

LIVING LEADERSHIP - James Steinberg

[James Steinberg] (0:02 - 0:28)

You become a leader by watching other leaders, right? And I have been very privileged in my life to work with some of the greatest leaders of our time. What you discover, you know, is that you learn things from them and you start applying those things as you are given increasing responsibility.

And at some point you reach the point where you realize that you are now the person that other people are looking at and you say, well, maybe I'm one of those things right now.

[Mike Doyle] (0:29 - 0:57)

Welcome to Living Leadership, a podcast brought to you by the Center for Innovative Leadership at the Johns Hopkins Cary Business School. I'm Mike Doyle, serving as the Executive Director. The conversations in each of these episodes will be led by current faculty and MBA students from the Center, blending academic insight with real-world experiences.

Join us as we uncover the traits that not only define great leadership now, but will continue to do so in the decades to come.

[Sujit Koppula] (0:58 - 2:12)

Today on the Living Leadership podcast, we're thrilled to host Dean James Steinberg, the 10th Dean of the SAIS School at Johns Hopkins University and former Deputy National Security Advisor to President Bill Clinton. I'm Sujit Koppula, and joining me today are my peers, Mike Zipperer and Sara Bliden. Dean Steinberg brings a wealth of experience from both government and academia, offering unique perspectives on the varied demands of leadership.

He'll share insights on the context-sensitive nature of leadership, the contrast between decision-making in government and academic settings, and the timeless qualities that define a true leader. We'll also explore the impact of rapidly evolving technology and how leaders can assess their effectiveness. Join us for a deep dive into the essence of leadership across different spheres with Dean Steinberg.

To start off our discussion, I'd like to look towards the future. How do you see the role of leaders changing within the fast pace of technology and global shifts, especially considering the advancements in artificial intelligence? Given that these issues are part of the current curriculum at the SAIS School, we're eager to hear your perspective.

[James Steinberg] (2:12 - 4:43)

So, you know, as an opening observation, you know, what I would say is that leadership is not a generic quality. That leadership is contextual, right? And different organizations and different places require different kinds of leadership, right?

It's very different to be a leader of a CEO of a corporation than to be a dean of a school or to be a senior official in a government organization, right? So there are some aspects of the skills which go across different contexts, but because, you know, the leaders have different authority, they have different size of organizations, they have different missions, that I've always felt that you have to think about leadership in the context of the particular organization, the particular mission that you're talking about. Because, you know, in some places, building consensus and bringing people of diverse perspectives along is a very critical part.

Sometimes you're charged with a situation where it's less about consensus than having a vision and building an organization to implement the vision. And so I think, you know, when we think about, you know, this, I mean, I think as we think about, you know, how to deal with AI and new technologies, it's very different for Sam Altman thinking about it, you know, when he's thinking about what you do at OpenAI or at Anthropic or some of the kind of the cutting edge firms that deal with these things too. And I wouldn't profess to tell you that I know how to be a good leader of an entrepreneurial organization like Sam Altman or whether what he does is the right thing or the wrong thing.

I really have had most of my experience in two contexts where, you know, authority is not the main thing, right? And so what you were talking about is intellectual leadership, idea leadership and idea entrepreneurship and bringing people around these new ideas, innovation and the like to find ways of bringing people together. Because, you know, even when I was in government, there's only one person who gets to decide.

And even he, the president, can't decide everything by himself. There's Congress and others they have to deal with. And certainly in an academic environment, you know, deans can be persuaders and can kind of find ways to help move an organization, move forward.

But we aren't authority. So, as I said, it's a long-winded way of saying that I think when I think about leadership, it's really been in the context of the two million years that I have spent all my career doing, which is in the kind of the academic and teaching and thinking sector and in the public sector.

[Sujit Koppula] (4:43 - 5:13)

Absolutely. I mean, I liked what you said about attuning your leadership style to the particular organization that you are leading at that moment because your styles are going to depend on your mission set, the role of the types of colleagues and the stakeholders that you're currently working with at the moment. So how would you say

that your leadership of the SAIS school today fundamentally differs from what you were doing in government?

[James Steinberg] (5:13 - 7:47)

I mean, I think the single biggest difference is that in government, ultimately, events drive your choices. You can do long-range planning, you can have long-range missions and objectives, but you do it in the context of events over which you have very little control. And so, and you're very often forced to respond to rapidly developing environments in ways in which there's, on the one hand, a desire to bring people along and try to find consensus, but there's a huge cost for taking the time to do it.

