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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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A letter from Niccolò: Machiavellian indulgences and strategic myths

20th July 1516

Esteemed Principal and Chief Executive,

If I may take this opportunity to make myself known to you. Indeed, given that I have for many years been well established as a diplomat, a strategist, a poet, an academic and a political thinker – you may already be familiar with my work. I have for example presented at numerous international conferences, enjoyed the sponsorship of wealthy donors and established partnerships with community governors. I am confident that my reputation (largely due to my associations) precedes me.

I suspect that much of what you have heard about me is misplaced. It is true that after some years in the most prestigious positions in further education colleges, some of whom enjoy a national reputation for excellence, I write this letter to you from a place of exile. It is from this state of exile that I seem to have attracted an unsavoury reputation. It is also true that my experience in the archaeology of policy may not seem the ideal vantage point for me to comment on leadership and the contemporary further education college. And yet, I ask for a moment of pause before you conclude finally that my advice – offered to you here as gift, yours to keep or dispose of in whichever way you choose – is of little relevance. You will see that my years spent listening to those who lead further education colleges, your colleagues, counterparts and competitors, have not been wasted. It is at the expense of these esteemed others that I have gained insight. No inducement would oblige me to share my perceptions with agitators, activists or trade unionists who would find in my words provocation to weaken your principalship; my only obligation is to you, to secure your flourishing.

My advice is based on an extended period of structured conversation and observation. I have worked with a team of researchers over a 15-month period, speaking to principals, vice principals, college leadership teams, observing management meetings at the highest level and generating answers to a series of formal written questions, which have resulted in a huge data set. I have noted everything in these conversations and it has profited me. My considered analysis - undertaken with the help of specialist software and codes – owes much to the guidance of Strauss and Corbin (1990). My labouring has been systematic and robust. Framed within the idea of ethics, I have given myself over to my
subject. I have thought deeply and debated extensively on these questions: what is further education leadership? What kinds of leaders are there? How is leadership gained and how is it kept?

What is further education leadership?

Your recent shift from College Principal to Chief Executive indicates to me that you have been engaged in a similar deliberation. As Chief Executive, you have become firmly entrenched in my world. That so many of you have made such a shift emboldens me. I need no longer to remain in the figurative shadows of leadership discourse. I claim only what I justly deserve: to be accorded a place in the leadership canon (Jackson & Grace 2013). What I distinctly offer leaders is a practical methodology. I speak across contexts – from warring Italian cities to the usually more peaceable further education college. I speak also across time scales, gliding between and across centuries. What I have learnt about ruling a state is germane to the problems of leading an organisation. And college life – like corporate life and not unlike military life - is about power – sovereign, disciplinary and bio (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). That is – when I advise that for the college leader it is better to be feared than to be loved, and if not better but certainly safer – I am offering an effective truth.

One that accepts how the world is rather than how it ought to be. I have yet to meet a Chief Executive who was not first a pragmatist and a visionary only as afterthought. To be an effective Chief Executive of a further education college, you will need to gain, hold and expend political power. When the staff who work in your college love you, they love you at their pleasure. They may love and they may unlove you as the circumstances require. When they fear you – they fear you at your pleasure.

The advice that I offer has had a mixed reception. By some I am hailed for my political acumen. By others I am maligned as amoral (my detractors have gone so far as to suggest malevolent) influence. This is of course a perfect echo for the equivocality of your own situation. Does it surprise you that I refer to your position as equivocal? You may feel that your work is premised on an entirely transparent undertaking. You are there, after all, to meet the needs of your community, to provide education and training, to build local competitiveness and individual prosperity. Could anything be clearer? Yet, in this undertaking, in calling yourself a Chief Executive – you claim the status of a business person operating within a market. As every business person knows – even ones who market their niche as an ethical enterprise – what matters is the bottom line.
The dilemma your profession faces in an age of austerity is this: how to maintain a convincing balance between ethical and financial exigencies. Several of my informants make this clear to me. *Do The Right Thing* is a useful refrain here. It sounds like an ethical obligation. But it is a qualified ethical commitment that ensures values are subservient to finance.

**What kinds of leaders are there?**

As Chief Executive it is your task to ensure the future viability of the college. To do this successfully you need to live in the real world. The three principles of advice I offer then are addressed to the real of college life, the actual. I have stripped the advice of idealism as this is a luxury you cannot afford. At a time when many Chief Executives are enjoying salaries that may be enumerated as a fraction of one million pounds - I mean here – a quarter of a million, £250,000 or a third of a million, £330,000 (Robertson, 2016) it may seem somewhat misplaced to suggest there is any luxury that a college leader might not be able to afford. But the point I am making stands. Your wealth – whether earned through hard work or merely good fortune – should not cause you to rest. Your promotion has been rapid, a mark of your sheer charisma and utter brilliance.

