

**"Doing an Alexander": Lessons on
Leadership by a Master Conqueror**

by

M. Kets de Vries

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**“Doing an Alexander”:
Lessons on Leadership by a Master
Conqueror***



Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries**

* Excerpt from the book *Are Leaders Born or Are They Made? The Case of Alexander the Great*

** Raoul de Vitry d’Avaucourt Clinical Professor in Leadership Development, INSEAD, France & Singapore

Abstract

The objective of this article is to explore what make for effective leadership and what contributes to leadership derailment. For the purpose of elucidation, one of the most famous leaders of all times has been selected: Alexander the Great of Macedonia, who more than any other person changed the history of civilization. His life-story illustrates the psychological forces that generally come into play in the making of a leader and reveals leadership lessons that can be learned from his actions. Included among the leadership lessons taught by Alexander are a compelling vision, the role of strategic innovation, the creation of an executive role constellation, the management of meaning, “praise-singing,” training and development, succession planning, and the importance of well-structured system of organizational governance.

KEY WORDS: charisma; leadership; hubris; cyclothymia; narcissism; megalomania; paranoia; vision; innovation; executive role constellation; management of meaning; praise-singing; succession planning; organizational governance.

My son, ask for thyself another kingdom,
For that which I leave is too small for thee.

—King Philip, *to his 16-year-old son, Alexander (the Great)*

Alexander the Great is often considered the most successful world leader in history. He is remembered as one of the most celebrated conquerors of the ancient world, one of history's greatest warriors, and a legend of almost divine status in his own lifetime. He falls into the category of individuals who changed the history of civilization and shaped the present world as we know it. He accomplished greater deeds than any other leader before or after him.

A brilliant military strategist and tactician, Alexander conquered most of the civilized world of his time. Before Alexander, world civilization had been dominated by eastern cultures—by Persians, Egyptians, and Babylonians. Alexander changed that picture completely. Starting with his conquests, the western societies of the Romans and the Greeks would be on central stage. From victory to victory, from triumph to triumph, he created an empire that made him a legend in his own lifetime. The first great conqueror to reach Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, and Asia as far as western India, he stretched the limits of what was considered the inhabited earth. Within a period of less than twelve years, Alexander conquered almost the entire known world of his era. At the height of his power, his realm stretched from the Ionian Sea to northern India. Not until the voyages of the Portuguese and Spanish explorers in the late 15th

century would Europeans be able to say that they had finally explored farther than Alexander had.

Alexander the Great was born in 356 BC in Pella, the ancient capital of Macedonia, the area around present-day Thessaloniki in northern Greece. He was the son of Philip II, king of Macedonia, and Princess Olympias of Epirus (now Albania). His father, a brilliant ruler and strategist who turned the Macedonian army into a formidable fighting force, conquered most of Greece in just a few decades. His mother, Olympias, was a woman known for her temper and willfulness. These traits, coupled with her great intelligence, made her an extremely difficult person to live with. Her quarrelsome nature put her at war with Philip (and him at war with her) for most of Alexander's childhood.

At the age of seven, Alexander stepped out from under his mother's wing to undergo rigorous training by Leonidas, a relative of Olympias. This kinsman taught him the physical skills needed to be a warrior-king—skills such as horseback riding and sword fighting. To further refine his education, at the age of thirteen, Alexander became a student of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who instructed him in rhetoric and literature and stimulated his interest in science, medicine, and philosophy. Through his mentor, Alexander learned the Greek ways of living and the ideals of Greek civilization. From him, he also acquired a love for the works of Homer. Alexander's final tutor was Lysimachus. From him, the young man learned many cultural aspects of the world around him, acquiring an appreciation for fine arts such as drama, poetry, and music, and learning to play the lyre.

