# From virtues and good character to skills and competences of strong or even disruptive leaders?

## *Is this a fundamental shift in trust and leadership?*

**Dr. Steven P.M. de Waal**

### Session Description

Trust, especially in the virtues of leaders, have long been considered fundamental to leadership, yet many democratic choices of recent years challenge this assumption. Around the world, voters elect leaders who defy these conventional trust metrics—embracing populism, media dominance, or anti-establishment rhetoric. Some leaders maintain these strong followings despite ethical controversies, governance failures, institutional clashes or even criminal suspicions.

This raises **crucial questions**:

a. Is there really a fundamental shift in the public perception, recognition of and trust in leadership, especially public leadership, going on?
b. If so, why now? What are the causes and contexts that can explain this shift?
c. Most basically: Is this shift not 'disruptive' to current leadership practice, theory and academic research, challenging its historical and fundamental asssumptions?

### From Virtuous Leadership to (merely) Impact and Influence?

For centuries, leadership was grounded in ethical and moral ideals.

**Aristotle's** concept of virtuous leadership[1] emphasized wisdom (*phronesis*), courage, and justice, asserting that a true leader must be guided by moral excellence rather than mere power-seeking.

Similarly, **Laozi's** Dao De Jing[2], speaks of 'leadership in virtuoso' (excellent leadership)—the idea that the best leaders lead with subtlety, wisdom, and humility, so that:

*"A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: 'We did it ourselves.'"*

Yet, in today's democratic landscapes, there appears to be a growing preference for hierarchical, strong-willed leaders over these collaborative models. Instead of leaders empowering their people quietly, many now dominate the public sphere, consolidate power, and rely on direct authority rather than collective wisdom. If public trust in leadership is now a fluid, volatile force, does it still depend on a leader's virtues and humility or is it now more about tactical skills, media mastery and an image of 'getting things done'?

A historical stream in leadership theory that is as influential as that of virtuous leadership is the stream that emphasizes leadership in politics, power and perception. A good writer to start with is **Nicolo Machiavelli**[3]. As the founding father of political analysis he emphasizes that in the political and public arena whatever purpose you pursue, you first need to have the power to realize things. So his main analysis is not about noble purposes, but about the political skills you need to get enough power to get anything done at all, including even evil or inhuman tactics. This last one certainly resonates with the need of the public of persons that 'get things done'. There is in his work, often not recognized, but relevant in this issue, a hidden connection with the 'virtuous leadership' stream because he also emphasizes that he exposes this kind of political behaviour from many rulers at that time, like emperors, monarchs and popes, because in the end he is a proponent of more democratic institutions that make the choice of rulers more public and transparant, especially for his home town Florence[4]!

In the same domain of political analysis we have more recent of course the renowned political scientist of **Judith Shklar** who also has explicitly drawn our attention to vices in political leaders, like cruelty, hypocrisy and arrogance[5].

In modern literature we also have the very appropriate study of **Barbara Kellerman** into 'Bad Leadership'. She even explicitly sets it off against the in her view still dominant stream of the virtuous leadership approach: "A leader is usually thought of as someone with vision and integrity and a range of other traits typically associated with being a paragon of virtue.[6]" Kellerman points out that bad leadership can be either ineffective or unethical or both. She even categorizes several vices that determine bad leadership: incompetent, rigid, intemperate, callous, corrupt, insular, and evil.

There is in modern literature a stream that is close to 'virtuous leadership', often now called **value based leadership (VBL) theory**.

Values-based leadership (VBL) emphasizes aligning leaders' actions and decisions with core ethical values, fostering trust, integrity, and commitment within organizations. Recent literature identifies several key theories under the VBL umbrella:

- Authentic Leadership: Focuses on leaders being genuine and transparent, promoting self-awareness and consistency between values and actions.
- Servant Leadership: Centers on leaders prioritizing the needs of others, fostering a culture of service and community within organizations.
- Transformational Leadership: Involves inspiring and motivating followers to exceed expectations by aligning organizational goals with individual values and aspirations.

