
Why we don't have the leaders we want

by Arthur Brooks | March 22, 2019 12:00 AM

I always thought people liked me. I make friends easily and am at about the 99th percentile in extroversion.

But when I first moved to the American Enterprise Institute as president in 2009, I often felt a distinct distance from my colleagues. As I approached the lunch table, I'd see my colleagues laughing and telling stories, but when I sat down, they would look down at their plates. I started to take it personally.

But then I read the work of Princeton University's Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize laureate in economics although he is a psychologist, and my relational isolation suddenly began to make sense. Kahneman's work reveals a hard truth: Tyrannical or not, people don't enjoy being around leaders all that much. In a well-known study, Kahneman and several colleagues looked at sources of unhappiness in our ordinary lives. They found that the No. 1 unhappiness-provoking activity in a typical day is spending time with one's boss. Leaders who think their employees look forward to seeing them are basically fooling themselves. Many leaders want to be the exception to this; few are. Why? Because most people find it stressful to be bossed.

Most of us in leadership roles make an uneasy peace with this truth. I, for example, started eating lunch at my desk. Tyrants, on the other hand, embrace it fully. The canonical text for despotic leaders is Niccolo Machiavelli's classic *The Prince*, in which he famously advised, "It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both." By process of elimination, since you cannot be loved and still be the boss, go ahead and be feared.

People who follow Machiavelli's advice are what psychologist Daniel Goleman calls "coercive leaders" in his seminal Harvard Business Review article, "[Leadership That Gets Results](#)." In his research, he studied the leadership styles of nearly 4,000 CEOs. The most hated? "Coercive leadership." The coercive leader, Goleman wrote, creates "a reign of terror, bullying and demeaning his executives, roaring his displeasure at the slightest misstep."

That doesn't sound like a leader most people would be eager to follow, but it does sound like a lot of current leaders and the general tenor of our political discourse. From television to social media to everyday politics at the highest level, we see powerful people belittling, maligning, and mocking those with lower status. Citizens, colleagues, and opponents are all routinely insulted and shamed in a system that rewards the loudest voices and most audacious claims.

Is this what we really want? After all, we vote for our politicians and tune in voluntarily to the media. Obviously, we've *selected* coercive leaders. Why?

[Related: [American Hangover: The death of parties, the distortion of democracy — and how to fix it](#)]

Goleman's work explains this choice. Divisive, coercive political leaders, in Goleman's telling, can be appealing during times of national despair, when voters want to change the status quo. If people are convinced a crisis is being ignored, a coercive leader might be just what they want, at least for a little while. Goleman describes one such executive who was brought in to save a food company that was hemorrhaging money. "His first act was to have the executive conference room demolished. To him, the room, with its long marble table that looked like 'the deck of the Starship Enterprise,' symbolized the tradition-bound formality that was paralyzing the company." The demolition was cheered by the rank and file, because it sent a message that the failing culture had to change.

Sound familiar? It should, because the motif of shaking up the system, if only to send a message, has dominated our politics and media since the run-up to the 2016 election. From populist politicians, including everyone from the president to his democratic socialist adversaries to angry pundits, leading figures on the Right and Left have spoken to broad swaths of the population that see themselves as having been given a bad deal, or worse, deprived of the sense of dignity that comes from meaningful work and community life. With wages [stagnant](#) for the middle class in the decade after the 2008 financial crisis, [suicides](#) and [opioid-related deaths](#) soaring to record numbers and labor force participation among prime-age men [in decline](#), Americans had been looking for a leader who would rescue them from an economy of despair, even if it meant rupturing the system.

A crisis explains the emergence of coercive leaders, in business and politics. As Goleman notes, this can be both appealing and even somewhat effective in the short run if for no other reason than that coercive leaders put an abrupt end to what people consider an unacceptable status quo. For an organization in free fall, this is not a small victory. In the long run, however, coercive leadership can end badly, in scandal or ignominious defeat.

Coercive behavior often destroys morale and leaves people alienated. As psychologists Jennifer Lerner and Larissa Tiedens have found, tendencies toward blame and anger exhibited by coercive leaders escalate "in a recursive loop" and have "especially deleterious effects in interpersonal and intergroup relations."

Under coercive leadership, people often turn on each other and don't trust their colleagues or neighbors. People in power scapegoat and vilify others in order to maintain their positions. If you don't reject this as a follower, you imply assent. That creates in-groups and out-groups among followers, which foments distrust and animosity. This certainly characterizes the current political moment in America, where 1 in 6 have ruptured a relationship over politics, doesn't it?

Can leaders who want a better ideological culture address the needs for dignity and opportunity without the costs of coercive leadership? The answer is yes, and it takes us back once again to Goleman's research on leaders. Specifically, we need what he calls "*authoritative* leadership," not to be confused with *authoritarian* leadership. These are far and away the most effective leaders.

Authoritative leaders in a company, according to Goleman, are visionaries who set a course for an institution and inspire each member to take responsibility for getting to the final destination. While coercive leaders drive people away by belittling and blaming, authoritative leaders garner their support by offering encouragement and trust. They foster a culture that affirms each team member's importance to the work being done, and in doing so convince individuals to invest deeply in the long-term prosperity of the organization.