This education made him aspire to greatness from an early age. Encouraged by his mother, he was taught to believe that on her side he was descended from Achilles, the mythical hero of the *Iliad*, while his father was said to be descended from Zeus's son Heracles. Heroes to look up to! The role models that eventually occupied Alexander's internal world—role models that help to explain the “stretch goals” he set for himself—included one ruler (Cyrus the Great), two gods (Zeus and Dionysus), one demi-god (Heracles), one epic chronicler (Homer), one hero (Achilles), and one philosopher (Aristotle).

As portrayed in works of antiquity, even as a young boy Alexander was fearless, strong, tempestuous, and eager to learn. Father and son were both extremely ambitious and highly competitive. Alexander was like a racehorse in his enthusiasm and competitiveness, eager to emulate and then surpass the conquests of his father. As a youngster, he is said to have complained to his friends that his father overshadowed him in everything. He feared that there would be nothing truly great left for him to do, nothing spectacular for him to show the world.

Alexander's upbringing at the court in Pella, where at a young age he met many leading statesmen, philosophers, and artists, turned him into a precocious child. That precocity, along with his mother's influence, fueled his fervor to surpass others. The intensity of his need to stand out is illustrated in a famous story. When his father bought a beautiful horse named Bucephalus, it proved to be so wild that nobody was able to ride it. Philip was about to get rid of it when Alexander made a wager that he would be able to tame the beast. When approaching the horse, the younger man noticed that it appeared to be afraid of its own shadow.

Facing it toward the sun to keep the shadow behind it, Alexander managed to get on Bucephalus and was able to ride him. Having won the wager, Alexander got to keep the horse and later rode him all the way to India. When the horse died there, Alexander founded a city and named it Bucephala after his beloved animal.

When Alexander was sixteen years old, he was sent to serve as regent of Macedonia. In that role, he had to deal with an uprising in a wild region of what is now Bulgaria while Philip was away at war. Alexander and his troops managed to subjugate the rebellious Thracian tribe, and he established his first city (of many to come), Alexandropolis. In naming it after himself, he was following his father's example. After a recent victory, Philip had named a similar outpost Philippopolis.

In 336 BC Philip was assassinated, and Alexander ascended the throne of Macedonia. The leaders of the Greek city-states saw Philip's murder as a godsend, an opportunity to rid themselves of Macedonian interference in their affairs. To their surprise, Alexander quickly showed his talent as an incisive strategist and brilliant tactician by putting down uprisings in Thrace and Illyria. To set an example, after subduing Thebes he destroyed the city and sold the inhabitants off as slaves. This draconian act sent a strong message to the other city-states and quashed any further attempts at rebellion. Alexander united the Greek cities and formed the League of Nations, of which he became the leader.

Although Alexander made use of the well-trained army created by his father, he pushed the limits of Macedonian and Greek power to levels nobody had ever dreamt of. Under his guidance the celebrated

“Macedonian phalanx”—an impenetrable fighting wall made up of rows of soldiers holding five- to seven-meter spears (each soldier protected by the shield of the person next to him)—reached the height of deadly effectiveness.

After having subdued the remaining opposition from various Greek city-states, Alexander, in the spring of 334 BC, embarked on an Asian campaign, a war originally planned by his father. The “party line” reason that he handed out for popular consumption was that the campaign was necessary to redress the insult of the Persian invasion by the great King Xerxes one hundred and fifty years earlier. Most likely, a more honest reason was that he needed the riches of the Persian king to support his costly war machine. Still another reason (perhaps the deepest motivation) was the urge to best his father.

The series of conquests Alexander then carried out proved to be the greatest in history. His main opponent during this time was the Persian King Darius III. At the time, the Persian kingdom was an empire of epic proportions, stretching from Egypt and the Mediterranean into India and central Asia—an empire that had dominated the ancient world for over two centuries. The story goes that when the army reached land after crossing the Hellespont (separating Europe from Asia), Alexander leaped from his ship in full regalia and, hurling his spear ahead, declared that he accepted Asia from the gods.

