

21st Century Ethics: 16th Century Advice from
William Shakespeare

by

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Henry V Introduction

As the United States entered not only the new century but the new millennia business was in the most serious ethical crisis in many years. The magnitude of the crisis is still being revealed in the late winter of 2004 as reports of aggressive abuse in tax shelters led by the major accounting firms in the late 1990' s come to light. Accounting frauds, looting of corporate assets, timing scandals in mutual funds, and who knows what else will unfold. The technology boom of the '90's was and will continue to be real, but the breaking of the stock market bubble has sobered the irrational exuberance of many. Everyone wanted a part of the apparent fortunes that were being made in the '90's, and no means seemed beyond the pale.

Most distressing was the breakdown in ethical judgment of that model of rectitude Arthur Andersen LLP. Now the unfolding tax shelter scams promoted by most of the other large accounting firms stain the reputation of what had been thought of as the most ethical branch of business—accounting.

Introduction

In times of ethical crisis a society in the process of cleansing itself should be able to look back on its own history for models that are relevant to guide us in creating a more ethical climate. This paper takes us back to the 16th century and examines a play from our greatest writer — Shakespeare. The play is Henry V which as we shall see is a play about ethical leadership. From this 16th century example, it is hoped we in the 21st century can begin to get our bearings as we move forward.

This paper is intended as an explanation of how Shakespeare portrays the problems of ethical leadership in a critical time in English history. It will make comparisons of Henry's decisions, which are political and military, with business leadership of today. The paper is also designed as a guide to a teacher who might want to use this or some other work of literature as a vehicle to teach ethical leadership.

Before discussing the critical elements of the play in detail we will discuss the context in which Shakespeare wrote, the historical context of the play, and how one makes a comparison between political/military leadership and business.

Shakespeare's context

The play was written in 1599 the last year of the 16th century. It centers on the reign of Henry V and his victory at the Battle of Agincourt against overwhelming odds in 1415. Or at about the same historical distance as the Alamo is to us today. England in Shakespeare's time was not the great imperial nation of the 19th or even the 18th century. The English had barely touched America at this time while Spain had a major New World empire. England had made a mark as a nation to be reckoned with as it had defeated the Spanish Armada eleven years previously.

The pride of England were privateers such as Sir Francis Drake who preyed on the Spanish ships bringing gold home from their conquests. The other element of pride was the greatest of all English monarchs — Elizabeth I. Her abilities and skill were leading England in the direction of greatness. Elizabeth, born in 1533, crowned in 1558, was now old. It was well known, as illustrated by the American colony of Virginia being named after the

virgin queen, that she had no issue. It was only a matter of time until new leadership would come to the throne. Henry V was written to give an example of ethical leadership, so that there could be an ongoing discussion of the qualities England would need to carry on in its rise to power.

The time of Henry V

After a strong beginning, the 15th century was to be one of the most miserable in English history. Shakespeare writes of this history in his early plays entitled Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III, and Richard III. This series ends happily in the establishment of the Tudor reign of which Elizabeth was to be the last. In a second series of plays Richard II, Henry IV, Parts I and II, and finally Henry V, Shakespeare gives the history behind the history.

Four hundred years of problems begin in 1066 when William, Duke of Normandy, conquers England. He becomes King of England but remains Duke of Normandy. The English ruling classes now speak French and continue to claim possessions in France. No one outside of England speaks English, and the ruling classes only slowly learn the language over several centuries. England is at about the end of the world and of little consequence.

The critical part of the story begins in the 1300's when the King of France dies without issue. He has only a sister to take the throne. She is married to Edward III, King of England. The French do not want them for obvious reasons and claim that something called Salic Law, a law from Germany with nothing to do with France, bars a woman from taking the throne or passing it on to her heirs. From this point until the 1700's, the English kings laid claim to the throne of France. The story of Henry V recounts one of the attempts to claim it.

