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Executive Search & Board Advisory

## 15 LESSONS FROM MACHIAVELLI

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*"The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him"* Niccolò Machiavelli

The book, *The Prince*, was written some 500 years ago by Niccolò Machiavelli. He wrote the book as a guide for leaders in political realism and necessary pragmatism. It has reportedly been read by Napoleon, Mussolini, Diderot, Rousseau, Thomas More, Frederick the Great and Stalin. Kissinger and Nixon had it as bedtime reading. The Church supposedly banned it at one time. The book presents us to a world viewed without morals or emotion.

Machiavelli puts questions forward such as, is it better to be feared or loved and surmises it is better for a ruler to be feared than loved because love is fickle, fear is constant.

A voracious reader of history, Machiavelli stripped out Christian virtues and ideals and drew examples from history. He argued to ignore reality, and to live up to an ideal would end in failure. He focused on effectiveness against moral considerations and argued the ends justified the means.

He makes his readers confront important questions about morality and politics. He does it in a dispassionate manner e.g. in order to secure new territories, he outlines one need "merely eliminate the surviving members of the family of their previous rulers." It is a ruthless view.

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Machiavelli is seen as a divisive and polarising philosopher/writer. However, his ice-cool leadership principles are still revered today. “Machiavellian” is a word we now associate for scheming, knife in the back tactics that get people ahead in life. Others argue he is a realist. His thoughts around business and the political manoeuvres to secure power translate well into today’s intense climate of business competition and leadership. While written in 1513 there are some interesting insights from *The Prince*. We will examine 15 of them:

- 1. “The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him.”**

Weak leaders have weak Executives/lieutenants, and strong leaders employ the best at what they do. Machiavelli goes on to mention that leaders should avoid flatterers or sycophants. “It is that of flatterers, of whom courts are full, because men are so self-complacent in their affairs, and in a way so deceived in them... There is no other way of guarding oneself from flatterers except letting men understand that to tell you the truth does not offend you.”

- 2. “Never was anything great achieved without danger.”**

Willingness to take calculated risks is a critical success factor in business and leadership.

- 3. “Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times.”**

In a world of fast-paced change, digital and international competition, leaders have to adapt.

- 4. “A wise man ought always to follow the paths beaten by great men, and to imitate those who have been supreme, so that if his ability does not equal theirs, at least it will savour of it.”**

Learn from the best; success comes from acquired knowledge. Learning can take the form of reading, having a coach or mentor and placing yourself in a position of wanting to learn from others who have been there and done it with great success.

- 5. “Where the willingness is great, the difficulties cannot be great.”**

Follow your interests, your passions and difficulties will subside. As ex-Apple CEO Steve Jobs declared “the only way to do great work is to love what you do.”

- 6. “He who is the cause of another becoming powerful is ruined.”**

Be careful who you trust and choose your friends carefully as they have incredible influence on your life if you are not mindful.

**7. “To exercise the intellect, the Prince should read histories, and study there the actions of illustrious men.”**

Devour books and read papers. It expands and sharpens the mind and places you ahead of many others while providing you with more thoughts to explore. If you look at the people who have led business or countries, you will find many of them are prodigious readers.

**8. “The wise man does at once what the fool does finally.”**

Make decisions and act. Analysis paralysis prevents many readers moving forward or enables competitors to seize the opportunity first.

**9. “Everyone sees what you appear to be, few really know what you are, and those few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them; and in the actions of all men, and especially of the princes, which it is not prudent to challenge, one judges by the result.”**

Appearances matter, dress to impress. Machiavelli goes on to say “men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because it belongs to everybody to see you, to few to come in touch with you.” Perception is reality and success is a mindset that leads to actions and results.

**10. “A wise Prince ought to observe some such rules, and never in peaceful times stand idle, but increase his resources with industry in such a way that they may be available to him in adversity.”**

Complacency destroys leaders, careers and organisations. It is argued that during times of success, one should change business models and attempt to implement new ideas as opposed to times of dramatic economic decline or when facing aggressive competitive forces. As a leader, move forward with resolve, don't stop. It is at these times one can excel. Be prepared for the worst, accept the best.

**11. “We shall find that it is easier for the Prince to make friends of those men who were contented under the former government, and are therefore his enemies.”**

Your enemies may sometimes be your friends. Look at the way the digital market has blurred the lines with manufacturers coming together to combine their efforts to penetrate new markets. This agile collaboration is leading to innovation. Companies entering into strategic alliances were once fierce enemies. This collaboration has moved to a level where companies seek out a variety of partners to generate new offerings and create previously untested business models. This includes the use of big data analytics which has led to accelerated expansion across traditional boundaries. CEO's are considering partnering with business networks, firms from other industries, academics, and competitors.

### **12. “I’m not interested in preserving the status quo; I want to overthrow it.”**

Leaders, true leaders see things differently, they respect the status quo but want improvement. They want to make their mark and have their team, company or political party leave a legacy.

### **13. “There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.”**

This rings true in mergers and acquisitions. In a large proportion of company acquisitions, the increased value gained is minimal. One could argue a similar view of major corporate initiatives, a change of CEO’s, where we see the shift from a centralised to the decentralised structure, from product line to regional line, and with enormous cultural upheaval, how much is achieved? This is where Boards need to determine the gap between the Chief Executives ego to business outcome rationale. It is a powerful, but a very relevant observation.

### **14. “The more sand has escaped from the hourglass of our life, the clearer we should see through it.”**

Wisdom comes with experience. In the discussions around Boardroom diversity, we forget that having some Board members with battle scars who have lived through more than one business cycle is valuable. Having ex CEO’s on Boards can also make a great deal of sense. Experience is a valuable commodity sometimes lost in the boardroom composition discussion.

### **15. “If one is on the spot, disorders are seen as they spring up, and one can quickly remedy them; but if one is not at hand, they are heard of only when they are great, and then one can no longer remedy them.”**

To lead, you have to be across your responsibility; you have to be engaged; you have to be informed, you have to show the way. You have to be present or in the present. This is not easy to achieve if your responsibilities are international, regional or across a business unit. Being present is an interesting point. It comes as no shock that many CEO’s are up at 5am to start sending emails, exercise at 6am and have dinner at 7pm with family and resume work after the meal. CEO’s have to be present, and across the business, if they are not engaged, according to Machiavelli they are doomed.

“Machiavelli’s writings may be 500 years old, but his thinking is relevant today. He brings an ice-cold pragmatic approach which needs to be tempered, but the essence of his message resonates,” said Gregory Robinson, Managing Partner, Blenheim Partners.

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