Paradoxical Truths in Heroic Leadership: Implications for Leadership Development and Effectiveness

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Leadership is a complex social activity that implicates numerous, interconnected psychological and interpersonal processes (Goethals, Allison, Kramer, & Messick, 2014). To understand leadership, scholars have rigorously studied the personality, vision, ethics, charisma, and actions of leaders (Allison & Goethals, 2013). Leadership, of course, transcends individuality. A full understanding of leadership phenomena requires an appreciation of the broader group context that includes an examination of the reciprocal influences between leaders and followers (Messick, 2005), the myriad characteristics of followers (Armstrong, 2010), and the holistic environment in which leadership takes place (Padilla, 2012). The multi-level complexity of leadership poses such a great challenge to scholars and practitioners that hundreds of books have been written about leadership processes over the past two decades (Goethals et al., 2014).

In this chapter, we discuss the basic elements of heroic leadership, showing how heroism and exemplary leadership are deeply intertwined. We then describe six paradoxical truths about heroic leadership that are often unrecognized and unappreciated. We believe that ignorance of these counterintuitive truths and paradoxes about heroic leadership can lead to misunderstandings about leaders, leadership, and leadership development. Most of these paradoxes are a central part of the hero’s journey as described by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949). We will discuss the genesis of these paradoxical truths, and we will suggest ways that an awareness of these principles can engender better leadership and more effective leadership development.
Leadership and Heroism

As research on leadership has proliferated over the past two decades, so has scholarly interest in positive psychology, a field that addresses optimal human functioning. Positive psychologists have shown a new (or renewed) interest in topics such as morality, cooperation, altruism, wisdom, meaning, purpose, resilience, hope, flow, human growth, courage, empathy, spirituality, health, public service, self-control, emotional intelligence, and character strengths (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, in press). The past few years have witnessed a notable surge in research on one category of exceptional individuals who best exemplify these positive qualities: heroes. A hero is defined as a person who takes risks and makes self-sacrifices to better the lives of others (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). Not surprisingly, scholars have also defined a hero as a type of leader (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Heroes lead others either directly or indirectly by influencing people to follow their example in performing behaviours that save, protect, or improve human lives. Thus, in this chapter, we use the terms heroes and heroic leaders interchangeably to refer to individuals who make positive and enduring contributions to organisations or to society.

A robust finding in psychology is that people are drawn to individuals who possess stereotypic characteristics of heroes and heroic leaders (Allison & Goethals, 2011, 2014; Goethals & Allison, 2014; Kinsella et al., 2014, in press). Defining these characteristics thus becomes vital to understanding heroes and heroic leaders. Freud (1922) conjectured that people assign leadership roles to men who represent the typical qualities of a group “in a particularly clearly marked and pure form” and would often “give an impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido” (p 129). That is,
leaders would be highly prototypical, unusually competent, and extremely powerful. When we encounter people who resemble archetypical images of a hero, we endow them with heroic qualities and respond to them with strong positive emotions. Research shows that we react with reverence and awe to people who exude strong self-confidence and charisma (Goethals & Allison, 2014). Moreover, evolutionary theory suggests that individuals who emerged as leaders in early evolutionary time were “big men” (Van Vugt, Johnson, Kaiser & O’Gorman, 2008). Physically large males were perceived to be the most skilled, intelligent, and effective in achieving the group’s goals. Some of these primal conceptions of heroic leadership have endured, as even today tall people tend to be judged as more competent and as better leaders than are short people (Murray & Schmitz, 2011).

**Psychological Benefits of Hero Stories**

Joseph Campbell (1949) was the first scholar to shed light on the psychological importance of hero stories and to offer insight about why we gravitate toward tales of heroism. According to Campbell, hero stories from every corner of the earth generally follow the same clear and predictable pattern. This universality prompted him to refer to the classic hero narrative as a *monomyth*, a single hero story to which all humans resonate. The monomythic hero story begins with an ordinary person, typically a male, who is summoned on a journey away from his safe, familiar world to a new and special world fraught with danger. At the outset of the journey, the hero is missing an important quality, usually courage, self-confidence, humility, or a sense of an important life truth. The hero journey is always a voyage toward self-realization and transformation (Allison, Kocher, & Goethals, 2015; Smith & Allison, 2014). Receiving assistance from enchanted and
unlikely sources, the hero shows remarkable cunning, courage, and resourcefulness to triumph. Once successful, the hero returns to his original familiar world to bestow a boon to the entire community.

