

Rehearsing Tomorrow's Leaders - the potential of mythodrama -

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In a recent article., Gary Hamel said:

There are a new set of challenges on the horizon. How do you build organizations that are as nimble as change itself? How do you mobilize... the imagination of every employee, every day? How do you create organizations that are highly engaging places to work in? And these challenges simply can't be met without reinventing our 100 year-old management model.

... the old model was "How do you get people to serve the organization's goals?" Today we have to ask, "How do you build organizations that merit the gifts of creativity and passion and initiative?" You cannot command those human capabilities. Imagination and commitment are things that people choose to bring to work every day - or not.

Hamel was espousing the changes he thought were imperative to management practice in order for businesses to thrive in a world transformed by technology and globalization. His thesis relevant to leadership was two-fold:

- i) traditional command-and-control models were obsolete in this turbulent, knowledge intensive, talent hungry, global and technology-enabled world, and
- ii) restricting leadership to the few at the top did not make good sense:

Too many executives seem to believe that while a few people in the company may be really clever and creative, most folks aren't. When you look at companies like Toyota, you see their ability to mobilise the intelligence of so-called ordinary workers. Going forward, no company will be able to afford to waste a single iota of human imagination and intellectual power.

¹ McKinsey Quarterly (2008) Number 1

Mobilising imagination, bringing passion and commitment to work, these are the challenges we have worked with over the past ten years. We have worked with global corporations, government and public sector groups, schools (teachers and pupils), the not-for-profit sector and in cooperation with leading business schools, observing and rehearsing people in the broadest range of leader roles. We have seen that every individual who chooses to develop has the potential to lead themselves and to lead others. Mythodrama has proved a powerful learning intervention that organisations we have worked with, tell us brings something unique to their leadership development programmes. This is perhaps best summarised by a director of a multinational telecommunications company who experienced the Mythodrama work :

'The single biggest challenge that faces business leaders is to attract, retain and develop the best people - to get them all working together to pursue a vision of some sort - firstly to identify that vision and then to lead the entire army off in that direction. And that is not an easy thing to do in such a dry, rational environment as business. That is where this program has really helped us by giving us a different vocabulary and making us step away from the numbers and look at things in the way that a Henry V figure might have looked at them.

'We truly believe that inspiring the greater workforce of eleven or twelve thousand people is something which the day-to-day vocabulary of normal business won't provide for - and Henry V can help us there.'

The Story of Mythodrama

Every academic, consultant, coach, teacher and parent, understands the power of story. Telling stories is part of human nature and a fundamental way that human beings learn. A story has the potential to bring complex patterns and relationships alive. Stories and myths are one of the universal artifacts of human culture. Shakespeare wrote some of the greatest stories about people, many about leaders. Warren Bennis, distinguished professor of business at the University of Southern California, recommends The Complete Works of Shakespeare as 'the best read' on Leadership and Change. He said, *At least read Henry IV, parts one and two, for a vision of heroic leadership. Courage is getting people to march behind your ideas.* And Joseph L Badaracco Jr., Professor of Business Ethics at Harvard Business School said: *Think of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. You could learn as much about leadership from that play as you would from reading any business book or academic journal.*

This explains where the 'Mytho'[in Mythodrama] comes from: the great stories and insights into human nature that Shakespeare created. The 'drama' is the second part of the learning experience. The method for getting the story across, the way meaning is made real and impactful.

Using Mythodrama as a leadership development intervention began for us in 1997. With colleagues at the Globe theatre [London] we studied Shakespeare's great plays as maps of human development and, after directing Henry V for the opening season of the Globe, we had the idea to present a Mythodrama experience to business leaders. We were encouraged by business guru Charles Handy and poet David Whyte - and were sponsored by the Office for Public Management. Participants at these workshops said the Mythodrama approach had a transformational effect. Their feedback was overwhelmingly positive,

² Fast Company (Sep 2004)

³ Harvard Business Review, March 2006

highlighting how they were caught-up with Henry's story and how easy it was to reflect on their own situation and experiences through the story. How they could rehearse new ideas and behaviors in the space created by the drama and under the inspiration of the actors/tutors in the room. This client affirmation was our "call to adventure", it was the excitement and positive energy we needed to make the move into Leadership Development from our actor/theatre pasts (see sidebar).

