



Executive Coaching from Prince Hal

GUEST COMMENTARY: An increasing number of executives are turning to Shakespeare for advice on how to run their businesses. Nigel Roberts reflects on the Bard's stories, myths & archetypes.

When Shakespeare was writing there were no corporations, no managers and certainly no courses in leadership. Jung and Freud hadn't been born and the academic disciplines of organisational change and employee engagement were not on the curriculum of the few ancient universities that existed in the 16th century. Yet the Bard managed to capture some universal truths about human nature and the complex way that individuals relate to each other which can provide useful lessons for today's corporate leaders.

Increasing numbers of companies are using the plays of Shakespeare as templates for change. The dilemmas of ancient Kings and Princes provide a fresh perspective on the challenges facing CEOs in the 21st century. Henry V is a case study in leadership and how to create loyalty. The Tempest a template on how to manage change without destroying the very thing you are trying to create. Julius Caesar an object lesson in how not to build a team.

All the challenges faced by today's executive were pre-empted and laid bare by Shakespeare many centuries ago. When Henry V delivers his famous Crispin Crispianus speech on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, he is faced with a dilemma familiar to many managers: how to persuade a recalcitrant workforce of foot soldiers and untrustworthy middle

managers (his noble lords) to go into battle with the French competition and put their lives (jobs) on the line.

That was the challenge facing a U.S.-based client who had a serious problem with its European operation. Poor performance and a need to cut costs meant that they dispatched the global IT director to restructure the division. The director had prepared a rational justification for the closure which made perfect sense in the Midwest of the U.S. but was likely to be explosive in Europe.

Hal's Leadership Lessons

His prepared text for a company meeting shared many similarities with George W. Bush's rhetoric in the 'Axis of Evil' speech. Here was a midwestern cowboy shooting from the hip and telling those pesky Europeans to get off the ranch. That might play well in the Midwest but would fail to impress in Europe.

Instead of modelling himself on George W. we reframed and rewrote his address to his troops by looking at Henry V's call to action before the battle of Agincourt. We made him realise, that like Hal, he faced an almost impossible task. Trying to persuade his men to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the company required a fundamental change to

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their mindset. Many of Hal's soldiers faced certain death. Some of his workforce faced certain redundancy. How do you sell that? Certainly not by shooting from the hip and telling them they had no choice. He had to persuade not just order them to do what he wanted.

We deconstructed Hal's Crispin Crispianus speech, examined the clever rhetorical devices that appealed to people's emotions, and then reconstructed a presentation that pushed all the right emotional buttons with the audience. By crafting a call to action that focused on the positives rather than the negatives and appealed to a higher calling than individual self-interest, he managed to persuade them to accept the restructuring. A similar process was adopted in developing the messaging and strategy for negotiations with a pugnacious Works Council. The end result was a seamless restructuring with no sabotage or industrial action. He won a battle that he had looked like losing.

The reason why exploring the characters created by Shakespeare can help 21st century corporate managers perform better is partly because it gives them a fresh perspective on their challenges which helps them to reframe their response to events. But the other reason is that it provides a narrative that helps to communicate more effectively with their stakeholders. Don't just transmit information and hope it is received and understood – weave that information into a story and it is more likely to persuade people to behave the way you want them to.

Telling Tales

I would argue that most companies fail to communicate effectively because they don't tell their story effectively. They present information but fail to have a meaningful conversation. As another playwright George Bernard Shaw said, "The problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

Most companies generate a huge volume of internal and external communication with no way of knowing whether it has been received and understood. One client told me: "We're very good at cascading information down through the company but as a management team we've never acquired the habit of listening. Listening and watching the lessons of Shakespeare has made me a better a better story teller and manager."

Storytelling is the heart of communication. From the cave painters through Greek myth to the fiction factory of Hollywood, people have sought to make sense of their world by developing a compelling narrative. This serves not just to record where they have been but also to help work out where they

want to go.

No executive or organisation can afford to ignore the power of storytelling. No other narrative structure can move hearts and minds in the way that a well crafted story can. Whether you are making a corporate presentation, holding a press conference, communicating strategy or leading your company in a competitive environment, stories help you engage your audience.

Stories are part of our collective unconscious. Jung argues that, in addition to our personal unconscious (a unique personalised psychic dumping ground for all our experiences, anxieties, neuroses and repressed thoughts) we all also share the same template in the form of archetypes, which help us understand and explain the world in which we live. The collective unconscious is rather like the operating system on our computer and it is by exploring those archetypes in the plays of Shakespeare, that corporate leaders can enhance their rational and analytical core competencies.

But it's not just individual executives who can benefit from lessons by the Bard. Companies have souls and personalities too which are made up of rational conscious processes and subconscious archetypal cultural energy. Therefore Shakespeare can be used to improve the performance of teams.

It is a sad truth of corporate life that most mergers fail to deliver shareholder value. There is much talk of cost synergies, but these often fail to materialise because cultural differences between the different personalities of the merging organisations clash and subvert the process.

Rough Magic

The Tempest is a good model to help reframe an organisation's approach to mergers and cultural change and also to build more efficient teams. As a business case study it operates on many different levels and Shakespeare provides Jungian insights into political and organisational dynamics. Prospero uses his "rough magic" (soft leadership skills) to challenge and subvert his estranged brother and his court who wash up on the shores of his "island of mystery" (newly merged organisation). You can chose your friends but you are stuck with family in the same way that many executives are stuck with an uncooperative management team post-merger.

The sheer volume of unfocussed and external communication in the corporate world calls to mind another Shakespearean quote. "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Explore the characters and stories of Shakespeare and I guarantee that your communication will mean something and give you "...a muse of fire that

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