Stories are psychologically powerful (Gardner, 1995; McAdams, 1997; Sternberg, 2011). Stories crystalize abstract concepts and endow them with contextual meaning (Boje, 1995). Sternberg (2011) and Gardner (1995) provide numerous examples of heroic leaders using stories to win the minds and hearts of their followers. Stories are more than tools for influencing others; they also promote self-change. McAdams (2014) has argued that personal self-narratives shape life trajectories and the maintenance of subjective well-being. For example, psychologists have found that war veterans suffering from PTSD are helped enormously by writing their personal stories of survival and recovery.

Stories are rich, emotionally laden capsule summaries of wisdom for which the human mind was designed (Green & Brock, 2005; Haidt, 2012). According to Price (1978), “a need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species Homo sapiens – second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter” (p. 3).

The Wisdom Function of Hero Stories

Hero stories in particular fulfill two principal human functions: a wisdom function and an energizing function (Allison & Goethals, 2014, 2015). The wisdom function refers to the knowledge and insights that hero stories impart to us. Stories of heroic action bestow wisdom by supplying mental models, or scripts, for how to nobly lead one’s life. Heroic narratives also teach us how we should behave in crisis situations (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Goethals & Allison, 2012). Yet, hero narratives are more than simple scripts prescribing prosocial action. Joseph Campbell believed that the classic hero
monomyth reveals life’s deepest psychological truths (Mishlove, 1998). Hero stories reveal deep truths in several ways. First, tales of heroism send readers into *deep time*, meaning that the truths contained in hero stories enjoy a timelessness that connects us with the past, the present, and the future. Rohr (2011) notes that deep time is evident when stories contain phrases such as, “Once upon a time”, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away”, and “they lived happily ever after.” A second way that hero stories emphasize deep truth is by emphasizing *deep roles* in our social fabric. Moxnes (1999) has argued that the deepest roles portrayed widely in hero stories are archetypal family roles such as mother, child, maiden, and wise old man or grandparent.

Many of the lessons to be gleaned from hero stories are not always so apparent. Another wisdom function of hero stories resides in their ability to shed light on meaningful life paradoxes. People have trouble unpacking the value of paradoxical truths unless the contradictions contained within the paradoxes are illustrated inside a compelling story. Campbell (1949) believed that stories are saturated with paradox, as evidenced in his famous utterance, “*where you stumble, there lies your treasure*” (p. 75). Only when heroes summon the courage to face their challenges do they undergo the personal transformation needed to complete their hero journey. According to Campbell, our hero journeys involve letting go of our false selves or former selves and allowing our true heroic selves to emerge. Counterintuitively, the journey requires a departure from the comforts of home into a strange, uncomfortable, and dangerous world (Campbell, 1988). Embarking on this pilgrimage is the surest path to growth and transformation, and hero stories teach us, whether we are heroes or not, that we must all leave our safe, familiar worlds to find our true selves (Levinson, 1978).
In addition to teaching us a way to discover our true selves, hero stories improve our emotional intelligence. Also known as EQ, emotional intelligence refers to people’s ability to identify, understand, use, and manage emotions (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001). Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim believed that children’s fairytales are useful in helping people, especially children, understand emotional experience (Bettelheim, 1976). The heroes of these fairytales are usually subjected to dark, foreboding experiences, such as encounters with witches, evil spells, abandonment, neglect, abuse, and death. The audience vicariously experiences these dark stimuli, allowing them to develop strategies for resolving their own fears and distresses. Bettelheim (1976) believed that even the most distressing fairytales, such as those by the Brothers Grimm, add clarity and salience to confusing emotions and give people a greater sense of life’s meaning and purpose.

