

## What Napoleon can tell us about how power works in organizations and society

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*My mistress is power. I have given too much to its conquest to let it be taken from me,  
or even suffer anyone to covet it.*

Napoleon in a letter to Roederer, an influential journalist, 4 November 1804

Napoleon's approach to leadership provides colorful examples of how to gain and use power on the battlefield, in domestic politics and in the international scene – and in the workplace. There are many ways to power: amongst them patronage, inheritance, merit, charisma, election, coup d'état, manipulation, fear ... and Napoleon was master of all. To Napoleon, power was everything. His experience and the context in which he gained and kept power have much to teach us. Anyone drawn to the responsibilities and pleasures of power or interested in those who wield it will do well to study his career – both the political machinations and his personal self-mastery.

### Eight modes of power

We have identified eight different power modes in the process of investigating the Napoleon story which help to explain his rise and fall. These might be considered tactics of power: we suggest that every leader has distinctive ways of practicing these tactics, and invite the reader to reflect on your own tactical strengths and weaknesses.

**PATRONAGE:** Napoleon was a beneficiary of patronage in his early life: the French colonial Governor of Corsica sponsored his attendance at a military academy in mainland France. Napoleon later repaid that debt by supporting France against a Corsican independence movement, betraying the cause once championed by his father. When in a position to grant patronage he squandered it on his family, fickle and incompetent; and so missed the opportunity to build a cadre committed to his Imperial project. (Note that patronage is more committed than mentoring – closer to what in modern parlance is usually called 'sponsorship').

**MERIT:** Napoleon's ability in mathematics and geometry qualified him for the artillery. At the 1793 Siege of Toulon he showed exceptional courage in battle, technical excellence as a gunner and talent as a commander: he became 'one to watch' in a new post-Revolution meritocracy. Soon he was able to demonstrate his ability to sustain long and complex campaigns, and to

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translate this reputation into the political sphere. But he became convinced that he could do everything better than others, and micro-managed every reform, cutting off other talent.

**CHARISMA:** Amongst many distinguished military officers, Napoleon's heroic exploits, gorgeous uniforms, decisive presence and dramatic newspaper accounts marked him as special: his arrival was a cause for eager anticipation. The Italian campaign of 1796/7 was marked by extravagant exploits of bravery in the field, campaigning genius and exceptional good luck; he systematically engineered his own fame. Napoleon's charisma allowed unchecked narcissism: taking credit for every win and uncritically accepting accolades, and a callous indifference to human life in the pursuit of his grandiose ambitions.

**SEIZING POWER:** As a general and in politics, Napoleon decisively seized opportunities. Returning from Egypt he sensed a power vacuum and maneuvered amidst the competing parties. Appointed to protect the Council, he relocated them out of Paris and failing to persuade them by speech, effected a coup d'état on 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire (9<sup>th</sup> November, 1799). Carried off with speed and determination, Napoleon quickly consolidated his position by control of the media, the police, and the legislature.

**MANIPULATION:** A feature of Napoleon's way of operating, he had one police service spying on another; he sent rivals away on long missions; and cooked up evidence of a crime if it served his purposes. He reversed policy towards the Church when it suited him, alternately fêting and imprisoning the Pope. By ceaseless manipulation he not only controlled state institutions following a period of extreme turmoil; he successfully sowed discord amongst the other European powers for 15 years.

**FEAR:** Napoleon managed threats to his increasingly dominant position through informers and enforcers. As First Consul he faced several assassination attempts, so feared for his own life, and responded ruthlessly. Criticism became intolerable. Observers such as Chateaubriand and Stendhal remarked how Napoleon initially attracted great talents around him; dependent on his patronage, many became compliant, but others were frightened into exile. When Napoleon abducted the Duc d'Enghein and condemned him in a trumped-up trial many supporters (notably Beethoven) were forced to recognize him as a tyrant, no longer the romantic hero of post-monarchical liberation.