On Edward the Third's death, his eldest son Edward, The Black Prince, has already died and the crown falls to the younger son who becomes Richard II. Under Richard, England enjoys good administration and a literary flowering (e.g. Chaucer) for awhile. Things then take a downward turn when the throne is seized by Richard's nephew, who takes the crown as Henry IV and for good measure has Richard murdered. Henry has now not only usurped the throne from God's appointed but has blood on his hands.

Henry pays with a series of civil wars. Meanwhile, his son, Prince Hal, while an excellent warrior, lives a riotous life and shows no promise as a king. On Henry IV's death, Prince Hal becomes the new king, Henry V. Shakespeare's portrayal of history is fairly accurate and his play Henry V opens with the young king about to be tested with opportunity in France and politics at home.

Outline of Henry V

The play is a dramatic whole, but the lessons in ethical leadership are taken from seven individual scenes in which Henry must make critical decisions. Shakespeare is very aware of the ethical nature of the decisions, so one does not have to search for the ethical lessons. The scenes are as follows:

I. Decision to go to war (Act I, Scene ii). Should Henry assert his right to the French throne? This decision which is seen as ethical is at the bottom a mix of legal right, just war doctrine, the consequences of war, and politics both domestic and international.

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II. Justice and mercy (Act II, Scene ii). How does it leader dispense justice and mercy? Henry, in this highly dramatic scene, deals with a common soldier for a minor infraction, and three advisors who have sold out to the French.

III. The ethics of battle (Act III, Scene i). How should one conduct one's self in battle, and how does one treat the other side remembering the war's objectives?

IV. Discipline in difficult times (Act III, Scene vi). Henry orders an old friend hanged for breach of discipline.

V. The conscience of command (Act IV, Scene i). Henry learns that there is only one person at the top, and it is all on him.

VI. The speech (Act IV, Scene iii). We band of brothers. When do you risk it all to accomplish the mission?

VII. The compromise (Act V). What are the ethics of calling it a day?

In addition to these scenes the play has scenes where we meet the French, and there are a host of low life characters in the sub plots of the play. For purposes of study of ethical leadership, I focus on the seven scenes listed above because each one deals with a critical aspect of leadership.

Students have the text of the play, but often find it difficult to navigate the 400 year-old English. I make available outside of class the 1989 Kenneth Branagh film, and for advanced students I have them see the Sir Lawrence Olivier 1944 version. In that version one would swear that France was England's enemy in World War II.

Ethical Leadership — the analogy between business and military/political leadership

One might reasonably ask why not study business ethics directly. The values and goals of military and political leadership differ from those of business. A good story will be remembered for a long time. Who tells a story better than Shakespeare? Words well put also stick in the mind, and Shakespeare is our number one wordsmith. Ethical values come out of our culture, and students in studying this play see that our current values were not invented yesterday. Our students are notoriously weak in anything to do with history, geography, and great literature. These disciplines define who we are and thus this play gives students a boost in all of these areas. Shakespeare was a successful businessperson who wrote his plays for money. As a business professor, I give a different slant than one might expect in an English Department. This is both healthy and good for our students. Our students in life will almost all be doers and not thinkers. We as business professors stand somewhere in between and thus can give useful perspectives.

Analogies only go so far, and it is important to recognize this and not push things too far. Yet there are many parallels between the military/political actions and business. The law, justice, and wisdom of actions requires a very similar analysis. Acquisition of power and concern for the value of others are central themes in both. Analysis of risk and reward in determining objectives is also very similar.

I also like to draw a picture for the students showing similarities between the corporation and political/military leadership. Under the law, the corporation is created for the benefit of the owners or shareholders. The CEO has a

fiduciary duty to serve the interests of the shareholders and not themselves or even the employees. In this play, Henry is a CEO whose obligation is to the people of England and not to his own comfort and glory. Kings at the time may have asserted their divine right, but there was no dispute at the time of Shakespeare that they were there to serve the good of the nation.

