

Leadership Lessons from the First Century, BC



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On Christmas Eve I had the opportunity to watch Jon Meacham interview Pulitzer Prize winning author Stacy Schiff on the PBS program [Need to Know](#). The less than ten minute interview peaked my interest and I took a short break from holiday preparations to order a copy of Schiff's new book, [Cleopatra: A Life](#). The book arrived two days later and during the early hours of New Year's Day I became completely absorbed in Schiff's fascinating tale of leadership in the Hellenistic Age. The book remained close at hand all weekend until I reached its concluding chapter late Sunday evening.

Schiff begins her book by cautioning the reader that with respect to her subject, "There is no universal agreement on most of the basic details of her life." Schiff expertly pieces together information from a multitude of sources, while reflecting on and explaining the context for source material. She reminds her reader that "...there were no plain, unvarnished stories in antiquity. The point was to dazzle."

As I followed the narrative of Cleopatra's 22 year reign as Queen of Egypt, I found myself reflecting on two leadership lessons her story offers.

- **Be fearless and mission-obsessed.** As a risk manager I am often accused of being overly concerned with risk and danger. The obsession is something of an occupational hazard. Yet despite the danger we modern leaders face on the Internet and on the road (be wary of multitasking drivers!), our world is extraordinarily safe when compared to the first century BC. Yet Cleopatra VII reigned with an extraordinary degree of fearlessness. This seems remarkable today given the queen's awareness that relatives and close associates were often plotting her demise. I recognize that it's hard to be fearless when watchdog groups, the media, and legislators seem intent on finding intrigue and the "not-doing-gooders" in our sector. We need to resist the lure of becoming fearful and scrutiny-obsessed and recommit to being fearless and *mission-obsessed*. Instead of establishing goals that you are certain or likely to achieve, consider adopting stretch goals—targets for which there is no guarantee of success nor an obvious path to follow. Chart a new path. Be fearless by engaging your board in a candid discussion about governance practices, and how the board's focus on operations robs it of the opportunity to engage in strategic thinking.
- **Ask for help even when it's your call.** Although her instincts and leadership skills were impressive when she began her reign as a teenager, Cleopatra's effectiveness was due in no small part to her ability to obtain expert help and advice when she needed it. Though she violated the modern-day admonition against mixing business and pleasure, her political alliances with the most prominent Romans of the day are legendary. Over the years I've heard many nonprofit CEOs lament the loneliness one experiences "at

the top” of the organizational chart. Even with a large board, a diverse staff and contract personnel coming and going, there are moments when great leadership requires looking within to reach a difficult decision. But it is never unwise to ask a trusted colleague for advice, to seek a second opinion from another source, or to look for wisdom or inspiration outside the comfortable setting of your organizational encampment. Throughout the year we receive calls from leaders who want that second opinion, who need confidential advice from an objective third-party, or who simply want to discuss the options they face with colleague who has “been there.”

As you begin a new year in the life of the organization you serve, I hope that your spirits are high, and your ambitious plans are buoyed by confidence and optimism. As always, don’t hesitate to reach out to your friends at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center if you need a [second opinion](#), [want help formulating stretch goals for your risk management program](#), or seek an [independent voice to deliver a message about good governance, effective board-staff partnerships, or enlightened risk taking](#).

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