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# Heroic Leadership

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## Heroic Leadership

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**Synonyms:** heroism, leadership, consummate leadership

**Definition:** Heroic leadership is the pinnacle of leadership, conducted by a transformed and enlightened leader who seeks to transform and enlighten others.

## Introduction

Heroic leadership is the pinnacle of leadership, founded on the principles of heroism. A hero is defined as an individual who (a) voluntarily takes actions that are deemed to be exceptionally good, or that are directed toward serving a noble principle or the greater good; (b) makes a significant sacrifice, and (c) takes a great risk. Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) offer this definition: “Heroism is the willingness to sacrifice or take risks on behalf of others or in defense of a moral cause” (p. 13). Allison and Goethals (2011) define heroism as “doing the right thing at a critical moment,” with the right thing involving a combination of great morality and competence (p. 9). Merriam-Webster’s definition of hero also adds that a hero attracts admiration from others, a *recognition* aspect of heroism that most scholars do not include in their definitions.

## The Journey of the Heroic Leader

Campbell (1949) described the classic hero’s journey in this way: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (p. 30). Hero tales from antiquity to modern times follow the same clear and predictable pattern. The hero is an ordinary person who is summoned on a journey away from her 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 self-confidence, humility, or a

sense of her true purpose in life. The hero journey is always a voyage toward self-realization and transformation (Allison and Goethals, 2014; Allison and Smith, 2015). Receiving assistance from enchanted and unlikely sources, the hero develops remarkable cunning, courage, and resourcefulness to triumph. Once successful, the hero returns to her original familiar world ready to bestow a boon to the entire community. In all, the hero's journey describes a transformative process that turns ordinary people into heroic leaders.

### **The Role of Transformation**

The hero transformation occupies a central place in the heroic leader's journey, and it serves five purposes. First, hero transformations foster developmental growth. The hero's journey is seen as a metaphor for successful passage through the various stages of life from birth to death. Early human societies recognized the value of initiation rituals in promoting the transition from childhood to adulthood (Allison, 2015). Campbell (1988) lamented the failure of postmodern society to recognize the psychological importance of rites and rituals. Coming-of-age stories are common in mythic hero tales about children confronting new worlds, fraught with danger, that must be conquered for entry into later developmental stages. A second purpose of hero transformations resides in their ability to promote healing. The simple act of sharing stories about hero transformations can instill hope, foster self-awareness, relieve stress, and cultivate a sense of meaning. A third purpose of hero transformations is they deepen spiritual and cosmic understanding. Campbell (1988) observed that the hero's transformation involves learning "to experience

the supernormal range of human spiritual life” (p. 152). Hero myths, he said, “bring us into a level of consciousness that is spiritual” (p. 19).

A fourth purpose of hero transformations lies in their ability to cultivate social unity. Campbell (1972) argued that hero transformations “drop or lift [heroes] out of themselves, so that their conduct is not their own but of the species, the society” (p. 57). The transformed individual has moved “from the lesser, secondary knowledge of himself as separate from others” to “the greater, truer truth, that we are all one in the ground of our being” (p. 151). Transformed heroic leaders are “selfless, boundless, without ego.” No longer isolated from the world, transformed individuals enjoy a feeling of union with others. In describing the hero’s journey, Campbell (1949) wrote, “where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world” (p. 25). The fifth purpose of hero transformations is they advance society. The culmination of the hero’s journey is the hero’s boon, or gift, to society. This gift is what separates the hero’s journey from simply a test of personal survival. For the voyage to be heroic, the protagonist in myth must use her newly acquired insights and gifts to better the world. The heroic boon to society follows the successful completion of the individual quest, making the social boon dependent on the hero’s personal transformation that made the personal quest a success. Hero mythology, according to Campbell (1972), is designed to teach us that society is not a “perfectly static organization” but represents a “movement of the species forward” (p. 48). During the process of experiencing personal transformation, the hero obtains the “elixir” that empowers and enables her to help guide others on their personal transformative journeys. This idea is consistent with contemporary theories of leadership

that focus on the role of enlightened leaders to transform their followers, elevating them toward greater levels of motivation and morality (Burns, 1978).

### **Transformational Patterns**

There are three patterns that characterize the transformations undergone by heroic leaders. First, there is a shift in mindset from *egocentricity* to *sociocentricity*. According to Campbell (1988), “when we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness” (p. 155).

Campbell believed that one of the central functions of hero mythology is to connect one with the greater social world. In most hero narratives, the hero begins the journey as a disconnected, self-centered, prideful individual whose sole preoccupation is establishing identity, career, and material goods. The primary goal of the heroic leader’s journey is to awaken the hero to the larger, deeper task of thinking beyond herself, to developing communion with everyone and with everything. In short, the heroic life is one that nurtures a compassionate unification with all of humanity.

