

**Thomas A. Michaud**  
Retired Professor of Philosophy  
and Dean-School of Professional Studies

## Leadership Idealism —A Path to Tyranny\*

In examining the lexical definitions of “tyranny” within the context of leadership, it becomes clear that tyrannical leadership is the harsh use of authority, the exertion of oppressive power.<sup>1</sup> This sense of tyranny can be applied to organizations of any type or scale. They can be corporations with their divisions, departments, and project work teams, non-profit NGO’s, governments and governmental agencies, leaders of nations, international organizations, such as the United Nations or the European Economic Union, educational institutions, military forces, religions, or revolutionary movements. On smaller scales, tyranny could also apply to a university dean, a boss of a labor union, a parish priest, or the head of a household family.

---

\* This essay is a substantially modified version of a longer, more developed article entitled, “Leadership Elitism—Idealism vs. Realism.” This article discusses the history of leadership philosophy and provides many examples of major leadership philosophers who represent the Idealist and Realist views. It also includes an original analysis of the differences between the important Afro-American leaders Booker T. Washington (realist) and W. E. B. Dubois (idealist). See: “Leadership Elitism – Idealism vs. Realism,” *Studia Philosophiae Christianae*, LV, no. 3, Warsaw 2019, 81–103.

<sup>1</sup> See: *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1980), 1287.

In all cases, from the macro to the micro levels, tyrannical leadership can be operative. And, what each case of tyrannical leadership has in common with all other cases of tyranny is that the leaders conceive themselves as superior to their followers. The followers, then, are viewed by the leadership as, in one way or another, inferior subordinates. The leaders believe that they themselves know and must do what they deem as best for their subordinates. A main reason why they view their followers as inferior is that in the leaders' thinking, their followers are just not capable of knowing and doing what is really best for themselves. Tyrannical leadership believes it must exercise harsh, even oppressive authority, for the sake of their inferior followers who are simply incapable of leading themselves.

To more fully understand leadership tyranny, a valuable conceptual framework detailing the contrasting tendencies of leadership idealism versus realism can be employed (see attached Appendix). Leadership tyranny can be best explained as emerging from idealism, which can, thereby, expose tyranny's origins and some reasons for its oppression. This exposition can enable us to understand the motivations for tyrannical leadership and perhaps even recognize and guard against potential tyrants before they develop full-blown tyrannical leadership. Before explaining the attached chart, the nine contrasting tendencies of idealist versus realist leadership, it is important to emphasize that the traits identified are offered as precisely what the title of the chart indicates. These traits are tendencies. This means that they are not necessarily characteristic of every instance of idealist or realist leadership. Some traits may be characteristic of some idealist or realist approaches, and some may not. There are, moreover, greater or lesser degrees to which a particular trait may be characteristic of a particular leader. Finally, it is helpful to interpret these traits by thinking that the idealist or realist leader tends to have some but not necessarily all of the traits.

1. The first contrasting tendency with the idealistic versus realistic ways of leadership reflects the most fundamental distinc-

tion between the two approaches. It also exposes the connection between idealism and elitism. For the idealist, leaders are born as such. The capacity for leadership is inherent or innate within a person, which establishes that the leader has an in-born superiority, and is, thereby, gifted with elite status. Tyrants tend to believe that their inborn superiority is the natural order of things. As such, they feel that they do not even have to justify their superior leadership. In contrast, realism believes that the ability to lead can be taught, and, thereby, acquired.

Leaders are not innately superior or elite, but their leadership can be nurtured, learned, and formed by proper training and education. They gain authority through implementing responsibly the best practices of what their training and education have taught them are truly best for their followers and the organization itself.

2. Following from the first tendency, idealist leaders view their leadership as a type of destiny fulfillment: they are born to lead; they have been chosen or anointed; they are the “elect.” Maybe they believe it was due to Darwinian natural selection, the natural order of things, divine ordination, or inherited birthright, but for whatever reason they affirm their leadership superiority as a “given” to which they are entitled. Insofar as they are so entitled, their authority is beyond reproach. Such is the tyrant’s self-conceived unquestionable authority. Realists differ since they believe that leadership is earned. When they earn the responsibility to lead others, they know that their continued status as a leader depends on their success with their followers—how well they can motivate and guide their followers to contribute beneficially to the good of the organization.
3. Idealist leaders are thoroughgoing visionaries. They are dedicated to a vision of perfection as they conceive it—a utopian ideal for the organization. Tyrants tend to become monoma-

niacal with their vision for the organization. They hold onto their vision no matter what, and they insist that their vision is THE way: in fact, it is usually a mentality of “My way or the highway.” Realists, however, form their visions in terms of concrete, practicable goals. They are not animated by some “pie-in-the-sky” dream. They have down-to-earth, creative imaginations and aim to translate practicable intentions into the reality of their organization in concert with the cooperation of their followers.

4. Just as epistemological idealists believe that what is real is what conforms to their minds, idealist leaders aim to make or re-make the organization conform to their vision. In doing so, they intend to construct their own organizational reality. Tyrants typically seek to fundamentally transform the organization. They aim to remake the organization, cast it in their own image. Realists, on the contrary, appreciate that feasibility requires that their goals must conform to the existing reality of the organization, which would include the mission, purpose, and resources of the organization and of their followers. They lead, therefore, within the given parameters of the realities of the organization. They recognize that a leader’s unrealistic intention does not translate into, but actually undermines, the reality of an organization. Realists do not aim to remake the organization in their own image. They aim to advance an image of the best of the organization, an image which encompasses the best of what the organization is and can be.
5. There is an ethical relativism within idealistic leadership in that such leaders typically exercise situational ethics and make moral judgements according to what they deem as right in a situation. In so doing, they, in effect, invent their own ethical standards as to what will best serve their interests and their vision. Tyrants do not get distracted by ethics. They lead with the supposition that what is right and in a given situation is what best serves the fulfillment of their agenda. Realistic

leaders eschew such situationalism and aim to discover the best and right ethical standards so that they can apply them to situations. This is not situation ethics, but ethics in the situation.