**ELECTION:** Through the media he frequently used populism to reach over the heads of the political elite to the mass of people comforted and inspired by his promise of strong leadership – he was not the last dictator to do so! Napoleon became Emperor by plebiscite, a practice invented during the revolution to enable wide participation in key decisions formerly made by the king and aristocracy; what an irony that it should be used to re-establish a hereditary imperium! And he was not above a bit of vote-rigging: disappointed by less- than enthusiastic

turn-out from the army, he added votes from the divisions that were then massed in Normandy, hoping to convince the anxious British that the troops were eager to follow their General across the channel.

**INHERITANCE:** Napoleon's implicit model of leadership was rooted in the clan and family norms of his native Corsica. No wonder that he drew his siblings into power, and that, in spite of the Revolution, the only acceptable succession should be through inheritance. He made a strategic marriage to Marie-Louise, daughter of the Austrian Emperor Francis I, (having been rejected by his Russian counterpart), with whom he had a son and crowned him 'King of Rome'. But after the defeat of 1814 mother and child were sent back to Vienna, and Napoleon never saw them again. His Austrian in-laws never really recognized him as 'family'; and when he escaped from Elba for '100 days', Europe united like never before to defeat him at Waterloo on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1815, and then banish him to St Helena, where he died in 1821, abandoned and powerless.

### **Analyzing Napoleonic Leadership**

Napoleon was highly visible and proactive as a leader – no quiet or behind-the-scenes leadership here. Addicted to power, he was directive, autocratic and hard-driving. He assumed that his top-down approach was the only way, expecting others to go along with his domineering leadership style and to accede to his vision of a modern Europe. His inspirational, even charismatic approach enabled him to attract a huge following, even though, spendthrift with human lives, he abandoned two enormous armies at massive cost in life and material. Soldiers who had been unpaid for two months and lacked uniforms and equipment continued to muster for him and to follow his lead.

For over a decade and a half Napoleon dominated all aspects of the French republic, personifying the nation, overshadowing his ministers and most other great men of the time. Napoleon leveraged his military career to gain political power at an early age. Transparent and naive, he never sought to hide his ambition; though criticised by some intellectuals, many admired his pursuit of personal glory.

As Napoleon consolidated his power, he became unapproachable and self-absorbed. His restlessly ambitious military strategy, at one time so inspiring, came to obscure any concern for the people who fought and suffered. Nearly half a million men perished in the snows of Russia, and as many as four million died in battle and the side-effects of war across Europe. But, it was none of these factors that brought about his eventual downfall: because he had no idea how to negotiate on any other basis than military victory, the European powers had no choice but to defeat him in battle.

## **Lessons for modern power elites**

Strengths of Napoleonic leadership include brilliance in a chosen field, charisma, fearlessness, adventurousness, confidence, energy, determination, passion, being visionary, and having excellent planning and organizing skills. But these can have a shadow side, such as his need for constant acclaim, narcissism, being overly-controlling and autocratic, manipulative and cruel.

Organizations and societies tend to develop power elites that do them no favors: they become self-seeking, corrupt and ruthless to all but their immediate associates and do little for the wider organization or society. When a power elite idealizes itself as a meritocracy, believing in the intrinsic superiority of its members, it becomes entrenched and defensive, closed to further learning and diversity – precisely the opposite of what is needed in the modern world. We have all seen how power-elites compete amongst themselves, as if winning every political point is all that matters. Merit can be a good route to promotion, but it is seldom enough to keep hold of power. Leaders and companies who try to run everything by themselves, trust in no one, become isolated, develop an obsession with control, feel the need to spy on others – and cannot last forever.

Napoleonic Leaders try to rewrite history, convincing themselves that the world will be a better place if it forced to match the vision they can see in their narcissistic fantasy. If allowed to go too far, they destroy opportunities for practical compromise, become monstrously ruthless, and impoverish their organizations. But in spite of all this, it is wonderful to see what they can, occasionally, create!