

# HOW CAN LEADERS BE MORE THAN A HAIRCUT?

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If you have two good leaders and one of them has a fancy haircut, how important is the haircut, wonders the Roman Philosopher Seneca?

Actually, I have a more pertinent question: How useful to modern day leaders is Seneca and all those other Roman and Greek Classical thinkers? Maybe those Classics are a bit like the DOS Operating System – a useful stepping stone, but hardly something to excite a modern technology whiz. I think there is some truth in that proposition. So why am I embarking on an Article to explore what the Classical thinkers can offer present day leaders?

I may not be a fan of some of their answers, but I admire their questions. I think they have a focus on a number of universal themes which are still very relevant to leaders – the centrality of Ethics; the

importance of Wisdom; and the priority of Being as well as doing and having. Seneca was not against haircuts – he was a practical guy and he considered them appropriate and necessary. But, for him, they were of a different order of importance compared to being a good person or being a good leader. There are a large number of other excellent Greek and Roman classical thinkers we could survey, and it was a long period of history, so I definitely will be cherry picking here. I will be taking an applied approach looking back through a particular lens to see what leaders can learn and use now.

The risk is that I will join the Take-Away Movement when it comes to the Classics. Someone like Seneca has found popularity in recent decades because he is very quotable, and there are folks, usually with a Marketing employment history, who have found themselves a nice little earner by churning out his quotes on a daily platter. OK – I did like Seneca’s take on haircuts! But I am wary of the quote-quotient approach to wisdom. For the same reason, I also am not a big fan of aphorisms or those books by celebrity business leaders sharing their success formulas – it can be difficult often to find any integration of insight, context and viable application or replication.

The Roman thinkers largely were educated by, and borrowed from, the Greeks. I have started with them because I studied them, and because some happened to be real-world leaders too. Cicero was a hot-shot Consul and Senator in the Republic; Marcus Aurelius was an Emperor, and; Julius Caesar was a ruthless conqueror turned Emperor, who was brilliant at military tactics, self-promotion and taunting Latin

schoolboys. Shakespeare lent him gravitas, but he doesn't qualify for wisdom or leadership ideas in this article.

Cicero, Aurelius and Seneca were big on the Greek Stoics. The English word "stoical", meaning calm in the face of events and adversity, is close to the original Stoicism. It advocated a path of virtue which allowed leaders and other folks to navigate setbacks, strong emotions and death itself. Stoicism is enjoying a little revival at present, and is seen as a "suck-it-up-sunshine" approach to modern life, especially by folks who visit gyms, run start-ups or grin a lot on Instagram. I am not sure what they would make of Seneca's virtuous side which stresses the opposite of self-obsession. He writes: "To live is to be of use to others".

Unlike stoicism, the common meaning of the English word "epicurean" is a million miles from Epicurus the main Greek rival of the Stoics – instead of feasting and debauchery, his pleasure approach to life tamely advised against such distractions, and focused on friendship, virtue and a release from anxiety because of the non-existent afterlife. No popular revival is happening for him at this stage.

Cicero wrote heaps about his career as a self-made man, navigating the upper echelons of power through intelligence, virtue and oratory skills. I enjoyed Robert Harris's fabulous trilogy of historical novels starring Cicero, rather than ploughing through all that previous Latin verse myself. Leaders could learn a lot from Cicero. He is no innocent, but he does demonstrate brilliantly how the art of influence and persuasion is still a viable pathway for a leader operating in an environment characterized by back-stabbing with real blood, power blocs, and greed.

Just your standard business organization really! He got it in the neck in the end, but that was a common fate in those days when there was little call for superannuation.

Marcus Aurelius probably is a more accessible chap, despite being the Emperor. This is because he shared all of his reflections and leadership shortcomings in a regular diary. “You have power over your own mind – not outside events,” wrote the most powerful ruler in the world, “realize this, and you will find strength.” Note to leaders – if the Emperor can, then you surely must be able to keep a Reflective Diary.