In spite of being greatly outnumbered, Alexander defeated the Persian army during three major engagements. The first encounter came in 334 B.C., when Alexander swept away a Persian defense force sent (but not

led) by King Darius III at the Granicus River (located in present-day Turkey). On the banks of that river Alexander quickly defeated the Persian troops who had been waiting for him. This victory made the rest of Asia Minor extremely vulnerable to his military might. That might was accentuated, symbolically at least, when he severed with his sword the Gordian knot, which (according to legend) would make the person who could untie it the ruler of the world.

In 333 BC Alexander marched into Syria. Even though King Darius had raised a large army, he was unable to withstand Alexander's powerful infantry, cavalry, and phalanx. The entire region soon submitted to Alexander. Following this victory he went on to Egypt, where he was welcomed as a deliverer from oppressive Persian rule and crowned as pharaoh. There he founded the famous city Alexandria, which bears his name; it would become a world center of commerce and learning. While in Egypt, he went to the oasis of Amon (now in Libya), where he was acknowledged as the son of the god Amon-Ra, an act that may have contributed to a conviction of his own divinity.

After the stay in Egypt, Alexander reorganized his forces and started for Babylon. In 331 BC he again defeated Darius in the decisive Battle of Gaugamela, after which Babylon surrendered. Subsequently, Darius was killed by one of his generals, a murder that gave Alexander the opening to declare himself King of Asia. Alexander then forced his way to Persepolis, the Persian capital, allowing his soldiers to sack the city. He did not rest for long, however, having set his sights on India.

Alexander went on from what is today Afghanistan into northern India. In the spring of 327 B.C. Alexander defeated King Porus (a formidable opponent equipped with, of all things, war *elephants*) at the river Hydaspes. After this difficult victory, his Macedonian soldiers rebelled, refusing to go farther. Having little choice, Alexander ordered the return to Babylon, where he spent about a year organizing his dominions and completing a survey of the Persian Gulf in preparation for further conquests. Those who returned safely with Alexander had covered over 20,000 miles within a period of roughly ten years.

Alexander was now at the height of his power. His empire stretched from the Ionian Sea to northern India. However, in spite of his troops' desire to call it a day and head home, Alexander was far from satisfied. He felt compelled to explore more territory, wanting to extend the borders of known civilization. In addition, he wanted to combine Asia and Europe into one country and name Babylon the new capital. In order to unify his acquisitions, he encouraged intermarriages, did away with corrupt officials, and spread Greek ideas, customs, and laws into Asia.

Alexander's many plans came to an abrupt end when, while in Babylon, he contracted a fever. His war-ravaged body could not combat the illness effectively, and he died in 323 BC at the age of thirty-two. He is supposed to have complained, as he lay ill, that he was dying from the treatment of too many physicians. Though his first wife, Roxane, was pregnant with his first son, Alexander left no provisions for a successor, and eventually his empire was divided between his generals. There was, however, a lasting legacy of his conquests: the bringing together of Greek and Middle Eastern civilizations.

As he built his empire, Alexander saw himself as the propagator of Panhellenic ideas, customs, and laws in new lands. Using both military and administrative techniques, he tried to integrate the various peoples he had conquered into a unified empire by devising localized forms of rule in each region. As much as he could, however, he kept intact indigenous administrative systems. In Egypt, for example, he became the pharaoh. In Mesopotamia he became the Great King. Regardless of the role he played, he tried to rule in a fair manner. If he heard that some of his provincial officials were ruling unjustly, he replaced them. He also founded hundreds of new settlements, encouraging his men to marry local women and setting an example by marrying a Persian princess and a Bactrian woman himself. He made the army multicultural as well, by including soldiers from all conquered regions. He introduced a uniform currency system throughout the empire and promoted trade and commerce. Exceeding the bounds of conventional rulers, he manipulated the local religions to legitimize his own rule, having himself named a god.

As a leader, Alexander was without peer. He could be magnanimous toward defeated enemies and extremely loyal toward his friends. As a general, he led by example, giving directives from the front, suffering the same wounds as his soldiers. He paid attention to every single man in the army, encouraging one or another whenever possible.

