

Equipping the Emerging Organizational Heroes

By John Michael De Marco

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Is there room for an OD Practitioner to be both consultant *and* artist?

OD, as we all understand, is a synthesizing approach that draws upon multiple practices and disciplines to accomplish its aims of serving others to lead sustainable change. Under its wide umbrella, OD will interface with and incorporate arenas such as behavioral science; change processes; diagnostics; leadership development; performance coaching; and systems thinking, among others.

Interestingly, many of these same practices and disciplines find parallels and even ancestry with numerous aspects of the humanities (such as myth; religion; philosophy; literature; theater; art; music; film; and history itself) that have spoken in a startlingly similar voice to members of nearly all cultures as compelling expressions resonate with a limitless audience who, despite its incalculable diversity, shares across all eras. The humanities themselves interact with so many slices of life—such as love, pain, hope, politics, commerce, psychology, and so forth—that it seems many of the same dynamics that shape organizational culture also help compose haunting expressions of human creativity.

The a universal captivation for a compelling story. The intentional OD practitioner, therefore, will draw lucid threads between the humanities and his or her services, in order to create powerful learning moments and sustainable takeaways for customers.

During Linkage's *Best Practices of Talent Management Summit* in San Francisco in November, I will present a workshop entitled "Equipping the Emerging Organizational Heroes." The 90-minute session will unpack the cross-functional mentoring and strengths coaching approach that my organization, Health First Inc., is using to build an arsenal of talent. I will discuss methods for aligning mentoring and coaching programs with strategic identity and initiatives; how to identify the best candidates for mentoring and coaching; and how to create, facilitate and measure the operational impact of both mentoring and coaching programs.

A key emphasis of the workshop, however, will be the value of equipping emerging leaders to plumb depths of *character*—while giving them the tools they need for success. I plan to pose the question, "How can the rise of fresh leadership be a story in and of itself, and not just a successful talent management maneuver for an organization?"

To deliver such a takeaway, I am packing the presentation with metaphors from the timeless "journey of the hero" archetype—made famous in recent decades by the writings of the late Joseph Campbell (see *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*) but found across all cultures and in most great literature and films. Study the shared elements of the most riveting stories ever told—from Homer's *The Odyssey* to the Old Testament's accounts of King David, to the blockbuster film *Titanic* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* phenomenon—and you will gradually observe a ubiquitous, progressive sequence:

- ◆ A call to adventure, which the hero may willingly embrace or be forced to undertake through circumstances or events
- ◆ Supernatural aid, whereby a guide, mentor or teacher comes alongside the hero, often providing key tools or weapons for the hero's arsenal
- ◆ Crossing into the dangerous unknown
- ◆ A succession of trials or tests
- ◆ Coming to terms with crucial relationships

- ◆ The accomplishment of a worthy goal or securing of a precious prize
- ◆ Returning as a much-matured leader to serve humankind, with individual desires more fully enmeshed with global needs

What are the parallels between this mythical heroic journey, and the potential adventure available for the leader who truly wants to make a sustainable difference? How can practitioners help clients to see the enduring value of speaking and acting beyond their comfort zones; of seeking out the tools and insights of wiser leaders; of being willing to take a few key risks where everything is on the line; of doing the hard and often awkward work of building accountable relationships and unleashing the potential that surrounds them in their team; and of utilizing significant accomplishments to better solidify themselves as the chief stewards of an organization, rather than simply consolidating power and influence?

We can do so, I believe, through the application of the right metaphors that unite heart and mind and deepen a leader's thirst for integrity and effectiveness. I would assert that the driving factor behind the disillusionment, disloyalty and lack of vision impacting much of today's organizational culture is that we have lost a shared sense of our place a grander story. Leaders with character must feel they are part of something more than just climbing the ladder, building a retirement nest egg or helping a company increase market share. The grander story is already written for anyone who desires to read it, but savvy practitioners must crack the cover for those they serve and, often, turn up the light as well.

Peter Block, in his magnificent book *The Answer to How Is Yes*, discusses how the most important organizational questions center on what is worth doing and what matters the most. Much of our entrenched leadership is still caught up in what works rather than what matters. OD practitioners have an exciting opportunity through the lens of the humanities to coach, mentor and equip decision-makers who aspire to more than simply meeting the demands of the moment.

But in order to help emerging leaders be captivated by this sense of participating in universal myths, practitioners must first become enamored themselves. This requires the rewarding investment of growing more steeped in the works and perspectives of artists past and present...while continuing to stay on the curve with the economists and engineers whom Block notes wield the most influence today. Here are several more examples that are at the curious practitioner's fingertips.