In the subsequent ten years, we have grown our team of theatre-trained consultants and have helped senior executives around the world to practice their potentials and develop their characters.

The great stories we use in our learning interventions include Henry V - as an inspirational leader; Julius Cesear to understand power, politics and influence; Macbeth to explore the danger of derailing behaviors and the potential for quiet leadership, evident in Prince Malcolm; the Tempest to understand the dynamics of leading change; and, As You Like It to enable positive culture change.

What Mythodrama - the methodology - employs is the power of storytelling to demonstrate the skills and behaviors of leaders. Mythodrama is an experiential way of preparing leaders for the unforeseen events that will ultimately define their leadership. It has proved to be a powerful learning intervention that enables people to bring all of themselves to work, to stand-up for what is important and adapt to meet new situations.

How Mythodrama Works - Examples from Shakespeare

The first play we developed for organizational leadership learning was Henry V, a story which embodies a vivid exploration of what it takes to be an inspirational leader. During the course of the play, many leadership issues arise - from communicating a vision to managing conflict and maintaining momentum, overcoming self-doubt and inspiring others.

The story of 'Henry V' is about a leader's journey. As heir to the throne, Prince Henry is not a credit to his crown, but is transformed when he steps into his new role as King. Because of his misspent youth, he has to establish a better reputation and win the respect of his followers before uniting them to a common, legitimate purpose and leading them to France to reclaim England's lands.

In France, the project has good days and bad. Henry uses his natural leadership talents to contend with the challenges and obstacles on his army's path. The climax of the play is the field of battle at Agincourt, where Henry and his tired, hungry, worn-out troops must face the enemy. It is here that we see the warrior leader in action, but in preparation for this day, Henry has a restless night where he has to face his own doubts and fears, challenge his own motives and beliefs. After the battle and victory for England, Henry has to turn his attention to healing relationships with France a task which forces him to take-on yet another leadership style. We learn many things that are relevant to leaders from Henry's journey, but a crucial one is the multifaceted nature of the task. Henry's success was, in part, the result of being able to play more than one role.

⁴ J L Badaracco (2002) Leading Quietly - an unorthodox guide to doing the right thing

At the beginning of a learning event, our theatre-trained consultant/facilitators relate Shakespeare's myth, creating the atmosphere of the play, explaining the storyline and inviting executives to get involved with the events and issues, finding ones that are particularly relevant to their individual situation. As in a workshop, we have chosen some Acts from the play as the focus of this paper.

A Sense of Purpose

A sense of purpose gives meaning to the everyday decisions and actions people take. 'Why am I doing this?' and 'What am I trying to achieve?' are vital questions that link individuals and the tasks they do to their work context. This is both fundamental and plain common sense, but is often given little attention and time by leaders at all levels of the organization. Leaders who know the value of aligning their people to the task have the answers to these questions and communicate them to their followers - often. Great leaders communicate messages about purpose and direction with belief and confidence.

In the play, Henry is newly ascended to the throne, having put behind him a dissolute youth spent haunting the taverns of London in the company of low life. He now needs something to unite people behind him, to demonstrate what he stands for as a leader and his worthiness to rule. It comes in the shape of his claim to the throne of France and the chance to wage a war.

This cause is legitimate and the 'right' thing to do. Of this, Henry is assured. He has consulted with his top management team - the nobles. His challenge is to convince others and instill in his followers the same sense of purpose and belief.