Though these traits encouraged loyalty among the men, all was not well. Alexander was also known for a ferocious temper. In fact, he once killed a close associate in a drunken rage. His adoption of Persian ways and his attempt to be seen as a living god became bones of contention within the

administration and on the front lines, creating estrangement. His vision of empire based on tolerance—that is, on giving equal status to the Persians and other conquered peoples—caused increasing resentment among his own people. In particular, his Macedonian officers objected to his attempts to force them to intermarry with the Persians. They were also troubled by how brutally Alexander put down an imagined conspiracy, and by other instances of harsh treatment.

Alexander can be seen as a multifaceted personality with a highly complex internal theatre. Among his outstanding “scripts” were his compensatory strivings, his quest (actively encouraged by his mother) to better his father, his recourse to a “flight into action” to ward off feared depressive reactions, and his cyclothymic characteristics—that is, his tendency toward radical mood swings. In addition, he was in great need of positive “mirroring” for affirmation, using his close friend Hephaiston as alter ego to establish greater psychological security. Moreover, like many leaders before and after him, Alexander became a victim of hubris—of excessive arrogance and pride. The combined effects of unbroken victories, unparalleled wealth, absolute and unchallenged power, extraordinary physical stress, alcoholic bouts, and isolation began to take their toll. As his advisers grew less and less willing to state their mind for fear of the consequences, Alexander’s system of reality-testing crumbled. He became a victim of his own success.

As time passed, Alexander was increasingly domineering and grandiose. His tragedy was not only the breakdown in reality-testing but also the display of very costly paranoid outbursts, which created a vicious circle of isolation and loneliness. Eventually, with no one willing to challenge

his self-created reality, his world became a house of mirrors: he could see only what he wanted to see. Despite this darker side, the constructive parts of his personality usually prevailed, helping him to go from victory to victory, from triumph to triumph, creating an empire that made him a legend in his lifetime.

Life on the Razor's Edge

Given this preamble, we can summarize some of Alexander's accomplishments:

- He brought Greek ideas, culture, and lifestyle to the countries that he conquered and assured the expansion and domination of the Hellenistic culture, which, together with Roman civilization and Christianity, constitutes the foundation of what is now called Western Civilization.
- He marched for 12 years over 20,000 miles and never lost a battle.
- He united an area of over 22 million square miles.
- He adopted Persian dress and customs, married Bactrian and Persian princesses, and required thousands of his Macedonian and Greeks to wed Persian women.
- He proclaimed himself god-king in Egypt, Greece, and other parts of his empire for the alleged purpose of unifying his realm.
- He took scientists along on his expeditions to gather data about biology and geography.
- He made Greek the prevailing language of the Near East for all matters of government, learning, and commerce.
- He established many new colonies and cities (*seventy* of them named after him in his honor!).

- He started a great experiment in acculturation by sending many children of Near Eastern families to Greece to be educated.
- He trained and used Persians in his army.
- He used Greeks, Macedonian, and Persians in his administration in an attempt to unite East and West.
- He revolutionized international trade by setting up a common system of currency for the entire realm. (The economic system that began to take shape after Alexander's reign remained virtually unchanged until the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century.)

Are there lessons to be learned from Alexander's conquests? Although no historical analogy is ever exact, many of the underlying principles of his activities remain as true today as they were 2400 years ago. Contemporary leaders would do well to take notice.

