

The Courageous Leader in a Premodern Organizational Context

William Bergquist

In its premodern form there is a leadership style that is quite influential—and often quite controversial. This style is founded on COURAGE. A person is assigned this form of leadership because the family, clan, group or organization in which he or she lives or works is confronting a major challenge (the enemy) that is very strong (not easily conquered) and quite menacing (serious in its intention to be victorious). This person is assigned a leadership role not only because he or she has demonstrated experience as a skillful tactician and strategist against this enemy (or a similar enemy in the past), but also because he or she is brave and willing to risk his or her own welfare (even life) in order to defeat the enemy.

Alexander the Great exemplifies this style of leadership (as well as the premodern style of leadership that builds on wisdom). He was truly a “courageous” leader and used much of the wisdom he had acquired as a student of Aristotle and much of his credibility as the son of Phillip of Macedonia to wage war against many enemies throughout the Mideast and Asia. Alexander apparently was physically quite impressive—as are many premodern courageous leaders. Research has shown that leaders tend to be taller than non-leaders (George Washington being an excellent example) and usually physically stronger or more skillful than other people. The original qualifications of the prestigious Rhodes scholarship illustrate this premodern focus. Recipients of the highly competitive Rhodes scholarship were to be not only academically gifted—they were also expected to be active in competitive sports. While courageous leaders are usually not actively engaged in competition against their enemy (they remain safely away from the battle zone), they should be capable of competing against the enemy.

While premodern leadership that builds on wisdom usually comes with a prestigious education, we are more likely to find that courageous leaders receive training that prepares them to fight against the enemy. It is much harder to defeat an enemy with a carefully worded argument than to defeat an enemy with a well-fought battle. Obviously, most of the battles being fought in contemporary organizations do not require the wielding of a sword; however, we do find that the courageous leader has been taught something about tactical and strategic planning as an MBA student or as a participant in management development programs within their organization. The knowledge needed to be effective as a tactician or strategist can, apparently, be taught and there are specific planning tools and procedures that are available through management training programs. While courage can not be taught—just as wisdom is not readily acquired—there are ways in which the courageous type of premodern leader can prepare ahead of time for battle. It is not enough, in other words, to be a courageous warrior. One must also be a cunning warrior.

Identifying the Enemy

The key to wholehearted acceptance of and sustained support for a courageous leader resides in the identification of an enemy that is both powerful and persistent. The enemy, of course, must also be perceived as ill-intended—at least with regard to our welfare. Sometime we worry about other people with whom we relate. We also worry about other groups or organizations with which we work. We are concerned that they are not dependable or that they are foolish or incompetent. We try to avoid them, but usually do not consider them to be enemies.

What triggers the sense of “enemy”? At one level the answer to this question is obvious: someone or some group is an enemy if it is threatening—if its intentions are not honorable, if it is capable of posing a threat, and if this threat is detectable to the enemy’s opponent. At a neuropsychological level, we can say that an enemy is threatening if it triggers a strong reaction from our Amygdala (a small neuro-structure located in our mid-brain that is often identified as the seat of our emotions). Many years ago, Charles Osgood (an eminent psychologist) proposed that humans tend to categorize almost everything into three binary categories: (1) good or bad, (2) active or passive, and (3) strong or weak. Using a factor-analysis-based tool called the Semantic Differential, Osgood made a persuasive case for the impact of these three categories on the ways in which we structure our world.

Given the more recent research on the role played by the Amygdala, we might propose that it is this mid-brain neurological structure that does the categorizing of everything into these three categories. Something is viewed as threatening if it is bad (not interested in our welfare), if it is active and if it is strong. Perhaps these are also the criteria we use (via the Amygdala) in identifying an enemy. The enemy is someone or something that is bad (evil, ill-intentioned, against us) and is also strong and active. While another organization can be in opposition to us, it will probably not be very threatening if it is weak or if it is inactive. A weak enemy can readily be defeated. A passive enemy remains non-threatening as long as it is itself not provoked.

