

The Replaceable Heads of Leadership

If you have ever watched a documentary about ancient Rome or visited an ancient history museum, you might have noticed that a lot of the statues were missing their heads. A lot of people note this and just assume that the ancient Roman sculptors were bad at attaching heads to statues, and they fell off over the course of the past couple of thousand years. It is a common misconception. They weren't bad at sculpting, they were very good at understanding the nature of social life and the impermanence of leadership.

Many of the sculptures were made with detachable heads for a practical reason. Commissioning a statue to honor a leader, a popular figure, or an emperor was expensive and time-consuming. The Romans quickly discovered that leaders and popular figures don't last long. They die, are overthrown, fall out of popularity, have a scandal, retire, or are simply replaced. Making the statue heads replaceable saved a lot of time and money. When the time came, they would just pop the old head off and replace it with a new one. The attitude was that life goes on; Rome goes on. What head is on top of the statue at the moment is less important than our lives, our families, our character, or the survival of this civilization that we've all built together.

Today we are seeing a new American president take office. Pop, off goes the old head, plunk here goes the new head. In four years, we will be doing it again. During our lifetimes, we will change the head on the metaphorical presidential statue many times. The older you get and the more times you see heads come off and be replaced, the more you understand that a nation is not about what head is atop the metaphorical statue at the moment. It is much more than that, a wisdom that comes with age and experience.

The same is true at your agency. Police chiefs come and go. Sheriffs come and go. Administrations change. New people are placed in charge of new things... for a while. Sometimes you will like the new head; sometimes you won't. What is important to remember is the lesson of the ancient Romans: this head is temporary. If it is one you like, enjoy it, but prepare and ready yourself for a time when it's not so great. If you dislike it, don't worry; the head will change soon enough.

The Stoic Approach to Leadership Changes

- 1. Remember what's in your control.** You can't choose your new leader, but you can choose your response to the change.

2. **Focus on your duty.** As Marcus Aurelius would remind us,

“Just do the right thing. The rest doesn’t matter.”

Your oath wasn’t to a person—it was to your community and the Constitution. You be you; you do the right things. That head is coming off sooner or later, and your values, your character, and what you believe in shouldn’t be changed every time a statue loses its head.

3. **Maintain perspective.** How many chiefs, sheriffs, or presidents have you served under? The position changes, but the mission endures.

In modern terms, think of it this way: your agency is like that Roman statue. Leaders come and go, but the foundation, the body of dedicated officers serving their communities, remains constant.

Practical Steps Forward

- **Stay Professional:** Your conduct during leadership transitions reveals your character.
- **Keep Doing Good Work:** Excellence doesn’t depend on who’s in charge. If you have decided to be excellent, then be excellent. You don’t serve a person or an administration; you serve an ideal.
- **Be Part of the Solution:** Help maintain stability during the transition. This is your team; this is your community. You don’t have to love the head to love the organization or the people in it. Be kind; help those who are struggling. Remember what Epictetus taught us:

“Don’t explain your philosophy. Embody it.”

During leadership changes, be the steady presence your colleagues need.

So the next time you face a leadership change, think of those practical Romans. Focus on what endures, maintain your excellence, and remember you’re part of something bigger than any single leader.

My advice: Always keep your head.

Amor Fati,
Sgt. Steve