And so you're constantly balancing the need to try to find common ground and bring many perspectives to bear and carefully, you know, analyze problems and expand the range of the solution set with the recognition that you don't always have the luxury of time. We mostly have the luxury of time in the academic environment. I mean, it's not infinite and there are costs for taking time, but it's a much more deliberative environment in which the general, I think, values are more about getting it right than getting it fast.

And so you do have to deal with a very different thing. We have the opportunity to be very deliberative in the academic environment because we're playing a long game for the most part. We're not responding to today's events.

We're thinking about the ideas and developing the research that's going to have long-term impact. We're preparing our students like you, you know, for a world in which you have time to sort of absorb these things. And so it's an environment which has the luxury of not often being driven by the clock, the calendar, the pressure of outside events.

And that creates a very different environment. You can afford to kind of take the time to bring colleagues together to look for common ground, to debate and to digest and to engage. And then it's not that these things aren't important in the private sector, but sometimes you just got to act, right?

And, you know, if you're facing an immediate crisis, as we can see, you know, in the world, if Russia is about to invade Ukraine, there's a limit to how much consensus building you can do because while you're building your consensus, you know, your choices are being shaped and options are being denied. So it is a very, the time urgency, the kind of the pressure of the external environment really is a huge part of what it takes to be a leader in that environment and to understand when it's worth taking the time to do some of these things, to explore more dimensions, to think about more things and when you have to decide that the trade-offs require you to do the best you can under the circumstances that you've got.

[Mike Zipperer] (7:48 - 8:11)

How do you recognize when you have to be reactive? Because it feels like that's kind of the secondary perspective that you don't want that. You don't want to choose to be reactive if at all possible because then you're by definition limiting the scope, depth, breadth, consensus, all of that sense-making that you're doing is limited. How do you choose when to be reactive versus saying, no, we have the time?

[James Steinberg] (8:11 - 9:30)

Some comes from experience and some comes from analysis, right? You're constantly asking yourself, you know, what are the costs or the benefits of delaying a decision? I mean, this is, you know, when we think about one of the things that I spend a lot of my time here is teaching about decision-making, right?

This is a critical part. I teach a course here with Professor Gavin who's the head of our Kissinger Center and it's largely about decision-making and how do you make decisions in the context of foreign policy? And so part of it is to be very self-conscious about the fact of deciding what do you believe the expected benefits of taking more time are going to be either in terms of collecting more information or analyzing, you know, more options or allowing events to develop versus the need to go.

So it's an explicit part of the decision calculus is to be aware of that and to be conscious about thinking, well, you know, I know I can take more time to get more information, to consult more people, but what are the potential consequences if I wait? So you have to build that explicitly into the calculus in deciding not only what to do but when you feel you need to make the decision and what are the potential benefits of delay versus the cost of options that are foregone or giving others, you know, more of a strategic addition.

[Mike Zipperer] (9:31 - 9:32)

That makes sense. Thank you.

[Sujit Koppula] (9:32 - 10:50)

Yeah, that's a fantastic point, Gene.

And one thing that I can't help but think about and I know that SAIS is fixated on this is obviously the role of leaders across the world right now, right? We have different types of leaders who are temperamentally different who are guiding the course of world events at the moment and those are in fact affecting the lives and the livelihoods of people all over the world. The way that perhaps a leader in Russia right now is affecting the leadership style of the leader of Ukraine and that is being dictated by the leadership style of the President of the United States.

So leadership in general, you know, we've learned that it's not a static endeavor. It's actually ongoing and it's dynamic and we evolve as we scale up our professional careers. So from your perch and from what you're observing all over the world in terms of leadership at the highest levels, particularly for those leading these large nation states, what lessons do you think in general they are missing and what lessons are you observing that are currently being exhibited by world leaders that perhaps weren't exhibited maybe 10, 20, 30 years ago?

[James Steinberg] (10:50 - 15:35)

The first thing that has to be said is that we need to be careful about overemphasizing the role of individual leaders, right? There is a huge debate. I'm a social scientist and a historian about the role of agency and how much do individuals matter in international affairs.

We're very focused on it because it's a very colorful way to think about things, right? It's very vivid and we think of this as it's about Putin, it's about Zelensky, it's about Netanyahu, it's about Biden, it's about Trump. But when we think about international events, we have to recognize that you have to ask yourself the question, how much are these being driven by the individual, by their individual styles, their motivation, their own history, and how much are these as a result of deeper forces and that we're very focused on Putin, but could one imagine a different person there who was doing different things or would almost anybody who rose to power in Russia right now be doing what Putin is doing because of external factors, structural factors, domestic political factors, right? And I've seen this a lot in my experience from being in government for a very long time.