In the context of civil leadership, the study of **Steven de Waal** "The Value(s) of Civil Leaders"[7] underscores the pivotal role of personal motivation and ethical values in driving societal contributions. Civil leaders, often operating outside formal governmental structures,

leverage their values to mobilize resources and address pressing societal issues, thereby exemplifying practical applications of VBL principles. In this study very much effort needed to be done about proving that the good societal impact that was the first reason to look into these leaders, was really due to and reached by the special leadership of these civil leaders! This is very much due to the fact that many persons want to show off their so called leadership by claiming the good, societal impact they have. So, even researchers have to be cynical about 'sweet talk' of 'good intentions' and 'moral impact'.

In summary, the current literature on values-based leadership underscores the significance of ethical values in guiding leadership behaviors. The integration of these values not only enhances organizational effectiveness but also contributes positively to societal well-being, as evidenced by the impactful roles of civil leaders.

## Different elements of leadership are relevant

In this discussion about this possible shift in perception or even preference of leadership it is helpful to look at current theory and study on what is now often called moral leadership. They often make a distinction between moral character, moral impact and moral purpose[8]. It now seems that the public is less interested in moral character and redefines the impact and purpose they wish for also in (much) less moral terms.

A modern leadership scholar like **Keith Grint**[9] identifies four critical components of leadership—Person (who the leader is), Position (where the leader operates), Process (how the leader leads), and Purpose (why the leader leads). Notably**,** trust seems absent in this modern view as a distinct component, although it can be part of all four components. The main criterium seems to be that a leader successfully navigates power structures and public perception. In his 'constructivist' approach followers define the leadership they want and, so, we must look beyond leaders to the leadership that people/followers currently search for, as is also subject of this paper.

There even may be a gender related cause for this preference for 'strong' leaders, because male leaders often benefit more from 'strongman' perceptions[10]. It could even lead to the phenomenon that female leaders are held to higher moral standards while male leaders are rewarded for dominance?

## The Impact of This Shift on Trust in Leadership

This fundamental shift in leadership, from a virtues-based model to one focused on skills, power, and disruption, significantly alters the nature of trust in leadership.

**Rosalinde Torres**, known for her work on adaptive leadership, argues that trust in modern leadership is no longer built on moral integrity alone but on a leader's perceived ability to navigate complexity and produce results[11]. Torres highlights that successful leaders today prioritize situational agility, bold decision-making, and an ability to respond to rapid societal shifts—even if their personal character is contested. This reflects a move away from intrinsic trust (based on values and virtues) toward instrumental trust, where followers support leaders based on their capacity to act decisively, regardless of ethical concerns Consequently, this shift has led to a paradox: trust in leadership becomes highly conditional and transactional, rather than deeply rooted in long-term relational credibility. As a result, many leaders now gain and maintain trust through constant public performance, strategic messaging, and direct

engagement with their base, rather than through demonstrated ethical consistency or collaborative governance This evolution in trust may explain why leaders with controversial reputations still maintain strong followings—followers trust them to act in alignment with their interests rather than embody universal moral ideals[12]

## Possible explanations

There are different explanations for this shift in public recognition of leadership in general or preference for this kind of leadership.

1. **Fundamental change of the public arena**

   The new public arena, fundamentally changed by the new media- and ICT technologies, demands strategically different public skills, stimulates polarization and makes people more used to 'disruptions', first of the economy and, now, of democracy[13].

   This change, because of the permanent 'battle for the eyeballs', further enlarged by the commercial drive of Big Tech by their use of algorithms, needs to make all political debate, discussion and conflicts more dramatic, theatrical and media minded. A crucial addendum in this new medialandscape in De Waal's analysis, is the invention of a 'third' channel, next to television & radio and newspapers, usually called social media. This third channel gives direct access and communication with followers or voters in general. In his analysis this channel will win over the others in attention, atmosphere and agenda setting. One of the advantages for public leaders is that it is an 'unscensored' communication, no longer interpreters like journalists and experts are commenting or even selecting your messages.