Ultimately people buy into the personal, not the abstract. People choose to follow people - not the vision/mission statement, not the logo or the strap line. Whilst needing to understand the rational reasons why the organization is taking this, or that, direction, it is how followers *feel* about their leader, what they *sense* about the commitment and belief this person has in her own words that motivates them to fight for the cause - or not. A leader who has the skill of inspiration, understands the need to appeal to both head and heart and can communicate 'belief' and commitment.

Using Henry as our guide, what we do in our workshops is to let people act out the consultation and commitment process. Participants can explore different strategies, rehearse using a different language and practice inhabiting new styles. People will follow someone who is honest, authentic and passionate about what they want to do. Communicating a vision is about combining rational business reasoning with emotional, value-led reasons that genuinely resonate with people.

Facing the Dark Night

Henry's enterprise in France runs far from smoothly and after numerous setbacks he and his troops are faced with encountering the superior numbers of the French army at Agincourt. The eve of battle is Henry's dark night when he doubts his ability to succeed. It is three o'clock in the morning and he admits that : *'tis true that we are in great danger'*. The dilemma he now has to face is if he and his army have arrived at this point

in the campaign because of his poor decision-making or, if this is just one last hurdle he has to overcome in the journey to success. Given how badly the campaign has gone so far, does he still have the right to ask people to follow him?

In our workshops, when we ask people to decide what Act of the play most interests them, this is a popular choice. It is attractive because it takes Henry and us, to the heart of what it is to be a leader - why people want to be one and what qualities they have which will enable them to succeed. The dark night is about facing one's innermost fears, doubts and uncertainties, especially in a crisis. There is a point in most meaningful projects when leaders are forced to ask some fundamental questions: 'Why am I doing this?', 'Why did I take this job in the first place?', 'Is this still the right thing to do?' and 'Am I the right person to do it?' Such moments are the times when we discover resources we never thought we had or alternatively that old modes of thinking and behavior are not enough to carry us through. Being a leader is about being brave enough to face up to one's deepest fears and being willing to dig deep to find out what inspires us. Without inspiration, we cannot inspire others.

What we try to do through mythodrama is to encourage people to acquire active self-awareness so that, as a leader, they are able to better manage behaviors in themselves and others. With this foundation, a leader should be able to demonstrate the openness, courage and compassion needed to build trusting and positive relationships inside and outside the organization.

Developing Presence

The most famous scene in 'Henry V' is the speech the king makes before the Battle of Agincourt. '*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers...*', these are powerful words, beautifully constructed and designed to rally followers to invest a last heroic effort in the cause. The lesson, however, goes beyond the words. Having presence and authority in leadership is the result of a more complex bundle of skills, including hearing, seeing, touching, gaining trust and being open with followers.

It's about understanding people, especially those you have to lead, and showing empathy. Before making the speech, Henry has wandered the English camp in disguise, listening to what the ordinary troops are thinking and feeling. Ask any manager if they listen and they will say of course they do but their position as a manager means that the troops may not honestly open up as to what they really think and feel.

Having learnt about the fears and uncertainties of his troops, Henry is able to deliver a speech that addresses them honestly. He doesn't, for instance, say that it's all going to be alright and nobody is going to die. It would be a lie that no one would believe. Instead he says, '*For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother.*' In other words, we are all in this together, we stand side-by-side. By saying this, everyone becomes a king for this fight against the odds. What Henry does is raise everyone up to his level of importance.

He goes on : '*And gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accursed they were not here and hold their manhoods' cheap while any speaks that fought with us upon St Crispin's day*'. To put it another

way, you will be the envy of others who were unlucky enough not to be here. Not that anyone standing in a muddy field and contemplating the prospect of being slaughtered would think of themselves as lucky but Henry makes it seem so by projecting what the survivors will feel in the future. He is giving them a future, a positive picture that takes them beyond the fight they must face tomorrow and, that future is worth going toward.

