

# Chapter 17: Better to be Feared Than Loved



**Sure, every politician wants to be popular;** we want to be seen as a friendly, generous, considerate, thoughtful, accessible, caring and compassionate. We want photographs and news stories to capture us helping people, serving the community, reaching out, smiling as we hand over the cheque to the local charity. In terms of public relations,

| *“Every prince ought to desire to be considered compassionate and not cruel.”*

Like the mantra of real estate – “location, location, location” – politicians should consider “reputation, reputation, reputation.” But, warns Machiavelli, don’t go overboard:

| *“Take care not to misuse this compassion.”*

If you’re doing good things for your municipality but being tough about it, writes Machiavelli in **Chapter XVII: Concerning Cruelty and Clemency, and Whether it is Better to be Loved Than Feared**, don’t worry about others seeing you as cruel and heartless. Be strong and ignore what others think:

| *“So long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal, a prince ought not to mind gaining the reputation for cruelty...”*

Why? Because rulers often show too much compassion, and in the end that causes turmoil, disorder and more problems, says Machiavelli.

Would voters rather you cut back the policing budget and put fewer officers on the street, or cut the parks and rec budget and mow the grass less often? A ruler is not the people’s model for virtue, but rather the one who maintains order. You can afford having a reputation for a little cruelty and meanness if it keeps people secure and the streets safe.

People always want more generosity, but since they never want more discipline, a little is all it takes to avoid chaos and restore order. A few sharp examples of well-used cruelty or meanness, as he described in Chapter 8, are all that is necessary; no need to overdo it. These select examples only hurt the one who gets the axe, not the general

population:

*“With a few exemplary executions, he will be more merciful than those who, through too much mercy, allow disorders to arise, from which follow murders or robberies. These harm the whole people, while those executions he ordered offend only the individual.”*

A single act of punishment or dismissal is a combination of economy and effectiveness. It only affects the individual, but the entire population gets the message.

Good people are often compassionate, but not strong. Once you start giving, people expect more gifts, not fewer. Like generosity in Chapter 16, in order to keep up a reputation for clemency, you have to keep showing it more and more often or people will see you as indifferent, mean and even tyrannical.

Mercy, or compassion, is as easy to overuse as is cruelty, as we saw in Chapter 8, or generosity in Chapter 14. Overindulgence in either encourages disruption in the state. Use them all sparingly.

*“It is precisely because the status of rulers and subjects is different that pampering the people always causes so much harm.”*

**Ogyu Sorai: Master Sorai's Responsals, 1720**

Newcomers, adds Machiavelli, will have a difficult time avoiding the reputation of being cruel because they were elected to make changes and changes are never easy.

You can't make omelets without breaking a few eggs; whatever you do will offend someone, and newcomers have to make a lot of omelets to establish their position and reputation, so just get cracking:

*“It is impossible for the new prince to avoid the reputation of cruelty, because new states are full of dangers.”*

Machiavelli had no use for tyrants who pursued needless cruelty to subjugate a people or get their own way. He had no use for ignorance, stupidity and laziness, either. As he wrote:

*“All who contribute to the overthrow of religion, or to the ruin of kingdoms and commonwealths, all who are foes to letters and to the arts which confer honour and benefit on the human race (among whom I reckon the impious, the cruel, the ignorant, the indolent, the base and the worthless), are held in infamy and detestation.”*

**The Discourses: I, 10**

Machiavelli did not advocate unnecessary cruelty or violence towards subjects, and was highly critical of rulers who abused their power. He argued that mistreatment of people would not win loyalty, trust, or obedience, and these were necessary for the ruler to be successful. But, he said, expedient methods – cruelty and violence included – could be justifiable if there were clear and measurable benefits from those acts. Tough love, you might call it.

Of course, he adds, don't overdo it or else people will hate you, not just fear you:

***“Nevertheless he ought to be slow to believe and not act impulsively, nor should he show fear, but proceed in a temperate manner with prudence and humanity, so that too much confidence does not make him incautious and too much distrust does not render him intolerable.”***

Love and fear are both powerful motivations. Affection, however, forges a bond of obligation where fear simply encourages obedience.

Fear is what motivates obedience to laws: fear of fines, fear of imprisonment, fear of retribution and fear of social stigma. Without the fear of those consequences, people will litter, park without paying, park in handicapped spaces without permits, not pick up after their pets, they will dump excess snow on the street, play loud music at all hours and let their cars idle for hours.

All municipalities depend on a reasonable ration of fear to in order. Simply asking people to behave well, to be civil or responsible doesn't work. Everyone wants to live in a safe, clean community, but not everyone feels they are responsible for keeping it that way. So the laws are mainly aimed at them.

Too much fear – set the fines too high, the punishments too strong – and you get resistance and overt disobedience. It has to be enough to encourage obedience without tipping the scale. Too little and it's not worth the effort to obey, or the consequences aren't worth contemplating when acting. Campaigns asking for buy-in, asking for compliance are usually just preaching to the converted.

