

# The hero's journey: leading organisational change

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Joseph Campbell was a philosopher, lover of stories and myths, and a seeker of wisdom who lived in the first half of the 20th century. He dedicated his life to studying stories across different cultures and languages, finding that in many of them there is a common thread. One of these threads, or rather a universal story that emerged as the underlying theme in all these stories, is referred to it as "the hero's journey". It is the basis of most Hollywood films, various books and stories we read as children and adults ranging from *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Hobbit*, *Captain America*, to *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

So how do fiction and Hollywood impact on a leader, you may ask. The story of the hero's journey offers a valuable map to leaders committed to transforming their organisations or teams. Analysis of successful transformation stories, whether individual or team or organisational, shows the same basic storyline as the hero's journey. Understanding the hero's journey can help business leaders navigate the complex process of driving sustainable change. It provides us with an archetype that can help the leader make meaning of both external and internal experience in the process of change.

The transformation process is an adventure and a heroic journey. It is not a problem to be solved with a linear or creative problem-solving process or the successful execution of a well-integrated plan in a controlled manner. Real transformation does not happen without adventure. Conflict, false starts, false dawns, doubt and surprise is an inherent part of transformation.

## A potential hero, an ordinary person

The hero's journey starts with someone, a potential hero, an ordinary person, who lives in a comfortable and familiar world. One day this person becomes aware of a "call to adventure". The awareness of the challenge, and the growing sense that the world as it used to be will not be appropriate for the future, drives the hero to step out of the "run of the mill world" on a quest or adventure.

According to Joseph Campbell, stories often start with an unwilling hero. The main character often tries to refuse the call to adventure. He may try to maintain the status quo or be so busy with distractions and worries of the day that he ignores the signs that a hero quest is necessary. Usually the call to adventure becomes more urgent and intense until the hero can no longer ignore it. Similarly, as leaders we are often forced into action by a sense of urgency or crisis after initially either consciously or unconsciously denying the need for innovation or change.

As with every good story there is a point when the "call to action" can no longer be refused and venturing into the darkness of the unknown is inevitable. A significant point made by Campbell is that in order for the journey to qualify as that of a hero it needs to be his own path rather than following someone else's and, on this path, the hero must face his own dragons and struggles.

In the context of business transformation, the hero's journey takes place on various levels.

## **The leader's personal journey**

There is firstly a personal journey that the leaders need to undertake to be able to support the process. Transformation heroes realise that the external change will also require inner change. The quest to achieve success in the external world is typically dependent on a parallel process of character transformation. Simply put, if leaders do not change, the organisation cannot change.

In novels and movies, the personal journey is a mythological process where something needs to die for something to live. Each leader needs to complete his own journey, which may include the unlearning of mindsets and behaviours or acquiring new skills.

In our experience of working with leaders on this path, a key theme is the leader's journey around moving from adaptation to the external and ultimately greater personal authenticity.

## **The leadership team journey**

The second journey is the leadership team journey. Organisation transformation is a complex endeavour that does not need the added complexity of leaders pulling in different directions. It is not an easy process and requires a highly committed and aligned senior leadership team to have any shot at success. Leadership teams need to fight and slay dragons relating to politics, mistrust and silo functioning. It takes courage to be honest and wisdom to be compassionate to break down the barriers in pursuit of a united leadership front.

## **The organisational journey**

The third journey is the most complex - leading the organisation into the forest to change individual and collective behaviour. Organisational transformation requires that the whole leadership team and all the people must step into the unknown.

Often the people are very comfortable in their own space of cynicism, lack of trust and "run of the mill" disengaged functioning. Why would they want to embark on an adventure with all the associated discomfort and hard work to fight for an organisation that they have withdrawn their passion and creativity from?

The leader needs to paint a simple vision, a dream, which is convincing enough so people will be prepared to take up the call to adventure. Leaders need to share the vision frequently in a simple, memorable format and keep it relevant to all company initiatives. The closer the link to existing company initiatives, the more relevant and top of mind the transformation journey will be. Positive language and support through providing staff with skills and tools to deal with forthcoming challenges are essential to the hero journey.

Successful organisation heroes know that the only sustainable strategy to ensure joint responsibility is one of engagement. They know that the leadership team cannot do it on their own. Negotiating the dragons will take collective wisdom and responsibility, and the hearts and minds of everybody.

The frame of the hero's journey helps allow us to reinterpret the difficulties of change as essential ingredients rather than annoying distractions. It helps the leader to begin to recognise the obstacles the hero encounters as fertile territory for change; real opportunities for discovery.

The frame reminds us that the transformation process cannot be managed by executing a recipe. Driving transformation is as much an unfolding art as a science. Leaders need to keep their finger on the pulse and adjust as necessary. No matter how well you plan, transformational processes are seldom clean and crisp. It is never a linear process where the entire journey, with key successes, potential challenges and pitfalls, is clear from the outset.

Be aware that how you manage the change process sends more powerful messages about what the future culture will be than what is said. People will take their cue more from what you do as a leader than what you say. After completing their journeys, the heroes return to the normal life, but as a changed people. They have been transformed and will now use their new perspectives and skills to serve their communities in a more profound manner. By the end of successful organisational transformation journeys, leaders are different, teams are different and the organisation is different. They can now serve each other and their clients in new ways.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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