Lessons in Leadership à la Alexander

Alexander also taught the world a number of important lessons on leadership. Through his example, contemporary leaders in business and politics can learn much about what leaders should (and should not) do. The major lessons he taught us should be applied every day in offices and conference rooms throughout the world:

- Have a compelling vision that speaks to the collective imagination
- Develop a creative strategy responsive to enemy strengths
- Create a well-rounded executive role constellation
- Model excellence
- Encourage innovation

- Manage meaning to foster group identification
- Encourage and support followers
- Invest in training and development
- Consolidate gains
- Plan for succession
- Create mechanisms of organizational governance

1. Have a compelling vision. Alexander's actions demonstrate what can be accomplished when a person is totally focused, when he or she has a magnificent obsession. His behavior confirms yet again the importance for leaders of having a clear, well-defined *vision*; effective leaders must be able to clearly convey what the existing situation is and where they want people to be headed. From early on, Alexander knew what he wanted to accomplish. His leap onto the beach after crossing the Hellespont and his statement about becoming the ruler of Asia made that quite clear. Through these dramatic gestures, he spoke to the collective imagination of his people. His army was going to make things right; they were going to demand retribution for Xerxes' slight to the Greek world. Alexander's rhetorical skills helped them buy in to this greatest of all adventures. Alexander knew where he was going and how to get there. Unfortunately, he did not know how or when to stop (to the great confusion and dissatisfaction of his troops).

2. Develop a creative strategy responsive to enemy strengths. Alexander was one of the most brilliant military strategists of all time. He had a great vision, yes, but he also knew how to make that vision reality. His use of strategy is unsurpassed in the annals of history. He was a master of competitive analysis. On the battlefield he knew how to take maximum

advantage of any situation, adapting quickly to the tactics of his opponents. He was comfortable in any battle situation, from standard combat to guerrilla warfare, and he was always prepared for the unexpected. He *maintained an excellent information system* and knew how to interpret his opponent's motives. Because he was a master at coordinating all parts of his military machine, *perfect execution* on the battlefield became his competitive advantage. Furthermore, no other military leader has ever used *speed and surprise* with such skill. He knew the true value of the statement that one is either quick or he is dead!

3. *Create a well-rounded executive role constellation.* Alexander also knew how to shape a committed team around him. He created an "executive role constellation" by which each of various commanders could build on the others' strengths. While Parmenion, his main commander, played an essential role on the battlefield and Antipater, his regent in Macedonia, kept his home base in order, his other key commanders superintended their particular domains. Their teamwork created the extraordinary coordination that made for Alexander's success on the battlefield. Only in later years did his relationships with his key people deteriorate.

4. *Model excellence.* Alexander set the example of excellence with his leadership style; he walked the talk. As mentioned earlier, he was not an armchair general. He led his troops quite literally. He did not *talk* their battles; he *fought* their battles. During the early years, unwilling to enjoy the comforts of his position, he lived the soldier's life, sleeping in simple tents and eating mess food. When his troops went hungry or thirsty, he went hungry and thirsty; when their horses died beneath them and they

had to walk, he did the same. This situation changed only when he was seduced by the luxury of Persian court life.

5. Encourage innovation. Alexander knew how to encourage innovation. He realized the competitive advantage of strategic innovation. Because of his deft deployment of the phalanx, his support for and reliance on the creativity of his corps of engineers, and his own logistical acumen, his war machine was the most advanced of its time. He knew the importance of understanding his adversaries, so he paid a great deal of attention to military information systems and used reconnaissance to maximum advantage. Alexander's creativity and innovation were not limited to the military field, however. His curiosity about biology, zoology, and medicine, and his support for the scientists on his expeditions, led to further developments in these areas of research.

6. Manage meaning to foster group identification. Alexander was a master at the management of meaning. He had a propaganda machine, and he used it effectively. His oratory skills, based on the simple language of his soldiers, had a hypnotic influence on all who heard him. As an exemplary charismatic leader, he made extensive use of myths, metaphors, analogies, and stories, evoking powerful cultural symbols and eliciting strong emotions. His jumping on the beach in full regalia to claim Asia and his cutting of the Gordian knot can be seen as good examples. When he felt that his case needed strengthening, he knew how to use his diviners to reframe various incidents as tokens of destiny; and he used symbols and rituals (such as sacrifice to the gods) to great effect. These meaning-management actions, combined with his talent at leading

by example, fostered strong group identification among his troops, motivating the men to give exceptional effort.