It is stretching things a bit to say the Board of Directors is the Legislature; but in any case, officers are appointed in both military and corporate life, and ordinary employees or soldiers are enlisted. Both the financial investment of the shareholders/country and the employees/soldiers are expendable in achieving corporate/national goals. The employee/soldiers know this and willingly take on the risk. It is not a one-way street as employee/soldiers sign on for their own gain. In Shakespeare's time, a soldier might achieve honor and glory but also a measure of power and possible wealth in a successful military campaign. Loot or booty was a part of life at that time, as well as reward from the ransom received in repatriation of prisoners. That the Department of War should be called The Department of Defense was not part of thinking in this more aggressive time.

Going into battle is a very high stakes operation, but so is the opening of an aggressive business campaign to gain market share at the expense of the competition. On May 13, 1940, Winston Churchill in his "Blood, toil, tears, and sweat" Speech spoke of policy and objectives that could well have come from a military leader. He said: "You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war... with all the strength and might that God can give us. And you ask what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory."

Under our laws excessive cooperation with the enemy or competition is illegal. That sets the stakes of competition very high. In a business venture if things go poorly, the shareholders lose their investment and the employees their jobs. In battle, the stakes are higher. Shakespeare through Henry is well aware of the pain and suffering caused by battle to soldiers and their families, but it is also clear that it is wrong to shrink from battle when the cause is good.

Now let us look in detail at the individual scenes.

I. The decision to go to war:

We first meet the young, untried, untested king in Act I, Scene ii as he is in the process of consulting advisors on various aspects of a possible military campaign against the French. We note that his advisors, especially the churchmen, favor war and a cautious but not timid Henry listens and asks questions.

1. Does Henry have a legal claim to the French throne? Learning, law, and ethics were dominated by the church at this time so advice must also come from this source. Henry's great-grandfather King Edward III's wife and mother of his children was Isabel, daughter of the King of France. Isabel had three brothers all of whom in turn became King of France after their father died. All of them died without issue. This should have left the French throne to Isabel and her descendants, all now English. Not surprisingly the French would have none of it and put a distant relative on the throne.

All of this had happened many years before but the fact remained Henry had the closest and most direct blood line to be King of France. The crown, the French made clear, would only be taken by force. What to do? The French claimed Henry was not in line to be king because of what was called the "Salic Law." This law prohibited one from taking the throne from or through a woman. Contemporary English sources and modern French sources tell us this is a ruse. The fact is that the French simply did not want an English king. The clerics tell Henry that by blood line he should be King of France, and that on a number of occasions French kings have taken the throne through a woman's blood line. Salic Law does exist; it was in force between the rivers Sallie and Elbe which is Germany not France.

2. Is a war just? Henry's strong claim to the throne of France does not necessarily justify a war. Before 20th century experience, most rulers would think no more of going to war than a modern CEO of taking over a rival or starting a campaign to put a rival out of business. Henry asks the question in the right way:

"Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,
How you awake our sleeping sword of war.

We charge you in the name of God, take heed. (Act I, Scene ii)

No 21st century leader could be so articulate, but the question is just right. Henry is told, "...your Grace hath cause, means and might." Just cause in theory was fairly developed at this time. It is a four point test. First, there is a wrong in the world. (Henry is denied his rightful place as King of France.) Next, all reasonable means of righting the wrong have failed. (Numerous ambassadors have tried to negotiate a solution.) Third, there must be an element of self-interest. Critics of the first Gulf War said the Western powers went into Kuwait because of the oil. Assuming the other tests had been met, it would not have been 'just' to go to Kuwait simply because we felt for them. Finally, for a war to be just the objectives must be accomplished at a reasonable cost. Most miscalculations have probably been on this point.

Henry then says, "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" The case for a legal claim and a just war have been made. Is it still the right thing to do? Henry is further told, in raising the next part of the ethical question that the evil as well as promise of war have been made clear, but what might come of doing nothing? The clergy makes the point in two ways. First they remind him of his ancestors: "go, my dread lord, to your great-grandfather' s tomb." Henry is reminded of the heroic deeds of those who came before, and then as the emotions rise he is told "Their blood ... runs in your veins." This emotional appeal also reaches out to the audience to remind them of the glory of English history. Still, there are a couple of steps to go before going to war is not only just, but wise.