Going back, my first experience in the federal government was in the Carter administration, right? Which is that leaders themselves tend to focus on other leaders because they're very conscious of their own sense of agency. And so, for example, for two years when I was in the White House in the Clinton administration, I was what's called the Sherpa for the G7, G8 summit, right?

So you are the person who helps prepare these meetings on behalf of your leader. And what's great about these G7, G8s is that in the meetings themselves, from each country, there are only two people in the meeting, the president, prime minister, whatever the leader is, and the Sherpa, right? And so you get to see these individual leaders interacting with their peers, right?

And they have this very powerful sense of, one, the importance of the individual, and two, the importance of the engagement and understanding of the individual as the dynamic. And, you know, I am very much one, unlike some structural IR theorists who believe that individuals do matter. I've written about this.

But we have to be careful in sort of recognizing, you know, both what the possibilities are

and the limits and how much it is a function of the individual leadership and the individual's style, right? And so that's, I think, just sort of a broad observation that I think we have to think about this, particularly when we think about public international events or public events, is just to both be perceptive about the importance of a leader and their individual proclivities, background, history, orientation, but also recognize that they are not entirely autonomous actors who just get to do whatever they want. And it doesn't matter even what the regime type is. Even in autocratic regimes, that's true.

So I think that's one. The second thing I'd say is that most of us who study history see that, you know, there are characteristics that are repeated. I mean, when we see kind of some of the demagogic populists that are leaders today, it isn't the first time.

So I teach a course now, our basic course in international relations and international relations theory. And like all courses of this sort, we all take a little time to look at Thucydides in the Peloponnesian War and to look at, you know, Pericles. And to look at Archidamus, the leader of the Spartans, and to look at Cleon and others, right, and to see how different styles of leadership have made a difference.

And there's no question that they have, right? I mean, and that you see that the different approaches that different leaders have taken do make a difference. But it's also we recognize even today, you know, the Pericles of today, the Cleons of today, the Archidamus of today, the Slitheniuses of today.

And so there are certain styles, approaches, backgrounds, orientations, theories of leadership that we can see that have continuity. So this is a long-winded way of answering your question to say is that, you know, I think the problems change, but there are characteristics of different ways in which people both come to leadership and exercise leadership that I don't think are... It's not like we don't recognize the figures of the past from Greece, from Rome, from, you know, from the 18th century as today.

I think we see them operating in a different context, but that there is, in terms of the kinds of things that both leads one to become a leader and how one comes to a position of leadership and then how one exercises it, that we do have a lot to learn from the past. And I wouldn't say there are kind of huge discontinuities about leadership today, say, than 2,000 years ago.

[Sujit Koppula] (15:36 - 16:02)

Yeah, it's a fantastic point. I mean, you know, social media today, I think, tends to sort of seduce the general populace into, you know, believing in the power of one person to operate in a vacuum and exert his or her will as they do. But in reality, I think you make an excellent point that at the end of the day, we are beholden to the organizations that we are helping lead.

[James Steinberg] (16:03 - 16:45)

I mean, leaders have to deal with publics. They have to deal with... And publics have been mobilized, you know, by external forces for a very long time, right?

I mean, we are very conscious. And I don't mean to say that both social media and particularly the issues of disinformation are huge challenges, but it's also the case that if you go back and look at the United States in the 1790s and the pamphleteers and the level of misinformation of people, you know, distorting the public records, you know, if John Adams were alive today to tell you what it was like to be president from 1797 to 1800, he'd recognize a lot of the challenges that our leaders today face.

[Mike Zipperer] (16:45 - 17:21)

That's actually really fascinating because I had always thought that, you know, information age, near instant proliferation of information across the globe, like multinational information sharing, at least at the unclassified level, all of that, I thought, would drive leaders to behave differently, that they would have to be, or at least appear to be, more thoughtful and responsive to that new scope of information sharing. But it sounds like not, that, you know, this is more cyclical than I thought, and people have lived this even, you know, before that this was actually a technological reality.

[James Steinberg] (17:21 - 18:37)

It's very much, I mean, if you can go, I mean, I have spent a lot of time, both as a student and as a teacher, sort of looking at early American history, and it was very powerful. But I think that, I mean, there's no doubt that time is more compressed, so the cycles, the speed of having to react. I mean, I saw this, you know, just as cable, you know, TV sort of really came into its own during the Clinton administration, and I just saw the way in which it did, sort of going back to earlier discussion about sort of forcing time compression. You know, it's faster than, you know, the newspapers only coming out once a day or magazines only coming out once a week.

But the forces themselves were, you know, the role of misinformation, of innuendo, of propaganda, you know, came out in a lot of different forms. And were they less persuasive in those days? I'm not so sure.