A final wisdom benefit of hero stories is in their focus on the essential role of sacrifice in the hero’s journey and in human growth and development. Franco et al. (2011) have claimed that self-sacrifice may be the principal defining feature of heroism, and they argue that sacrifice distinguishes heroism from altruism. Campbell (1949, 1988) emphasized the importance of sacrifice in the hero’s journey and observed that self-sacrifice is an integral element of hero myths around the globe. Ancient Greek and Roman religious practices revolved around sacrificial ceremonies during which animals were killed and eaten to show respect for, and earn peace with the gods. In the Odyssey, Odysseus must plant his oar into the ground and sacrifice a ram, a bull, and a boar to Neptune. Rohr (2011) has argued that this sacrifice reflects Homer’s belief that all great heroes cannot complete their heroic task unless they give up tangible symbols of youthful
priorities. A battering ram, a breeding bull, and a wild boar are vivid symbols of immature male energy that must be outgrown and sacrificed for Odysseus to develop into a true elder and heroic leader of Ithaca.

The Energizing Function of Hero Stories

Hero stories do more than just teach us important lessons; they also energize and inspire us. Recent work suggests that heroes and heroic action evoke a unique emotional response that Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have called *elevation* (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003). When people experience elevation, they feel a mix of awe, reverence, and admiration for a morally beautiful act (Gray & Wegner, 2011). The emotion is described as similar to calmness, warmth, and love. Haidt (2003) argues that elevation is “elicited by acts of virtue or moral beauty; it causes warm, open feelings in the chest” (p. 276). Most importantly, the feeling of elevation has a concomitant behavioural component: a desire to become a better person. Elevation “motivates people to behave more virtuously themselves” (Haidt, 2003, p. 276). A form of moral self-efficacy, elevation transforms people into believing they are capable of significant prosocial action (Britton, 2008).

Besides promoting elevation, hero stories serve an important healing function. Storytelling is known to be a community-building activity (Price, 1978). For early humans, the act of gathering around communal fires to hear stories established social connections with others. This sense of family, group, or community still remains central to human emotional well-being (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The content of hero stories also promotes a strong sense of social identity. Effective heroes perform actions that exemplify and affirm the community’s most cherished values. The validation of a shared
worldview, displayed vividly through storytelling, alleviates doubts and distress as well as builds self-esteem (Solomon et al., 2014).

Hero stories also inspire us to give back and make positive changes to the world. Campbell’s (1949) stages of the hero’s journey culminate with the gift, boon, or elixir that the hero bestows upon the community from which he originated. Both Campbell and Erikson (1975) believed that personal transformation is the key to reaching the generativity stage of human development, during which people generously give back to the society that has given them so much. In effective hero stories, the key to achieving transformation is the discovery of an important missing inner quality that has heretofore hindered personal growth. Good heroes use the power of transformation not only to change themselves for the better, but also to transform the world in which they live. Campbell (1988) describes the power of mythic transformation in this way: "If you realize what the real problem is—losing yourself, giving yourself to some higher end, or to another—you realize that this itself is the ultimate trial. When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness. And what all the myths have to deal with is transformations of consciousness of one kind or another” (p. 112).

Moreover, hero stories energize and change us by featuring a hero who is an underdog or “everyman” summoned on a journey fraught with extraordinary challenges. Our research on underdogs shows that we identify with them, root for them, and judge them to be highly inspiring when they triumph (Allison & Burnette, 2009; Allison & Goethals, 2008; Davis et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2008; Vandello, et al., 2007). Research conducted by Kinsella et al. (2015) suggests that the inspiring quality of heroes is what
distinguishes heroes from altruists, helpers, and leaders. Consistent with this idea, Allison and Goethals (2011) used factor and cluster-analytic statistical procedures to uncover eight general categories of traits that describe heroes that they coined as *The Great Eight*. These trait categories consist of smart, strong, charismatic, reliable, resilient, selfless, caring, and inspiring. When asked which of the great eight are the most important descriptors of heroes, a different group of participants reported that the trait of inspiring is the most important of the eight (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

**Paradoxes of Heroism**

G. K. Chesterton described paradox as “a truth that stands on her head to gain attention” (Douglas, 2001). We agree with Joseph Campbell (1949) that hero stories are rife with paradoxical truths, and we further contend that an understanding of these paradoxical truths is essential for the implementation of effective leadership development practices. Below we describe six such paradoxes and how they can be used to improve the way we view leaders, follow leaders, and become leaders ourselves.