"Your brother kings and monarchs of the earth
Do all expect that you should rouse yourself,
As did the former lions of your blood." (L 121)

A king or CEO is tested every day, but when they are new in the job the competition watches with particular intensity. It is understood that if the king does not rise to the test that the "brother kings and monarchs of the earth" will find an excuse to test him in their own good time. The nation must prove itself strong or be subject to invasion. Weakness at the top also brings on rebellion and civil war at home.

It is summed up by the church "Your grace hath cause and means and might." Not only is the cause for a just war made, but it is also shown to be a wise action.

In the final part of the scene an emissary from the French arrives. It is an official message from the Dauphin or the second in-command. This is in itself an insult because protocol would demand an official message would be from king to king. The Dauphin also sends Henry a present of tennis balls which tells Henry in effect to go play games and leave France alone. The audience is of course enraged at French insolence, and Henry now has no real choice but to choose war as the remedy.

Shakespeare shows us that ethical leadership is a complex mixture of law, emotion, and practical politics and all done for the highest stakes under the watchful eye of the Supernal Judge who sits on high.

II. Justice and mercy (Act II, Scene ii)

Leadership ethics is a mix of justice or discipline, and mercy. A leader who exacts the maximum penalty for the smallest breaches of order becomes a tyrant and this in time breeds rebellion and low morale. Yet the leader who lacks the fortitude to enforce justice will encourage anarchy.

Henry deals with both in a very dramatic scene. Three of his most trusted advisors have been selling information to the French — obviously a capital crime. He calls them in to face them down and 'have them put to death. But first, in their presence, he tells Exeter:

"Enlarge the man committed yesterday. .
That railed against our person. We consider
It was excess of wine that set him on,
And on his more advice we pardon him." (L 40 - 44)

The traitors say he is being too easy on the man and more discipline would be appropriate. Henry feels mercy is appropriate and has the man released. For the traitors, there will be, however, no mercy.

K. Henry: "God quit you in his mercy! Hear your sentence,
You have conspired against our royal person,
Joined with an enemy proclaimed, and from his coffers
Received the golden earnest of our death.
Wherein you would have sold your King to slaughter,
His Princes and his peers to servitude,
His subjects to oppression and contempt,
And his whole kingdom into desolation.

Touching our person seek we no revenge,
But we our kingdom's safety must so tender,
Whose ruin you have sought that to her laws
We do deliver you. Get you therefore hence,
Poor miserable wretches, to your death,
The taste whereof, God of his mercy give
You patience to endure, and true repentance
Of all your dear offenses! Bear them hence. (L 166-181)

This highly effective scene shows that an ethical ruler can sort out the trivial from the important and thus gain the respect of his soldiers and people.

III. The ethics of battle. (Act III, Scene I)

"Make the other poor bastard die for his country."

[Alarum. Enter King Henry, Exeter, Bedford, Gloucester, and soldiers, with scaling ladders.]

King Henry. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man'
As modest stillness and humility.
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger,
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage.
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect,
Let it pry through the portage of the head
Like the brass cannon. Let the brow o'erwhelm it
As fearfully as doth a galled rock
O'erhand and jutty his confounded base,
Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean." (L 1-14)

"Dishonor not your mothers. Now attest
That those whom you called fathers did beget you.
Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
And teach them how to war. And you, good yeomen,
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
The mettle of your pasture. Let us swear
That you are worth your breeding, which I doubt not,

For there is none of you so mean and base
That hath not noble luster in your eyes.
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot.
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
Cry "God for Harry, England, and Saint George!"
[Exeunt. Alarum, and chambers go off.] (L 22-35)

Then in scene three he demands unconditional surrender of the city:

