

HBO's Succession: The Intersection of Nepotism and Leadership

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In the HBO series, *Succession*, Logan Roy is the larger-than-life founder and CEO of a media and entertainment empire, Waystar Royco, whose leadership team consists almost exclusively of Roy family members. As the series begins, viewers quickly learn of the patriarch's health woes, and two seasons paint a picture of leadership on the brink with the company's future at stake (FANDOM TV, n.d.). Episode after episode showcases the interplay among Roy family members who try to leverage their skills, loyalty, and connections in a nepotistic battle to become heir to the throne. This nepotism influences Logan Roy's different leadership styles, oscillating between charismatic and visionary leadership. Logan is a character who at times protects his family above all else and at other times leverages his position and his children's fealty to manipulate and create advantages within the company.

Episodes, Actions, and Behaviors

The first three episodes of the series highlight an arc of leadership and of expectations. Even the names of the episodes—"Celebration," "Sh*t Show at the F*ck Factory," and "Lifeboats"—convey the turmoil and aftermath of a series of events that force different family members attest to their rightful position as the next CEO after Logan, helping paint a picture of Logan as a multi-dimensional and complicated leader. In "Celebration," the Roy family celebrates Logan's 80th birthday, awaiting what they all assume to be the announcement of both his retirement and his replacement. Kendall Roy, the second-eldest son, is assumed to be the next successor, and he has positioned himself in his work and his life for this move. However, all does not go according to plan; Logan does not step down, and instead he suggests adding his third wife Marcia to the board. His children are incensed by this idea, and the family argument that ensues leads Logan to suffer from a massive stroke at the end of the first episode. "Sh*t Show at

the F*ck Factory” and “Lifeboats” deal with the aftermath of Logan’s health scare, and layer after layer of family secrets, cover-ups, debt, and backstabbing are peeled back in an effort to prove loyalty to—and win affection from—the powerful patriarch and media kingpin, Logan.

Getting to Know Logan Roy

The Roys are often compared to the family of another media mogul, Rupert Murdoch (Blake, 2019; Brown, 2020; Wittmer, 2019) or even to Donald Trump and his family (Blake, 2019), but before the show aired, Brian Cox, who plays Logan, was eager to distinguish that “[t]he differences between Logan and those figures is that Logan is an autodidact, and he’s probably from a far simpler background” (Brian Cox, as cited in Schager, 2018). Logan’s upbringing as a self-made man no doubt influences his leadership style with his children: the Roys are critical to the legacy of the family business, but they are never coddled and instead are manipulated as much as any rival. This relationship influences how industry leaders view the family as well as how the Roy children interact with each other.

Roy’s interactions with his family members are cutthroat, conniving, and manipulative, begging the question of how his family views him as a leader and what their motivations are for supporting him. As Maccoby (2000) reminds, “[p]eople follow a leader either out of fear or for a mix of positive reasons such as hope of success, trust in the leader, excitement about a project or mission, or the opportunity to stretch oneself to the limit” (p. 57). In one of the first negotiations of the series, Kendall visits a smaller media company, Vaulter, to try to negotiate an acquisition with their CEO. The offer is not well-received, with CEO Lawrence Yee telling Kendall “F*ck you, daddy’s boy” (TV Show Transcripts, n.d.-a) before Kendall confronts Waystar Royco COO Frank Vernon about a new approach. This exchange establishes a tone that remains through the

entire series, as Roy family members try to assert that they are not under Logan's thumb while others seem less-convinced:

Staffer Allesandro Daniels: Do you wanna call your dad?

Kendall: Do I wanna call my dad? No, I don't wanna call my dad. Do you wanna call your dad?

Daniels: No.

Kendall: No? Do you wanna call your dad? Does anybody wanna call their dad? OK, nobody wants to talk to their f*cking dad. So, we've started, so let's buy this f*cking company....

Vernon: OK.

(Phone buzzes)

Logan: How's it going?

Kendall: Yeah, I'm right in the middle, Dad.

