

# Can We Truly Lead Without the Humanities?

A talk delivered to McGill University's [Building 21 Idea Laboratory](#)  
by [Dr. Norman B. Sandridge](#)  
Associate Professor of Political Science, Howard University

For a deeper dive into questions about leadership development through the study of the humanities check out my recent book, [Rise of the Benevolent Octopus](#), as well as my articles on Substack, including my concerns about the challenges AI poses to leadership development:

[https://sandridge.substack.com/?utm\\_campaign=profile\\_chips](https://sandridge.substack.com/?utm_campaign=profile_chips)

Here are a few recent articles:

- [A Brief Treatise on Sixty-three Key Concepts of Leadership](#)
- [Sixteen Key Concepts Regarding the Potential that Agents of Leadership Activate](#)
- [Humanity's Core Problem Right Now in One Neologism](#)

Also, check out the work of Kallion Leadership, Inc., a non-profit I co-founded in 2019 for leadership development through the humanities: [www.kallion.org](http://www.kallion.org)

## Part One: Five false arguments for the claim that you can't truly lead without the humanities

First False Argument: Only those who studied the humanities have ever truly led.

Second False Argument: There are famous leaders who studied the humanities, so that proves you need the humanities to lead.

Third False Argument: The mere consumption of humanities works will improve leadership. The more you consume, the better your leadership.

Fourth False Argument: More advanced humanistic study will lead to better leadership.

Fifth False Argument: All fields of humanities study will equally improve leadership.

## Part Two: The best approach I can think of

STEP ONE: Define Leadership

“The art of addressing the needs and activating the potential of others” (a paraphrase of Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus* 1.6.7)

STEP TWO: Identify “requisites” to practicing this art. Explore how necessary the humanities are to doing this.

- Does the study of the humanities give you **knowledge of the needs of others [REQUISITE ONE]**?
  - a. CLAIM 1.1: The more abstract the need, the more you need the humanities for your leadership.
  - b. CLAIM 1.2: The more psychological, ethical, and social the need, the more you need the humanities for your leadership.
  - c. CLAIM 1.3: The more a need is in tension with other needs, the more you need the humanities for your leadership.
  - d. CLAIM 1.4: The more a human need is unfamiliar to you because of differences of culture, race, gender, age/generation, or neurotype, the more you need the humanities for your leadership.
- Does the study of the humanities give you **knowledge of how to meet those needs [REQUISITE TWO]**?
  - a. CLAIM 2.1: In circumstances where a need is clearly understood and agreed upon, you may not need the humanities very much to know how to meet the need.
- Does the study of the humanities give you **knowledge of the potential of others [REQUISITE THREE]**?

- a. CLAIM 3.1: For many kinds of physical potential, intellectual potential, or skill, you probably do not need the humanities to know what human potential looks like.
  - b. CLAIM 3.2: In order to understand human social potential, political potential, or psychological potential, you probably do need the humanities, though this understanding could also be reached through observation and experience.
  - c. CLAIM 3.3: The more a person's potential is unfamiliar to you because of differences of culture, race, gender, age/generation, or neurotype, the more you need the humanities for your leadership.
- Does the study of the humanities give you **knowledge of how to activate that potential [REQUISITE FOUR]**?
  - a. CLAIM 4.1: In circumstances where a person may need careful instruction, persuasion, and motivation to reach their potential, you probably need the humanities.
- Does the study of the humanities help you identify and cultivate types of **motivation that are intense, durable, and aligned with addressing the needs and activating the potential of others [REQUISITE FIVE]**?
  - a. CLAIM 5.1: The study of the humanities can give you insight into your own motivation. It can help you think about forms of motivation that are intense and durable. Most importantly, it can help you game out how different motivations for leadership—money, power, control, prestige, good will—will affect your leadership.
- OVERARCHING CLAIM 6.1: In circumstances that require resourceful and versatile leadership, you probably need the humanities.
- FINAL CLAIM 7.1: Studying the humanities for leadership can be deliberate, e.g., trying to improve your speech and writing and also looking for examples of character to emulate and avoid. BUT studying the humanities for leadership development also works analogous to (sleep) dreaming: it gives us the opportunity **to strengthen countless weak associations** that turn out to be crucial to addressing the needs and activating the potential of others. Furthermore, when we study the humanities *together*, we have the added benefit of strengthening our social associations.

Congressman Jamie Raskin on contrasting White Houses (Kennedy, Trump) and using the humanities for leadership development:

I remembered something my dad once told me when I was in high school, about his experience working in the Kennedy White House. There was always a state of high chaotic energy there, he said, but the closer you got to the Oval Office and the president, where the most important decisions were being made, the quieter and calmer it got. When I asked why this was, he said that everyone on staff was scrambling to organize or respond to the events of the day, but the president was communing with history itself. That is why a president may seem to have time for extracurricular distractions like poetry, tweeting, squabbles with celebrities, romantic affairs, or golf: the actual work of government is being done elsewhere, and the president is just steering a very big ship, making minor adjustments to the ship's wheel, adjustments that have vast implications for our collective destinations and destiny. I imagined President Kennedy—whom my father liked very much but never idolized—communuing with Jefferson and Madison, with John Quincy Adams, with Lincoln and Grant and Frederick Douglass, with FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt, and with other leaders of the misty past as well as hypothetical presidents of the future.

Raskin presents a polar opposite situation for President Trump who is about as averse to studying the humanities as one can get:

With Trump, of course, I imagined the ambient noise level in the White House operating in reverse from the way my dad described it: it was probably eerily quiet in the staff quarters of the Trump White House, where people worked in abject terror of attracting Trump's attention, and louder and more frenetic as you got physically closer to Donald Trump himself—at which point, in the inner sanctum, you finally entered a world of careening, chaotic mental derangement and screeching rage (Jamie Raskin, *Unthinkable: Trauma, Truth, and the Trials of American Democracy* 294).