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The ethics of strategic leadership: The decision-making and execution process

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When most people think about leadership, strategy isn't typically the first thing that comes to mind. But leadership without strategy is a recipe for disaster. It's much like being blindfolded and wandering aimlessly in the dark, hoping to arrive at an intended destination—chances are you won't. To be successful, you'll need a plan of action and a high-functioning compass. Connecting the dots between the vision, purpose, and execution to produce desired outcomes is crucial.^[1]

But what is strategic leadership? The concept has made its way into many high-level conversations, from combat operations to corporate governance, yet the meaning is still, oftentimes, elusive. In his Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs series, "David Petraeus on Strategic Leadership," retired Gen. David H. Petraeus explains strategic leadership—the link between policy and operations—in this way: "[S]trategic leadership is that which is exercised at a level of an organization where the individual is truly determining the azimuth for the organization, is actually charting the path. ... [I]n essence there are four [core aspects]." ^[2] We'll discuss each of the four aspects shortly, emphasizing their ethical imperatives.

From Petraeus' perspective, we glean that strategic leadership is a systemic approach to helping an organization find its true north. Leaders who step into this nuanced role focus on understanding organizational challenges, crafting the big picture vision, and providing directives for the way forward. Petraeus' explanation also makes clear that one cannot lead effectively without clearly defining and prioritizing the metrics for success.

But if vision and strategy were all it took to be successful—and make no mistake, these components are indeed a big haul—there would be no need to look any further. However, just below the surface begs the question of ethics and integrity: Must ethics and strategy coexist for the mission to be successful? Indeed, the concepts are inextricably linked. The soul of leadership is grounded in the integrity of those at the helm, together with the multifaceted actors who lead at various levels and the frontline warriors who manage the process from start to finish.^[3]

Let's examine the core aspects of strategic leadership according to Petraeus, along with the ethical imperatives that guide each task.

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