Logan: Did you close? (n.d.-a)

After spending time emphatically asserting he can make decisions independently, consider the following exchange between Logan and Kendall later on in "Celebration" (n.d.-a). After reaffirming his desire to have Kendall take over as CEO upon his retirement, Logan changes his mind toward the end of the episode, seemingly in response to Kendall not being aggressive enough in the Vaulter meeting:

Kendall: When will you be ready?

Logan: To step down? I don't know. Five?

Kendall: Five years?

Logan: Ten?

Kendall: Ten! Dad? Seriously!

Logan: It's my f*ckin' company....

Logan: Do you want to hit me, is that it? Huh? Go on. Go on. Give it your best shot.

Kendall: Dad, come on. What are you doing?

Logan: Are you gonna f*ckin' cry? Kendall, are you f*ckin' crying? (n.d.-a)

Finally, consider the reaction in "Sh*t Show at the F*ck Factory" as the family grapples with Logan's stroke. Uncertain of his prognosis, the children start to turn on each other, with Kendall and his younger brother Roman mirroring the same kind of hostile interactions they have had with their father:

Roman Roy: [Y]ou were about to be announced, Ken, and then you weren't. I mean, the only thing we know for certain, like for absolute certain, tonight, is that Dad didn't want you running the company. So if there was a list of 7 billion people on this planet that Dad would choose to be boss, we know you would be last. Dad fired you, man.

Kendall: No, he did not fire me. He said it was just gonna take a little longer.

Roman: But he said that to be nice. What I think he meant to say was that he wished that Mom gave birth to a can opener because at least then it would be useful. (TV Show Transcripts, n.d.-b).

Succession is especially eye-opening and jarring because even as viewers learn more about the unsavory actions Logan has taken during his career and how he interacts with his family, he is still a compelling antihero. Logan Roy makes for engaging TV viewing, despite the fact that his more egregious actions and character traits are a fairly accurate depiction of some of polarizing modern-day leaders, including Murdoch and Trump (Blake, 2019). As the seasons progress, viewers learn more about Logan, including his interactions with the more seasoned non-family members on his team. Saul Gellerman has been a professor and management consultant since 1984 and outlines four rationalizations that leaders and managers make to justify their decisions and actions: believing the action is not actually wrong, believing that bad behavior is in the best interest of the organization, believing that one can get away with the behavior undetected, and believing the company will support the action and the individual performing the action (1986). All four of Gellerman's rationalizations are explored to some degree with fantastic detail (and dialogue) in *Succession*. Even if Oswald and Mascarenhas (2019) argue that "[e]thically neutral leadership is impossible—ethical views shape the means and ends of leaders" (p. 118), viewers never get the sense that Logan truly feels remorse for his actions—whether those actions are being vicious toward his own children or covering up significant scandals (TV Show Transcripts, n.d.-d). Logan isn't ethically neutral, but his pendulum swings opposite of how Oswald and Mascarenhas (2019) anticipate. Furthermore,

Gellerman's (1986) third rationalization—that the Roys would be expected to follow in their father's footsteps and scruples and get away with it—seems to explain how the children treat each other and those around them.

Logan Roy's Leadership Styles

Nepotism

Mhatre, Riggio, and Riggio (2012) discuss trust in nepotistic relationships, suggesting “the benefits accrued when trust is present in a leader-follower relationship offer substantial incentives for leaders to strive to gain the trust of their followers” (p. 184). Logan goes slightly off script, however, because he uses the illusion of trust to test loyalty and manipulate his children and their interests, moving them around strategically like pieces on a chessboard. Logan knows that “followers [have] an active role to play in organizational success” (Baker, 2007, p. 50), but where other leaders might be cautious and acknowledge “that unfair displays of favoritism based on kinship could potentially have an adverse impact on organizational members and on the performance of the organization itself” (Mhatre, Riggio, & Riggio, 2012, p. 192), Logan uses shifting favoritism to his advantage, reminding his children of the “sharp and distinct difference between leader and followers” (Baker, 2007, p. 51).

