

# Terence Fletcher's Strategy to Achieve Success in Whiplash Movie (2014): A Machiavelli's Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine Terence Fletcher's leadership strategy in Whiplash Movie (2014) through the theoretical lens of Niccolò Machiavelli's concept of power. Specifically, the research seeks to (1) identify the indicators of success in Whiplash that reflect Machiavelli's philosophy, (2) analyze how Fletcher's methods align with Machiavellian leadership strategies, and (3) explore Fletcher's motivations for using extreme teaching techniques to achieve excellence. While previous studies have discussed Fletcher's psychological impact on students, few have applied Machiavelli's framework to critically assess his leadership approach. Using qualitative analysis of selected film scenes, the study finds that Fletcher's actions, though ethically controversial, reflect core Machiavellian concepts such as *virtù* (personal ability), fortuna (luck), the strategic use of fear, and the principle that the ends justify the means. These findings suggest that Machiavellian leadership tactics can be effective in high-pressure environments but may also inflict significant psychological and ethical costs. This research contributes to literary and leadership studies by offering a new perspective on how ambition, power, and manipulation operate in educational settings portrayed in cinema.

## KEYWORDS

Machiavellian,  
Whiplash (2014),  
Terence Fletcher,  
Virtu and Fortuna,  
Psychological

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## 1. Introduction

Literature has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting human conflicts, principles, and desires. Literary works not only serve as entertainment but also help us understand and learn about the social and cultural situations of their time (Irani, 2025). According to Qadriani et al. (2022), literary works act as a medium and a bridge that connects the reader with the author, allowing readers to reflect on their own reality and expand their understanding of others' experiences. Movies, categorized as drama, represent a particularly rich and complex form of literature that combines visual, auditory, and narrative elements. Edgar-Hunt et al. (2010:11), state that film is a medium that combines various art forms, such as painting, photography, theater, music, architecture, dance, and the spoken word. Bateman et al. (2012:10), further emphasize that movies have the unique ability to communicate complex emotions and ideas more profoundly than other media, using visual and audio elements to create immersive atmospheres that evoke powerful emotional responses from audiences. The findings of a recent article by Lu et al. (2024), states that dance, music, and film come together to generate creative and experimental content that uses visual and aural aspects to convey emotions and ideas further support this. Also by Петровська (2024), the blending of visual arts, such as theatre, painting, photography, and film. It highlights the ways in which several artistic disciplines converge to produce a complex expressive experience.

In Whiplash (2014), directed by Damien Chazelle, the film explores themes of ambition, perfectionism, and the cost of success through the relationship between Andrew Neiman, a young

jazz drummer, and his music instructor, Terence Fletcher. Fletcher is portrayed as an instructor who employs extreme methods, including manipulation, intimidation, pressure, and even violence, to push his students to their limits. He believes that these methods are necessary to bring out the best in his students and to achieve musical excellence. Ningrum (2022) argues that men, like Fletcher, are often associated with traits such as violence, aggression, and ambition, which resonate with Fletcher's approach to teaching. The film tells the story of Andrew's struggle to become a famous jazz drummer, highlighting the sacrifices he makes and the emotional and physical toll he endures to achieve his goal. Manzano-Hidalgo et al. (2022) also said how perfectionism and fear of failure in adolescent males may drive aggressive responses, similar to the high expectations seen in Fletcher's teaching methods. Ultimately, the film explores the price of ambition, as Andrew's desire to become the best leads him to suffer personal and emotional costs, ultimately culminating in a final performance that showcases his mastery and commitment.

Terence Fletcher's character embodies many of the principles found in Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), particularly the notion that the ends justify the means. Machiavelli asserts that leaders must be willing to use any necessary means whether manipulative, immoral, or even violent to achieve their ultimate goals. In *The Prince* (1532:115), Machiavelli states, "Leaders should not be afraid to face accusations of committing crimes if it is necessary for the safety of the state." This philosophy can be directly applied to Fletcher's extreme teaching methods, which prioritize the end results achieving greatness in his students over the ethical concerns surrounding his tactics. Machiavelli's philosophy involves not only violence but also the creation of fear, which is in line with Fletcher's approach to creating greatness, even through controversial methods (Fen, 2023). This is also supported by Richardson (2021), this book examines Victorian literature, particularly how the ambition of male characters and their associated aggression reflect wider societal views of masculinity. Fletcher's belief in pushing his students beyond their physical and emotional limits parallels Machiavelli's view that the ultimate goal of success justifies the means used to achieve it.

