

## Leadership and the Ethics of Care

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**ABSTRACT.** The job of a leader includes caring for others, or taking responsibility for them. All leaders face the challenge of how to be both ethical and effective in their work. This paper focuses on the requirement that leaders be present to care for their followers in times of crisis. It examines the story of Nero playing his fiddle while Rome burns. This is a tale that has been repeated in various forms by ancient historians and modern writers. The fact that the story gets repeated through the ages tells us about the kind of care that people expect from their leaders.

**KEY WORDS:** care, crisis, duty, leadership ethics, leaders' presence, Nero

Are leaders professionals? The word *professional* comes from the word *profess*, which was originally used to mean a public declaration made by someone entering a religious order. It later came to mean a solemn public promise or vow that one makes to an occupation. The core of the professions rested on three criteria: formal technical training and an institutional certification; specific skills and knowledge; and institutional means of making sure that the profession is put to socially responsible uses. Leadership does not seem to have any of the qualities of a profession, but like the professions, we expect

leaders to serve the interests of others in an un-self-interested fashion.

The job of a leader includes caring for others, or taking responsibility for them. All leaders face the challenge of how to be both ethical and effective in their work. I focus on the requirement that leaders care for their followers, especially in times of crisis. I examine the story of Nero playing his fiddle while Rome burns. It is a story that has been repeated in various forms by ancient historians and by writers such as William Shakespeare (1994). Today, we sometimes use the phrase “like Nero, the politician fiddled while Rome burned” as shorthand for a leader who is self-centered, inattentive, irresponsible, and has failed to look after something that is important.

To fully understand the significance of this story for our understanding of leadership, we must first ask, is it true that Nero fiddled while Rome burned? The Roman historian Gaius Cornelius Tacitus reports that when Rome caught fire, Nero returned from his vacation home and set up relief efforts for the people; however, there was a rumor that he went home and played on a stringed instrument a song about the fire (Tacitus, 2004). This latter story is repeated as an example of a leader who did not seem to pay attention or care. It says quite a bit about how Nero's followers and enemies felt about him.

Care means attention to what is going on in the world and emotional concern about the well-being of others. Martin Heidegger ties the idea of care (*Sorge*) to what it means to be or to exist and “*Da-sein*,” to mean “being there” (Heidegger, 1996). He talks about care as attention to one's own presence in the world. However, care is not just about the self, it is also about attention, solicitude, and active involvement with others. Unlike the golden rule, which is objective and egalitarian, care entails having certain dispositions and feelings. It is highly subjective and selective. Some philosophers

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contrast the ethics of care with the ethics of justice. Others consider the ethics of care part of feminist ethics, but this is not necessarily the case. For example, Søren Kierkegaard introduced the notion of care as a means of counteracting the excessive objectivity of philosophy in the early twentieth century (Kierkegaard, 1958). Seneca observed that behaving rationally is only part of morality (Seneca, 1953). He said humans were given reason so that they can achieve the good. They were given the capacity to care so that they can perfect the good.

While we want leaders who have feelings of care for other human beings, a sense of duty is also important in times of crisis. A leader does not need to have a tender heart to know when and where he or she should be. Care is about feelings, but it may also be framed in terms of attention to one's duty. "Being there" means the leader is "on the job" and paying attention. A leader's presence can give followers confidence in the leader and this confidence can be a source of comfort. Leaders can do their job out of duty, which can be learned, or out of care, which they may or may not feel. Whether Nero really did "fiddle while Rome burned" is not

important. What the story tells us is that a leader's job is to be in the right place and paying attention to the right things.

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