A second pattern of heroic transformation describes heroic leaders as undergoing a form of social growth that can be described as a shift from *dependency* to *autonomy* (Allison and Goethals, 2017). Campbell (1988) believed that western cultures promote dependency by emphasizing a preoccupation with safety, security, socioeconomic wellbeing, and entertainment. People’s behavior and identity are steeped in consumerism, materialism, competition, violence, and nationalism. This emphasis on the lower-level needs in Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy stunts people’s transformative growth. A person’s

willingness to deviate from the dominant cultural pattern is essential for heroic transformation. Heroes do the right thing, and do what they must do, regardless of authority, tradition, and consequence. Maslow called this characteristic *autonomy*. “There are the ‘strong’ people,” wrote Maslow, “who can easily weather disagreement or opposition, who can swim against the stream of public opinion and who can stand up for the truth at great personal cost” (p. 379). Fulfillment of the lower needs in the pyramid is essential for autonomy to develop in individuals. The world’s greatest heroic leaders have been fearless in their autonomy. Jesus of Nazareth was a revolutionary who defied the conventions of his culture. Other similar examples are Martin Luther King, Jr., Joan of Arc, Malcolm X, Harvey Milk, and Mahatma Gandhi.

The third heroic transformation is the change from *stagnation* to *growth*. One can be sociocentric and autonomous but not necessarily growing and stretching toward realizing one’s full potential. The hero must leave home and venture on the journey to obliterate a status quo that is no longer working. The pre-transformed hero resists change, and severe setbacks may be her only impetus to grow. Without a prod, she will remain comfortable in her stagnation, oblivious to the idea that anything needs changing. For this reason, many spiritual traditions call the hero’s journey an awakening to one’s true calling in life, also described as the death of the false self and the birth of the true self. Campbell (1988) described the process as “killing the infantile ego and bringing forth an adult” (p. 168).

### **The Heroic Leader as Mentor**

One of the most essential social events of the hero's journey is the arrival of the mentor figure. In classic myth, the mentor is often a magical outsider, an elder, an exotic person or creature whom one would least expect to possess the wisdom needed for the hero to succeed. The majority of people who are asked to name their heroes mention a mentor or coach who had a transformative effect on them (Allison & Goethals, 2011). As legendary football coach Tom Landry observed, a mentor is someone "who tells you what you don't want to hear, who has you see what you don't want to see, so you can be who you have always known you could be" (Farcht, 2007, p. 294). Famous mentors in hero tales include Merlin the Magician giving King Arthur the knowledge to rule England, Yoda helping Luke Skywalker defeat Darth Vader, and Mr. Miyagi training the Karate Kid. Good mentors equip the hero with what she needs, but there can also be dark mentors who steer the hero down a dark path of self-destruction (Allison and Smith, 2015). Examples of dark mentors include the serpent in *Genesis 3:4*, Sauron in *Lord of the Rings*, Terence Fletcher in *Whiplash*, and Tyler Durden in *The Fight Club*.

### **Temporal Sequencing of Mentoring**

The temporal sequencing of mentorship is an important element of the hero's journey. Mentors help heroes become transformed, and later, having succeeded on their journeys, these transformed heroes then assume the role of mentor for others who are at earlier stages of their quests. In short, "transformed people transform people" (Rohr, 2014, p. 263). Mentors can have a transformative effect with their words of advice, with their actions, or both. Words can fall on deaf ears but one's actions, attitudes, and



lifestyle can leave a lasting imprint. St. Francis of Assisi conveyed it this way: “You must preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words” (p. 263).

The hero’s journey prepares people for leadership and mentoring roles by offering a transformative experience that can be shared later with others. Burns (1978) argued that transforming leaders make an effort to satisfy followers’ lower needs (e.g., survival and safety), thereby elevating them for the important work that they – leaders *and* followers -- must do together to produce significant higher-level changes. Leaders create a “new cadre of leaders” (p. 20). This conception is consistent with Campbell’s ideas about the role of mentorship during the hero’s journey, with the mentor elevating the hero, thereby preparing her to become a mentor later. Burns’ framework also makes explicit a notion that is largely implicit in Maslow’s (1943) model, namely, that the self-actualized person has become an elder, a mentor figure, and a moral actor who wields transformative influence over others.

Other theories also point to the transformative effect of mentoring and leadership. Hollander (1995) has proposed a two-way influence relationship between a leader and followers aimed primarily at attaining mutual goals. Hollander defined leadership as “a shared experience, a voyage through time” with the leader in partnership with followers to pursue common interests. For Hollander, “a major component of the leader–follower relationship is the leader’s perception of his or her self relative to followers, and how they in turn perceive the leader” (p. 55). Tyler and Lind (1992) have shown that these perceptions are critically important in cementing good follower loyalty. Followers will perceive a leader as a “legitimate” authority when she adheres to basic principles of procedural justice. Leaders who show fairness, respect, and concern for the needs of

followers are able to build followers' self-esteem, a pivotal step in Maslow's (1943) pyramid, thereby fostering followers' transformative movement toward meeting higher-level needs.