Niccolò Machiavelli, an Italian political philosopher, is renowned for his pragmatic and often controversial views on power and leadership, most famously articulated in his 1532 work *The Prince*. Machiavelli's theory is grounded in *realpolitik*, a philosophy that emphasizes practical and often ruthless strategies to maintain power and achieve political success, rather than relying on moral or ethical ideals. For Machiavelli, a leader's primary duty is to ensure the stability and success of the state, even if this requires actions that may be considered immoral by conventional standards. One of the key principles in Machiavelli's theory is the concept that "the ends justify the means." According to Brunello (2023), Machiavelli's thought is often misunderstood as advocating immorality, but his central argument in *The Prince* is that political success may sometimes require the abandonment of traditional moral constraints. The ends justify the means, a mantra that echoes through history in the actions of political leaders, especially in cases where the stability of the state is at stake. In *The Prince* (1532:122), Machiavelli argues that a leader must be prepared to act immorally if the situation demands it. He acknowledges that leaders should appear virtuous but asserts when necessary, they must be willing to use deceit, force, or cruelty to achieve their goals. This principle aligns directly with Fletcher's teaching methods in *Whiplash*, where he justifies extreme actions to bring out the best in his students, regardless of the ethical cost. Machiavelli's leadership theory holds that appearances can be deceiving, ruthlessness is often masked by a facade of virtue. Political leaders who successfully manipulate these dualities maintain their power. This dualism is embodied in the figure of Terence Fletcher in *Whiplash*, whose overt cruelty is veiled by his professed goal of excellence (Mazzone, 2023).

Another central concept in Machiavelli's theory is the relationship between *virtù* (a leader's personal ability) and *fortuna* (luck or fortune). Machiavelli asserts that success is not solely dependent on luck but on a leader's ability to navigate and control circumstances. In Chapter XXV of *The Prince*, Machiavelli states that a great leader uses their *virtù* to overcome *fortuna*, acknowledging that while fortune may favor some, it is the leader's skill and decisiveness that ultimately determine their success (Machiavelli, 1532:156). Machiavelli's ideas provide a framework

for understanding leadership as a dynamic interaction between personal abilities and external circumstances (Marasco, 2022). In *Whiplash*, Fletcher's leadership style reflects virtù his ability to manipulate and push his students beyond their limits in pursuit of greatness. The unpredictable nature of his students' success parallels fortuna, where their potential is influenced not only by their talent but also by how they respond to Fletcher's extreme tactics. Machiavelli's view of leadership also includes the strategic use of fear as a tool of power. In Chapter XVII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that it is safer for a leader to be feared than loved, as fear can more reliably maintain control over subjects (Machiavelli, 1532:118). However, he cautions that fear must be measured and balanced to avoid breeding hatred. Fletcher's use of fear in *Whiplash* through public humiliation, threats, and intimidation mirrors this Machiavellian principle, as he creates an environment where students are constantly under pressure to prove their worth and are driven by the fear of failure. Finally, Machiavelli discusses the concept of measured hardness, stating that a wise leader should use force or cruelty in a calculated and limited manner. In Chapter VIII of *The Prince* (1532:83), Machiavelli suggests that "injuries ought to be done all at once, so that, being less tasted, they offend less." Fletcher's tactics in the film, including sudden bursts of cruelty followed by moments of intense pressure, echo this principle, as he aims to break down his students to rebuild them into exceptional performers. The use of violence or aggression in his teaching is strategic, aimed at pushing students to reach their full potential.

The primary motivation for this research stems from the limited academic study focused on Terence Fletcher's success strategy, particularly through the lens of Machiavellian philosophy. While much has been written about the psychological and emotional toll Fletcher's methods take on his students (Ramdani et al., 2023; Rivai & Nafisah, 2023), and the ethical concerns surrounding his approach, few studies have directly connected Fletcher's methods with Machiavelli's theories on leadership and power (Liyanagamage & Fernando, 2023; Tapas, 2024). The second motivation arises from the compelling narrative of *Whiplash*, which contains numerous moral messages that have the potential to inspire reflection on the nature of ambition and the sacrifices made in the pursuit of excellence. This study seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing Fletcher's success strategy in *Whiplash* through the framework of Machiavelli's theory of power, focusing on three central research questions: What are the indicators of success in Machiavelli's perspective reflected in the movie *Whiplash*? How is Terence Fletcher's strategy to achieve success reflected in the movie *Whiplash*? And why does Fletcher employ such extreme methods to achieve success?