I mean, there's a lot of debate, and I think that there are some who argue that this is not only different, it's different in type, but I see a lot of similarities in terms of the challenges of having to deal with these kinds of informationally complex environments, even at a time when the information channels were not as complex and as sophisticated as they are today.

[Sara Bliden] (18:37 - 18:57)

So I love this discussion that we're having about kind of looking backwards, looking at cyclical issues that persist throughout time, but I'm also wondering, looking forward, what are the most significant leadership challenges you foresee for the next decade, and what are you doing to prepare for them?

[James Steinberg] (18:57 - 21:24)

You know, the single biggest thing is trying to prepare for the impact of emerging technologies. I mean, I do think that they are transformational. You know, again, you can do the historical thing and you say, well, didn't electricity transform everything?

Didn't the railroads transfer? You know, and those things did, and they had huge impacts, and leaders had to figure out how to do it. But I think now, and the reason is that, one, the potential uses of these technologies, they're just pervasive, and they affect every piece of life, but they also, you know, go to this question about the control of the technologies and kind of, and how do you make them be in the service of benefits and, you know, control the downsides?

I mean, we have these kind of sci-fi nightmares about, you know, basically, you know, the AI robots just taking over, right? And we sort of kind of deferring to them. And so, you know, an important part of leadership is to understand where does human agency continue to fit in to this, into making the technology in service of humankind, rather than allowing it to be a substitute for humankind.

So I think that's, you know, kind of the meta challenge that we're all thinking about is how do we make sure that the technologies don't govern us, rather than we govern the technologies? And I think that that requires both a level of understanding about the technologies, but also understanding about, you know, fundamental roles of governance and how do we organize ourselves socially and politically and economically so that these are beneficial, so that it doesn't undermine the world of work, or it doesn't undermine, you know, individuals' control and privacy and all those things. So I do think that this is a profoundly different set of challenges than we have ever really had to face because the capacity of these technologies, especially their capacity to be autonomous, you know, is something that we didn't really ever have before.

I mean, you know, we had railroads, but they didn't run by themselves, right? And we had a lot of other sort of transformative technologies, but the potential for autonomous development of these technologies and sort of how much, you know, where does the role of society and politics writ large, you know, fit into this I think is probably the meta challenge of our time.

[Sara Bliden] (21:24 - 21:47)

Thank you for sharing that. And I love the direction this conversation has been going, but

would love to learn a little bit more about you and your leadership journey, Sujit did a great job kind of summarizing your background, but I'm wondering, I've heard you call yourself a social scientist, a teacher, but when did you first come to recognize yourself as a leader?

[James Steinberg] (21:48 - 24:17)

That's a really interesting question. I mean, I think that you probably don't realize it until well after you become one. You know, I mean, I think you become a leader by watching other leaders, right?

And I have been very privileged in my life to work with some of the greatest leaders of our time. You know, I worked my first job when I was back in high school and early in college was working for the first black city councilor in Boston, Thomas Adkins, who was a great leader, had to deal with a very, very challenging environment in Boston. We were in the middle of the busing fights in those days.

And then I went on to work for Kevin White, who was the mayor of Boston at the time and also very courageous leader who had a lot of challenges in navigating through that. I worked for Senator Edward Kennedy, you know, one of the great political leaders of our time and learned immense amounts from him. And I've had the privilege of working for Joe Califano, who was the secretary of HEW in the beginning of the Carter administration.

And of course, the amazing experience of working with President Clinton and Secretary Clinton and during my later careers. And so what you discover, you know, is that you learn things from them and you start applying those things as you are given increasing responsibility. And, you know, you reach, at some point, you reach the point where you realize that you are now the person that other people are looking at.

And you say, well, maybe I'm one of those things right now. So I don't know that there's a moment, you know, when you actually have that. I mean, it's certainly for me, you know, probably the first time that I had kind of a classic leadership role was when I became the head of the Foreign Policy Program, Vice President for Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings, where I kind of had a manager role.

Because we tend to think of leaders as managers, right? Which is not fully correct. But, I mean, the first time I think you think about yourself is when you have actually people who report to you.

So it's like, you know, when I was in the Clinton administration, I mean, I had a small staff at the policy plant when I was head of policy planning at the State Department. But you think of yourself as kind of a member of a team and, you know, intellectual leader. When I was deputy and a security advisor, I was deputy, right?

So deputies don't think of themselves as leaders. So I think there are institutional places

in which you think of yourself as a leader because you have a kind of set of authorities and administrative responsibilities. But what you come to understand is that a lot of leadership can be exercised even if you don't have leadership positions and that you can lead by persuasion, by engagement, and things like that.