"Defy us to our worst. For, as I am a soldier—
A name that in my thought becomes me best —
If I begin the battery one again,
I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur
Till in her ashes she lie buried.
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up." (L 5-10)

"As send precepts to the leviathan
To come ashore. Therefore, you men of Harfleur,
Take pity of your town and of your people
Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command" (L 26-29)

"The scene makes one wince a little. He demands surrender, or he will have everyone killed. This may be a breach of the law of war; but at some point, the mission and future of his nation are more important. His decision may be debatable, but it was essentially our policy in World War II against Japan and Germany. When does a leader overlook law and ethics for the higher good?

IV. Discipline in difficult times.

1. Hanging of Bardolf

After the surrender of Harfleur, things take a difficult turn. In the cold and rain, his troops are in a forced march across France. Discipline must be maintained or the army loses any effectiveness and becomes no more than bands of roving brigands. Henry orders the French civilian population to be treated with respect and nothing taken without payment. His old drinking buddy, Bardolph is caught stealing a cross from a church. Henry orders him hanged.

Leadership ethics demand the maximum at times and favoritism to an old friend could prove fatal to his leadership.

2. The Nuremburg lines (Act IV, Scene i, L 136-139)

Bates: "Aye, or more than w should seek after.
For we know enough if we know we are the King's
subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the
King wipes the crime of it out of us."

This is the only point in the play when the modern leader would disagree with Shakespeare. His ethic is that following orders is an excuse. The situation is not quite the same as in our day. The context is the overall justice of Henry's cause. Except for top leadership, we did not hold individual German soldiers responsible for fighting within the laws of war in World War II. Most who felt the Vietnam War was illegal would still not fault a soldier for fighting for their country. It does not quite come up to what the ethic is when one is ordered to commit a war crime, although it is implied the duty to follow orders is the stronger ethic.

The analogy does not quite apply to business because in contrast to military duty our contract can be terminate at any time. The scandals of recent years show many examples of otherwise good people swept up in illegality. So many decided to follow the illegal culture that so many companies had developed. For them the lessons from Nuremburg are better than this part of Shakespeare. It is interesting to note that in all other cases we are comfortable with the leadership ethics of 400 years ago.

V. The conscience of command. (Act IV, Scene i)

Bates: "Be friends, you English fools, be friends.
We have French quarrels enow, if you could tell
how to reckon." (L 239-241)

K. Henry: "Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives,
Our children, and our sins lay on the King!
We must bear all. Oh, hard condition,
Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel

But his own wringing! What infinite heartsease
Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!
And what have kings that private have not too,
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?" (L 247-257)

"What drink'st thou oft, instead of homage sweet,
But poisoned flattery? Oh, be sick, great greatness,
And bid thy ceremony give thee cure!" (L 267-269)

"No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave
Who with a body filed and vacant mind
Gets him to rest crammed with distressful bread" (L 283-287)

It is the night before the Battle of Agincourt and Henry is alone with God only. It is a feeling of every leader in tough times when the command decision is his alone. The ethical leader recognizes there is no alternative but to bear the burden. Eisenhower must have felt this when he ordered the troops to go to Normandy, and to some extent, when Presidents Bush ordered the attacks against Iraq. Now Henry is shown as this unfailing leader who always knows what to do. Here he bears his soul, and we get a lesson in what any leader must feel.

VI. The Speech. (Act VI, Scene iii, L 56-67)

"This story shall the good man teach his son,
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered —
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother. Be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day."

Many regard this speech as the most stirring oratory in Shakespeare or in literature generally. What is behind it? Henry has real alternatives before the battle. The French have repeatedly offered terms of surrender. He could save his own life as well as the lives of his troops. As is the custom of the time, the French would have ransomed the soldiers and in effect sold them back to England. Military glory may be a noble thing, but money has its advantages. All scholars agree the French outnumbered the English 60,000 to 12,000 and stood between Henry's army and safety in Calais.

