

**Leadership:
The Story of Heroes and Princes**

by

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I recently examined a considerable number of book reviews submitted by postgraduate business students who were asked to select a book of their choice and critique it for insights that the book offers in terms of leadership development. The majority selected an account of a noted personality such as the Pope, Helmut Schmidt, ex-president of the Federal Republic of Germany, Clive Lloyd, past captain of the West Indian cricket team and Jan Carlsson, ex-chief executive of the Swedish international airline, SAS. They made interesting reading.

While reading these accounts, I was reminded of the emphasis we put on the success story and the hero in our society. The accounts I read were of people who did make a difference and offered insights into leadership and identified some of the attributes that need to be addressed in leadership development programs. It also made me aware of the overemphasis we sometimes place on high profile personalities in business, politics and sport — to the point where we cannot discern the hype from the reality. This observation did not arise from the people identified in the book reviews, but from the many books and articles that I have read.

The purpose of the paper is to say we need heroes. However, we need to recognise hype when we see it and we need to make sure we don't underemphasize the impact that low profile personalities have on our lives — the unsung heroes.

We live in a world of hype. Why? Over-zealous people are finding more imaginative and effective ways of representing and presenting the truth, whatever the truth may be. We are regularly accused of being caught up in the excitement, the mystery, the excesses of someone's story. And the truth is a story, an explanation of something we have an interest in and collectively accept on its merits.

Leadership is a topic that the business world in particular has a great interest in at the moment. The hype centers around establishing a strong connection between a good leader and making money, or between a saviour and salvation. How do we lead an organisation, a team, a society to a dream — the million dollar question? To Al Dunlap, when he took over at Scott Paper Company, it was a question of downsizing and turnaround for a \$100 million pay cheque for less than three years work as chief executive. For the Pope, it is the reinforcement of a set of values to maintain one of the world's oldest organisations.

The books are full of heroes, of princes and of princesses. But the prince is generally portrayed as the hero and the princess as the one to be saved; good old masculine stories that need to be desensitised in our new, politically correct world of *prins*. Prince Charming

does it with a kiss. Robin Hood, prince of thieves, does it with the antics of a delinquent. Machiavelli's prince does it with manipulative finesse.

Metaphorically speaking, the prince, in particular, represents a type of leader elevated by romance, myth and legend, the essence of a good story. Many of our heroes, and even villains, are seen as leaders because they are elevated above the crowd. They have a uniqueness because of the way they are regarded and because of their impact on particular groups of people. Their elevation comes from a position of privilege, respect, crisis or specific identification with the person and role. And to the sceptic, their elevation comes because there is money in it, as well as a degree of substance. The press is always looking for a good story and journalists know that the public loves a hero.

The Australian Navy and the Air-Sea Rescue Services were presented as heroes for rescuing two yachtsmen and one yachtswoman who got themselves into difficulties in treacherous seas between Australia and the Antarctic. The Englishman, Tony Bullimore, in particular, became a household name for surviving in his capsized yacht for several days. To Channel 7 in Perth, a local cameraman became a company hero for generously giving Tony Bullimore his cap (as the saying goes, to protect an Englishman from the midday sun). The significance of this was that the Channel 7 insignia was registered around the world by all of the early TV and press shots of the rescued sailor.

Sometime after the saturated coverage of these events, an actor and ex-trawler deckhand wrote a small piece to the editor of a regional newspaper. You could tell he was not amused by this sort of hype and the elevation that various parties get from the decision by media organisations to select their targets for elevation. He complained that ordinary people such as trawler men who fish the waters of Tasmania for a living, would be lucky to get even one helicopter in the event of a drama. He referred specifically to rescue operations involved with the disappearance of two friends in these waters.