**Paradox 1: The truest heroes are fictional heroes.**

Our research on heroes has revealed an important insight about the distinction between heroes of fiction and heroes of non-fiction. We conducted a study in which we asked people to rate the goodness (or badness) of heroes and villains. Some of the heroes and villains that people rated were fictional, whereas others were real-life heroes and villains. Our results showed that fictional heroes and villains were rated as more extremely good or bad than their real-world counterparts (Allison & Goethals, 2011). In short, fictional heroes are more archetypal or “truer” heroes. We suspect that the creators of fiction draw from classic prototypes of good and evil when constructing their
characters. While elements of these exemplars can surely be found in real-world heroes and villains, fictional stereotypes are more cleanly drawn with their essential features accentuated. This exaggerated prototypical nature of fictional heroes may explain why people are drawn so strongly to comic book superheroes, whose amplified abilities and virtues hold such alluring appeal.

Being cognizant of the hero archetype has significant implications for leadership. Highly effective leaders know that framing their lives and their careers in the context of a good hero story will bring them greater success. Leaders develop personal narratives and use hero characteristics to convey a powerful message that will move followers emotionally and behaviourally (Gardner, 1995; Sternberg, 2011). To maximize the effectiveness of the message, the hero of the story should acquire and retain as many traits that are prototypical of heroism as possible. Ideally, the leader has (1) undertaken some type of risky journey; (2) made significant self-sacrifices along the way; (3) discovered something important about himself or herself and the world; (4) undergone a momentous personal transformation; (5) developed a deep, altruistic desire to share the gift of this discovery with the world; and (6) as a result of the journey, acquired heroic traits such as strength, courage, wisdom, resilience, loyalty, and generosity.

**Paradox 2: The most abundant heroes are also the most invisible.**

An important type of hero is called the *transparent hero*, who does his or her heroic work behind the scenes, outside the public spotlight (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Transparent heroes include teachers, coaches, mentors, healthcare workers, law enforcement personnel, firefighters, and military personnel. Although these heroes are found in abundance, they largely go unnoticed and are our most unsung heroic leaders.
These hidden heroes make miracles happen everyday but also go unrecognised.

It may appear unbelievable that transparent heroes so frequently go unnoticed and underappreciated despite their charitable behaviour. A cognitive bias called the *negativity bias* (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001) may help explain this unjust and unfathomable phenomenon. This bias refers to the human tendency to show greater sensitivity to negative information about people than about positive information. For instance, if one is given both good and bad information about someone, one is more likely to pay attention to the bad information and to remember it more so than the good information. Additionally, the bad information will carry more weight in impressions of that person. Psychologists have also found that negative experiences in our lives have more emotional impact on us than positive ones (Baumeister et al, 2001). If people have a good and a bad experience close together in time, they are more likely to feel worse than if they have two neutral experiences.

To the extent that we show the negativity bias in our perceptions of the world, the salience of good behaviour will always be drowned out by bad behaviour even if there is a much greater preponderance of good behaviour. For this reason, transparent heroes will go about doing their heroic work unnoticed and unsung. Fortunately, transparent heroes are not motivated by fame and fortune. Instead, they are intrinsically motivated to do their jobs of healing, nurturing, and protecting simply because they know it is the right thing to do. If they were motivated by money or fanfare, they would most certainly pursue an alternative form of heroism. Leaders should always remember that the most vital lesson of the transparent hero is that of humility. Although it is crucial for leaders to accentuate their positive qualities, leaders must do so in the role of the humble servant for
whom service to others is not the means to an end but is the end itself.

