The Courageous Leader in a Modern Organizational Context

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In a modern organizational context, there is a style of leadership that focuses not so much on personal bravery in defending the organization against an external enemy (common in a premodern organizational context) as on the capacity of the leader (as manager) to instill organizational bravery in those with whom this leader works – this is a process of EMPOWERMENT. The "enemy" doesn't reside outside the organization. It resides inside the organization and can take on many forms. The enemy might be manifest in rivalry between different departments inside the organization or in the misunderstanding that exists among individuals or groups within the organization. The courageous leader who is operating in a modern organization is effective if she can manage the conflict between these departments, groups or individuals. At an even more profound level, the enemy resides within the power differentials that operate within virtually all organizations. Those who are "in power" control things and those who have little power feel as if they are pawns or victims of this power differential. The modern leader of courage can be effective if she can help increase the sense of power among those who typically feel powerless. She EMPOWERS as a leader and manager.

Trained for Management

While modern leadership of wisdom that focuses on the sharing of knowledge usually comes with ongoing education, we are more likely to find that empowering managers receive training in the use of specific tools that enable empowerment and that help a courageous manager struggle against the "enemies" that exist in the competition and misunderstanding that is found within the organization. The tools for engaging effective management of courage are tactical more than strategic. There are essential four sets of modern managerial tools that lead toward empowerment: (1) communication, (2) conflict management, (3) problem-solving and (4) decision-making. I have written extensively about these four sets of tools in other publications, but will offer a brief summary here.

The tools of communication that an effective manager of courage can learn through an intensive training program include: paraphrase (and other active listening skills), group facilitation (with a focus on gate-keeping—the equitable distribution of time among all group members), and (in recent years) emotional intelligence (with a focus on the sharing of information about oneself and empathy for the feelings and concerns of other people). The tools of effective conflict management include negotiation (and other interpersonal facilitation tools), assertiveness (and other related communication tools) and group facilitation (with a focus on managing the difficult, self-oriented team member).

There are a wide variety of tools available in the area of problem-solving. Some are oriented toward systematic and rational problem-solving (such as the Kepner-Tregoe tools that were so popular in the corporate world during the late 20th Century), while others are oriented toward creativity and originality (such as the tools of brain-storming, Synectics and reframing). In the area of decision-making there are tools that range from the highly structured procedures for conducting meetings (building on the tradition of Roberts Rules of Order) to more humanistic tools associated with the processes of consensus building (such as those exemplified in the Future Search process).

In each of these cases, the skills needed to be effective as a tactician are assumed to be available to all managers. Specific tools and procedures can be taught that involve communications, conflict-management, problem-solving and decision making. While courage can not be taught – just as wisdom is not readily be acquired—there are ways in which this second type of modern leader can prepare ahead of time for battle. It is not enough for the modern manager to be a courageous warrior. She must also be a cunning warrior—equipped with powerful managerial training.

Identifying and Engaging the Enemy

The key to wholehearted acceptance of and sustained support for a courageous manager operating in a modern setting resides in the identification of an enemy that is both powerful and persistent. Given that the modern enemy resides within the organization, conceptual tools must

be available that enable a manager to readily identify the enemy. One such tool is Bruce Tuchman's stages of group development. This very popular conceptual tool helps a manager identify a specific sequence by which certain challenges associated with groups and teams will emerge. Furthermore, this sequence suggests an appropriate sequence for acquiring and engaging each of the four sets of empowerment tools.

Tuckman's first stage concerns the challenges associated with forming a group or team and the tools for enhancing communication are particularly appropriate at this stage. Stage Two concerns the movement of a group or team through a storming stage, with the tools associated with conflict-management being most appropriate. At the third stage, a group or team is focused on building the enduring norms by which it operates. The tools associated with problem-solving fit nicely with this stage, for the group or team is typically at this stage determining how it will be "thinking" about the issues it must address and about the ways in which the full capacities of the team can be engaged. Finally, the stage of performing primarily concerns the process of arriving at and implementing decisions. The tools of decision-making are obviously relevant here. Just as battles tend to move through various stages, so do the dynamics of groups and teams (as well as interpersonal relationships) move through predictable stages. The manager of courage should learn about these stages and engage appropriate tools at each stage if she wishes to be effective in engaging the internal enemies in her organization.