The rescue did have its leaders and heroes. But a much bigger story needed to be told of the event, rather than a three minute grab on TV news. One such account of a rescue that identifies ordinary people becoming heroes and leaders under adversity is given by Rob Mundle (1999) on the disastrous 1998 Sydney to Hobart yacht race. These accounts remind us of the great potential and strength of ordinary people to rise to the challenge. We need to look for more stories of such ordinary people being heroes for a moment, a day, or a week.

Many accounts of the two world wars told of the deeds of kings, queens, emperors, prime ministers and generals. They were the heroes. But it was the ordinary people who did extraordinary feats. Peter Drucker (1996) related a story in the classroom. The students had to critique a book on the Great War. One student observed that all of the books described the war as one of total military incompetence and wondered how that could be. The teacher quickly responded that not enough generals were killed.

One of the themes that persist in conversations I have with managers and professionals in medium to large organisations is their frustration and sense of helplessness in making a

difference. They can see what needs to be done but, for one reason or another (mainly to do with internal politics, relationships and leadership incompetence or non-competence, rather than technical issues), they perceive that the first step has to start somewhere else, generally higher up the status chain. They yearn for heroes in their midst to give them the spark. James O'Toole presents some interesting points regarding contemporary leadership and this sense of disempowerment in his interpretation of Christ coming to Brussels.

“The excruciating complexity of contemporary leadership was captured graphically in the influential nineteenth-century painting on the cover of this book. One’s first glimpse of *Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889* takes the breath away. The colours are garish, the multitude of faces depicted is surreal, and the daring theme is fittingly grand for the vast expanse of wall the painting occupies at the Getty Museum in Malibu, California ... The subject matter is a crowded street scene, the nineteenth century equivalent of a New York ticker-tape parade to honour the return of a conquering hero. The celebrating crowd is frenzied, the myriad participants all joyously doing their own wild and crazed things. There is a band with a drummer in the foreground, but nobody is marching to his beat. This is a chaotic party — colourful, glorious, raucous ... ” (O’Toole, 1995, p. 1).

O’Toole is describing the 1888 painting by Belgian artist James Ensor. The title mentions Christ, but O’Toole asks where is Christ in all this confusion? He suggests you need to double-check the title to see if you have read it correctly because if the title is correct, shouldn’t Christ be in the forefront, leading the parade? Shouldn’t Christ be the focal and visual standout in the painting? O’Toole points out that after much searching, “the Redeemer is finally located in the background, a little to the left of center, almost lost in a throng of revellers that threatens to engulf him ... ” (O’Toole, 1995, p. 2).

In Christianity, Christ is elevated to the position of prince of princes. Even in death, His cross is placed upon a hill overlooking the crowd. Why then is this Prince lost in Ensor’s crowd? The elevation occurs in the context of time and culture. Being lost in a crowd can reflect a different time and different culture. Ensor was sensitive to the social changes and impending chaos coming out of what O’Toole describes as the secular democracy of nineteenth century Europe. O’Toole gave an example of seventy-six channels of cable television as one of the new cultural horrors to emerge and make sure that old traditions give way. The drummer boy in the painting could very well be represented by the television set.

For centuries, Christ rose above the crowd and, suddenly, an expressionistic artist loses him in the crowd. How could he possibly rise to the fore in the new order of individualism, rights, equality and political correctness? While Christ will still be the prince of princes for Christians, this 1888 scene in Brussels indicates the significant power of the crowd in elevating or obliterating individuals. This is in contrast to those who prescribe, rather than ascribe, transformational and charismatic qualities on individuals for social control and change. The frenetic street scene in Brussels depicts the chaos and turbulence of organisational life today, leaving us to wonder where the starting point is for would-be leaders and change agents.

This new breed of heroes is made up of ordinary people grappling with the challenges of the knowledge era, computers and changing work demands. Most don't know the term 'transformational leadership' which, according to Carnell (1995), is both appealing and uninspiring. They act, they support, they show the way. They share the limelight. They take the backseat, as well as the front seat, regularly. They help their colleagues to take the first step. They don't seek elevation. Their stories go untold. They know what the crowd yearns for.

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