

Men of Light, Men of Darkness

DR. GLORIA C. DUFFY President and CEO



Photo by Amanda Leung

When New York Governor Eliot Spitzer was whisked out of office after being caught canoodling with prostitutes, I stopped to ponder. Why do men who go into public life and reach high levels of power and influence so often engage in risky behavior? Certainly it is not rational, after working obsessively to build a public service career, to then take a sudden dive from the high board into the cement. But it is remarkably frequent, as mentioning folks like Gary Hart, Bill Clinton, the Keating Five, Gary Condit, Randy Cunningham and now Spitzer, reminds us.

From my experiences consorting with men of power and influence, I would offer a few clues to this puzzle.

The very qualities that serve these men well in seeking and serving in public office can also be their downfall. To be creative leaders, they need to be risk-takers, to ignore boundaries, to believe they are capable of doing special things and are invincible. The dark side of this is that they often cannot draw the line between risk-taking that is functional in their work lives and dysfunctional personally.

Many of these individuals are compulsive. As leaders, they are expected to shoulder large responsibilities, remember all their constituents' names, understand the intricacies of public policy,

“What surprises me most about these individuals is that they seem unable to imagine the impact of their behavior on their careers, were it to become publicly known.”

author effective legislation, fight opposing political factions – all with the laser-like focus and attention to detail that leads to successful outcomes. The flip side is that a compulsive personality tends to be consistent, so along with the functional traits sometimes go addictions to sex or gambling or drinking or excessive acquisition of luxury goods.

Our leaders also work in a highly stressful environment, with crazy schedules and often very little sleep. Think of the California congressman who lives out of a suitcase and away from his family in Washington all week, works 18 hours a day, and commutes coast-to-coast twice a week. The resulting state of mind is often one of diminished capacity, where emotional needs are unmet and judgments are poor.

Elected officials, in particular, run for office based on their record, image and personality. Through campaign advertising, their photos

and laudatory comments about them are pasted everywhere. When in power, everyone defers to them. Those with narcissistic tendencies may be attracted to this type of self-promotional role, and by the time they have been in this environment for a while, they begin to believe all the hype about how important they are. Narcissism's companion is lack of empathy, so they can't feel what their wives, children, constituents or others they affect might be experiencing enough to deter them from harmful behavior.

Then there is lack of grounding. The individuals who fall from grace may each lack a core value or belief that grounds them. It can be loyalty to their wife or family, religious values, or the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

What surprises me most about these individuals is that they seem unable to imagine the impact of their behavior on their careers, were it to become publicly known. When considering every action, a little voice in their heads should be saying, “How would this appear in a headline in tomorrow's newspaper?” Where is that voice in some of our public officials? Eliot Spitzer was the highly visible governor of New York, and he thought no one would notice that he was using prostitutes? Bill Clinton was the president of the United

States, the most well-known individual in the entire world, and he thought no one would be aware of him carrying on with an intern? Maybe they think they are invisible, or rather invincible, and able to control the consequences if people find out.

To deal with the barrage of media today, the most successful public figures are those able to master spin, or the creative interpretation of reality in the service of political goals. So perhaps they believe they will be able to spin themselves out of any difficulty. And many of these spinmeisters keep on spinning even when evidence of their indiscretions is irrefutable. “I did not have sex with that woman.” Even when caught, they often seem more concerned with the impact on themselves and their careers than on others.

We can try to see more clearly into the personalities of candidates, and elect those ethicist Robert Greenleaf called “servant leaders,” with less of the narcissism and compulsiveness that may lead to their downfall. But even if we choose more carefully, the phenomenon of bright, driven leaders who fall from grace will likely always be with us, since their accomplishments and compulsions probably come from the very same sources within their personalities. Ω