Greek mythology brings us the unfortunate character of Tantalus, whose name serves as the foundation for our modern use of the word "tantalize." Punished for an egregious misdeed, Tantalus was forced by the gods to stand in a pool of water that disappeared whenever he was tempted to stoop down for a drink. Furthermore, branches of fruit grew just above his head; but whenever he reached up to grab hold of something to eat, the wind would sweep the fruit away from him.

The eternal frustration felt by Tantalus of seeing something so close but beyond out his grasp has been felt—albeit, to a far less extreme level—by anyone who has allowed themselves to remain stuck in the wrong fit when it comes to their vocation. Far too many persons settle for less than what their hard-wired talents call them toward, never allowing this latent potential to develop into strengths. Stuck in a tepid pool of mediocrity, these individuals catch glimpses of passion and excellence but can never quite get their arms around the opportunities to unleash them. How can the symbol of Tantalus help the OD practitioner drive home the value of leaders developing their strengths and learning to choose the best fit?

A great parable of embracing change is found with the lead character of Saul Bellow's novel *Henderson the Rain King*, published in 1959 at the height of the post-war period. A millionaire

pig farmer who from a materialistic perspective “has it all,” Henderson feels a lack of any meaningful connection or passion in his life. Hoping for a change of pace and a fresh perspective or epiphany, he heads to Africa—where a series of events lead to the locals declaring him to be their Rain King, the one who will bring about an end to the oppressive drought plaguing their village.

Henderson engages in numerous philosophical discussions with the village’s king, Dahfu, and through this relationship gradually begins to see that life is more than just the slow wasting away to which he has reduced it. Instead, each person has the opportunity to embrace a succession of rebirths, or transformations, through engaging their imagination. Life, Henderson learns, can be a journey of ongoing spiritual growth, ultimately geared toward seeking to love others well. The protagonist leaves the village with the intent of becoming a doctor when he returns to his home. Before his departure the long-awaited rain falls down, symbolizing how the parched landscape of Henderson’s own soul has at last been nurtured.

As I look back and examine my own seasons of “drought,” they have been windows when I was learning and growing the least—times when I had resigned myself to things as they were without seeking to elicit meaningful change. Organizations and companies, too, hit these patches when leaders or employees are looking to the corporate skies for some evidence of impending showers—perhaps hoping a “Rain King” in the form of the latest innovation, maverick executive or other quick-fix will show up.

And yet, as Henderson found, both individually and organizationally the imagination to give us birth anew is right at hand. What is holding us back from daring to dream and achieve? How can Saul Bellow help us equip leaders to be successful, creative agents of transformation?

A famous 20th Century play was the Irishman Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The entire story concerns two tramps literally waiting by the side of a road for the arrival of someone named Godot, with whom they have an appointment. Two others show up at some point to taunt the waiters. Eventually a boy comes along and declares that Godot will not arrive that day, but is coming the next day. The play ends with the tramps deciding that Godot will never show up, and they should move on. But they don’t move along. They just stay there.

Beckett’s entire play is a study in futility, a window into inertia. And it holds a mirror up to much of the excuses-making that disguises itself as productivity in organizations. How can Samuel Beckett help us equip leaders to hold themselves and others more accountable for actual results?

What can T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* teach us about untapped organizational talent? How do the tragedies of the Trojan War shine a light on the dangers of failing to effectively manage conflict? How do the antics of *Great Expectations*’ Pip underscore the value of emotional intelligence? How can Wordsworth help us teach leaders to practice the operation of integrated, holistic systems?

Or what about the mythological plight of King Midas, who was granted his wish that everything he touched be turned into gold but lived to regret it? What are the applicable management lessons found in Charon, the ferryman of the Styx River who brought the souls of the dead into the underworld; Charon merely steered; his shadow did the actual rowing. What does Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* teach us about the thirst for power, and how can we distill lessons from such a massive book and make them relevant for the leaders we serve on a regular basis?

A humanities-driven mindset can help us facilitate powerful insights, conversations and rallying points through crafting memorable analogies that connect story with practice. The savvy use of metaphors, symbols or motifs can even brand a particular OD service across a company or

institution, reinforcing its internalization. While popular tools grow stale and fade like fashion trends, the breadth and depth of the humanities at the enterprising practitioner's disposal ensures that the well never has to run dry.

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