

Ideal leaders as collective phronimoi

I am a maths teacher at Barr's Hill School, Coventry, and an MA student at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham. I would like to suggest a conceptual connection between two of your central questions: How might the construct of individual *phronesis* be expanded to encompass collective *phronesis*? And: What kind of character profile does an ideal leader possess? Specifically, I will propose that an ideal leader might be considered a collective *phronimoi*.

Phronesis is an intellectual meta-virtue which acts as moral integrator when different virtues come into conflict (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 30). Suppose your friend asks you how her new dress looks. You think it looks ugly. How should you respond? Do you tell the truth, try to change the subject, or even tell a white lie? Here, the moral virtues of honesty and considerateness are at odds with one another. *Phronesis* would enable you to adjudicate the relative weight of these virtues and reach a verdict on the best course of action (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 88).

In institutions and companies, most significant decisions are not made by individuals, but by teams of leaders. In my school, for example, and indeed most schools, there is a Senior Leadership Team overseen by a Headteacher. This parallels many organisations in which there is a team of executives overseen by a CEO. Thus arises the question of *collective phronesis*. Whereas at the individual level there are competing virtues, at the collective level there are competing individuals, each of whom has their own virtues, blind spots, and even vices. Collective *phronesis* would arbitrate among these individuals and decide on the best course of action. This, I suggest, is the role of an ideal leader – the collective *phronimoi*.

If a leader is to play this part, this may shed light on the question of their individual traits. What traits would enable someone to be an effective collective *phronimoi*? First, they must themselves be a *phronimoi*, at the individual level. If they cannot resolve the tension within themselves, then what hope would they have of arbitrating among others?

But there is an asymmetry, here. On the individual level, we have direct access to our own inner workings: emotions, desires, motivations. At the collective level, however, we can only observe overt behaviours and utterances, and try to infer the minds behind them. This makes conflict resolution at the collective level much more difficult – but not impossible. Just as an individual *phronimoi* must know themselves, a collective *phronimoi* must know their team. A detached and impersonal leader could not possibly serve this function.

Yet it is widely acknowledged that leaders must maintain some measure of professional distance from their team. Become too close, and this may interfere with the decision-making process, and could even lead to nepotism and corruption. Striking this balance – between knowing one's team and keeping a professional distance – may be the mark of an ideal leader.

So, is it helpful to think of an ideal leader as a collective *phronimoi*? I would be delighted to present this question for discussion at the 2024 Jubilee Centre annual conference.

References

Kristjánsson, K. (2017). *Aristotelian character education*. Routledge.