

LAW 1

NEVER OUTSHINE THE MASTER

JUDGMENT

Always make those above you feel comfortably superior. In your desire to please and impress them, do not go too far in displaying your talents or you might accomplish the opposite—inspire fear and insecurity. Make your masters appear more brilliant than they are and you will attain the heights of power.

TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW

Nicolas Fouquet, Louis XIV's finance minister in the first years of his reign, was a generous man who loved lavish parties, pretty women, and poetry. He also loved money, for he led an extravagant lifestyle. Fouquet was clever and very much indispensable to the king, so when the prime minister, Jules Mazarin, died, in 1661, the finance minister expected to be named the successor. Instead, the king decided to abolish the position. This and other signs made Fouquet suspect that he was falling out of favor, and so he decided to ingratiate himself with the king by staging the most spectacular party the world had ever seen. The party's ostensible purpose would be to commemorate the completion of Fouquet's château, Vaux-le-Vicomte, but its real function was to pay tribute to the king, the guest of honor.

The most brilliant nobility of Europe and some of the greatest minds of the time—La Fontaine, La Rochefoucauld, Madame de Sévigné attended the party. Molière wrote a play for the occasion, in which he himself was to perform at the evening's conclusion. The party began with a lavish seven-course dinner, featuring foods from the Orient never before tasted in France, as well as new dishes created especially for the night. The meal was accompanied with music commissioned by Fouquet to honor the king.

After dinner there was a promenade through the château's gardens. The grounds and fountains of Vaux-le-Vicomte were to be the inspiration for Versailles.

Fouquet personally accompanied the young king through the geometrically aligned arrangements of shrubbery and flower beds. Arriving at the gardens' canals, they witnessed a fireworks display, which was followed by the performance of Molière's play. The party ran well into the night and everyone agreed it was the most amazing affair they had ever attended.

The next day, Fouquet was arrested by the king's head musketeer, D'Artagnan. Three months later he went on trial for stealing from the country's treasury. (Actually, most of the stealing he was accused of he had done on the king's behalf and with the king's permission.) Fouquet was found guilty and sent to the most isolated prison in France, high in the

Pyrenees Mountains, where he spent the last twenty years of his life in solitary confinement.

Interpretation

Louis XIV, the Sun King, was a proud and arrogant man who wanted to be the center of attention at all times; he could not countenance being outdone in lavishness by anyone, and certainly not his finance minister. To succeed Fouquet, Louis chose Jean-Baptiste Colbert, a man famous for his parsimony and for giving the dullest parties in Paris. Colbert made sure that any money liberated from the treasury went straight into Louis's hands. With the money, Louis built a palace even more magnificent than Fouquet's—the glorious palace of Versailles. He used the same architects, decorators, and garden designer. And at Versailles, Louis hosted parties even more extravagant than the one that cost Fouquet his freedom.

Let us examine the situation. The evening of the party, as Fouquet presented spectacle on spectacle to Louis, each more magnificent than the one before, he imagined the affair as demonstrating his loyalty and devotion to the king. Not only did he think the party would put him back in the king's favor, he thought it would show his good taste, his connections, and his popularity, making him indispensable to the king and demonstrating that he would make an excellent prime minister. Instead, however, each new spectacle, each appreciative smile bestowed by the guests on Fouquet, made it seem to Louis that his own friends and subjects were more charmed by the finance minister than by the king himself, and that Fouquet was actually flaunting his wealth and power. Rather than flattering Louis XIV, Fouquet's elaborate party offended the king's vanity. Louis would not admit this to anyone, of course—instead, he found a convenient excuse to rid himself of a man who had inadvertently made him feel insecure.

Such is the fate, in some form or other, of all those who unbalance the master's sense of self, poke holes in his vanity, or make him doubt his pre-eminence.

When the evening began, Fouquet was at the top of the world.

By the time it had ended, he was at the bottom.

Voltaire, 1694-1778

OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW

In the early 1600s, the Italian astronomer and mathematician Galileo found himself in a precarious position. He depended on the generosity of great rulers to support his research, and so, like all Renaissance scientists, he would sometimes make gifts of his inventions and discoveries to the leading patrons of the time. Once, for instance, he presented a military compass he had invented to the Duke of Gonzaga. Then he dedicated a book explaining the use of the compass to the Medicis. Both rulers were grateful, and through them Galileo was able to find more students to teach. No matter how great the discovery, however, his patrons usually paid him with gifts, not cash. This made for a life of constant insecurity and dependence. There must be an easier way, he thought.

