

Charlemagne, the Roman Empire, and the Importance of Good Leadership

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Over the past several years I have become fascinated with leaders and entrepreneurs and what makes them successful. The power of an entrepreneur or leader — to take an idea, unite people around it, and create a long-functioning and successful organization — is profound. When organizations are experiencing a decline, a good leader can turn things around. When a company is starting up, a good leader can make it successful. In fact, the leader of a nation can profoundly shape its outcome.

I have no doubt that many large companies and other organizations have been saved by the quality of their leaders. In a similar vein, an organization can be "crushed" by poor leadership. The number of companies which have gone from success to failures in a short period of time, often faces this due to the quality of their leaders. When you are choosing a company to work for, the quality of the leader is paramount.

The news stories are filled on a daily basis with discussions about the leaders of companies. When a company is doing poorly, the Chief Executive Officer often loses their job. When a company is performing well, the Chief Executive becomes a "hero" to the press and others. The Chief Executive writes books on what he did to make the company so successful. My library has more books by the former CEO of General Electric than I can even remember. Successful leaders attract a following and become famous. Successful CEOs are also often tapped to run as governors of states, or even the President of the United States.

Your success in your career will have a lot to do with the quality of the leadership at the company you choose to work for. When you are evaluating companies to work for (or stay working for), the quality of the leader in the company will also have a lot to do with what ends up happening to you and your career. The history of companies and even civilizations confirm the importance of a good leader.

A significant lesson of history is that people who are united are more effective than people who are not. One of the greatest groups in history, for example, was the Romans and the Roman Empire. At its peak, the Roman Empire controlled over 6.5 million kilometers of land. Due to the Roman Empire's huge size and long endurance, the extent of its influence on the government, architecture, philosophy, law, and government nations continue to this day. In *The World According to Rome*, the *National Geographic* wrote of the Roman Empire's legacy:

The enduring Roman influence is reflected pervasively in contemporary language, literature, legal codes, government, architecture, engineering, medicine, sports, arts, etc. Much of it is so deeply inbedded that we barely notice our debt to ancient Rome. Consider language, for example. Fewer and fewer people today claim to know Latin — and yet, go back to the first sentence in this paragraph. If we removed all the words drawn directly from Latin, that sentence would read; "The."

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire in 476 AD, Europe entered a period known as the Dark Ages. The Dark Ages were characterized by limited building activity, very few cultural or intellectual achievements, a lack of written literature, and a great deal of overall demographic decline. The term "dark" is used to describe this time in history because there was so little cultural and artistic output compared to the previous periods of history. Even historical records of this period are very scarce. The term "Middle Ages" is also used to describe this period of history.

During this period of time, various tribes fought each other over the remains of the Roman Empire. Without Rome to unite them, Europe was disjointed and not united. One of the kingdoms of the time comprised the area that is today modern-day Germany. The leader of this territory was Charlemagne (742-814). Charlemagne was the king of the Franks. In the eighth century, Charlemagne began uniting many of the territories that were once part of the Western Roman Empire. In 800 AD, on Christmas day, the pope crowned Charlemagne the first Holy Roman Emperor.

While this Roman Empire never completely united Europe, it was a major and significant force in Central Europe for the next several centuries. Charlemagne's forces spread Christianity throughout Europe. More importantly, Charlemagne's rule was associated with the Carolingian Renaissance. This was a period of intellectual and cultural revival that took place. There was a sense of renewal among the people that Charlemagne brought by uniting them. In addition, writing, literature, the arts, architecture, jurisprudence, and more — all increased. Charlemagne ordered the creation of schools and did his best to attract the leading scholars of his day to the court. Standardized curriculums were created for the schools.

The lesson of Charlemagne is that a leader is a force that can unite and bring about progress. Companies also need good leaders. Without a good leader everything "goes dark" and companies and civilizations all experience decline.

Signs a Company is Led by a Good Leader.

How do you choose a company to work for based on the quality of its leadership?

- Companies that have good leadership are generally growing.
- They are generally offering new sorts of products and services others are not.
- They generally have people who are excited about their jobs.
- They generally have fairly clear expectations about what people should be doing.
- The people working there are generally committed to a "mission" of some sort.

Another thing I have noticed about leaders is that they tend to have a "magic touch" whereby everything they touch sort of turns to gold. There are so many things that go into a good leader that I believe it is impossible to discuss all of them. Instead, you simply should "look for the trail" the leader leaves: It does not matter what sort of company they are leading, everywhere they go good things happen.

It is not unusual for a CEO of a company or organization to have many jobs prior to their current job. If a leader has had a lot of success in prior endeavors, the odds are quite good that they are going to succeed the next place they go—this is just how it works. When choosing a company to go to work for (or stay employed with), you should always look for the quality of the leader. The quality of the leader will unite people and help drive the company forward. A poor leader will do the opposite.

In Los Angeles, there is a high school where I attended an open house recently. In the past twenty years since the school hired a well-known and extremely effective headmaster, the school has gone from average to one of the best in the United States. In hearing stories about the school and its constant improvement under this leader, I am convinced that it is this man's leadership that has made the school it is today. Today a good portion of the kids from the school go to top colleges. The school's endowment has grown. The kids that come out of the school even have a sort of "low key" self confidence that seems unique to this particular school. I believe that a lot of what has happened at this school is a product of the leader. When you think about how much this leader has changed peoples' lives it is amazing. Students have been empowered and their lives have changed. Without this leader, this might not have taken place for these kids.

Leadership matters and the quality of your leader and your organization's leader will have a lot to do with your success. A few months ago I was at a conference, and I saw a man speak, who had made hundreds of millions of dollars running a "pump and dump" stock scheme. The man had been caught and had gone to prison. He now goes around speaking to people about his experience and has been doing exceptionally well. In fact, the man will likely become well known all around the country in the near future. He has already written a book and is a very good speaker.

During his rise to the top, he had helped numerous people become very wealthy and rich themselves. As the man spoke, I noticed there was a man sitting near him. Part way through his speech, the man introduced the man sitting next to him as one of his former stockbrokers. The stockbroker looked out of place in the audience and somewhat rough. Nevertheless, when I looked at the stockbroker I realized that he was "hitching his wagon to a star"—or a leader who had done very well for him in the past. I am not arguing, of course, that you should follow former felons as leaders. What I am trying to show you is that a good career strategy is follow people who have gone somewhere good before. When you do this you too are likely to do well.

Conclusions

Organizations thrive and do well when they are led by good leaders. You should evaluate the signs of a good leader in the organization. Organizations which are led by good leaders are likely to be going places and this will have a solid, positive long-term benefit on your career. Similarly, an organization which is led by a poor leader will have a negative impact on your career. The best advice I can give you is to always choose a company led by a good leader.

THE LESSON

Good leadership is crucial to the success of any company, and the quality of leadership in your workplace helps determine your own success. Organizations with good leadership thrive, while organizations with poor leadership suffer and can negatively impact your career. When evaluating potential employers, be sure to select companies with strong leadership.

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