Logan knows how desperate his children are to be in idealized roles and believes them to be smart enough to know the tradeoff: “lifelong job security [] in exchange for their loyalty, obedience, and hard work” (p. 52), but he never gives the impression that earning a seat at the table will be easy. Logan leverages this desire alongside his position and his influence to get his children—his most devout followers—hanging on his every word. On the face of it, this may be why Logan signs over to Marcia as his successor. It could also be that he just wants to protect his

children from the fact that the company is in debt to the tune of \$3 billion (TV Show Transcripts, n.d.-b). By the time viewers find this detail out, they are left wondering whether Logan's decisions are made to protect his family or at the expense of them.

Charismatic Leadership

Logan is a charismatic leader who has “personal, exploitative, and self-aggrandizing motives” (Bass & Riggio, 2010, p. 78). Charismatic leaders rely on their personalities to gain followers and persuade individuals to do as they ask. These leaders may have innate charisma, or this charisma may be a quality that they spend time and effort perfecting based on the organization or industry in which they lead. As a modern-day charismatic leader, Logan's leadership style “involves what many refer to as the dark side of charisma—[he uses his] abilities to inspire and lead followers to destructive, selfish, and even evil ends” (p. 78). Charismatic leaders also tend to play upon emotions, like “fears, [which] may well be interpreted as charisma by an appreciative audience” (Oswald & Mascarenhas, 2019, p. 128). Not only does Logan use the emotional connection with his family members to blur the lines between different aspects of their relationship, but he plays upon the fear this creates to motivate his family to be as cutthroat as him on his behalf. However, he also has to keep his children at an arm's length, because they have learned the same ruthless techniques as their father, from their father.

Visionary Leadership

Visionary leaders use an idea or the belief of potential to motivate others to action. Logan Roy is no exception. While Logan is not a religious figure or a particularly likeable character, there is no denying that at one point he thought Waystar Royco could change the world, or as a media empire inspired by Murdoch's media empires, to change how consumers thought about and interpreted news and facts.

Logan's leadership can be seen as following three fluid and overlapping phases: envisioning the future of the Waystar Royco with his children at the helm, communicating this vision to followers and various Waystar Royco shareholders, and empowering his family to execute the vision or sacrifice their role (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). Logan, like many other visionary leaders who are in the waning years of their careers, is "the product of [his] times, of [his] followers, of [his] opportunities;" and unfortunately, Logan and his empire have started to potentially "fade into obscurity, or worse, become the villain[]" (p. 30). Though Logan (and Cox) considers the Roy empire to be autodidactic, this clashes with Westley & Mintzberg's (1989) notion that "true strategic visionaries are ... are not self-made" (p. 30). In this sense, the next Roy to take over may have the potential to evolve into a visionary leadership role even more successfully than Logan Roy.

Can Logan Roy Improve as a Leader?

The premise of *Succession* is to dissect Logan Roy's leadership capacity and business maneuvering during the later years of his life, as his company navigates scandal, family tension, and the impact of technology on an industry (media and entertainment) that may be unable to keep up (Brown, 2020). If Logan wants to improve as a leader, he needs to first acknowledge any need for improvement. In Logan's eyes, if scandal and debt are not revealed, they do not exist. Many of the most loyal, non-family member characters in Logan's circle know where the skeletons are buried (n.d.-c; n.d.-d); this is no doubt why they have been trusted and kept close for so long, to act as buffer between Logan and his children. Logan should also adapt to changing technology and listen to viewpoints that more closely reflect the values of his desired audience.

Finally, in addition to embracing technology, Logan would be well-served by adapting his leadership style into a more progressive one, where he could flip flop some of his own leader

traits and welcome challenges from followers like his children as part of a “new model of leader-follower relations [] built on a leader's courage to be less than dominant and a follower's courage to be more dominant” (Baker, p. 55). After watching two seasons of the series, viewers can confidently assume that neither Logan Roy nor his children are prepared for this new version of leadership, but episode after episode it becomes more convincing they should be.

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