

Integral Leadership Review

Volume X, No. 5
October 2010



Why What You Thought about Heroic Leadership is Probably Wrong

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In 1978, James MacGregor Burns published his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Leadership*. In it he classified leadership into the now well-known categories of transactional and transforming types. Transforming leadership was the preferred process in that it was more potent, engaged the full person of the follower, and leaders and followers stimulated each other to advance followers into leaders and might even convert leaders into moral agents. The transforming approach clearly has much to recommend it. These include significant positive change in people and organizations, changes in perceptions and values, and changes in the expectations and aspirations of those led. Most importantly, it is differentiated from transactional leadership in that it is not based on an exchange relationship, but on the leader's personality, traits and ability to create change through example and articulation of a vision, goals, and tasks. Transforming leaders are idealized because they are not focused on benefits to self, but on benefits for the organization, its members, and those they serve (Burns, 1978).

At the same time, Burns also introduced the concept of Heroic Leadership. Unfortunately, perhaps misled by a misunderstanding of what the name represented, some have corrupted Burns' term such that it has become a representative of transactional leadership and for much that has been wrong about leadership in modern times. There is even a "Post-Heroic Leadership" in which corporations now supposedly operate, or should operate, and four "facts" that are now accepted by many as why Heroic Leadership was and is the incorrect approach. However, as "The Father of Modern Management," Peter Drucker often observed, "what everybody knows is frequently wrong." In point of fact, I suggest that the reality of Heroic Leadership, rather than an idea that should be shunned, is a concept that leaders should embrace and apply. Let's look first at four myths about Heroic Leadership which everyone knows to be true, but which are not.

Myth One: Heroic Leadership is a Form of Transactional Leadership

Burns separated transforming leadership into four subcategories: intellectual, reform, revolutionary, and *heroic*. That's where the term originated. Burns made other claims for the Heroic Leader, but basically Heroic Leadership was described as a relationship between leader and follower in which followers placed great faith in the leader's ability to overcome obstacles and crises (Burns, 1978). Some view this aspect as a negative which diminishes the importance of other stakeholders. It doesn't. It simply means that followers have greater confidence in their leader, a desirable situation which encourages a favorable outcome in most leadership scenarios. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a situation in which followers lacked confidence in their leader and a favorable outcome ensued.

However, the point is that Heroic Leadership, as defined by Burns, is a form of transformational leadership, not transaction leadership. It has nothing to do with use of “the carrot or the stick,” the exchange relationship that is probably the most representative technique of transactional leadership. So the first myth is that Heroic Leadership is transactional. It’s not, its transforming.

Myth 2: Heroic Leadership is Always Authoritarian

Perhaps because of the first myth, some see Heroic Leadership as necessarily Theory X (authoritarian), as opposed to Theory Y and the preferred participative style. That’s myth also. Participative Management or Participative Leadership began with Douglas McGregor and Rensis Likert, both in the late 1950s and early 1960s. McGregor defined Theory X and Theory Y through several assumptions.

Theory X assumptions included:

- The average person dislikes work and will avoid it if possible.
- Most workers must be forced with the threat of punishment to work towards organizational objectives or seduced into doing so with rewards. In other words, “carrot and stick.”
- Workers mostly prefer to be directed and to avoid responsibility.
- Workers primarily value security.

Theory Y assumptions were quite different. They included:

- Workers will apply self-control and self-direction in the pursuit of organizational objectives without external control or the threat of punishment.
- Workers usually accept and will even seek responsibility.
- The intellectual potential and ability of the average worker can be more fully utilized by having subordinates participate in the decision-making process.

Like, Burns’ work, McGregor’s, too, was corrupted. Many whose bias was for more participation by subordinates interpreted McGregor as advocating Theory Y as a new, better, and morally superior way of leading (Author Unknown, 2010). McGregor’s actual intent was that his categorization would lead managers to investigate the two sets of beliefs and develop managerial strategies that made better sense as to how and when each should be applied. Peter Drucker was one of several management writers that tried to point out that simply adopting Theory Y was not what was intended and doing so was inadequate (Drucker, 1974).

About the same time, Rensis Likert, who had gained fame for developing the well-known Likert Scale, introduced his theories of participative management and introduced this term into management terminology. His research found that the most effective managers accept more participation in decision making from workers and consider them fully capable and useful in the decision making process.

It is important to note is that neither writer claimed the Heroic Leader to be either authoritarian or participative. In fact, the term Heroic Leadership isn’t used as the theories of both Likert and McGregor pre-dated Burns. Moreover, all seem to be in agreement that a participative leader leads more by influence than authority or power. We will see that this is exactly what the Heroic Leader does when we examine the behavioral influence strategies. For now, let us say only that a Heroic Leader also is well aware and may frequently utilize participative decision making.

Myth 3: A Heroic Leader Operates in a Hierarchy with a “Command and Control Structure”

Some claim that, the Heroic Leader operates in a hierarchy with “a traditional command, control, and reporting structure.” This is easily disproved. A symphony conductor, a surgeon heading an operating team, and a sports team captain, among others, may be Heroic Leaders. Yet they obviously do not operate in a traditional hierarchy, since their reporting structure is flat and there is only one level of management with no middle managers. So we would have to say that Heroic Leaders may or may not be part of a traditional hierarchy. What about “a traditional command, control, and reporting structure”?