The Challenges

The premodern leader of courage builds her credibility typically by looking to an external enemy as the focus for engaging this courage. A modern leader of courage builds her credibility on the foundation of empowerment. This foundation enables the modern manager to move tactics to a position of leadership. She can influence, even if she can't (and usually doesn't want to) control. She leads not by pointing outside the organization to find an enemy, but by turning to an even more menacing enemy—the one that exists within her own organization. She is challenged by the nature and power of the internal enemy.

In many ways, an internal enemy is much harder to engage than one that is external. The internal enemy may be constantly shifting, as new factions develop around specific policies or priorities.

Furthermore, we usually have to work with the internal enemies rather than defeating them. We must become empathetic as we seek to appreciate the insights offered from alternative perspectives in our organization and as we seek to empower those with whom we work. At this point, the internal enemy is likely to be transformed from a specific person, department or organizational perspective. The enemy is now generalized—it becomes a pervasive ignorance in the organization or to a pervasive sense in the organization of entitlement or passivity or bureaucratic indifference.

The Ambiguous Enemy

The premodern enemy is usually rather easy to identify. He is out there, threatening us at the gates of our city (or organization). The internal enemy is inherently ambiguous—unless we chose to take the destructive path of identifying a specific and tangible internally-threatening enemy. How do we go about identifying and "concretizing" the ambiguous internal enemy? Do we use the rhetoric of warfare, such as often occurs with a government agency: "the war on drugs" or "homeland security"? While this may work short term, this rhetoric carries unwanted or inappropriate baggage with it. We look to war-like strategies to defeat the war-like internal enemy. We question loyalty when alternative perspectives are offered. We apply coercion rather than either clarification or persuasion to bring about the "defeat" of the internal enemy.

Much as the challenge of premodern courageous leadership can be summed up in two words ("powerful enemy"), so the challenge of modern leadership/management of courage can be summed up in two other words: EMPATHETIC EMPOWERMENT. The effective leader of courage will be open to alternative perspectives and will fully appreciate the need for flexibility in addressing the complex problems of the modern world. Furthermore, this leader will fully embrace and engage the processes of empowerment as related to patterns of communication, conflict-management, problem-solving and decision-making in her department or organization.

The Strategies of Empathic Empowerment

There are several alternative strategies that can be applied in moving toward empathetic empowerment. These strategies are much less warlike in orientation. The metaphors to be used are based on models of appreciation and collaboration. First, we can frame the internal enemy as

a corrective polarity. A specific perspective or strategy has gone too far or is no longer relevant. For instance, it may be important to honor organizational traditions and to serve the interests of continuity and predictability within an organization. Excessive and indiscriminate change can destroy an organization. Yet, an emphasis on tradition, continuity and predictability can be pushed too far, leading an organization to atrophy. The enemy becomes an over-emphasis on tradition (or an over-emphasis on change). This over-emphasis needs to be "corrected" not "defeated." The empowering leader can show modern-day courage by pointing the way to this correction and by ensuring that the correction doesn't shove the organization to the opposite extreme and to a whiplash swinging from extreme to extreme. This first approach to framing and managing the internal enemy is systemic in nature. There is a need for rebalancing the organization—an acknowledgement of homeostasis (the important and adaptive tendency of healthy organizations to return to some balance point between two extremes).

The second way in which to frame the internal enemy is based on an alternative perspective regarding organizations as systems. This approach focuses on the dynamics of homeorhesis (the important and adaptive tendency of healthy organizations to return to some operational pattern). This approach is much more ambitious and much harder to engage than homeostasis. It is much easier to return an organization to homeostasis than it is to identify, address and correct an embedded organizational pattern. What do these homeorhetic patterns look like? They often involve one or more of the four patterns I identified previously: communication, conflict-management, problem-solving or decision-making.