Galileo hit on a new strategy in 1610, when he discovered the moons of Jupiter. Instead of dividing the discovery among his patrons—giving one the telescope he had used, dedicating a book to another, and so on—as he had done in the past, he decided to focus exclusively on the Medicis. He chose the Medicis for one reason: Shortly after Cosimo I had established the Medici dynasty, in 1540, he had made Jupiter, the mightiest of the gods, the Medici symbol—a symbol of a power that went beyond politics and banking, one linked to ancient Rome and its divinities.

Galileo turned his discovery of Jupiter's moons into a cosmic event honoring the Medicis' greatness. Shortly after the discovery, he announced that "the bright stars [the moons of Jupiter] offered themselves in the heavens" to his telescope at the same time as Cosimo II's enthronement. He said that the number of the moons—four—harmonized with the number of the Medicis (Cosimo II had three brothers) and that the moons orbited Jupiter as these four sons revolved around Cosimo I, the dynasty's founder. More than coincidence, this showed that the heavens themselves reflected the ascendancy of the Medici family. After he dedicated the discovery to the Medicis, Galileo commissioned an emblem representing Jupiter sitting on a cloud with the four stars circling about him, and presented this to Cosimo II as a symbol of his link to the stars.

In 1610 Cosimo II made Galileo his official court philosopher and mathematician, with a full salary. For a scientist this was the coup of a lifetime. The days of begging for patronage were over.

Interpretation

In one stroke, Galileo gained more with his new strategy than he had in years of begging. The reason is simple: All masters want to appear more brilliant than other people.

They do not care about science or empirical truth or the latest invention ; they care about their name and their glory. Galileo gave the Medicis infinitely more glory by linking their name with cosmic forces than he had by making them the patrons of some new scientific gadget or discovery.

Scientists are not spared the vagaries of court life and patronage. They too must serve masters who hold the purse strings. And their great intellectual powers can make the master feel insecure, as if he were only there to supply the funds—an ugly, ignoble job. The producer of a great work wants to feel he is more than just the provider of the financing. He wants to appear creative and powerful, and also more important than the work produced in his name. Instead of insecurity you must give him glory. Galileo did not challenge the intellectual authority of the Medicis with his discovery, or make them feel inferior in any way; by literally aligning them with the stars, he made them shine brilliantly among the courts of Italy. He did not outshine the master, he made the master outshine all others.

KEYS TO POWER

Everyone has insecurities. When you show yourself in the world and display your talents, you naturally stir up all kinds of resentment, envy, and other manifestations of insecurity. This is to be expected. You cannot spend your life worrying about the petty feelings of others. With those above you, however, you must take a different approach: When it comes to power, outshining the master is perhaps the worst mistake of all.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that life has changed much since the days of Louis XIV and the Medicis. Those who attain high standing in life are like kings and queens: They want to feel secure in their positions, and superior to those around them in intelligence, wit, and charm. It is a deadly but common misperception to believe that by displaying and vaunting your gifts and talents, you are winning the master's affection. He may feign appreciation, but at his first opportunity he will replace you with someone less intelligent, less attractive, less threatening, just as Louis XIV replaced the sparkling Fouquet with the bland Colbert. And as with Louis, he will not admit the truth, but will find an excuse to rid himself of your presence.

This Law involves two rules that you must realize. First, you can inadvertently outshine a master simply by being yourself. There are masters who are more insecure than others, monstrously insecure; you may naturally outshine them by your charm and grace.

No one had more natural talents than Astorre Manfredi, prince of Faenza. The most handsome of all the young princes of Italy, he captivated his subjects with his generosity and open spirit.

In the year 1500, Cesare Borgia laid siege to Faenza. When the city surrendered, the citizens expected the worst from the cruel Borgia, who, however, decided to spare the town: He simply occupied its fortress, executed none of its citizens, and allowed Prince Manfredi, eighteen at the time, to remain with his court, in complete freedom.