Engaging the Enemy

If an enemy does emerge, what do we do about it? Once again, the neurosciences offer an important clue. Most neurosciences for many years have suggested that human beings (like other primates) tend to react in one of three ways to threat (and the Amygdala helps to prepare the body for these three responses, through activation of the arousal/stress system). The first response is *fight*. Here is where the courageous leader obviously enters the picture. We mount an attack against the enemy and are led by the courageous leader.

The second response is *flight*. While the courageous leader would not initially seem to play an appropriate role regarding this second response, we find that courageous leaders often do play an important (if somewhat indirect) role in assisting another person, group or even entire society to escape from a very powerful enemy. At the global scale we see the emergence of great premodern leaders who have led their tribe into exile. Moses comes immediately to mind, as do the leaders of many Native American tribes who were driven into exile. There is yet another way, however, where flight leadership comes to the fore. Filmmakers produce movies of distraction during period of social unrest, while comedienne find a way to make light of the challenges that a society faces. It is not irrelevant that many filmmakers and humorists come from a background of discrimination and poverty. They know how to flee from a powerful enemy (racial bias or economic distress) and apply these flight strategies in their work as cultural leaders in a highly stressed society.

The third response is *freeze*. It has only recently been given sufficient attention. As several neurobiologists have noted, the human being living on the African savanna will rarely be successful in fighting against a ferocious opponent. Furthermore, as a guide in a South African game park once told me, there are very few animals that are slower than the human being. Hence, humans don't stand much of a chance if they try to run away from their enemy. The only alternative is freeze. If we can just hide behind a tree or stand absolutely still—then maybe we won't be detected by the enemy. Unfortunately, freeze is not very good for our body or mind. We are frightened and this triggers the neurotransmitters and hormones needed to engage in fight or flight. We are suddenly wired for action, yet decide that the best action is inaction. As a result of this freezing response, our body is boiling over but unable to dissipate the energy. We end up with ulcers, hypertension and other stress-related illnesses.

Our courageous leader doesn't have much of a role to play when freeze is the chosen response. Furthermore, he or she is likely to experience the stress associated with inaction in a very personal manner—and probably will be even more stressed by the inaction than will other members of the group, organization or society, given expectations that the courageous leader will take action. Thus, while freeze may be the most common reaction to powerful and highly active enemies, it is least aligned with the assumptions about courageous leadership—leaving many organizations with a pervasive sense of profound disappointment in the “cowardly” inaction of their leaders.

The Challenges of Premodern Courageous Leadership

The premodern leader who is honored and respected for his or her courage needs a viable enemy. One of the great challenges for this type of leader emerges when the enemy has been defeated. If there is no longer an enemy, then why do we need a courageous leader? We can point to Winston Churchill as a notable example of this decline in collective support for courageous leadership. While most historians agree that Churchill was a disagreeable chap, he is widely acknowledged to be a man of extraordinary courage during war time. His speeches and actions during World War II may have been critical in the failure of Nazi Germany to invade Great Britain. Yet, soon after the end of the war, Churchill was out of office. When he came back into office in the early 1950s the British Empire was in decline. While England was engaged in battles in many parts of

the world (including the Mau-Mau rebellion in Africa, the war in Malaya and the Korean War), none of these wars involved England's defense of its own homeland and, as a result, Churchill was not very successful as Prime Minister. He was the prince of War not the Prince of Peace (nor the Prince of Wars in distant lands).

I have personally witnessed this transition while working with the Taiwanese during the past twenty years. Chiang Kai Shek was identified by the citizens of Taiwan as a courageous leader—though he was “defeated” by Mao and the Chinese Communists in 1948 and had to escape from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan. Many of the native Taiwanese were not (and still are not) pleased with the “invasion” by Chiang and his followers in 1948; nevertheless, despite the defeat and the perception of unwanted invasion, Chiang Kai Shek (and his son) held a firm grip on Taiwan for many years, declaring martial law because of the threatened invasion of his sworn enemy, Mao.