Communication patterns often involve the distribution of "air-time" among members of a group (whether meeting in person or meeting virtually via email or conference call). Who is expected to (and allowed to) dominate the conversation? Who is expected to offer information and who can offer options? How is the communication managed? Does someone serve as "gatekeeper" ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak? Are there many attempts to clarify the communication that does occur? Is there much paraphrasing? Is active listening engaged? To what extent does each person who is speaking (or writing) build on the ideas being presented by the previous speaker or writer? Empowering communication typically involves candid

conversations about these patterns (a process that is often described as "meta-communication" or communication-about-communication).

Once communication has been addressed successfully by a courageous leader and her associates, attention should focus on ways in which conflict is being managed. Typically, it is only when communication is clear and when all parties are given an opportunity to voice their own opinions and share their own assumptions, that differences among these parties become clear. We might assume that our perspectives and desired outcomes differ from those of other people; however, we don't really appreciative the differences that exist until such time as we can truly listen to the words being spoken or written by these other constituencies. This means that it is not unusual for conflict to increase or at least become more evident once empowering communication has been established.

Conflict is best addressed in an appreciative, empathetic and empowering manner when a leader of courage seeks a higher level of agreement between herself and the other party. We seem to agree about the need for XXX. Given this agreement, we can shift our attention to finding a common path that leads to this goal. Alternatively, the modern leader of courage may chose to work with a conflicting party by reaching agreement with this party about a sequence of actions: we will first seek to achieve your goals and then seek to achieve mine. A third alternative is to shift attention from the issue of direct priority (which goal is most important) to the issue of enablement (to what extent does each goal enable other goals to be achieved). My goal may be inherently more important than your goal; however, if we achieve your goal, we will more readily be able to achieve other desired goals (including my own).

With the resolution or at least effective management of conflict, a courageous leader is ready to address the pattern of problem solving in her department or organization. Is there a focus on the current state (realism) or on the desired state (idealism)? Is there a tendency to move quickly to action or to spend considerable time in reflection on alternative actions (as related to the assessment of current or desired state)? To what extent is there a focus on rational and convergent processes of problem solving or to what extent is there a focus on creative and divergent processes of problem solving? Empowered problem solving requires a balance

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between realism and idealism, a balance between reflection and action, and a balance between rational and creative processes. An empowering leader of courage encourages (endows with courage) and embraces multiple problem solving strategies.

Finally, with an empowering and diverse set of problem solving strategies in place, the leader of courage is ready to engage effective decision-making processes in the organization. The existing patterns of decision-making are often the most challenging to reform. The courageous leader must be willing to identify and openly discuss the benefits and costs associated with current patterns of decision making in her organization and identify ways in which her specific department or organization might most successfully make decisions in specific areas. When should consensus be reached? Consensus decision making is usually only needed for very important decisions that require not only the understanding and consent of all parties, but also the active engagement of these parties in implementation of the decision. When can a small subgroup make the decision? When is it appropriate for the leader to operate in a unilateral manner? When are votes to be taken? What constitutes a "working" majority?

For empowerment to be successful, the courageous leader must encourage (en-courage) ongoing reflection on the communication, conflict-management, problem-solving and decision-making patterns in her department or organization. This successful modern day leader is guided by the principle that *form follows function*. The particular pattern to be engaged by members of her department or organization should be based on the specific function(s) being served by this department or organization. Does this department or organization need to respond rapidly to shifting environmental conditions? How much risk can be taken? Is there a high or low level of clarity with regard to the current challenges being faced by the department or organization? The answers to these fundamental questions will help to guide the processes of communication, conflict-management, problem-solving and decision-making that are being engaged by the modern leader of courage.