**Paradox 3: We do not choose our heroes; they choose us.**

As we have noted earlier, people are drawn to individuals who possess stereotypic characteristics of heroes and heroic leaders. More than half a century ago, Carl Jung (1954) proposed the idea that all humans have collectively inherited unconscious images, ideas, or thoughts, which he called *archetypes*. These archetypes reflect common experiences that all humans (and their ancestors) have shared over millions of years of evolution. The main purpose of these archetypes is to prepare us for common experiences. Two such archetypes, according to Jung, are *heroes* and *demons*. Current research appears to support Jung—scientists have found that newborn babies are equipped with a readiness for language, for numbers, and for their parents’ faces. Recent findings also show that young infants exhibit a preference for moral behaviour over immoral behaviour (Hamlin, 2013). Humans appear to be innately prepared for certain people and tasks, and we believe this may include encounters with heroes.

Archetypes prepare us for the process of identifying and choosing heroes and leaders. These archetypes produce the following paradox: Because our minds are innately equipped with images of the looks, traits, and behaviours of heroes, our leaders and heroes may choose us as much as we choose them. One implication of this paradox is that leaders can develop a keen understanding of followers’ archetypal sensitivities, which will allow them to better attract followers and meet their needs. Jung’s research on archetypes suggests that we can learn to trust our instincts about good leadership and heroism. At the same time, we must be careful not to be misled by our instincts, as appearances can be deceiving. An incompetent leader who is tall and charismatic can fool
us into believing he is an effective leader. We must also be careful in never using what
we know about leadership archetypes to exploit others. Authentic leadership involves
using knowledge of archetypes to improve one’s ability to motivate and connect with
followers.

**Paradox 4: We love to build up our heroes, and we also love to destroy them.**

People are thirsty for heroes because heroes offer hope. Our research shows that
dramatic tales of heroes rising into prominence, especially when these heroes are
underdogs who prevail against the odds, captivate audiences. We cherish heroes and
seemingly go out of our way to construct them. But the reverse is also true. We appear to
crave the undoing of heroes as well. Our studies show that our greatest heroes cannot get
away with anything less than near-perfect moral behaviour. For this reason, many heroes
are bound to fall from grace. We seem to believe in, and relish, a perverse law of heroic
gravity: what goes up must come down. The rising of the hero is a central part of the hero
narrative that imparts wisdom about how to succeed and prevail amidst adversity.
Likewise, the falling of the hero imparts wisdom by offering us a cautionary tale about
the consequences of succumbing to human vices.

The implication for leadership development is the importance of remembering
that leaders are held to a higher standard of ethical conduct than are non-leaders. Moral
transgressions, even minor ones, can destroy a revered leader’s career and legacy.
Followers have a low tolerance for, and a heightened sensitivity to, heroic leaders who
behave immorally in the slightest degree. Allison & Goethals (2015) propose a
psychological reason for this sensitivity to leader misbehaviour. They theorize that
followers believe that an implicit contract exists between themselves and heroic leaders.
This implied contract stipulates that followers will give heroes their adoration as long as the heroes behave virtuously. When heroes engage in a moral transgression, followers interpret the transgression as a violation of the contract, thereby giving followers permission to terminate their adoration. Therefore, heroes and leaders must be mindful of this tacit contract or else they risk tarnishing their reputation and credibility.

**Paradox 5: We love heroes the most when they are gone.**

The results of many studies underscore the role of death in shaping our affections toward heroes. As much as we love our heroes when they are alive and well, we love them even more when they are dead. We call this phenomenon the death positivity bias (Eylon & Allison, 2005). Elevated posthumous evaluations may contribute significantly to people’s beliefs about the heroism in a leader. Research has shown that getting assassinated truly helps a leader gain stature as a stirring legend (Simonton, 1994). The most cherished of our heroes often must die to achieve their greatness. Moreover, the cause of death influences how we evaluate deceased leaders. Our research has shown that leaders who die from a prolonged illness are evaluated the most favorably, presumably because we sympathise with their suffering. The death positivity bias is almost as strong for leaders who are assassinated or who die in accidents. The bias is smallest for leaders who commit suicide.