   Apart from the change of the public podium and its audience, leading to this requirement of more rhetorical and theatrical skills, this new technology maybe is an undermining force of trust in general: giving too much information or even fake news and closing up in information bubbles[14]. The current further technological innovation by Artificial Intelligence can increase these unermining effects on trust in general with deep fakes and knowingly political manipulation.

   In the same constructivist analysis Grint puts much more emphasis on the performing arts of leaders as demanding and necessary skills of rhetoric and negotiation. He even states that leadership is 'performance' and a 'social invention'. Than this fundamental shift in public media landscape can certainly explain this shift in recognition of leadership too.

   This analysis could go even further: this new power of citizens over public opinion and over information they can gather themselves, now reveals that 'the people' never believed in the virtuous leadership approach, that was maybe only dominant in academic and intellectual cultures. They always were cynical about the personalities, and skills of the persons that lead them and certainly looking through their 'sweet talking'. And because the public opinion is now of the public itself this view and perspective is in the open. They even can verify this as a dominant view in public opinion in their mutual communication as a 'swarm'.

Of course, the more cynical analysis can be that the so called importance or even dominance of virtuous leadership as the 'genuine' leadership always was about the public perception of these virtues and good character. There never was an 'objective' or 'scientific' method to measure the real 'good character' of persons. Even current personality tests are always predominantly testing if the person is honest by nature or a trained lyer. So, one could say that even the virtuous leadership approach was mostly about rhetorics and theatrical skills.

## 2. Specific context: Lack of trust in government, explains the wish to 'disrupt'

Maybe this shift, as we observe in democracies, is not that general, but is specific for what democracy is about: choosing your public leader as leader of government and public administration. Now voters in democracies are putting their trust in the skills and competences of leaders in being disruptive towards all kinds of current institutions (changing 'the rules of the game' or even 'fate'?) instead of trust in their 'good' character, intentions and purpose.

This could explain why there may be a difference between what people choose as their political leaders and what they wish for as a good leader closer to home, when they have to work with them themselves, like in their teams, organizations and neighbourhoods.

Does this new view on and preference of leaders only apply to the new public arena and the position of followers as voters?

What could be a related issue (because they blame government for not doing enough about it), but also a seperate reason (all kinds of anonymous forces, including globalization and capitalism, are to be blamed), is the rising economic disparity and unequality[15]. This leads to disillusionement with tradidtional leadership and lack of trust in regulations, laws, institutions. This pushes voters toward outsiders or disruptors, because they position themselves as fighters against economic elites or public administration.

Although this certainly can be a factor in the shift we discuss here, this also can depend on national and political culture and certainly on the competition these discruptive leaders face in electoral battles. There are all kinds of political leaders that are elected in democracies, that certainly are viewed more in the 'virtuous' stream of leadership than the 'disruptive' or 'hierarchical'stream. Some names that arise are Nelson Mandela, Jacinda Ardern, Vaclav Havel, Mahatma Gandi. When we broaden this stream further to a 'values based' leadership, there certainly can be put more names to it, like Angela Merkel or Barack Obama.

## 3. The fight for power or political capital is much bigger and intense

Of course there can be an explanation closer to Machiavelli: underneath all appearances of public leadership now lies a much bigger fight for power. So, only the one with these skills and competences (or the perception of followers of it), gets the recognition of (potential) leadership. There are many aspects of a fight for power that are contrary to virtuous leadership, like an emphasis on self-interest, rationalizing their

pursuit of power by moral stories, trying to silence moral critique, using gossip about bad behaviour to eliminate an opponent.[16]

It certainly can be an explanation in democracies: the one scarce thing voters can give to someone is their one vote. So, they want to give it to the one they think will win and not just the one they most prefer as leader, personally.

