should we also discuss the maintenance of ethical behavior in the face of success? Is adherence to principle in either the face of competitive pressure or the wake of success a matter of ethics or of virtue? If success leads to increased levels of power, then we must take steps to deal with the phenomenon that "power corrupts." Researchers and academicians must look for creative ways to prevent this from occurring while not limiting the ability of leaders to lead.

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