Here we see the analogy between the army and the corporation. The soldiers had signed on for better or worse; and while their lives counted for something, they were expendable. Henry as CEO also owed the country and its people more than he did to himself or his army. Had he surrendered, England would have suffered incredibly with conflict between those loyal to him and those who would take over. If he is killed in battle, there would be no ransom to pay and England could more easily go on. He decided to risk it all for his country.

Business is not all sacrifice; but naturally" there is the element of personal gain. In business it is money' and for soldiers it is honor. Henry tells his troops that the anniversary day ,shall not pass "from this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remembered" Agincourt was one of the great English military victories of all time; and with Shakespeare to write for you, Henry's boast pretty much came true.

Facing 60,000 well-armed enemy with only 12,000 of your own is a high-risk operation to say the least. The odds are not so different for many start-up technology firms of our own day. A leader must inspire his troops to give everything if there is any chance of overcoming the odds. Henry's case goes on to say that the fewer that share in the glory makes the glory the greater. He describes them as "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers." These words are picked up centuries later when Winston Churchill in the Battle of Britain referred to the pilots of the Royal Air Force as "the few." More recently a television series about World War II in Northern France—the same ground that Henry fought over — was titled "Band of Brothers."

The final point is not lost on the troops. He says "and gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accursed, and hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks who fought with us upon St. Crispin's Day." How true.

There is a respectful silence when a Civil War veteran or a former G.I. quietly and modestly relates their experiences.

A note on the battle of Agincourt. As part of the background for teaching this assignment I went to the battlefield. There is a small museum seldom visited by the French that displays artifacts from the fields and shows the battle lines of Henry and the French. The actual battle took place in October after several weeks of unceasing rain. I visited in early March after it had also rained for quite sometime. In October and March there are no crops but only mud. This part of Northern France (the Pas d'Calais) has a clay-like soil that is oozy and sticky. Essentially the fields were merciless to horse and rider especially those heavily armed and armored.

Henry took full advantage of the situation. It was customary in battles of the time after a final parlay to try to find compromise. Both armies would charge and meet one another in midfield. Henry however dug in, formed his lines, and let the enemy try to come to him. Under the circumstances, "try" is the correct word. His chief weapon was the English long bow. An archer could shoot five arrows a minute and the effective range was 100 to 150 yards. The French had cross bows that could fire an arrow once every 90 seconds with a range of 50 to 75 yards. The French archers; were never in the fight.

The French dead formed an impregnable barrier between the armies. A lot of business and military success is being in the right place and the right time and having the skill to see opportunity. Winston Churchill in describing the battle said the English archers developed a firepower that was not equaled with guns until the American Civil War. There is an interesting lesson on morale. Historians on both sides agree that the French lost about 10,000 and the English somewhere around 1,000. This means the French on the next day outnumbered the English 50,000 to 11,000 and the English probably had used most of their arrows. The French morale was spent in spite of their overwhelming strength. How many strong business ventures have gone under because of low morale?

VII. The compromise. (Act V)

Anti-trust or competition law discourages cooperation between competitors. Still in business, one must know when to stand down. A victory in Northern France is a long way from the whole country as the English would learn later in that century. Henry makes a compromise with the French. He marries the French King's daughter, and an agreement is made that their heir will rule both France and England. Once more Salic Law comes into the picture; and of course, the agreement buys time for the French who ultimately never buy into a dual monarchy dominated by the English. In the short run though, the Dauphin is passed over.

Epilogue:

The Battle of Agincourt took place in 1415. It was a stellar moment in English history, but the glory was brief. Henry died in 1522 leaving a one year-old son as Henry VI. It was to be as Shakespeare said "a long and troublesome reign." There was in that century civil war and the ultimate loss of possessions in France. The 1420's started out well and English fortunes improved until 1428. The old king had died and the Dauphin of Henry V remained uncrowned as the French lost territory to the advancing English.

France was saved by the Maid of Lorraine, Joan of Arc. But, that is a story for another day.