With the decline in Maoist threats (or at least after many years of non-invasion), Taiwan began to look for a different kind of leadership. Martial law was dropped and multiple political parties were formed. Soon, a new government came into power and a new president was sworn in. There was major dissention in the country. Fist fights broke out in the Taiwan legislature (these fights were widely reported throughout the world). Over the years, this new Taiwanese-based party lost support and the president was not expected to be re-elected. He advocated for the independence of Taiwan and, as a result, China once again openly threatened Taiwan. The poll numbers for this unpopular president suddenly soared. Taiwan once again had an enemy and could look once again for a courageous leader. Ironically, China's threatening behavior ensured the re-election of a man that Chinese leadership hated. Or did these leaders of China at some level want Taiwan to be a threat (thereby justifying their own position as courageous leaders?)

A critical point to make in this regard concerns not only the increased support for a courageous leader when an enemy is present, but also the accompanying unwillingness of this leader or the social system he or she is leading to countenance any disloyalty or dissention: “we must remain united if we are to defeat our enemy. Any dissent will be interpreted by our enemy as a weakness and will be used to defeat us!” Dissent in Taiwan exists as long as there is no viable enemy

(China), but collapses when once again the enemy is threatening. I would even suggest that when the external enemy ceases to exist, we create internal enemies. The new leaders of courage are now brave in battle against other factions within their own social system.

What about the United States? Did we find ourselves floundering as a nation when our long-time enemy (the Soviet Union) collapsed? Was Ronald Reagan our last warrior-king? Have we been struggling since that time to identify the new kind of leader we need—when there is no clearly identifiable enemy? Did the polarization in political parties between the Republicans and Democrats emerge because we no longer had this external enemy? While terrorists are certainly enemies, they are not easily identified (unless we wish to become bigots who identify all Muslims or all people from the Middle East and Asia as enemies). Is Barack Obama a courageous leader—or have we turned with his election to a new king of leader (perhaps the premodern leader of vision—another premodern style). What about the broad-based support for Obama's campaign promise to promote bi-partisan search for solutions to complex problems? Is American society ready to embrace a reduction in dissent as a result not of the re-emergence of an enemy, but rather some profound shift in the nature of desired leadership for the United States?

What about the role of premodern courage on a smaller plain—in a group or organization? I would propose that the same challenge exists. The enemy must be strong and menacing. This enemy might be a competitor, in which case a win-lose mentality is likely to be prevalent. If there is no clear external enemy, then an organization can turn to internal enemies. There are many candidates: management, unions, sales, finance, or stockholders (to name a few candidates). Alternatively, the enemy can be identified in a more nuanced manner. The “enemy” can be poor quality of product or service. It can be poor management, inequitable labor policies, or ill-informed decision-making processes. If this latter perspective is embraced by an organization, then the enemy is likely to remain viable for many years—given that we can always find ignorance, injustice and poor group process in an organization!

Just as the challenge of a wisdom-based form of premodern leadership can be summed up in two words (“succession planning”), so can premodern leadership based on courage be summed up in two words: **POWERFUL ENEMY**. We must retain (and never defeat) the enemy. When a

courageous leader is playing a key role in an organization, then considerable discussion must occur with regard to who or what is the enemy. There can't be multiple enemies (unless they are perceived as being part of a unified coalition), nor can the enemy be identified in some vague terms. In addition, the organization must focus on the tactical and strategic plans that will be engaged when confronting the enemy.

Perhaps the most important and difficult step involves the organization's support for diversity of perspective and dissent. As I have already noted, a courageous style of premodern leadership often is attended by a stifling of unpopular opinions. This is unlikely to be a successful strategy. If the enemy is truly powerful (meaning the enemy is competent and persistent), then we are best served by a tactical and strategic plan that has been carefully conceived, with all viable perspectives and opinions being considered. Otherwise, the enemy will win and we will be out of business—as seems to be the case, tragically, with many organizations during our present day economic downturn. The enemy turns out to be not an external threat, but rather our own ignorance and intolerance. We have found our enemy—and it is us!

I propose that we are still living in premodern organizations and are living in the back of our minds and hearts in a world that yearns for men and women of courage (and wisdom). It is important—perhaps essential—that we recognize this premodern reality and acknowledge this premodern yearning for leadership that is courageous.