A new approach that could give these issues about leadership and the views on leadership a more neutral ground, is based on the earlier work of Bourdieu[17] about social and political capital. It is now summarized in a Leadership Capital Index[18]. As an approach it is as 'neutral' as Machiavelli was in analyzing political leadership, so without presumptions about their character, their virtues or their morality. Differing amounts of leadership capital, a combination of skills, relations and reputation, allow leaders to succeed or bring about their failure. The LCI offers a comprehensive yet parsimonious and easily applicable 10 point matrix to examine leadership authority over time and in different political contexts. In each case, leaders 'spend' and put their 'stock' of authority and support at risk. It examines how office-holders acquire, consolidate, risk, and lose such capital. As mentioned this is a more 'neutral' and less 'moral', approach of what we are seeing as a shift in political and public leadership. This can explain why some leaders get more room to maneuvre and adjust their behaviour accordingly, without having to worry about their level of morality, not even the public perception of it?

**Summarizing the issue**:

A. **Trust** still is necessary for leaders to be and become leaders. Public performance in the new public arena to be recognized as a (potential) leader is crucial. But that performance is no longer in showing their virtues and good character, but in showing that they got the competences, skills and attitude to get things done (for me, follower), even if this is disruptive for established institutions and governance routines.
B. The **paradoxical** situation than seems to be that in democracies voters define their leadership by chosing leaders who are themselves not very democratically minded, but rather hierarchical and not working together with or in close attention to the public. So, on the one hand their choice is certainly based upon strong public performance, rhetorics and symbolic competences, but on the other hand this seems to be a leadership style in which followers are, after the elections, no longer important?
C. The **future in leadership and so in leadership studies** must be in a new, innovative synthesis of what historically is seen as two extreme sides of the one bar of leadership; morality, character, virtues and values (good or bad!) on the one side and strategic intelligence, rhetorical skills and power tactics on the other. Could there be a new leadership paradigm where trust is based on both impact and moral consistency rather than choosing between the two?

# Discussion Format

This session will be highly interactive, featuring these key questions.

Of course, there will be room comparing perspectives across different regions and governance models

We will examine real-world examples from global elections and leadership trends, exploring how trust operates—or becomes irrelevant—in democratic choices today.

## Expected Outcomes

Participants will leave with:

- A deeper understanding of how trust in leaders is shifting globally
- New insights into whether leadership is still about personal virtue (*as Aristotle and Laozi claimed*) or has become a strategic skillset (so public appearance of skills and competences are now more important than character and virtues)
- An exploration of how disruptive citizen power shapes leadership legitimacy

The ILA's 2024 conference theme, "Leading Together," certainly invites reflection on these tensions. If we are to lead together, how does this relate to a hierarchical model, as preferred by a large part of followers, or should the concept of leadership return to a more collective, empowering style—one that aligns with Laozi's belief that true leadership uplifts others, rather than commands them? We need a deeper understanding of how the ILA's "Leading Together" vision aligns—or clashes—with today's dominant leadership models, as defined by followers

The big issue still is: leadership is defined by followers, not by academics.

This session will appeal to scholars, practitioners, and leaders across sectors grappling with trust, governance, and democracy in the modern era.[19]

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[1] Nicomachean Ethics, written around 350 BC.
Aristoteles also makes a distinction between the good citizen and the good man in morality and good behaviour. The only combination of both can be in "the good ruler who possesses the quality of moral wisdom required for being a good subject. The quality of moral wisdom which he possesses is the essential quality of the good man; and in his case the excellence of the good citizen is identical with that of the good man' (Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy, p. 229, Steven M. Cahn, Oxford University Press 2012).