Authoritative leadership is not just advantageous in business. It can be used in any setting, including public life. If our goal is to reclaim the sense of dignity that has been attenuated for so many Americans, it's not enough to smash a conference table and excoriate the establishment. What we require is a new vision from authoritative leaders for the purpose of our economy and public policy. By articulating a clear aim of restoring human dignity and expanding opportunity, authoritative leaders can create space for Americans to solve the pressing challenges the country faces.

Authoritative leaders are not peacemakers, however. They know we need disagreement to improve policy in all domains, from social safety net reform to a revamping of America's education system. Sometimes, disagreement leads to a conflict of values, but for authoritative leaders, that's all right. Their goal is not that we all get along. In fact, they typically instigate vigorous debates and challenge people in uncomfortable ways.

Maybe you're thinking there's no appetite in America for authoritative public leadership, at least not any more. Perhaps the last few years have beaten you down so much that you have become pessimistic or hopeless and concluded that our new state of political nature is something like what Thomas Hobbes described as what life would be if left up to nothing but our own devices: "nasty, brutish, and short."

I disagree. I look at a lot of public opinion data in my job, including a [survey](#) from the nonprofit More in Common showing that 93 percent of Americans dislike how divided we have become as a country. I believe America is ready for unifying, authoritative, visionary leadership at all levels. Authoritative leadership gives us what we crave more than revenge, and more even than pure victory. At the level of deep moral values, authoritative leadership helps us connect with our fellow citizens, even those we disagree with on political matters.

How do we uncover and feed this hunger for more authoritative leadership in our nation today? For clues, we can look to our recent history. In the 1950s and 1960s, America was deeply divided over race relations. Conventional politicians believed white America was not willing to

fight for civil rights for black Americans. Civil rights legislation in Congress stalled. Divisive, coercive leaders fed a political demand for segregation and resisted change.

But from a time dominated by coercive leaders emerged one of the greatest authoritative leaders in American history, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He envisioned what escaped the eyes, and even imaginations, of many other leaders of his time: an America insistent on the common humanity and the right to dignity, of all people, no matter their race. He saw that, deep down, Americans wanted their country to live up to the promise of the nation's founding, and would work to that end if only a leader would inspire them to do so.

King offered a unifying vision for the future. Standing in the shadow of Abraham Lincoln on the National Mall, he declared, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' ... I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

His message touched the hearts not just of those gathered on the National Mall, but of millions of Americans who had not yet been part of the civil rights cause and would be motivated by his example. Of course, America did not change overnight. King was [broadly unpopular](#) at the outset of the civil rights movement, and in fact, in the year of his assassination, he faced a public disapproval rating of [nearly 75 percent](#). But what made King such a profoundly effective leader was that he saw — indeed, created — a mainstream hunger for civil rights that people didn't even know they had.

Going further back, authoritative public leadership was the secret to America's founding. In the 1760s, many colonists were unhappy with King George III. They hated the tea tax and the Stamp Act. But they didn't know they wanted to create a new country. I was amused to learn that my direct ancestor, John Brooks, was married in Boston on July 4, 1776. There is absolutely no evidence he was agitating in any way for the birth of a republic.

It wasn't until a group of visionary leaders, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, claimed we could make a new kind of nation that the independence movement began. They articulated a revolutionary vision of self-government, and they inspired their fellow men and women to take up together the cause of life, liberty, and, most radically, the pursuit of happiness.

These examples demonstrate that the most lasting moral victories are propelled by authoritative leaders, not those who belittle, coerce, or polarize. When we land upon hard times, it is only natural to look for a coercive leader, one who will identify the enemy, shake up the status quo, and fight using any means necessary, dirty or clean.

However, if we want to build a better country, we need leaders who exemplify the authoritative style. This does not mean we need leaders who agree on all questions of policy. Far from it. But what America does need is leaders who are capable of building a shared moral consensus of pushing opportunity to those who need it the most and facilitating meaningful disagreement about how to achieve that shared aim, all while treating all Americans with love and respect.

The solution doesn't only begin with national figures in politics and culture. It also starts with each of us. We can be everyday authoritative leaders, whether at home, around the watercooler at work, or in our neighborhoods. We can exhibit the kind of leadership we wish to see from our country's public figures. And as we practice authoritative leadership in our own lives, we will find ourselves better prepared to weather the storms we face as individuals and as a nation.

As for me, I've learned a lot over my decade at the helm of the American Enterprise Institute. Machiavelli's question of whether it is better to be feared than loved turns out to be an irrelevant one, because great leadership isn't about how people feel about the leader. Rather, it is about whether they are inspired to work for their shared cause and serve each other. I never get tired of working for that, even if I wind up eating lunch by myself.

Arthur C. Brooks has served as president of the American Enterprise Institute since January 2009. In July he will leave AEI to join the faculty of the Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School. This essay was adapted from his new book, Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt .