

The 48 Laws of Power for Virtuous Leaders

The Power Moves | 16 August, 2019 | by Lucio Buffalmano

I am somewhat at odds with “[The 48 Laws of Power](#)”.

To begin with, I am not a fan of total amorality and power purely for power’s sake.

Why?

Because **power purely for power’s sake makes for toxic personalities**, [toxic relationships](#), and a toxic world.

And, unless you’re totally amoral and unemotional, it makes for a poorer quality of life for yourself, too.

If you aspire to be a leader and a [high-quality man](#), I also find it hard to separate power and leadership from ethics, morals, and virtues.

When you’re a leader, it’s not just about you, but also about what your followers think of you.

And from a social science point of view, I can tell you that **people prefer leaders with strong values and ethics**. These are the types of leaders that they look up to.

Hence, ethics and morals are embedded in strong leadership.

So let’s review the new “48 Laws of Leadership”:

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The Updated 48 Laws of Power for Ethical Leaders

⬜⬜⬜ ⚡ Law 1: Never outshine the master

⬜⬜⬜⚡ **Law 1:** Respect your mentors and stick with them as long as you are learning from them and they are great role models.⚡

If you’re not learning and if they’re not role models, **move past because you’re wasting your life working for poor leaders**.

⬜⬜⬜ ⚡ Law 2: Never put too much trust in friends, learn to use enemies.

⬜⬜⬜⚡ **Law 2:** Give enough trust to people that they feel empowered, but not enough that they could take you and your team down.

Most of all, learn to tell apart trustworthy individuals from [toxic ones](#) and make sure you only have trustworthy ones around

⬜⬜⬜ ⚡ Law 3: Conceal your intentions.

⬜⬜⬜⚡ **Law 3:** You will rarely be able to be honest 100% of the times, but that’s not an excuse not to try to be as honest as possible.

Most people can smell fakeness and lies anyway.

Solution?

Strive to align your values, words and actions so that you can act, be and slowly *become* a man of honor

⬜⬜⬜ ⚡ Law 4: Always say less than necessary.

⬜⬜⬜⚡ **Law 4:** Speak only when needed and when you can add real value. That way, people will

come to see you a true wise man and everyone will listen when you open your mouth

â□□ Â Law 5: So much depends on reputation. Guard it with your life.

â□□Â **Law 5:** Your reputation is a fancy way of saying “what people think of you”.

Don’t become a slave of what people think of you.Â

Differentiate worthy people you want to help and support and people who are not worthy of your time and best behavior. The reputation with the former matters. With the latter, it doesn’t.

â□□ Â Law 6: Court attention at all cost.

â□□Â **Law 6:** Narcissists are weak and, dependent on external validation as they are, not in control of themselves.

Make yourself into a man who does not depend on external validation instead (read “[the antifragile ego](#)” to start)

â□□ Â Law 7: Let others do the work for you, but always take credit.

â□□Â **Law 7:** Build your team around group identities and foster an environment where people want to work “for the team”.

You will automatically reap the benefits as the leader

â□□ Â Law 8: Make other people come to you. Use bait if necessary.

â□□Â **Law 8:** Pull is always better than push.

Make people *want* to come to you based on your knowledge, skills and personality

â□□ Â Law 9: Win through your actions, never through argument.

â□□Â **Law 9:** Actions and arguments are two faces of the same coin.

Make sure you’re good at both and make so that your actions and words support and reinforce each other

â□□ Â Law 10: Infection: Avoid the unhappy and the unlucky.

â□□Â **Law 10:** Avoid complainers and people with paper-thin egos: they are incompatible with self-development, healthy work environment and high performance.

Don’t cut out unhappy and unlucky people instead: everyone can be unhappy at times and they will love you if you manage to make them happy.

And go back to science 101 if you still believe in luck: luck doesn’t exist and powerful leaders make their own luck

â□□ Â Law 11: Learn to keep people dependent on you.

â□□Â **Law 11:** Get your mind off the concept of keeping people dependent.

Why?

Because that’s exactly how low quality men, [power hungry men](#), [abusers](#), [controllers](#) and [jealous-paranoid](#) men think (ie.: how the scumbags of this world think).

Instead, be so good that you won’t even manage to give your time to all of those who wants a piece of you.

â□□ Â Law 12: Use selective honesty and generosity to disarm your victim.

â□□Â **Law 12:** You will not be able to always be 100% honest, but strive to be as honest as you can, as often as you can.

Every time you behave ethically and in line with your professed values, you build a reservoir of goodwill.Â

â□□ Â Law 13: When asking for help, appeal to people’s self-interest, never to their mercy.

â□□Â **Law 13:** Avoid appeals to self-interest only or you attract low-quality people who only think of “[what’s in it for me](#)”.

[Psychology shows](#) that extrinsic motivation and appeals to higher ideals work better

â□□ Â Law 14: Pose as a friend, work as a spy.

â□□Â **Law 14:** Be a good friend, but learn to judge people's true character. Learn to read the [signs of frenemies](#) and drop these people.

â□□ Â Law 15: Crush your enemy totally.

â□□Â **Law 15:** There will never be a war to end all war, so always seek to avoid wars.

But if you really must, avoid attacking in any way that willÂ make your enemy willing and able to retaliate

â□□ Â Law 16: Use absence to increase respect and honor.

â□□Â **Law 16:** Focus on delivering as much value as possible with your presence.

Then, once you'll be away, your presence will be sorely missed

â□□ Â Law 17: Keep others in suspended terror: cultivate an air of unpredictability.

â□□Â **Law 17:** Don't be a fickle, but don't be afraid of showing signs of strong emotions when it's called for.

It reminds people that you are serious and committed to your goals, team and values

â□□ Â Law 18: Do not build fortresses to protect yourself â□□ isolation is dangerous.

â□□Â **Law 18:** Fortresses can be good.

Don't be afraid to fortify your life: knowing you have a bastion of power to retreat to will make you both more confident and more carefree.

Just don't spend your life inside of them: they're for emergencies only.

â□□ Â Law 19: Know who youâ□□re dealing with- do not offend the wrong person.

â□□Â **Law 19:** The original "law" is the mindset of slimy, powerless individuals.

Instead, know who you're dealing with because not everyone is worth your time, attention and help

â□□ Â Law 20: Do not commit to anyone.

â□□Â **Law 20:** Commitment limits your freedom, but can also bring many benefits.

Just make sure it's win-win.

â□□ Â Law 21: Play a sucker to catch a sucker- seem dumber than your mark.

â□□Â **Law 21:** If you are not yet sure who you're dealing with, pretend to be dumber to truly assess people's character.

And if you must go on a war path, pretend to be weaker and dumber to induce your opponent into mistakes

â□□ Â Law 22: Use the surrender tactic: transform weakness into power.

â□□Â **Law 22:** Never fight unwinnable wars. That's the definition of idiocy.

As a matter of fact, avoid most "winnable" wars, too: they rarely are as "winnable" as they look on paper (and as presented by power-craving generals)

â□□ Â Law 23: Concentrate your forces.

â□□Â **Law 23:** Don't waste your time on today's countless distractions. Find something meaningful and fulfilling and give your full attention to it

â□□ Â Law 24: Play the perfect courtier (royal advisor).

â□□Â **Law 24:** Don't be the idiot who reads Greene and thinks that politics is all there is to power. Politics is important, but it's only half the battle. The other half is hard skills and results.

If you had to choose between "perfect courtier" and hard skills, go for hard skills: they are transferable while politics disappear the moment you leave an organization or a group (read "[the futility of social status](#)")

â□□ Â Law 25: Re-create yourself.

â□□Â **Law 25:** Choose who you want to be, then work to become it.

And choose your identity wisely, because it will determine how you think, how you act and, ultimately, the direction of your lifeÂ

â□□ Â Law 26: Keep your hands clean.

â□□Â **Law 26:** Refrain from behavior which is below you.

Little by little seek to think and behave more and more like the (wo)man you aspire to be

â□□ Â Law 27: Play on peopleâ□□s needs to create a cult-like following.

â□□Â **Law 27:** People want to look up to someone.

Become someone who is worth looking up to and you will have an endless crowd wanting to follow you, learn from you and spend time with you

â□□ Â Law 28: Enter action with boldness.

â□□Â **Law 28:** Once you decide on a course of action, don't half-ass it, but fully commit to it and give it your very best

â□□ Â Law 29: Plan all the way to the end.

â□□Â **Law 29:** Start out with a rough plan and a target of where you want to be.

Don't overplan, though: it never goes according to plan. Be ready to adjust along the way: the end goal matters. But how you get there, doesn't

â□□ Â Law 30: Make your accomplishments seem effortless.

â□□Â **Law 30:** Train until getting things done will be effortless for you. But never be shy of telling people how hard you worked: everyone admires [grit](#) and staying power, and that's what you want to teach your best followers

â□□ Â Law 31: Control options: get others to play with the cards you deal.

â□□Â **Law 31:** It's often better to give options rather than commanding.

Learn the psychology of [nudging](#) people towards a certain option so that you still get what you want while people feel empowered and committed to their choice

â□□ Â Law 32: Play to peopleâ□□s fantasies.

â□□Â **Law 32:** Pitch your ideas and opinions in a way that fits *your audience*, not yourself

â□□ Â Law 33: Discover each manâ□□s thumbscrew.

â□□Â **Law 33:** Learn to get to know the people [behind their mask](#). Their dreams, aspirations, goals... And their weaknesses too, including their pains and past traumas.Â

â□□ Â Law 34: Be royal in your own fashion: act like a king to be treated like one.

â□□Â **Law 34:** Dress well because everyone judges books by their covers. Once you have enough power, skills and reputation, dress however you please. By then your content will precede you and you don't need to care for the cover

â□□ Â Law 35: Master the art of timing.

â□□Â **Law 35:** Study, learn and understand the spirit and the zeitgeist of our time.

But never let it control you: there is always a place for those who rebel against it -especially in our the digital era-

â□□ Â Law 36:Â Disdain things you cannot have: ignoring them is the best revenge.

â□□Â **Law 36:** Weak minds let what they don't yet have control them. Strong minds focus on the work needed to achieve. The transcendental minds learn not to need any external possessions and recognition

â□□ Â Law 37:Â Create compelling spectacles.

â□□Â **Law 37:** “If you build it they will come” is a failed approach to business and life.

Marketing and product are two faces of the same coin: curate both

â□□ Â **Law 38:** Think as you like but behave like others.

â□□Â **Law 38:** Learn how your social group thinks and behaves and, as a beginner, adapt to it. As you grow and start getting more and more responsibility, start shaping that culture for the better

â□□ Â **Law 39:** Stir up waters to catch fish.

â□□Â **Law 39:** An emotional enemy can be a weak enemy. But it can also be a dangerous enemy. Make sure you know the difference when you deploy the risky “stirring up waters” strategy

â□□ Â **Law 40:** Despise the free lunch.

â□□Â **Law 40:** Despise the [freeloader’s mindset](#) instead of the free lunch. Learn to use freebies and generosity as a tool for influence and persuasion. And, for those who deserve it, provide free lunches out of kindness and caring

â□□ Â **Law 41:** Avoid stepping into a great man’s shoes.

â□□Â **Law 41:** Follow great men and seek to make them your mentors: that’s where the real learning begins. You’re not going to learn nearly as much following poor leaders

â□□ Â **Law 42:** Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter.

â□□Â **Law 42:** Go at the root of the problem. If it’s about people, be aware that you need to strike early because toxic attitudes spread like wildfire

â□□ Â **Law 43:** Work on the hearts and minds of others.

â□□Â **Law 43:** Some people say that emotional appeals trump rationality. That’s true, but it’s not always the case: learn to appeal to *both* instead and you’ll cover all your basis ([Aronson, 1972](#))

â□□ Â **Law 44:** Disarm and infuriate with the mirror effect.

â□□Â **Law 44:** The mirror effect can be effective, but it communicates you are consumed by your opponent, which naturally puts you in the subordinate position.

Don’t waste time with those low-level power games: focus on becoming the kind of person others want to mirror, instead

â□□ Â **Law 45:** Preach the need for change, but never reform too much at once.

â□□Â **Law 45:** Effective change is the hallmark of leadership, don’t be afraid of it when it’s called for.

Present change as a natural consequence of who you are as a group, be the first to show the way, praise people embracing change, cut out the insubordinates... And soon you’ll have a much-upgraded team

â□□ Â **Law 46:** Never appear too perfect: it creates envy and enemies

â□□Â **Law 46:** Foster an environment where people aren’t afraid of mistakes. Reward those who own up to them and learn from them.

But do not commit mistakes on purpose just to be more “relatable”: it’s such a waste of time and life. Focus instead on getting rid of the jealous and envious types

â□□ Â **Law 47:** Do not go past the mark you aimed for; in victory know when to stop.

â□□Â **Law 47:** Have a goal in mind and do your best. And if your best overshoots the mark, then your mark was too low: raise it and keep on going.

â□□ Â **Law 48:** Assume formlessness

â□□Â **Law 48:** Enjoy everything, but don’t get attached to anything because everything in life is transitory. You included.Â

Is Moral Leadership Less Effective?

Let me preface this:

It's difficult to answer such a general question in a short format.

And this is not the place for moralism, so let me also say this right away: sometimes, amoral leadership might provide an edge (.

However, contrary to what many readers of "The 48 Laws of Power" or "[The Prince](#)" might think, it's not true that amoral leadership is always superior.

[Frans de Waal](#)'s research among chimpanzees shows that alpha male ape Yeroen remained in power, not through aggression and strength, but thanks to his social intelligence and *his ability to foster peace and harmony*.

What was remarkable is that in peacekeeping and breaking fights, Yeroen didn't let his own friendships get in the way.Â

And that's exactly what gave him a superior moral edge: he was a true impartial judge working for the good of the group, not in support of his cronies.

Chimpanzees are also more combative and aggressive than humans, so that is likely even more true among humans than among chimpanzees.

Indeed, as Miller says in "[The Mating Mind](#)": "Status based on moral leadership is a legacy of the great apes", and we only must look at ourselves to know it's true: we all admire and love an impartial leader who works for the group.

So yes: moral leadership can work great.

No leader has any excuse to be an ahole.

SUMMARY

"The 48 Laws of Power" is a good text to learn more about power.

But it deals mostly with micro-level expressions of power and its laws are not generalizable.

Furthermore, it boasts its amorality as proof of being "real-world".

But that's how cynics think, and it's not necessarily how real life works.

Indeed cynics often fail in their quest for power and they never make for great leaders.

If you want to become a better person, including a more powerful person, then ethics and morals should be part of the mix.

And even if you want to do completely without ethics and morals, "**The 48 Laws of Power**" is a **poor text for leadership**. Especially for leadership in democratic environments where people have a choice and can vote you out of power with their ballots, or with their feet.

This article quickly revisits the laws not only adding more ethics, but also adding more real-world wisdom.

Also read:

- [The 13 laws of leadership](#)
- [How to be a great manager](#)
- [The updated 48 Laws of Power \(Part II & Part III\)](#)