6. Idealistic leaders tend to be self-centered. For them, the organization ought to be a projection of themselves, of their own egos which spawned their ideal vision. Consequently, they are typically intolerant of opposition and interpret criticisms and disagreements about what is best for the organization as personal assaults that must be eliminated. Tyrants are extremely intolerant of opposition. Their self-righteousness presumes that any criticism of their agenda is an attack on them personally so the perpetrator must be silenced or eliminated. Realists, in contrast, accept that the organization is greater than any egotistical projection; hence, their leadership is not about them personally but about the organization's mission and their followers. They dispose themselves to the organization, leading with humility and charity.
7. Hope and change are a usual message of idealistic leaders. For them, however, the message is egocentric since hope is aiming to actualize the utopian vision the leaders concoct. Change is striving to transform the organization's reality, through any means, to make it conform to that for which the leader hopes. For tyrants, hope is not merely total commitment to their vision. They expect that their subordinates will enshrine their vision as a type of transcendent perfection that nothing but their vision can realize. Realist hope and change transmit a much different message. Hope is respecting what is discovered about the organization's reality and trusting that conforming to the best and right standards will engender what is truly good for the organization. Change is striving to actualize those best and right standards within the organization's reality.

8. Because the ideal supplants the real for idealist leaders, they tend to ignore or de-emphasize possible real consequences of their visionary ideas for changing an organization. Since their ideas for change are *per se* best for instantiating their vision, whether those ideas will actually work in reality is a detail they dismiss. Tyrants maintain that of course their ideas will work because the ideas are extensions of their own egocentric vision. Unlike idealists, realistic leaders know that ideas have real consequences, and such consequences must, as much as possible, be foreseen and factored into assessing whether an idea would indeed be feasible and benefit the organization.
  
9. The final contrasting tendencies pertain to the ways in which leaders view their subordinates. Elitist idealists tend to reify their subordinates as collective entities because in doing so, they are able to assign their own “identities” to their followers. For example, such leaders might tend to view subordinates principally according to race/ethnicity so that they define themselves as leading African Americans, Hispanics, Asians etc., who can be divided into further groups like men/woman/LGBTQ types. This collectivism is truly an idealistic tendency for it enables the leader to fabricate the diverse individuality of the followers according to the leader’s projected group traits: the real, individual identities of the followers are subsumed into the collective group identity the leader concocts. Tyrants become extreme in their grouping of their subordinates. They are unable to regard any inferior as an individual deserving of respect. Consider such tyrannical groupings that pit a favored group against an inferior one: The oppressors vs. the oppressed, the proletariat vs. the bourgeoisie, the Aryans vs. the Jews, Christians vs. Moslems, and the WOKE Progressives vs. the Dozed Conservatives. Realist leaders, however, tend to strive to get to know, respect, and treat the individual followers as who they are as real persons and not as mere instances of the collective identity the leader has forced upon them.

Leadership idealism is a path to tyranny. Not all idealistic leaders evolve to the extreme of tyranny, but all tyrants are idealists. Their harsh, staunchly authoritarian leadership is actually an oppression and their inferiors the oppressed. This is sadly the wicked irony of tyranny. ■

APPENDIX  
Contrasting Tendencies  
of Leadership Idealism vs. Realism

IDEALIST	REALIST
1. Leadership is inherent or innate within a person; an in-born elitist superiority.	1. Leadership can be taught; leaders can be formed by training and education.
2. Leadership is a destiny fulfillment.	2. Leadership is earned by reaching practical goals.
3. Utopian vision and ideals.	3. Concrete, down-to-earth perspective.
4. Leaders construct their own organizational reality. They aim to make the organization conform to their vision.	4. Leaders lead within the given parameters of the realities of the organization. They conform their goals to the reality of the organization.
5. Leaders invent their own standards or principles, including ethics principles, according to what they believe is best for a situation.	5. Leaders discover the best and right standards, principles, and ethics through conscientious learning, and conform to them and apply them to situations.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>6. Self-centered; egotistical; intolerant of opposition.</p> <p>7. Hope and change: Hope is striving for the “utopian” vision of reality the leader defines (invents). Change is striving to transform reality, through any means, to make reality conform to what the leader hopes for.</p> <p>8. The possible real consequences of the leaders’ ideas are ignored or de-emphasized.</p> <p>9. Leaders view and treat followers (subordinates) as a collective entity having a group identity based on, for instance, race, ethnicity, gender, job position or socio-economic status.</p> | <p>6. Other-oriented; humble; charitable.</p> <p>7. Hope and change: Hope is respecting what is discovered about reality and trusting that conforming to the best and right standards will lead to what is good and successful. Change is striving to actualize the best and right standards within reality.</p> <p>8. Ideas have real consequences, and such consequences must be foreseen, as much as possible, and factored into assessing their ideas.</p> <p>9. Leaders strive to respect and treat followers as individual persons without fitting them into a collective identity.</p> |
|---|---|