The responsibility invested in you is enormous. You are the steward of an organisation upon which so many rely. The students (I should, of course, say customers), the local business community, the national economy, yes indeed – the national economy and its capacity to compete in an increasingly international and interconnected global system of capital flows - rely on you to provide literate, numerate workers imbued with dispositions that enable them to fit into their allotted place in a shrinking labour market (Bowles & Gintis 1976). They must be willing to endure moments of unemployment, flexible destitution and precarity.

The country needs you to produce a labour force who accept without question the sweetly framed deceptions of their elected representatives. You must, if you can, encourage in them a post-colonial melancholic yearning (Gilroy, 2005) for the days when Britain was a proud independent nation. (That such a moment has never existed does not matter.) Let them believe that they have no need for Europe when they have a formally colonised Empire longing to be re-conquered. If you are indeed the leader of a pedagogic enterprise as you claim, then your task is to ensure they are willing to accept want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness as acts of a secular god. You are not alone in this endeavour. Others will aid and abet. What matters is that your students learn that collectivism - institutional, European, or global - is dangerous and undesireable. Your further education college is essential for the survival of capital, and
capital needs a skilled, and a subsidiary labour force. But there is another, closer and deeper aspect to survival. One that impacts upon your person.

Does it help to rehearse the multiple ways in which this climate has changed the quotidian life of the college; there has been a weighty catalogue of additional burdens placed on those working in Further Education - reductions in staffing, increases in teaching hours, intensified workloads, top heavy management structures - all accompanied by the insatiable demands of neo-liberalism (Mather & Seifert 2004), accountability, inspection - the sheer terror of performativity (Ball 2003). All of these things extract their toll (Kinman & Wray 2014). Sleepless nights, the sheer physicality of stress, the lingering discomfort of guilt, and the awkward intellectual contortions necessary to justify the unjustifiable are all reminders that survival is personal. Its intensity is felt in your body (Morley 2005). The contemporary college Chief Executive needs a survival strategy. One that allows you to resist changes that risk the ongoing existence of the college (where, after all, do persistent funding cuts lead if not ultimately to the obliteration of the sector) while nonetheless maintaining your capacity to acquiesce to policy demands.

I must restate, I have met and conversed at some length with several college Chief Executives and I am yet to meet one who was not a pragmatist. Admittedly, their pragmatism might be 'principled' or 'contingent'. (Moore, Edwards, Halpin, & George 2002) But in each case it is a pragmatism driven by a desire to survive. I have frequently wondered about this Darwinian theme of survival. What is the entity that survives contingency, equivocation and compromise? To borrow again from Ball and Olmedo (2013) I might accept that it is the mortal soul that survives; in more secular terms – the self. And yet, to make reference to Darwin is to make reference to the survival of the fittest. It is to make reference to a theme that requires us to move from the personal back to the institutional. Only lean organisations survive austerity. Only those organisations willing to assume the mantle of impoverishment survive; and when we examine as closely as we dare the impecunious post-austerity college, we have to consider not only what precisely it is that that survives but at what (and whose) cost?

How is leadership gained?

There is a difference between calling yourself a Principal or a Chief Executive. The distinction I notice here is connected but not restricted to biography. If you are an accountant who has become a college leader after a successful career as a merchant banker you may well wish to be known as a Chief Executive. After all, when you attend the local chamber of
commerce meetings, Chief Executive is a title that your counterparts know, recognise and respect. Given the changes that have taken place in FE colleges over the past few years, it is unsurprising the Chief Executive has become the preferred title. The 1990s managerial myth - the idea that the management of public sector organisations is energised by professional self-interest – has created opportunities for a new type of college leader, one unencumbered by the luxuries of ethics. There are advantages to being so unencumbered. The situation that colleges now find themselves in might even demand it. In the absence of actual ethics, one thing that every college leader, Principal or Chief Executive has recourse to is an ethical mantra. A mantra that resonates powerfully across the sector with sufficient ambiguity to justify anything.

I would suggest you develop and regularly use a mantra that has all the appearance of an ethical principle but little of its content. It is wise to link this mantra to some distant educational radical – Freire or Dewey are good examples, but several others will do. Once the association is made, you may use, reuse and misuse this notion in as many ways as the situation requires. The mantra Do The Right Thing coupled with an ethics of survival will convince your staff, through love or fear, to descend with you to the depths of hell. They will do anything.