[Sara Bliden] (24:18 - 24:21)

Thank you. How do you know you're doing a good job as a leader?

[James Steinberg] (24:23 - 27:17)

That's a very, very, very tough question. You know, I think that because there are different ways to think about this problem. I mean, one is to have a sense of what your goals are and are you achieving?

Right? I mean, to be very explicit about when you come into a position, why did I decide to take this? What do I hope to achieve in this?

And then, as you continued before, how am I doing in getting to where I set myself as a goal? So you have to be pretty explicit about the goal setting in order to be able to judge yourself. If you just say, well, I'm going to get in there and see how it goes and kind of take it day by day, it's very hard to tell how you're doing because it's the classic if you don't know what the destination is, any road is as good as another.

Right? So I think the first thing is to understand when you take on a position of leadership, what is it that your goals are? And they may have been negotiated, right?

They may have been negotiated when you were hired or they may be negotiated with somebody who's your superior, but at least you have a set of here are my objectives and am I achieving my objectives? Or if I'm not, am I doing everything that I can to achieve it and that there are obstacles that are not within my power? There's a second part which is harder to judge, which is how am I doing in terms of the community or the institution that I'm working in, which is less about goals and more about creating an environment in which people feel a common sense of purpose and working together to achieve common things and creating an environment that's supportive of other people and to help them advance their goals and help the organization help its goals. And that's very tough, right? I mean, because, you know, there are trade-offs, right?

I mean, you can't be an effective leader if the only thing you're trying to do is make everybody happy. Not that you ever could, but even if you could, there may be a tension between that and achieving the goals that you set out to do. On the other hand, it's hard to be an effective leader if, you know, you're kind of trampling the grass while you're...

And so, you know, I try to spend a lot of time with my ear to the ground meeting with people to understand, you know, how people are feeling. One is never satisfied about

this because it's very hard. It's the hardest part of the job.

And inevitably, some people aren't happy. And so you challenge yourself about is this a failure of my leadership that there are people who aren't feeling that they feel part of it or are feeling engaged in the thing. And are there better things I can do?

I think that for many of us, certainly for me, I'm very tentative to that part of the job, but I find that, you know, in some ways, the most challenging is that being that kind of... building a community of structure and organization, not just for yourself and for the specific goals that you're doing, but, you know, for the organization's kind of... its value in and of itself.

[Sujit Koppula] (27:18 - 27:50)

Yeah, it's a critical point, Dean. And, you know, obviously, this has been a terrific conversation. And as we sort of get to the tail end of it, you know, we had one final question for you, which should really represent a summation of a lot of the different topics that we've been engaging in.

So looking back at earlier leadership moments in your career, are there any particular situations that you would have handled differently or things that you wish you had known sooner in your leadership journey?

[James Steinberg] (27:50 - 29:52)

I mean, you learn, right? And so, I mean, I'd like to think that you learn. And I think it's really an important part of leadership is to learn.

I mean, I have learned, you know, I have the advantage, which is probably unique and it may be a fault rather than a plus. This is my third state as a dean. There are very few people who've done that, right?

Especially in the same kind of organization. I've been a dean of three policy schools, right? And what I have learned, you know, is that...

is a better balance between my goal-oriented side of leadership and my institutional building side of leadership. And to recognize that sometimes you do have to subordinate some of the substantive goals that you have set in order to keep the organization going for the long term. I don't know if that's being the present or thinking about the future, but I think, you know, when I...

in my first deanship, you know, I had a strong mandate from the president of the university to make some changes and I saw that as my job, but... and we made it. But it, you know, but it'd be probably...

I probably did less good job in, you know, engaging the community and bringing them

along. Now, that having said, as I said, sometimes there's a limit to what you can do because not everybody's ever going to agree with you. But I do think that I've learned more about the long-term value of bringing as many people along with you as you can when you're trying to go than just the getting there.

And I've seen, you know, good leaders who do that and I've seen leaders who were not good even in the academic world of people who took the other tack and on the one hand, accomplished a lot, but they damaged the organization and the institution that they were part of in doing. So I guess that's probably the big one that I've learned that especially in an academic community that this is a thing that existed before you will exist after you and you are there for... you're given stewardship for a time, but you have to not only just accomplish what you want to accomplish there, but think about the long-term well-being of the organization.

[Mike Doyle] (29:55 - 30:11)

Thank you for tuning in to Living Leadership. We hope this episode has left you feeling inspired and equipped with new perspectives and approaches for leading others. Stay connected with us at the Center for Innovative Leadership for more.

Until next time, keep innovating and leading the way into the future.