This research aims to explore how Machiavelli's principles of power such as the justification of immoral actions, the interaction of virtù (personal ability) and fortuna (fortune), and the use of fear as a tool for power are reflected in Fletcher's character and his teaching methods. By answering these questions, the study will provide a deeper understanding of Fletcher's leadership style and its ethical implications. Moreover, the research aims to shed light on how Machiavellian tactics can be applied in high-pressure environments like music education, offering insights into the broader implications of such leadership strategies. The findings of this research will contribute to the existing body of literature on *Whiplash* and offer a fresh perspective on the connection between power, ambition, and moral compromise in leadership. The benefits of this study are twofold. First, it provides a new theoretical framework for understanding Terence Fletcher's approach to success, offering valuable insights for future literary researchers and scholars of leadership. Second, it contributes to the broader discussion on leadership ethics, offering a critical examination of how Machiavellian strategies can be both effective and ethically problematic in achieving success. This research will not only deepen our understanding of *Whiplash* but also offer applicable insights into the role of power and manipulation in achieving excellence, particularly in competitive, high-stakes environments.

## 2. Method

This research focuses on analyzing Terence Fletcher's strategy in *Whiplash* movie (2014) by Damien Chazelle, specifically through the lens of Machiavelli's theory of power. To accomplish this, the researcher employed a qualitative research methodology. According to Creswell et al. (2007), qualitative research is a process used to understand social phenomena through words and images, reporting detailed data in a natural environment. This approach is particularly well-suited for exploring the complexities of Fletcher's character and teaching methods, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the themes of power, manipulation, and leadership within the context of the film. The object of this research is *Whiplash* movie (2014), directed by Damien Chazelle. The main character, played by Miles Teller, is Andrew Neiman, an inspired student. The plot twist that arises as Andrew Neiman, the film's protagonist, solves challenges is what makes this film different from others. It shows how the protagonist overcame all challenges to become the featured jazz drummer at the JVC Jazz Festival. The study examines how Terence Fletcher's strategy for achieving success in the film aligns with Machiavelli's principles, particularly focusing on his use of manipulation, intimidation, and extreme methods. The research analyzes these strategies through a qualitative lens, drawing connections between the actions and behaviors of Fletcher and Machiavelli's views on leadership and power.

Primary data for this research was collected from the film *Whiplash* itself, which was obtained from an online source and downloaded for analysis. The full title of the film is *Whiplash*, directed by Damien Chazelle and produced by Jason Blum, Helen Estabrook, Michel Litvak, and David Lancaster. The film was released on October 10, 2014, with a runtime of 106 minutes. Secondary data was sourced from relevant literature, including books, journals, and scientific articles related to literary studies and Machiavelli's theory of power. These secondary sources provide theoretical context and support the analysis of Fletcher's strategies in the film. The primary data consists of visual and verbal content from the film, including key scenes, dialogues, and character actions that are relevant to Machiavelli's theory of power. The researcher captured specific frames and dialogue from the film that illustrate Fletcher's use of extreme measures to achieve success. Secondary data includes Machiavelli's theoretical works, particularly *The Prince*, as well as scholarly interpretations and applications of his theories in leadership and power dynamics.

Data collection and analysis followed several key steps. The researcher repeatedly watched *Whiplash* to identify scenes that reflect Fletcher's teaching methods and to capture visual and dialogue elements that align with Machiavellian principles. Relevant books and articles were read to contextualize Machiavelli's theory within the framework of the film. Key ideas were noted down from both the film and theoretical texts to identify patterns in Fletcher's strategies. The researcher then identified and analyzed specific scenes and dialogues that illustrate Fletcher's manipulative and aggressive tactics in relation to Machiavelli's views on power. Finally, the researcher connected the data from the film, Machiavelli's theory, and secondary sources to identify recurring patterns and relationships that link Fletcher's behavior to Machiavellian leadership. To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher applied the triangulation technique. According to Hanson-DeFusco (2023) triangulation is a way for verifying the interpretation of phenomena by examining the reliability of data by combining evidence from several sources and approaches. Triangulation is a method of checking data accuracy by comparing and cross-referencing different sources of information (Hadi, 2010; Mekarisce, 2020). In this study, triangulation was employed by cross-checking the primary data from the film with the theoretical framework provided by Machiavelli's writings and secondary literature. This process ensures that the findings are accurate and reliable, with data corroborated from multiple sources.


## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Result


#### 1. Indicators of success in Machiavelli's perspective are reflected in the film *Whiplash*

### A. The Ends Justify the Means


Machiavelli says in *The Prince* that a leader who wants to maintain power and achieve his goals must be prepared to use any means necessary, including manipulation, lies, or violence. As long as the end goal of stability, power, or success is achieved, the methods used are justified. The ends justify the means is represented in the movie *Whiplash* as follows

Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
50: 37 – 52: 25	<p>Andrew: “And when I was with you, I would only think about drumming, I would only think about Jazz, composition, and so on and after that, because I wanted to be great.”</p> <p>Nicole: And you are not great?</p> <p>Andrew: I want to be one of the best.</p> <p>Nicole: And I will prevent you from doing that?</p> <p>Andrew: Yes.</p> <p>Nicole: You knew I would prevent you? You knew that very well?</p> <p>Andrew: Yes.</p> <p>Nicole: And I can't see you anymore?</p> <p>Andrew: Yes.</p> <p>Nicole: And when I see you think of me as trash because I'm just a girl who doesn't know what she wants, and you have a path, you're going to be great, and I'm going to be forgotten, and you can't give me your time because you're pursuing something bigger.</p> <p>Andrew: That's what I'm talking about.</p> <p>Nicole: What's wrong with you?</p> <p>You're right, we shouldn't be dating</p>		<p>Andrew revealed to Nicole about his desire to focus on his drumming career rather than their relationship. Andrew felt that Nicole was interfering with his ambition to become a great drummer, Andrew decided to end his relationship with Nicole</p>

**Table 1** *The Ends Justify the Means in Whiplash (2014)*

Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
27: 08 – 28: 13	Terence Fletcher: “Now, do you want to go too fast or too slow or do you want to follow my tempo?!” Andrew: “I will follow your tempo.”		Terence Fletcher throws a chair at Andrew because he feels Andrew's drum tempo is not right. Then approached Andrew and questioned him in a calm but intimidating tone. Fletcher's rude actions aim to mold Andrew into a great musician.

*Table 2 The Ends Justify the Means in Whiplash (2014)*


Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
01: 20: 20– 01: 21: 10	Terence Fletcher: There are no two words in English more dangerous than “Good Job”.		Fletcher openly shared his educational philosophy with Andrew, emphasizing his belief that “good job” are the two most dangerous words in the English language. He argues that giving praise to someone who has not reached their full potential can actually trigger complacency and hinder the process of self-development. For Fletcher, it is only through constant pressure, high demands, and an environment of insecurity that a person can be pushed beyond their limits.

*Table 3 The Ends Justify the Means in Whiplash (2014)*

### B. *Virtù* and Fortuna

Machiavelli believed that a combination of *virtù* and *fortuna* determine one's success. *Virtù* are internal abilities, such as courage, decisiveness, and ingenuity that enable one to take action and overcome obstacles. *Fortuna* are external factors, such as fate and opportunities that one cannot control. Successful people are those who are able to utilize *virtù* with the power of their *virtù*, so that they not only depend on luck but also act smart and resilient in every situation. *Virtù* and *Fortuna* are represented in the movie *Whiplash* as follows.



Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
01: 07: 05– 01: 07: 21	Taxi: Are you okay? Andrew: Yes, im going to get my sticks Taxi: No, stay away from the car, im calling 911. Andrew: Its okay, just a few more blocks.		Andrew, who had undergone intense training to the point of physical and mental exhaustion in order to achieve peak performance, suddenly faced a situation that was beyond his control. Nevertheless, Andrew resolutely refused to give in to the situation. Despite his serious injury, he continued to run to the concert.


*Table 4 virtù and fortuna in Whiplash (2014)*

Duration	Scene	Description
01: 41: 09– 01: 41: 45		Andrew Neiman, previously a victim of Terrence Fletcher's manipulation, was able to turn the situation around and turn the trap into a moment of triumph. This shows how individual skill can turn bad luck into success.