Obviously, we do not encourage leaders to die to maximize their impact, although that would appear to be the comically morbid conclusion to reach from our research. Instead, we encourage organisations to capitalize on great leadership from the past to motivate and inspire followers. In America, Ford Motor Company uses stories of legendary founder Henry Ford to tell a stirring and heroic message of sacrifice and
innovation for the benefit of followers. Apple Computers does the same with former CEO Steve Jobs. Current leaders need not die to inspire their followers but they can resurrect the genius of past leadership to stimulate followers and create a vision for organisations.

**Paradox 6: Sometimes the darkest side of a leader’s personality produces the brightest leadership.**

As we have noted earlier, positive psychologists have directed their attention to human traits that promote the most admirable heroic behaviour. These traits include courage, empathy, wisdom, kindness, and other inspiring qualities (Allison et al., in press). Paradoxically, some psychologists have discovered that several personality traits associated with psychopathy have also been linked to success in business, politics, and even professional sports. Vitelli (2012) has observed, for example, that psychopaths and heroes share the trait of *fearlessness*. Vitelli (2012) also notes that President Lyndon Baines Johnson and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill demonstrated traits that could be considered “psychopathological”. For instance, early in their careers Johnson and Churchill were daring, adventurous, and unconventional young men who began playing by their own rules. Later, they mellowed into respected politicians after learning to effectively harness these traits.

The dark side of human nature may sometimes produce the brightest leadership. Moreover, there may a paradox within this paradox. People tend to admire rule breakers if they get away with their transgressions, and this fact could be part of the appeal of both Johnson and Churchill. Maradona is a much admired football player in Argentina precisely because he broke the rules and got away with it, in much the same way that Robin Hood was a much admired outlaw in medieval England. Lilienfeld,
Waldman, Landfield, Watts, Rubenzer, & Faschingbauer (2012) found that fearless dominance, which is also considered to be a psychopathic characteristic is linked to the success of many American presidents, especially during times of crisis management. These investigators argue that fearless dominance is a telling attribute of high-functioning psychopaths who are able to thrive as leaders in business settings. Paradoxically, personality traits associated with human pathology can sometimes be useful—if harnessed toward a noble end—to engender the brightest leadership. Leaders should understand and anticipate that expressing a trait such as fearless dominance may be necessary during times of emergency and turmoil.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In this chapter, we have borrowed wisdom gleaned from the classic hero narrative to generate lessons for leadership development and leadership effectiveness. Many of these lessons are nonobvious because they stem from paradoxical truths about the hero’s journey. These lessons include the idea that (1) fictional heroes can teach us as much or more about heroic leadership than can real-world heroes; (2) the most invisible heroes among us underscore the timeless principle that humble unsung service to others is a central goal of leadership; (3) a keen understanding of the hero archetype can help leaders cultivate connections with others and foster their ability to motivate others to action; (4) leaders must always honour their part of the implicit contract that exists between them and their followers by leading ethically and responsibly at all times; (5) leaders should consider harnessing the genius of past leadership to stimulate followers and to promote a
vision for organisations; and (6) leaders can utilize some personality traits associated with human pathology, such as fearless dominance, for good use during times of crisis.

Campbell (1949) believed that the monomyth of the hero contains rich insights about the deepest psychological needs and desires of humanity. Leaders who acknowledge their followers’ needs and desires can lead with greater effectiveness. We have shown how human beings resonate well to notions of deep time and deep roles, which remind us of ageless truths about living and working together in the most optimal, harmonious, and productive ways. We have also demonstrated the crucial importance of sacrifice in the hero’s journey, and we encourage leaders to make rousing accounts of past sacrifices an integral part of their organisation’s story.