I have been sparse with quotes, but it is time for another. This one also is from Marcus Aurelius, and it adorns the entire cover of *Creatures of a Day*, a recent book by the terrific author Irvin Yalom, who himself is advancing in years: “All of us are creatures of a day; the remembering and the remembered alike. All is ephemeral – both memory and the object of memory. The time is at hand when you will have forgotten everything, and the time is at hand when all will have forgotten you. Always reflect that soon you will be no one, and nowhere.” This is one of the core assertions of both the Stoics and Epicureans – that Plato was wrong and there is no enduring soul, and there is no afterlife to fear or desire, and so it is best to make your contribution now and forget about enduring legacies. What a great antidote to egotism and grandiosity in leadership. When I personally am feeling flat, I actually do remind myself that I have something that not even the vain-glorious Julius Caesar enjoys – I have the privilege of being alive. Take that Julius! I do hope the Stoics are right and there is no hell.

The Greek originals Socrates and Plato came later for me. Socrates was a giant who strongly encouraged logical thinking and the pursuit of wisdom. He said it all with: “The unexamined life is not worth living”. Blasphemous as it is, I am not a big fan of his Socratic logical deduction method. I much prefer dialogue to be more democratic and relational, the insights more distributed, and not to rely on some smarty pants up front to prove everyone wrong. The folks from Duke University once visited our Business School to share their Socratic method which they use in management development. It is a great University, but I was underwhelmed by the approach.

Socrates’ student Plato is another giant, and often considered the founder of the philosophic method. His dialogues sometimes are a little more exploratory than Socrates. In the Monty Python Philosophers’ Olympics, he definitely would be a flag carrier for one of the best teams, if he could recruit Aristotle, Pythagoras, the well-scrubbed Archimedes, and arrange a transfer for Ptolemy back from Egypt. Plato could even be the flame lighter.

At least one of his ideas has an enduring impact in the world today. He postulated that humans have a Soul which is greater than and different to their human body and lives on after death. The Stoics may have been unconvinced, but a small Jewish sect called the Christians adopted the idea when the Roman Empire started cozying up to them and put their lions back on the leash. Plato discovered the Soul and a bunch of other great things in a Cave. The rest is history.

Plato's allegory of the Cave appears in his *Republic*, where he imagines a group of prisoners who have been chained together in a cave from birth. Behind them is a fire and various puppets are paraded with accompanying noises in front of the fire casting shadows on the wall. The prisoners know only the shadows and the echoes, and they believe they are reality, never guessing at the greater reality of the puppets, the fire and everything else behind it all. Plato argues that what our senses detect empirically in the world, are like the shadows and merely a limited representation of a greater reality. We observe beautiful things, but they are just reflecting the greater reality of Beauty itself. It is the same for Goodness, Love, and even Being. These Essences are greater than and endure, this short life trapped in a body. The goal for any wise and virtuous person or leader, is to get to know this greater reality beyond limited physical appearances and external circumstances.

This is the view which Sartre contested when he claimed that "Existence precedes Essence". For him, we only infer these abstract categories such as Beauty from our lived experience of many beautiful concrete things. It is the existence of beautiful things that gives rise to the idea of Beauty, and not the other way around. Existence comes first and is what matters most. He argued the "Soul" had been used to justify ugly exploitation of the poor and workers, who were pacified into slaving for wealthy elites throughout history, on the promise of better things in the afterlife. I prefer the Existentialist point of view, but there is still a tug for me in Plato's notions of Beauty or Goodness. I

wonder as an amateur, whether the experience of Being is where some reconciliation occurs.

Management development is dominated by economists and psychologists. The economists are strong in the arena of Having. The psychologists tend to focus on Doing through behaviours. Neither give much attention to Being. Innovation expert Otto Scharmer from Massachusetts Institute of Technology argues that the role of Being is the blind spot for many leaders. The Greeks pioneered the study of Being known as Ontology. The Existentialists revived it in the West. And the Buddhists always focused on it. Otto Scharmer argues that two managers can Do the same activity in the same way, and Have totally different results, depending on who and how they are Being when they do it.

My own take on this would leave the intellectuals Plato and Sartre both unhappy. For me, our moment-to-moment existence is the great reality. We find ourselves participants in this fabulous mystery called life. The circumstances can be pure chance or cruel. What happens next depends on our choices. Be distant, robotic, and a victim with the Executive or team, and you get one kind of outcome. Be present, be friendly, be curious and responsible, and something different occurs.

We have come across waiters and bakery shops, dish-washing and weeding, and finally haircuts and caves in this trilogy of articles. I am still a little dubious about Seneca's haircuts – when I look at all those Roman busts, I do wonder if they should tidy up the hair arrangement!