*Table 5 virtù and fortuna in Whiplash (2014)*

Duration	Scene	Description
01: 08: 30– 01: 10: 00		Andrew forced himself to perform despite being injured in a car accident on the way to the concert. The scene shows that Andrew fought his fate with his own determination.


*Table 6 virtù and fortuna Means in Whiplash (2014)*

Duration	Scene	Description
00: 31: 17– 00: 32: 23		Andrew practiced drumming with extreme intensity and obsessive dedication, constantly repeating plays until his hands were injured from the friction of the drumsticks. That illustrates that great success is often not the result of natural talent alone, but born out of suffering, relentless hard work, and an unwavering determination to achieve victory.


**Table 7** *Virtù and Fortuna in Whiplash (2014)*

### C. Fear as a Tool of Power

Machiavelli argues that it is safer for a leader to be feared than loved, as fear is more capable of control and devotion than love. However, fear should not be abused into hatred. Fear serves as a tool of power to encourage discipline and obedience, not to oppress or hurt excessively. Fear as a Power Tool is represented in the movie *Whiplash* as follows`

Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
00: 27: 08– 00: 28: 13	Terence Fletcher: Now, do you want to go too fast or too slow or do you want to follow my tempo?! Andrew: I will follow your tempo.		Terence Fletcher threw a chair at Andrew because he felt Andrew's drum tempo was not right. The action aims to create fear in Andrew to be obsessive about perfection.


**Table 8** *Fear as a Tool of Power in Whiplash (2014)*

Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
00: 28: 44– 00: 28: 54	Terence Fletcher: Now, answer my question, are you too fast or too slow? ANSWER! Andrew: Too fast.		Terence Fletcher humiliated Andrew in front of everyone by yelling and even slapping him repeatedly. Under tremendous mental and physical pressure, Andrew cried in front of his friends. However, Fletcher still did not show an ounce of sympathy. He continued training with absolute firmness, taking



Andrew's tears as a sign of weakness that should be destroyed, not pitied.


**Table 9** *Fear as a Tool of Power in Whiplash (2014)*

Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
01: 05: 37– 01: 05: 57	Terence Fletcher: If your ass isn't there with a stick in your hand or you make one mistake, one! I'll kick your ass back to Nassau being a page turner until you graduate or get expelled, when you're done at Shaffer, you can tell your Dad your success story, or we'll let Johnny Utah play. You choose Andrew: This is my part, I will be on your stage. Terence Fletcher: Asshole. You have 10 minutes to be on stage.		Terence Fletcher gives Andrew a stern reprimand for leaving his drumsticks behind, even threatening to expel him from the band. Fletcher's actions aim to instill fear in Andrew while encouraging him to pursue more perfection in his technical abilities.

**Table 10** *Fear as a Tool of Power in Whiplash (2014)*


#### D. Measured Hardness

Machiavelli states that the use of force can be justified if it is done in a measured manner, with clear objectives, and with the right strategy. Such force should be used when appropriate and necessary, not constantly or out of emotion. The goal is not revenge or senseless cruelty, but to create stability and effectiveness. Use of Measured Hardness is represented in the movie Whiplash as follows

Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
00: 27: 46– 00: 28: 06	Terence Fletcher: Are you too fast or too slow? Andrew: I don't know Terence Fletcher: Start counting.		In this moment, Terence Fletcher deliberately applies emotional violence, such as insults, intimidating interrogations, and physical slaps, in a measured and strategic

manner. His actions were not the result of spontaneous rage or directionless cruelty, but rather part of a purposeful plan. Fletcher created conditions of extreme emotional distress to push Andrew beyond the limits of his comfort, improve his rhythmic sensibilities and perfect his sense of tempo.


**Table 11** *Measured Hardness in Whiplash (2014)*

Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
00: 21: 58– 00: 22: 45	Terence Fletcher: For the record, Metz isn't phony, you're phony Erikson, but he doesn't know that, and that's bad enough.		Fletcher stopped the training session decisively, accusing Metz of playing “out of tune.” Although the fault was not actually Metz's, Fletcher still decided to fire him. Metz was dismissed not because of anything he did wrong, but because of his ignorance that he was actually playing correctly.

