

A Study in Machiavellianism

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It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.

Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince

Whatever you are working on, and whoever you are working with, open and authentic communication is ultimately the best way to establish trust relationships and work collaboratively over the long term.

But what if you encounter people who you suspect may be presenting themselves in one way and acting in another, maybe working against you, or who you feel may not be genuine?

One way of describing these people is ‘Machiavellian’ – but what does that word mean, and how can you know if someone is using Machiavellian tactics?

The [Oxford Dictionary definition](#) of ‘Machiavellianism’ is ‘the employment of cunning and duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct.’

The word ‘Machiavellian’ is derived from Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), an Italian politician and philosopher. He was a strategic adviser to the Florentine Republic in the early sixteenth century, and author of *Il Principe* (‘The Prince’), a treatise on how to acquire and use power.

‘Machiavellianism’ is now inextricably linked with the author of *The Prince*, yet the translation and intent of his original text, especially given the circumstances under which it was written, means that [what Machiavelli originally meant](#) and what we understand of the concept that bears his name may not align:

It’s from Machiavelli that we get the notorious phrase ‘the end justifies the means’. A much more accurate translation from the original Italian is something more like ‘one must consider the end’.

And then there's [this](#) – it appears that unravelling what the first Machiavellian truly meant is beyond the scope of this post!

Bearing this in mind, what we call 'Machiavellian' can be [summed up as follows](#):

...a leader must know how to be deceitful when it suits his purpose, but he must not appear that way. Because, while it is better to be feared than loved, the best way to avoid being overthrown is to avoid being hated. A Prince must know how to do wrong, and when to properly use this to his advantage, often in secret. Princes that use cunning are generally more successful than those that could be fully trusted.

Machiavellianism is not only the preserve of leaders of course, and in popular culture, [Edmund Blackadder](#) is a classic example of being highly adept in his capacity to influence events, manipulating leaders like queens and generals (even if his 'cunning plans' often go comically awry).

Machiavellianism can be found anywhere there is a group, whether in formal political structures, companies, sports clubs or among a group of friends.

Reality TV shows like Survivor and Big Brother are excellent places to observe Machiavellian behaviour under a microscope, but there is one recent example where the traits are on full display – Game of Thrones.

Among the many reasons this fantasy medieval drama developed such a following, whether fans realise it or not, is that it is a study in Machiavellianism.

[AndPhilosophy](#) has produced a [book](#) which examines the series from a philosophical point of view, drawing on the works of Machiavelli and other philosophers including Hobbes, Descartes, Augustine, Plato and Aristotle as a way to analyse characters and plot lines and explore themes such as war, honour, morality and gender politics.

Although there are a number of Game of Thrones characters of both genders who engage in Machiavellianism (Lord Tywin Lannister, Queen Cersei and Daenerys Targaryen stand out), the three most intriguing characters to me are

those who have made it into an art form by being far more subtle with their machinations:

- Tyrion Lannister, youngest son of Lord Tywin of the House of Lannister, one of the families vying for the crown and the Iron Throne of Westeros.



[Image credit](#)

- Petyr Baelish, aka 'Littlefinger', the King's Master of Coin who gathers intelligence on political rivals through his network of brothels. His spy network is rivalled only by that of Varys'.
- Varys, aka 'The Spider' or 'Master of Whisperers', who maintains a web of informants across continents.

Is remaining neutral a key aspect of Machiavellian behaviour, allowing that person to switch sides as situations shift?

The storms come and go, the waves crash overhead, the big fish eat the little fish, and I keep on paddling.

Varys, Master of Whisperers, Game of Thrones

If forewarned is forearmed, then it would be useful to be aware that you are dealing with such characters – but how can you know?

1. know their motivations & characteristics

Machiavellian-types are motivated by self-interest, self-preservation and extrinsic goals. They are likely to be detached, cool characters who willingly manipulate others for their own benefit, and are adept in exploiting circumstances to their advantage. The main thing that sets them apart is that they are – or appear to be – devoid of emotions.