It is hard to argue that cuts to provision are in the interest of students. Once their evening course has gone they may never improve their life chances or attend a literacy class; they may have no other social contact; indeed, they may never even leave the house. Yet, you must frame the choice as to either accept a 60% cut to provision this year or risk provision altogether next year. For the long-term future of the college, for your own reputation as a Chief Executive who stands up in the face of hard decisions, for the sake of a six figure salary (Robertson 2016) to implement a 60% cut is to Do The Right Thing.

Another cohort impacted by cuts are those lecturers and managers who remain in post. It may be to the detriment of staff to have their terms and conditions dramatically changed overnight. There are now instances of staff who in the name of flexibility have no upper limits on their contractual teaching hours per year (Dennis, 2014). This is to their personal detriment. But is it the right thing to do? Yes. Your college survey makes it clear – high levels of staff stress correlates with high levels of student satisfaction. This is unambiguous. And the distress caused is worth it. We are here to meet the needs of our customers. The student is always right.

Any protest against these conditions of service must be silenced. And this is the third and final beneficial use of the ethical mantra. It allows you to appear ethical, while remaining silent on the damage policy does to your students, your staff, your college, and the communities you serve. You are earnest in your belief that you always Do The Right Thing.
There is no need to confuse the issue with caveats. *Do The Right Thing* might be more accurately phrased as *Do The Best We Can Under The Circumstances*. It might be the best course of action when confronted with a series of unwholesome alternatives, (even if those alternatives are never explicitly articulated). It is more often the best compromise we can make, in a certain situation. It has the surface appearance of an ethical ideal. But it is better to ignore any suggestion that a compromise we are prepared to live with and can persuade others to live with might not be the right thing.

**How is leadership kept?**

Finding a compromise you can live with is not quite the same as doing the right thing. It involves a complex series of choices. Your confident assertion that you always *Do The Right Thing* is something that you tell yourself and others tell themselves to avoid confrontation with an unpalatable truth. I cannot stress just how much and how frequently this phrase is repeated to me in conversations. However, it would be simplistic and naïve to accept that it means precisely what it says. What this commitment to *Do The Right Thing* suggests is that College Leaders are indeed concerned with the ethics of their behaviour and the organisations they lead. Ethics matter. A lot of work goes into considering what the right thing to do actually is and every college strategy statement contains some kind of ethical commitment. I then have to explain why it is that these statements must be treated as a Machiavellian indulgence: a strategic myth.

If you are to maintain your position as Chief Executive, it is important that you hide your wickedity. I should of course say the wickedness of college life. The subterfuge this hints at is suggested for reasons other than those you might imagine. Let me explain. Your college is a complex adaptive system (Plsek and Greenhalgh 2001). That is, it is a collection of individual agents who behave in unpredictable ways. Please recall my reference to Dejours (2010): the ‘real’ work of organisations. In a complex adaptive system all actions are interconnected. The actions of one individual change the context within which others act. This situation is characterised by paradox, creativity, surprise and emergence. The inherent wickedness of College Leadership is sketched against this background. I am indebted here to Rittel and Weber (1973). A wicked problem has no formulaic identifiers. It is not entirely and immediately clear precisely what the problem is, and any solution is impossible to definitively grasp. Any number of approaches might well be possible, plausible and even desirable. In most instances there are always some unanticipated outcomes. The preferred solution is therefore not an all-time all-places response. It is a preferred response to a unique situation. ‘Every solution counts’ (Wright 2011 p.350). There is no way to test whether a preferred solution is right or wrong. There are only perpetual retrospective
arguments about whether it is better or worse. Wicked problems cannot be resolved by simple, linear, reductionist techniques.

The invocation to *Do the Right Thing* is the ultimate in a linear reductionist one-size-fits-all solution. It purports to act as an ethical satellite navigational device while also providing a deceptive rhetorical ruse that submerges the inherent wickedity of the challenges you face. It merely offers a placebo that reassures but does nothing to address the real work within which you are embroiled. But it is a good device. It garners support for absolutely any action you wish to take.

The brilliance of this strategy is to your credit. My contribution is merely to notice and elaborate upon its effectiveness and advise how this may be entrenched more fully into your leadership.

I end in the hope that you will accept the gift of my advice in the spirit in which I offer it. I implore you to read diligently and consider carefully what I have noted, and in these words recognize the purity of my desire for you to attain the eminence you deserve. I want only to contribute towards your success. Should you from your elevated position feel the need to learn more of my conversations with your colleagues, counterparts and competitors I would be most pleased to meet with you at your convenience. In my reduced circumstances, I am compelled to endure the ‘keen and unremitting malignity of fortune’ (Machiavelli, 1985 p.7). But the indignity of my circumstances will not stop me from reaching out. I would see your esteemed self grasp not only national success but international triumph. To this end, I place my insight at your disposal.

Niccolò Machiavelli

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