7. Encourage and support followers. Alexander was a praise-singer. He knew how to encourage his people for their excellence in battle in ways that brought out further and greater excellence. He routinely singled people out for special attention and recalled acts of bravery performed by former and fallen heroes, making it clear that individual contributions would be recognized. He paid attention to his men's needs, visiting and helping the wounded, arranging for elaborate ceremonies for the fallen (and providing for their widows and children), and rewarding his troops handsomely. He possessed what has been called a "*teddy bear*" quality, meaning that he had the ability to be a "container" of the emotions of his people. He could also be an excellent listener.

8. Invest in training and development. Extremely visionary for his day, Alexander spent an extraordinary amount of time and resources on training and development. He not only trained his present troops but also looked to the future by developing the next generation, schooling young Persians in the ins-and-outs of Macedonian warfare and striving to bring Greek language and mores to Asia.

9. Consolidate gains. Three of Alexander's most valuable lessons were taught not through his strength but through his weakness. The first of these is the need to consolidate gains. He didn't *put the right systems into place* to integrate his empire. Alexander never savored the fruit of his accomplishments. Captive to the demons in his inner world, he could not rest and enjoy but felt compelled to go ever forward. It was as if he had

no choice; the trumpets of rivalry never gave him a rest. His temperament, personal development, and historical moment combined to make him who he was: a man destined to succeed in battle and to win a vast empire. They also limited him, however, forming the walls of a psychic prison containing demons of the past (the main themes of his inner script) that constrained him from consolidating his domains. Conquest may be richly rewarding, but a leader who advances without ensuring the stability of his or her gains stands to lose everything.

10. Plan for succession. Another lesson that Alexander taught (and the second that he taught by omission) is the need for a viable succession plan. Alexander was so focused on his own role as king and aspiring deity that he could not bring himself to think to a future without him. (Of course, it can be argued that his young age when he died, played a role in this lack of planning.) As a result, vultures tore his vast empire apart after his death. Power is an easily ignited explosive that must be transferred with care. Great leaders realize that they are taking care of an heirloom that should be left behind in better shape than it was received. To do so, they need to ensure competent succession. His narcissistic disposition didn't permit him to look beyond his rule.

11. Create mechanisms of organizational governance. The final lesson that the case of Alexander illustrates (again taught by omission) is the paramount importance of countervailing powers. Unchecked power creates hubris, contributing to decline and fall. Leaders have the responsibility (weighty though it may be) to put proper mechanisms of organizational governance into place. Checks and balances are needed to prevent faulty decision-making and the abuse of power. Alexander began

his reign as an enlightened ruler (given his time and circumstances), encouraging participation by his “Companions”—loyal soldiers drawn from the noble families in Macedonia—and others. But like many rulers before him, he became addicted to power. As time went on, he tolerated nothing but applause from his audience, so his immediate circle kept their reservations to themselves. With candor muted in those around him, he began to live in a world of his own, his reality-testing severely distorted. Only a crisis, such as happened when his soldiers rebelled and refused to march further, could bring Alexander into the real world. Being out of touch with reality contributed to his inability to consolidate his empire.

It would be difficult to say which of these lessons is the most important, because an empire’s (or an organization’s) needs change throughout its history. Though all these lessons are important, Alexander taught the last three most forcefully, emphasizing their prominence with the crumbling of his empire. Though his realm was huge and wealthy, his hubris was greater still. Feeling invincible and unstoppable, he neglected the gains he had already achieved and gave no thought to what would happen to his lands and his people if he were to die. He shared the view that would later be expressed by one of his successors in the field of empire-building, the “Sun-King,” Louis XIV. “Après moi le déluge,” Louis said, apparently unconcerned about what he would leave behind. But Alexander, in spite of his failure to provide for effective succession, left his footprints indelibly on the world as we know it. Thoughts about darkness and light, war and peace, resolution and magnanimity—these are his remembrance. As a purveyor of dreams, he still captures the imagination.