In their Journal of Applied Communication research paper '[Machiavellian's Motives in Organizational Citizen Behavior](#)', Joanne Becker and Dan O'Hair identify characteristics which may be present in those with Machiavellian tendencies, including:

- saying things others want to hear
- hiding personal convictions well
- being sensitive to information about others
- changing position in argument readily
- being able to change strategy in response to a situation
- resisting social influence
- being exploitative, but not viciously; exploiting more if others can't retaliate being suspicious of others' motives
- never being obviously manipulative
- not assuming reciprocity
- preferring a fluid (changeable) environment

Ticking one or few of these characteristics does not necessarily mean someone is Machiavellian – for example, being able to change one's view can also be a sign of good leadership.

Contrast these with characteristics of non-Machiavellians, which include:

- being vulnerable to others' opinions
- believing others 'ought to' act in certain ways
- assuming reciprocity

- accepting others' motives at face value
- wearing their convictions on their sleeves, clinging to convictions becoming locked into a single course of action
- reacting in socially desirable ways
- being sensitive to others' efforts appearing unreasonable in negotiations preferring a stable environment

2. know their tactics

There are plenty of tactics in the Machiavellian's toolkit, but examples include:

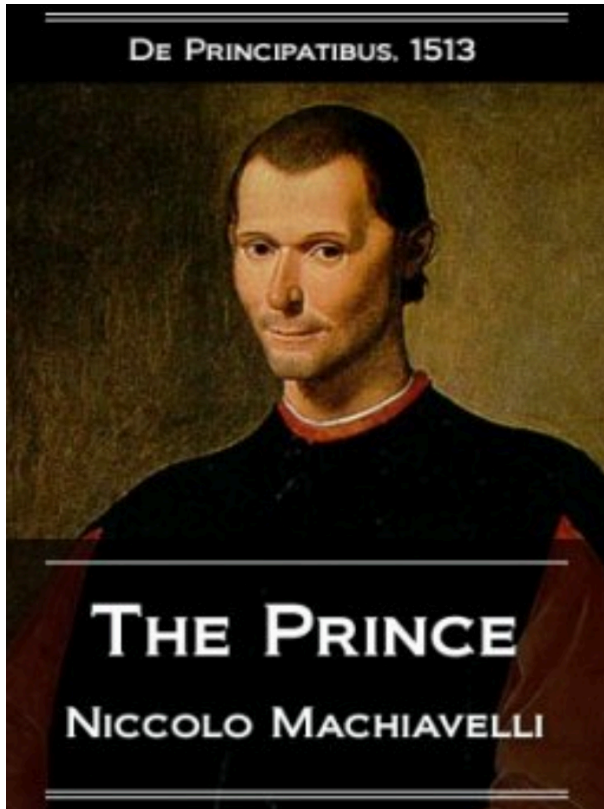
- [misdirection](#) – where people are fooled into willingly disclosing valuable information; or into acting on information which they later find is incomplete or inaccurate
- [white-anting](#) – subverting an organisation or group from within by 'leaking' information designed to undermine the group's goals
- ['dog-whistling'](#) – using coded language with one meaning for a group in general, and another for a specific subgroup (hence the name, because high-frequency dog whistles can be heard by dogs, but are inaudible to humans)

Aside from observation and intuition, another way to identify Machiavellianism is by testing for it.

In the 1960s, social psychologists Richard Christie and Florence Geis created a survey from statements in Machiavelli's writings, asking people how much they agreed with each.

They concluded that Machiavellianism is a distinct personality trait, and published this research as MACH-IV in 1970. Those with a 'high MACH' rating are more disposed to use Machiavellian tactics.

Test yourself by clicking on the image below, taking the short 20 question MACH-IV survey, and see how truly Machiavellian you are.



Now you know your own MACH rating, perhaps you can find a way to test your colleagues for this tendency, without them realising.

...oh, did I just say that?

Maybe I should reveal that my own Machiavellian rating is 56 – the tipping point for ‘high Mach’ people starts at 60.