The mythic hero’s journey has yet to be fully mined for its insights about leadership and followership. Central to the classic hero narrative is the idea that heroes are missing a vital inner quality when they first embark on their journeys. This quality is essential for their success; thus, heroes must experience suffering because they are ill-equipped to handle the challenges they face. Campbell (1949) emphasizes the role of a mentor figure who appears before the hero to help him or her discover, or recover, the missing quality. This mentorship, of course, represents the leadership component of the hero’s journey. Paradoxically, then, hero stories teach us that setback and suffering are necessary for progress and growth. The leader’s mission in any organisation is to serve as a mentor for followers, helping them discover and develop qualities that they are missing. We encourage leaders to humbly recognize that they are not the heroes; rather, they are the mentors who are assisting in the transformation of followers, who are themselves in the early stages of their own hero journeys.
The ultimate paradox of leadership may reside in the idea that one must “give it away to keep it.” This spiritual principle is a core principle of Alcoholics Anonymous’s twelfth step, which encourages members to stay in sobriety by passing along the knowledge of their recovery program to others. One’s own gifts are best retained by offering them to others. Consequently, one of the greatest strategies for becoming a heroic leader is to assist in the development of heroic leadership in others. James MacGregor Burns (1978, 2003) called this process transformational leadership. Having once been mentored into greatness, our most heroic leaders understand that their current role in the hero journey is to help transform others and the greater society to which they belong.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

1. How can you use the classic hero’s journey to maximize your effectiveness as a leader? First, consider which aspects of your personal and professional life parallel the classic hero’s journey. What unique challenges have you faced and conquered? What positive traits were you compelled to cultivate as a result of these challenges? What heroic mentors have provided invaluable assistance to you on your journey? What valuable life lessons (and organisational lessons) have you learned from these mentors? In what ways have you used the wisdom you have gleaned from past mentors to improve your leadership and/or your organisation?

2. How can you use Paradox 1 to enhance the effectiveness of your leadership? Specifically, what risks have you taken to foster better leadership? What sacrifices have you made? What important self-discoveries have you come to that have served you well on your personal and professional journey? In what ways have you been
transformed, either personally or professionally? Have you shared your new-found gifts with others or used those gifts to help transform others?

3. How can you use Paradox 2 to improve your leadership? Leaders should always remember that the most important lesson of the transparent hero is that of humility. Although it is important for leaders to accentuate their positive qualities, leaders must do so in the role of the humble servant for whom service to others is not the means to an end but is the end itself. With all of your successes, how have you remained humble? In what ways are you careful to cultivate a non-arrogant image of yourself and of your organisation? Do you make sure that you are of service to others, both within and outside of your organisation?

4. How can you use Paradox 3 to augment your leadership effectiveness? What practices do you employ to ensure that your leadership is authentic and not contrived? Are you careful not to show biases in the hiring and training of managers? Are your leadership practices based on substantive criteria and not simply on superficial appearance?

5. In what ways can you use Paradox 4 to improve your leadership? Do you take steps to ensure that you follow the highest standards of ethical conduct? Do you ensure that your leadership team knows that any transgressions, even minor ones, can destroy a career and legacy? Develop an action plan for making every person who occupies a leadership position in your organisation aware of the implicit contract that exists between themselves and their followers. Remember that the implied contract stipulates that followers will give heroes their loyalty as long as the heroes behave virtuously.

6. How can you use Paradox 5 to maximize the effectiveness of your organisation? How can you capitalize on great leadership from the past in your organisation to motivate
and inspire current followers? What are the inspiring qualities of these past leaders and how can you tap into those qualities to precipitate positive change in your organisation today? Develop a plan for resurrecting the genius of past leadership in your organisation to stimulate followers thereby creating a vision for greatness in your organisation.

7. What lessons for effectiveness leadership can be gleaned from Paradox 6? What personality traits associated with human pathology might at times be useful – if harnessed toward a noble end – to engender the brightest leadership in your organisation? Have any past or present leaders in your organisations taken a controversial stand on an issue and were later shown to be pioneers who were ahead of their time? Could you use this genius to bolster your current organisation’s direction? Is current leadership in your organisation lacking the trait of fearlessness? Could leaders in your unit benefit from more judicious risk-taking? Is the leadership in your organisation so opposed to risk that bold, new, creative ideas are discouraged? Develop an action plan for encouraging the generation of daring new ideas from both leaders and followers in your organisation with the idea that heroic leadership involves revolutionary thinking and intelligent risk-taking.
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