**Table 12** *Measured Hardness in Whiplash (2014)*

## 2. Terence Fletcher's Strategy to Achieve Success in the Movie


Terence Fletcher's strategy to achieve success in *Whiplash* is reflected in his extreme teaching methods. He emphasizes strict discipline, psychological pressure, and uncompromising standards of perfection. Fletcher believed that only through extreme pressure could one achieve the highest level of greatness. By creating a training atmosphere full of tension and fear, he pushed students beyond their comfort zone to reveal their full potential, just like he did with Andrew Neiman. Here are some of Terence Fletcher's strategies for achieving success that are reflected in the movie *Whiplash*

Duration	Dialogue	Scene	Description
00: 27: 08– 00: 28: 13	Terence Fletcher: Now, do you want to go too fast or too slow or do you want to follow my tempo?! Andrew: I will follow your tempo.		Terence Fletcher throws a chair at Andrew because he feels Andrew's drum tempo is not right. Terence Fletcher's harsh action aims to mold Andrew into a great musician.

**Table 13** Terence Fletcher's strategy to achieve success reflected in the movie *Whiplash* (2014)

Duration	Scene	Description
00: 57: 17– 01: 01: 27		The scene where Terence Fletcher forces the drummers to play the same part over and over again for hours until their hands hurt. Fletcher intentionally created a brutal rehearsal atmosphere, so that only the toughest and most persistent would survive and thrive.



**Table 14** Terence Fletcher's strategy to achieve success reflected in the movie *Whiplash* (2014)

Duration	Scene	Description
01: 28: 54– 01: 30: 50		In this scene, Terence Fletcher deliberately creates psychological manipulation to test Andrew Neiman's mental and emotional resilience. Fletcher's actions are not an oversight, but a deliberately designed strategy. By subjecting Andrew to a public failure, Fletcher wanted to find out whether Andrew would sink into shame and fear, thus halting his music career, or rise to the devastating challenge.

**Table 15** Terence Fletcher's strategy to achieve success reflected in the movie *Whiplash* (2014)

### 3. Fletcher's Motivation for Using Extreme Methods

Terence Fletcher applies a rigorous and stressful approach because he believes that conventional learning methods are not enough to produce great musicians. According to him, a person's true potential will only emerge if they are pushed to the limit, through extreme emotional and mental tests, to go beyond their limits. Fletcher is determined to create not just talented musicians, but legends like Charlie Parker who were born from an extraordinary struggle of failure and resurrection. Here are some reasons why Terence Fletcher used a successful strategy in the movie *Whiplash*.

Duration	Scene	Description
01: 40: 24– 01: 41: 41	 	<p>Both scenes above are evidence of the success of Fletcher's strategy as seen in the movie's closing scene, when Andrew Neiman gives a spectacular performance at a major jazz concert. Despite his previous humiliation, Andrew chooses to return to the stage and play an explosive drum solo with confidence on the song "Caravan." This performance makes Fletcher, who had been angry, finally smile with satisfaction and take over. This performance made Fletcher, who had been angry, finally smile with satisfaction and take over leading the band following Andrew's rhythm. The moment symbolized the recognition that Andrew had reached the level Fletcher had been looking for, not only technically superior, but also possessing true character and excellence as a musician. It proved that, although Fletcher's methods were ruthless, the end result was someone extraordinary.</p>

**Table 16** *The Reason Terence Fletcher did a success strategy in the movie Whiplash (2014)*

### 3.2. Discussion

#### 1. Indicators of Success in Machiavelli's Perspective Reflected in Whiplash

Machiavelli's concept of success is defined by the ability to achieve one's goals through strategic, and sometimes morally questionable, methods. This study finds that Whiplash vividly reflects four key Machiavellian indicators of success: the idea that "the ends justify the means," the balance between virtù and fortuna, the use of fear as a tool of power, and measured hardness. First, the idea that "the ends justify the means" is central to Fletcher's actions. He uses manipulation, verbal abuse, and even violence to push his students beyond their limits. Fletcher justifies these actions by focusing on the end result creating a musical genius. This is evident when he throws a chair at Andrew or breaks down his students emotionally (Tables 1–3). From Machiavelli's standpoint, such methods are acceptable as long as they lead to success, which they ultimately do when Andrew delivers a masterful performance at the end.