Mentors and leaders can also use their charisma to exert a transformative effect on their followers. Goethals and Allison (2014) reviewed the transforming leadership of three heroic leaders from the 20<sup>th</sup> century whom they dubbed *the three kings* of heroic leadership: Muhammad Ali, Elvis Presley, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These kings radiated powerful charisma that transformed their followers. All three kings had exceptional personas. All three made an emotional connection with their audiences. All three related and embodied compelling stories. All three enacted theatrical leadership that gave people what they wanted and needed. Two of them, King and Ali, used words, delivered in riveting styles, often touching on religious precepts, to influence their followers' thoughts, feelings, and behavior. The three kings used their charisma to transform others, through both their words and their example.

### **Transforming Others**

Burns (1978) proposed that leaders and followers raise each others' motivation and morality, and he suggested mechanisms that are backed by recent research. Heroic leaders lead by example, demonstrating high degrees of competence and morality to followers (Allison & Goethals, 2011, 2013). Heroic leaders are moral exemplars who evoke a unique emotional response which Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have called *elevation* (Haidt, 2003). Haidt borrowed the term "elevation" from Thomas Jefferson, who used the phrase *moral elevation* to describe the euphoric feeling one gets when

reading great literature. When people experience elevation, they feel a mix of awe, reverence, and admiration for a morally beautiful act. The emotion is described as similar to calmness, warmth, and love. Haidt argues that elevation is “elicited by acts of virtue or moral beauty; it causes warm, open feelings in the chest.” Most importantly, the feeling of elevation has a concomitant behavioral component: A desire to become a better person. Elevation motivates people to behave more virtuously themselves. A form of moral self-efficacy, elevation transforms people into believing they are capable of engaging in significant prosocial action. Abundant research evidence supports this idea (Allison, Goethals, and Kramer, 2017; Csikszentmihalyi, Condren, and Lebudá, 2017).

The importance of leaders and leadership in fostering a heroic motive in followers is highlighted by Gardner (1995). Gardner proposed that leaders influence significant numbers of their fellow human beings through their words and example and that they do so through stories that they both relate and embody. Furthermore, the most powerful stories are stories about identity, about the leader’s identity and followers’ personal identities and the identity of their group. The story concept underlines the fact that leaders frequently offer a dynamic perspective, about where a group has come from, where it is going, and what obstacles it has faced and is facing. Leaders and followers are central and heroic figures in these dramatic narratives. Gardner’s examples include Robert Oppenheimer who successfully led the Manhattan Project to completion by relating, through what he said and what he did, a story of dedicated scientists pushing back the frontiers of knowledge to build a weapon that would win the war against despotism but also, perhaps, make future wars unthinkable. That story was important in mobilizing thousands of young scientists toward the common goal of creating the atomic

bomb. Another example is Pope John XXIII, who reached back to the early teachings of Jesus to relate a story about a caring, nonhierarchical, inclusive church that concerned itself with uplifting the human condition.

### **Conclusion**

The world's most revered leaders have traveled the hero's journey of personal transformation and, in turn, have used their gifts to transform others. Martin Luther King, Jr., came from humble origins to organize the American civil rights movement. He transformed himself and then heroically transformed others, as evinced in his famous quote: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: what are you doing for others?" (King, 2001, p. 3). The hero's journey also characterizes the lives of indirect leaders such as Helen Keller. Born with illness that left her without sight or hearing, Keller overcame here severe disability to achieve a life of extraordinary philanthropy and humanitarianism. She said, "I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble" (Wallis, 1983, p. 240). Keller's personal transformation played a role in transforming the world.

The heroic leader's journey is the human journey, replete with struggle, growth, learning, transformation, and an ascendancy from followership to heroic leadership (Goethals and Allison, 2017). Those who dare to transform, or who are compelled to do so by circumstance, grow into fully developed human beings ready, willing, and able to transform others. The transformed hero represents the pinnacle of human maturity, the state of wellbeing that allows people to flourish (Seligman, 2011) and experience

eudaimonia (Franco, Efthimiou, and Zimbardo, 2016). For Buddhists, the highest state of enlightenment is *nirvana*, a state of bliss when one is reborn into a new life and free from all suffering. For Hindus, this ultimate state of bliss is *ananda*, and for Muslims it is *taqwa*. Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified six universal human character virtues: *wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence*. The six virtues closely match Campbell's (1949) description of the transformed heroic leader. As a result of their journeys, heroic leaders acquire wisdom about themselves and the world; they develop the courage to face their inner dragons; they are in union with all of humanity; they pursue justice even at a cost to themselves; they are humbled and tempered; and they use their acquired gifts to unify the world.

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