

We Used to Call it Machiavellian

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by

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I've read several pieces lately that suggest that even some of the most self-described ethical individuals seem to think that there is a whole set of moral rules that don't apply in business situations. People who would consider it wrong to lie or cheat when it comes to dealing with their families take it as business-as-usual when it happens on the job – and they are more than willing to take part. This kind of thinking, however, has a long history.

A Stroll Down Memory Lane

They call him the father of modern political theory and this moniker is chillingly close to the truth. The author of the one of the first books ever banned by the Catholic Church, 15th-16th century would-be politician and author, Niccolo Machiavelli is often quoted today for his moral philosophy. He wrote his famous book *The Prince* as a ploy to ingratiate himself with the ruling Medicis in Renaissance Italy.

Although not a prince himself, nor even a ruler, he had observed several leaders, most importantly Lorenzo de Medici and Cesare Borgia, and put into words what he thought they would like to hear. In a nutshell, his philosophy of ruling suggested that political expediency ought to be placed above morality, what could best be described as necessary immorality. In other words, to be a good leader one ought not to be bound by the morality of the masses – any kind of deceit would be acceptable in an effort to achieve objectives. Does any of this sound familiar in modern-day business practice.

We use the term Machiavellian today to describe those people who appear to use any unscrupulous means they think appropriate in an effort to achieve their ends – not only in the political arena. And even more to the point, these are people who believe that they are justified in doing so because of their position or goals.

Machiavellian PR

Public relations is no stranger to this approach to morality in business. And this ability to separate what's right in one's personal life with what's right in business seems to have an early genesis.

It is not at all uncommon for PR students to demonstrate this behavior fairly early on. (Note that this is not confined to PR students. It is rampant on university and college campuses). When asked in an ethics class if they have ever, even once, done any of the following, students responded willingly in the affirmative:

- Planned to take crib notes into an exam but chickened out.
- Used a paper largely written by someone else.
- Lied to a professor about the reason for missing a deadline.

And the list went on. Not all admitted to such behavior, but the defense that each gave for engaging in any of these was this: because it's only school. They would never do it anywhere else in their lives. Guess what? Studies show that this kind of behavior will predictably continue into their careers.

But this is not where it ends. According to one William H. Peterson writing a piece called "PR Morality" in the online publication *The Freeman*, "The public relations counselor all too often is a weather vane advocate who meets plots with counterplots, whose unspoken motto is: My cause, company, industry, or client right or wrong." This is an example of loyalty to one's organization run amok and the results manifest in a Machiavellian approach public relations that says, "Whatever it takes is okay as long as I achieve my goals." He then goes on use the political action committee as an example of a public relations tactic gone ethically wrong.

Indeed, if you plug the terms Machiavellian and public relations into an internet search engine, it is chilling the number of hits that you will get (6,520 to be exact in the search I did). The term "machiavellian spin doctors" is one I'm especially fond of and it comes up more often than you might like to believe.

Learning from Machiavelli

Machiavelli's philosophy did one important thing: it started discussions, debates and disagreements about the nature of human morality that continues today. Like others who followed him in the hallowed halls of moral writing, Machiavelli had a fairly pessimistic view of what human beings are like. Indeed, he seemed to believe that given the option, human beings were likely to choose the immoral approach anyway. Later on in the 17th century Thomas Hobbes would take a similar view and propose that we needed a "Social

Contract” that could be enforced by law to ensure that we would all behave well enough that we didn’t have to fear for our lives every day since we were just as likely to be killed or maimed as cheated by one of our own kind.

In 21st century North American culture, we like to think that we have evolved both in our thinking and our behavior beyond what these renaissance and later philosophers considered to be the true nature of human morality. But have we really? Or are we just cleverer about what we do and apply our more sinister nature to more subtle ways to do each other in? In that case we may be kidding ourselves about the extent to which we make the morally right decision when it comes to business today.

It might be a good time to examine more closely each of our own decisions in view of this Machiavellian framework.

1. How often is your decision-making based first on bottom-line dollars and cents before considerations of the real right or wrong of the decision?
2. Do you often take the view that you’ll have to be tough and seemingly powerful to get someone’s attention in your work?
3. Do you believe that expediency is the most important way to determine the right thing to do in a situation?
4. How often is your approach to solving problem based on a cynical view of human beings?

If you are someone who finds that these are the fundamental bases of your decision-making, then you might rightly be called Machiavellian.

As Machiavelli himself said, “Ambition is so powerful a passion in the human breast, that however high we reach we are never satisfied.” 🍀*