Even Thomas More, ardent Catholic theologian, writing in his book, *Utopia*, lectured on the necessity of laws, and pointed out that fear was necessary to maintain order:

*'I would gladly know upon what reason it is that you think theft ought not to be punished by death: would you give way to it? or do you propose any other punishment that will be more useful to the public? for, since death does not restrain theft, if men thought their lives would be safe, what fear or force could restrain ill men? On the contrary, they would look on the mitigation of the punishment as an invitation to commit more crimes.'*

***Thomas More, Utopia, Book I***

Machiavelli poses a basic question that all politicians have to answer for themselves: is it better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? And his answer is clear: fear is better.

***“Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? One should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved.”***

Safer is better, too, because you won't have to watch your back as much. People will be less likely to conspire against someone they fear than someone they love.

Fear works best because you can't trust people to always be loyal through affection:

***“In general men are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, dissimulating, hungry for profit and quick to evade danger.”***

Being a sycophant should be among his categories. He warns that those who appear to be your supporters because you gave them some favour will turn against you if your own fortune changes and those favours start to dry up:

*“As long as you succeed and do them good, they are devoted to you entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life and children... but only when danger is far distant; when danger approaches they turn against you.”*

## Make Them Fear You

Affection is fickle, but the fear of punishment is constant. A little generosity goes a short way, but a little whip snapping goes a lot further.

Dick Morris, in *The New Prince*, argues that the modern choice is between being aggressive and being conciliatory. Be aggressive, says Machiavelli, it lasts longer and you don't need to use as much of it.

As a realist, Machiavelli understood that, at times, loyalty had to be bought, not earned. But bought loyalties, he said, are tenuous and depend on your continued favours. What some may see as a gift, others may see as corruption. You attempts to buy loyalty can backfire.

Any obligation those you benefit feel towards you now is easily shrugged off later when your reputation or power wanes:

*“That prince who, relying entirely on the people's promises, and has not taken other precautions, is ruined; because friendships obtained by payments, and not by greatness or nobility of mind, may indeed be bought, but they are not owned. In time of need, they cannot be relied upon. Men have less scruple in offending one who they love than one who they fear, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity when their self-interest intervenes; but fear preserves you because a dread of punishment never wanes.”*

So teach them to fear you, he says. Just don't make them hate you. Don't take their offices, their property, their jobs or their honours for yourself. Leave their staff alone, but put a bit of stick about so everyone knows you're the boss:

*“A prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred; because he can endure very well being feared while he is not hated, which will always be as long as he abstains from despoiling the property of his citizens, and from their women.”*

If you really need to dismiss someone or remove them from a position, do so. Don't procrastinate or duck the issue. Rulers sometimes have to get their hands dirty when running the state. Just don't do it and then take on that staff person's or committee member's roles and responsibilities for yourself. People will see you as a thief, not a leader:

*“But when it is necessary for him to execute someone, he should do it only with proper justification and for manifest reason. But above all things he must keep his hands off the property of others, because men more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony.”*

That last sentence is one of Machiavelli's most acute observations: people will forget the death of a parent sooner than they will forget the loss of their property. And with property you can add honour, reputation and face as something people value more than family. You wrong these and the victim will never, ever forget you.

Machiavelli writes that leaders have to use strength and discipline to control staff, because being brave or good alone is not enough to secure their loyalty. People admire good leaders, but they respect and obey strong ones. Citing the example of Hannibal, he wrote,

*"...his inhuman cruelty, which, with his boundless valour, made him revered and feared in the sight of his soldiers, but without that cruelty, his other virtues were not sufficient to produce this effect."*

He then cites the example of the Roman general, Scipio, whose troops rebelled under his control in Spain. They did not because the discipline was too odious, but rather too lax, and Scipio did not seem inclined to punish them for their rebellion:

*"His army rebelled in Spain; this arose from nothing but his too great leniency, which gave his soldiers more licence than is good for military discipline... someone in the Senate said there were many men who knew much better how not to make mistakes, than who knew how to correct the errors of others."*

Too much compassion allows for disorder and turmoil. Machiavelli warned about disorder in several chapters, and in other works.

*"But the duke's soldiers, not being content with having pillaged the men of Oliverotto, began to sack Sinigalia, and if the duke had not repressed this outrage by killing some of them they would have completely sacked it."*

***Description Of The Methods Adopted By The Duke Valentino***

A few examples of forceful discipline was all that Scipio needed to bring the troops back under control. Scipio failed to use them, and was forever criticized.

*"Punishment is not for the benefit of the sinner, but for the salvation of his comrades."*  
***Gen. George Patton, quoted in What Would Machiavelli Do? by Stanley Bing.***

Machiavelli concludes with a simple piece of advice: you can't control other people's emotions or behaviour; you can only control your own. Base your administration on what you can control.

*"Men love according as they please, and fear according to the will of the prince. A wise prince should establish himself on that which he controls, and not in that which others control. He must endeavour only to avoid being hated."*

So be strong and bold, and even be cruel, but not so much that people hate you for it.

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[Previous Chapter](#) – [Next Chapter](#)

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