Second, the interplay between virtù (personal ability) and fortuna (luck or fate) is also demonstrated in the film. Andrew shows strong virtù through his relentless practice and refusal to give up, even after a car accident. Meanwhile, fortuna is seen in the unexpected opportunities and challenges he faces. The final performance illustrates how Andrew's virtù allows him to master his fate and turn potential failure into triumph (Tables 4–7). Third, Fletcher employs fear as a deliberate tool to instill discipline and control. According to Machiavelli, it is safer for a leader to be feared than loved, as fear can ensure obedience. Fletcher demonstrates this principle through public humiliation and psychological intimidation, which forces students to constantly strive for perfection (Tables 8–10). Though controversial, this method drives Andrew to reach new levels of excellence.

Machiavelli's idea of "measured hardness" strategic cruelty used to achieve a specific purpose is also evident in Fletcher's teaching style. Fletcher does not act out of uncontrolled anger but uses cruelty in a calculated way to break down and rebuild his students. His removal of a band member for playing out of tune, even if the person wasn't actually at fault, is a strategic move to instill fear and sharpen awareness (Tables 11–12). These tactics reflect Machiavelli's belief that a leader must sometimes act immorally in a calculated, purposeful way to maintain power and achieve goals.

## 2. Terence Fletcher's Strategy to Achieve Success in the Movie

Terence Fletcher's leadership strategy in *Whiplash* is grounded in the belief that excellence requires not just talent, but transformation, a painful and radical reshaping of the individual. Fletcher's methods are not merely educational techniques but deliberate instruments of psychological engineering. His approach is aligned with Machiavelli's view that power and control must be exercised with strategic ruthlessness to mold exceptional outcomes. Fletcher's strategy centers around several key elements: extreme pressure, deliberate failure, fear as motivation, and emotional manipulation. He applies these through controlled, repeatable tactics that serve a greater vision. For instance, Fletcher repeatedly humiliates Andrew Neiman, isolates him from his peers, and subjects him to long, grueling rehearsals (Table 14). These tactics are not haphazard; they are tools of refinement. He aims to eliminate mediocrity by creating an environment where only the most resilient can endure and emerge stronger.

This approach strongly resonates with Machiavelli's principle that a leader must sometimes abandon conventional morality to achieve greatness. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that "a prudent leader cannot, and should not, keep his word when it puts him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist" (Machiavelli, 1532:92). Fletcher embodies this pragmatism, his promises of mentorship or support are fleeting and often reversed when they no longer serve his goal. For example, when Andrew gains his trust and then falters, Fletcher immediately turns cold and punitive. The inconsistency is not carelessness; it is strategic unpredictability, a technique to keep students constantly alert and striving. Furthermore, Fletcher manipulates emotional highs and lows to test his students' thresholds. This aligns with Machiavelli's belief that cruelty, if applied correctly, can serve a positive political function: "Injuries ought to be inflicted all at once, so that, being less tasted, they offend less" (Machiavelli, 1532:83). In the film, Fletcher often switches from kind encouragement to harsh criticism without warning, creating a volatile environment in which students cannot become complacent. His sudden outbursts like throwing a chair, slapping Andrew, or public scolding are intense but calculated bursts of cruelty meant to shock students into peak performance.

Additionally, Fletcher weaponizes failure as part of his strategy. One of the most striking examples is when he sets Andrew up to fail during a public performance by giving him the wrong music. Rather than apologize or console him afterward, Fletcher observes his reaction closely. This scene (Table 15) shows how Fletcher uses disgrace not as punishment but as a



test: will Andrew surrender, or will he come back stronger? This mirrors Machiavelli's preference for leaders who seize opportunity in adversity who can turn disgrace into dominance. Fletcher's leadership is not democratic, compassionate, or nurturing. It is meritocratic, authoritarian, and transactional. He offers students one thing: a chance at greatness. But the price is total submission to his methods. In this way, his strategy represents an uncompromising Machiavellian structure: tightly controlled power, strategic cruelty, and the calculated destruction of weakness in service of a higher aim. Fletcher does not see students as fragile individuals; he sees them as raw material, potential masterpieces to be shaped by fire.

### 3. Fletcher's Motivation for Using Extreme Methods

Fletcher's motivation for employing such extreme and often abusive teaching methods is deeply rooted in his philosophical belief that greatness is forged in suffering. He is not merely trying to teach music; he is attempting to create the next Charlie Parker, the mythical jazz figure who, in Fletcher's view, would never have existed without harsh correction and relentless pressure. This belief is clearly articulated in one of the film's most pivotal lines: "There are no two words in the English language more harmful than 'good job.'" This statement reveals Fletcher's core conviction: praise breeds complacency, while pressure breeds greatness. From a Machiavellian perspective, this reflects a belief that human nature is fundamentally lazy and must be governed with fear and struggle to unlock potential. Machiavelli believed that leaders must shape their subjects' behavior through strict discipline, often invoking fear to control them. Fletcher does the same with his students, he terrorizes them into perfection.