A few weeks later, though, soldiers hauled Astorre Manfredi away to a Roman prison. A year after that, his body was fished out of the River Tiber, a stone tied around his neck. Borgia justified the horrible deed with some sort of trumped-up charge of treason and conspiracy, but the real problem

was that he was notoriously vain and insecure. The young man was outshining him without even trying. Given Manfredi's natural talents, the prince's mere presence made Borgia seem less attractive and charismatic. The lesson is simple: If you cannot help being charming and superior, you must learn to avoid such monsters of vanity. Either that, or find a way to mute your good qualities when in the company of a Cesare Borgia.

Second, never imagine that because the master loves you, you can do anything you want. Entire books could be written about favorites who fell out of favor by taking their status for granted, for daring to outshine. In late-sixteenth-century Japan, the favorite of Emperor Hideyoshi was a man called Sen no Rikyu. The premier artist of the tea ceremony, which had become an obsession with the nobility, he was one of Hideyoshi's most trusted advisers, had his own apartment in the palace, and was honored throughout Japan. Yet in 1591, Hideyoshi had him arrested and sentenced to death. Rikyu took his own life, instead. The cause for his sudden change of fortune was discovered later: It seems that Rikyu, former peasant and later court favorite, had had a wooden statue made of himself wearing sandals (a sign of nobility) and posing loftily. He had had this statue placed in the most important temple inside the palace gates, in clear sight of the royalty who often would pass by. To Hideyoshi this signified that Rikyu had no sense of limits. Presuming that he had the same rights as those of the highest nobility, he had forgotten that his position depended on the emperor, and had come to believe that he had earned it on his own. This was an unforgivable miscalculation of his own importance and he paid for it with his life. Remember the following: Never take your position for granted and never let any favors you receive go to your head.

Knowing the dangers of outshining your master, you can turn this Law to your advantage. First you must flatter and puff up your master. Overt flattery can be effective but has its limits; it is too direct and obvious, and looks bad to other courtiers. Discreet flattery is much more powerful. If you are more intelligent than your master, for example, seem the opposite: Make him appear more intelligent than you. Act naive. Make it seem that you need his expertise. Commit harmless mistakes that will not hurt you in the long run but will give you the chance to ask for his help. Masters adore such requests. A master who cannot bestow on you the gifts of his experience may direct rancor and ill will at you instead.

If your ideas are more creative than your master's, ascribe them to him, in as public a manner as possible. Make it clear that your advice is merely an echo of *his* advice.

If you surpass your master in wit, it is okay to play the role of the court jester, but do not make him appear cold and surly by comparison. Tone down your humor if necessary, and find ways to make him seem the dispenser of amusement and good cheer. If you are naturally more sociable and generous than your master, be careful not to be the cloud that blocks his radiance from others. He must appear as the sun around which everyone revolves, radiating power and brilliance, the center of attention. If you are thrust into the position of entertaining him, a display of your limited means may win you his sympathy. Any attempt to impress him with your grace and generosity can prove fatal: Learn from Fouquet or pay the price.

In all of these cases it is not a weakness to disguise your strengths if in the end they lead to power. By letting others outshine you, you remain in control, instead of being a victim of their insecurity. This will all come in handy the day you decide to rise above your inferior status. If, like Galileo, you can make your master shine even more in the eyes of others, then you are a godsend and you will be instantly promoted.

Image:

The Stars in the
Sky. There can be only
one sun at a time. Never
obscure the sunlight, or
rival the sun's brilliance;
rather, fade into the sky and
find ways to heighten
the master star's
intensity.

Authority: Avoid outshining the master. All superiority is odious, but the superiority of a subject over his prince is not only stupid, it is fatal. This is a lesson that the stars in the sky teach us—they may be related to the sun, and just as brilliant, but they never appear in her company. (Baltasar Gracián, 1601-1658)

REVERSAL

You cannot worry about upsetting every person you come across, but you must be selectively cruel. If your superior is a falling star, there is nothing to fear from outshining him. Do not be merciful—your master had no such scruples in his own cold-blooded climb to the top. Gauge his strength. If he is weak, discreetly hasten his downfall: Outdo, outcharm, outsmart him at key moments. If he is very weak and ready to fall, let nature take its course. Do not risk outshining a feeble superior—it might appear cruel or spiteful. But if your master is firm in his position, yet you know yourself to be the more capable, bide your time and be patient. It is the natural course of things that power eventually fades and weakens. Your master will fall someday, and if you play it right, you will outlive and someday outshine him.