Having faced the leader's self doubt, learnt how to sense and feel the mood of the led, knowing how to put into words a picture of the future and raise others to the level of kings - above their own fears, this is the wisdom Henry shares with us and we can use to practice the art of authentic leadership.

Turning Battlefields into Gardens

Against all odds, Henry is victorious at the Battle of Agincourt. Having won the war, he must now win the peace. It is time for Henry to show us a new face of leadership.

In modern times, Winston Churchill offers us an instructive example. Although a charismatic and inspirational war leader, when it came to peacetime, he had no vision to offer the electorate who chose a decidedly uncharismatic leader, Clement Attlee, instead. But what Attlee lacked in charisma, he more than made up for in vision, the promise of a better future in the shape of the 'welfare state'.

In Henry's case, he recognizes the need for change in order to meet the new challenge of peacetime and he turns from warrior into lover to woo Katherine, the daughter of the King and Queen of France. No matter how uncomfortable this new role is, Henry knows he must take it on in order to turn his victory at Agincourt into something lasting and substantial. His goal is to secure marriage to Katherine to cement the union of England and France.

One of the oldest and most persistent metaphors for business is the military one - fighting against the odds, struggling to achieve targets, battling with the competition. It is a picture that resonates strongly, it is popular and easily understood - but it is not sustainable or appropriate as the *only* way for organizations to be. Different contexts require different modus operandi. There are strategic alternatives. There are times when the leader needs to tend the health of the organization, repair bridges with the outside world, nurture and develop talent, stimulate new ideas to take hold and grow.

In the play, it is the 'garden' of France that Henry must now turn his attention to. The battle is over, he has to put aside his armour and take on a new mantle of leadership that is not based on being the warrior. He must turn the battlefield into a garden.

Shakespeare's story of Henry as a peacemaker provides powerful material for our workshops. It allows us to explore the behaviors behind this face of leadership and to rehearse the skill of being a leader who can restore organizational health and take responsibility for the future wellbeing and sustainability of the business.

Transforming Business Leadership

Authentic leaders are ordinary people able to draw on extraordinary talents. They are prepared to bring themselves to work, to stand up for what is important, and to adapt appropriately to meet new situations. These leaders are emotionally intelligent and self-aware, knowing their own strengths and limitations. They develop others, who choose to follow them not because they have to, but because they want to. They sustain their people and their culture in an ethical manner, building a platform for long-term success and high-impact performance. They inspire consistently, tell compelling stories, lead others through complex problems to collaborative decisions and are committed to leaving the world a better place.

Shakespeare's great mythical leaders provide a means to study the traits of authenticity. As one of the keenest observers of human behaviour, the combinations of characters and situations Shakespeare created in his plays, make for enduringly relevant and rich case studies about leaders and followers. Mix metaphor with drama as a teaching and rehearsal intervention and the learning experience is powerful and effective. In a world where change is everyday reality, where leadership needs to be widely dispersed through the organisation, where imagination, creativity and commitment are what you need employees to bring to work everyday, there is great value in taking this different approach to leadership education.

Sidebar

Olivier Mythodrama is a team of theatre-trained consultants dedicated to the idea of applying the skills and insights of theatre, psychology, philosophy and the arts to the development of authentic leaders in organizations across all sectors, public and private, commercial and not-for-profit. The founder, Richard Olivier, son of Sir Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright, has been a leading theatre director for over ten years and directed 'Henry V' for the opening of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London in 1997. He has worked extensively in the fields of organizational and personal development.

Olivier Mythodrama was born out of Richard's work with 'Henry V' for Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and his collaboration with like-minded and creative individuals who helped to shape the thinking behind - and subsequent formation of - the company. These include Nicholas Janni, renowned theatre director, Ben Walden a member of the inaugural company at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, William Ayot a poet and playwright and Michael Boyle, a member of the European Society for Communicative Psychotherapy.

Olivier Mythodrama was created in 2001 and now presents learning interventions around the world.