[2] Written around third century BC. Citation Dao De Djing from Chapter 17

[3] Macchiavelli 'Il Principe', written between 1513 – 1515, first edition 1532

[4] Tinneke Beeckman (in Dutch) 'Macchiavellis' Lef' (Boom 2018), especially explaining his use of the (Italian) word 'virtu'

[5] Judith Shklar in her study 'Ordinary Vices' (Harvard University Press 1985) saw vices in leaders as deeply tied to abuses of power, injustice, and the failure to recognize human suffering. She emphasized that leadership should be judged not just by virtues but also by the avoidance of certain key vices, particularly cruelty, hypocrisy, and arrogance. She analyzed vices as cruelty, hypocrisy, snobbery, betrayal, and misanthropy. Shklar viewed cruelty as the worst political vice, arguing that societies and leaders must prioritize minimizing harm to individuals. She believed that history shows how unchecked power leads to oppression, making cruelty the most fundamental evil in politics. She also condemned hypocrisy, but with nuance—she saw it as a necessary part of politics yet dangerous when it masked deeper injustices. Leaders who hide their real motives behind false virtues undermine trust and accountability. Finally, arrogance in leadership was another vice she warned against, as it blinds leaders to their own mistakes and disconnects them from the realities of those they govern. Arrogant leaders dismiss dissent and ignore the suffering of others, making them prone to authoritarian tendencies.

[6] Barbara Kellerman , 'Bad Leadership', Harvard Business Review Press 2004.
Quote from interview in the Harvard Gazette , octobre 28 2004

[7] Dr. Steven P.M. de Waal 'The Value(s) of Civil Leaders', Boom 2014

[8] David P. Gushee and Colin Holtz, 'Moral Leadership for a divided age', p 6, Brazos Press, 2018.
They acknowledge, referring to my analysis further in the paper, that definition and measurement of 'good character' and morality of the leader was difficult, even in this systematic study. For them it is not easy to define the moral leaders they set out to study. They use words like 'something stirs us toward...' and 'we sense, deep in our bones, that a fleeting greatness existed in that person', 'we suspect that we can learn....by stuying their stories.' (p. 7). In the end this resulted in 14 moral leaders to be studied and they did that in a very detailed and 'distant' and 'objective' analysis in 10

aspects. One of those is 'Consider character qualities' and this is about 'virtues and vices, strengths and weaknesses' (p. 12).

[9] Keith Grint, The Arts of Leadership, 2000. Reference of the next issue: p. 22, 23
[10] See eg Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli "Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders" (Center for Public Leadership), Harvard Business Review Press 2007

[11] Torres: TED talk **"What It Takes to Be a Great Leader"** (2013); 2015, Harvard Business Review, "Adaptability: The Key to Leadership Survival"; 2016, "Leadership in Times of Change," McKinsey Quarterly

[12] Torres, 2017, "The Leadership Trust Gap," Harvard Business Review. 2018, "Trust and Influence in the Digital Age".

[13] De Waal, Civil Leadership as the Future of Leadership, Amazon 2018

He analyzes this as "disruptive power of citizens". This highlights how digital technology, social movements, and alternative political narratives have weakened traditional leadership cultures and structures. Citizens can now challenge authority, directly shape political discourse themselves, and propel unexpected figures to power by their collective power as a 'swarm'

[14] See e.g. a quotation from Hannah Arendt from an interview with Roger Errera in 1974, what turned out to be Hannah Arendt's last public interview.
Arendt spoke about the importance of a free press in an era of mass manipulation of truth and public lying: She said:

*"The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please."*

[15] See for example Thomas Piketty 'A brief history of equality' (Belknap Press 2022)

[16] See further Keltner, Langner and Allison 'Power and Moral leadership' in 'Moral Leadership" by Deborah L. Rhode (editor), A Warren Bennis Book, John Wiley and Sons, 2006

[17] Pierre Bourdieu 'Language and Symbolic Power' , Harvard University Press 1993

[18] M. Bennister (editor), The Leadership Capital Index; a new perspective on political leadership', Oxford 2017

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