Fletcher's obsession with greatness also reflects a deeper, almost tragic idealism. He does not hurt his students for personal pleasure or out of sadism; rather, he views pain as an essential ingredient in transformation. His logic is rooted in the idea that only those who survive extreme hardship can achieve anything extraordinary. In this sense, Fletcher aligns with Machiavelli's notion that a leader must be willing to sacrifice individual comfort for the stability and greatness of the state, or in Fletcher's case, for the birth of artistic genius. The final concert performance (Table 16) serves as the ultimate justification of Fletcher's philosophy. After being humiliated, betrayed, and broken, Andrew returns to the stage and delivers a performance that stuns both the audience and Fletcher himself. In that moment, Fletcher's smile is not just one of satisfaction, it is one of vindication. His method worked. He broke the boy and built the artist. This moment captures the essence of Machiavellian leadership: a ruthless path that leads to undeniable success.

Moreover, Fletcher's methods can be seen as a critique of modern education and societal norms. In a culture that often prioritizes self-esteem over achievement, Fletcher acts as a counterforce, a harsh reminder that excellence is not democratic. It is reserved for those who are willing to suffer, sacrifice, and risk everything. In this sense, his motivation is not purely personal; it is ideological. He believes he is fighting against a tide of mediocrity, and his brutal strategy is his weapon. Finally, Fletcher's motivation is deeply tied to legacy. Like a Machiavellian prince who wishes to leave behind a powerful state, Fletcher seeks to leave behind an immortal student, a musician so brilliant that his success will reflect back on the teacher. He believes that if he can create just one genius, all his cruelty will be justified. This is Machiavellian legacy-building: sacrificing morality today for glory that will last forever.

### 4. Conclusion

This study has examined Terence Fletcher's leadership strategy in *Whiplash* movie (2014) through the lens of Niccolò Machiavelli's theories of power and leadership. The analysis of Fletcher's character revealed that his approach to teaching, characterized by extreme measures such as manipulation, intimidation, and psychological pressure, aligns closely with Machiavellian principles. Machiavelli's assertion that "the ends justify the means" (1532) is clearly reflected in Fletcher's belief that the achievement of excellence in his students justifies the use of harsh and morally

questionable tactics. This research has shown that Fletcher's methods are not only an application of Machiavellian thought but also a reflection of the notion that success, particularly in high-stakes environments like music education, is often achieved through resilience, sacrifice, and the strategic manipulation of power dynamics. The application of Machiavelli's concepts of virtù (personal ability) and fortuna (luck or fortune) further enriched the analysis, demonstrating that success is not simply determined by talent or external factors, but also by the strength of character and the ability to endure adversity. Andrew Neiman's journey exemplifies this interplay, as his growth as a musician is not just the result of natural ability but also his resilience in the face of extreme challenges imposed by Fletcher. This study has also highlighted how Fletcher's use of fear, rather than aiming to destroy, is employed as a tool to build mental toughness and excellence, preparing his students for the rigors of the professional world.

The findings of this research contribute to the broader discourse on leadership, particularly in education, by providing a critical examination of Machiavellian principles applied in a non-political, educational context. While Fletcher's methods are extreme, they are not without merit in certain high-pressure environments where excellence is paramount. However, the ethical implications of such strategies must be carefully considered, particularly in terms of the psychological toll they may impose on students or employees. As this study has demonstrated, the manipulation of power for the sake of achieving excellence raises important questions about the balance between pushing individuals to reach their potential and ensuring their emotional and psychological well-being. In conclusion, this research has not only answered the central questions posed in the introduction, but it has also provided a comprehensive analysis of how Fletcher's leadership methods align with Machiavellian thought. The study underscores the notion that success in highly demanding fields is often achieved through sacrifice, struggle, and the purposeful use of power. Future research could expand on this analysis by exploring Machiavellian leadership in other professional or cultural contexts, examining the long-term psychological effects of such extreme methods, and further investigating the balance between achieving excellence and maintaining mental health in high-pressure environments.

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