



## The Iron Lady's failed mid-career transition

**With the recent movie, *The Iron Lady*, leadership scholars like myself have seized the opportunity to reflect on the lessons of her life and career. In the film we see an old and diminished Maggie flashing back to Thatcher at the pinnacle of her power. But, perhaps the most important and the least obvious lesson— for Thatcher herself as well as for us— is about the midlife transition she failed to make; victim, as many of us, of her own success.**

From her early days as head of Oxford's conservative political association to her first moves as a politician, Thatcher's story is a textbook case on how to get power and, later, how to lose it. An outsider, she used her drive and hard work to get into the best position possible for growing her competencies, her network and her visibility. Elected to government before age 34 she alerted the press that there might be a good story in covering the "youngest ever Member of Parliament." Tapped to give her first speech, she picked a topic, freedom of the press, that she knew would interest the media, and then researched it until she became an expert. Her debut was brilliant and it was well covered by the media. It gave a preview of what would become her signature way of mastering the facts and out-preparing both rivals and opponents. As a former aide put it "I've seen members reduced to considerable distress when they realized she knew their case better than they did." She attracted powerful mentors who would groom her for bigger and better things. She also learned that she could outsmart almost anyone and that so intimidated most would bend to her will.

Moving into mid-career, she used her experience and reflection to crystallize a political identity and she embodied the message, her life story a metaphor for what she felt was missing in the UK: a sense of self-determination and redemption through hard work. You can agree or disagree with her political beliefs but she was coherent and she was authentic. This allowed her to stand out from the pack and clear the hurdle needed to break into the highest levels of business and politics. No matter how smart and well-connected you are, it is hard to get the top of your game without a differentiator.

But, as we all know: what got you here won't get you there.

Her success also began sowing the seeds of her own downfall.

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By then known to the world as the Iron Lady, Thatcher became more and more convinced about the rightness of her ideas and the necessity of her coercive methods to get the job done. She could still beat anyone into submission with the power of her rhetoric and conviction, and she was only getting better at it. Without my tenacity, where would we be, she told herself as ally after ally defected from her cause? Asked about why she chose to stand alone in her opposition to the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, she answered with a paranoia that is typical of the too-powerful: "I knew that they were ganging up on me. But, I had an expert put in a paper for me. Thank goodness I did!" Alone and embattled, she was eventually forced to stand down.

Looking over this remarkable story, I see the most important lessons in the middle of her career, when she paints herself into a corner, stuck in the Iron Lady identity trap of her own making. In one of my favorite moments from a mid-90's BBC documentary, Thatcher is asked about her legendary aversion to consensus. Flashing her famous blue eyes, she answered in measured tones: "If you look at the great religions, and the Judeo-Christian religion is really at the heart ... would you have those great guidelines if Jesus had said 'Brothers, I believe in consensus.'" After a long and piercing look, she answers own rhetorical question: "Of course not, you'd have nothing of value."

Having made her name on her steely and single-minded toughness, how could the Iron Lady reinvent herself as a collaborative leader in a changing landscape of relevant players? Always divisive, how could she refashion herself into a uniting force for new times? What would have been the transition? From Iron Lady to what? In the documentary, she tell us herself what she sees as the alternative: "there's not much sense in being a weak floppy thing in a chair, is there?"

Maggie's story is ours as well. We might see the

need to evolve but towards what? When the formula is working, how do we determine the shifting point? How do we come to value the polar opposite of everything by which we have defined ourselves?

If we are lucky, like her we come to know early on what we do well and in what arena we want to make a mark. Then, if we are successful, the hard part kicks in: we come to the point where we have to reinvent ourselves. What must we keep and what must we shed in order to advance and grow?

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