Reference to the term “command and control” is somewhat misleading in a leadership context. The term is a military one. Its official definition in the United States is “... the exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of a mission” (Author Unknown, 2003). It refers to a military commander’s authority to have his legal orders obeyed. However it has little to do with leadership. It has to do with his or her legitimacy and is one source of power.

Other organizational leaders have similar authority due to their position such as the three non-military leaders already noted. Also, there are other various sources of authority and power including legitimacy, position in the organization, expertise, personal attraction or ability, or the effort exerted. However, among many the term “command and control” leadership has come to mean a leader who leads through simply giving orders and ensuring their obedience. So in common usage it refers to a leader who uses a single behavioral influence strategy, direction, and has an authoritative, as opposed to a participative, approach regardless of his source of authority derived from his power.

So this is a half-myth. A Heroic Leader may operate within a hierarchical reporting structure, but so may a “Post-Heroic” Leader. Both probably work in a “command and control structure” with formal authority with the exception of *ad hoc* leaders who arise with no prior planning or organization, say a leader when there is an automobile accident with neither paramedics nor police present on the scene. Heroic or Post Heroic, authoritarian or participative, all may have some sort of authority to have their orders enforced. This authority is derived from their power. This power may be derived from any one of a number of sources. Again, that authority is simply source of power. It is not leadership.

Myth 4: The Heroic Leader Never Surrenders Control

Another incorrect notion is that the participative leader leads by surrendering control, that is, without being in charge. This too is a myth. It was again Peter Drucker who pointed out, that there is no such thing as *laissez faire* leadership. While critiquing Douglas McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y. Drucker maintained that there must always be a responsible leader, otherwise there is chaos. He continued that contrary to subordinate free-wheeling under Theory Y, effective employment of Theory Y was more difficult and required even greater effort and involvement on the part of the leader. This implies, more, not less control. This is true both of the formal and *ad hoc* leader.

No less a leadership expert of the stature of Warren Bennis tried implementing Theory Y in a more or less *laissez faire* fashion in an attempt to turn around the University of Buffalo during his tenure as president. As Drucker relates, “There was tremendous excitement but also total failure. Instead of achievement, there was lack of direction, lack of objectives, lack of controls, and frustration . . .” (Drucker, 1974).

According to proponents, the so-called “Post-Heroic Leader” operates in a role set in which there is little direct control. Instead, the Post-Heroic Leader leads only through influence. This is simply a misunderstanding of

Heroic Leadership. The Heroic Leader, in fact all effective leaders, always lead through influence, whether that influence is direct or indirect or through the use of some other strategy. Direction is necessary, for example, when time is a major factor or direction may be the only effective influence behavioral strategy that is likely to work, and especially when the leader has some kind of authority and responsibility for those he or she is leading. From my research, I have identified the following major behavioral influence strategies used by Heroic Leaders in both formal and informal environments:

1. Direction - Giving orders
2. Indirection - Getting things done by intentionally avoiding giving direct orders
3. Redirection - Reframing the objective so it becomes more desirable or acceptable
4. Deflection - Claiming inability to do what is desired by a subordinate
5. Enlistment - Asking for cooperation toward a goal using an emotionally based appeal
6. Persuasion - Persuading progress toward a goal through logical reasoning
7. Negotiation - An explicit exchange between leader and follower(s)
8. Involvement - Involving a follower in a project such that he has ownership in the action and the outcome

An effective Heroic Leader will use not one, but all of these behavioral influence strategies depending on the situation. Probably involvement is the most effective behavioral influence strategy in many situations, but there may not be time, or under certain conditions it may not be effective. In most cases, the behavioral strategy selected and how it is applied may be more effective than positional authority and simply giving an order. That is why many researchers have discovered that there are leaders in any organization who have no title or positional authority, and yet may be more effective as leaders than those who do possess formal authority. But this is nothing new. It was known and described by Xenophon, a Grecian general in his book, *Anabasis*, translated as the *Persian Expedition* and *Kyropaidia* and translated as *The Education of Cyrus the Great*. Both were written about 2000 years ago. The latter, by the way, was Drucker's favorite. He described it as the first systematic book on leadership and still the best (Drucker, 1954). Even in ancient times, Heroic Leadership worked!

There are conditions when a Heroic Leader must by circumstances lead with less control over those led, and this is more prevalent today, than say, fifty years ago. This might include leading a partner in a joint venture, leading subcontractors, leading other managers at the same level, or when leading someone who has specialized knowledge that the Heroic Leader lacks. There was a time when most leaders in industry could do any job in their organizations. This is no longer true. The leader, however, is still responsible and must lead, sometimes even using a direct, rather than an indirect, influence behavioral strategy when required. That is, the leader, even though this may not be his or her normal mode of operation, must operate in an authoritarian fashion if it is necessary to accomplish the mission of the organization at that particular time. This is true even in *ad hoc* situations where someone with no formal authority for the group takes charge, and saves the day.

What is Heroic Leadership?

So far, we've looked at Heroic Leadership and four myths surrounding it. We've established that Heroic Leadership:

- according to Burns, who first used the term, it is transforming, not transactional leadership;
- may be either participative or non-participative;
- may or may not operate in a traditional hierarchical structure;

- is not “command and control leadership;”
- may or may not require less direct control depending on the situation.

But what exactly is it? About fifteen years ago I began unique research which I termed “The Combat Leadership Study.” Battle leadership probably represents the greatest leadership challenge for any leader, formal or *ad hoc*. In combat, conditions are severe. There are terrible hazards. There are poor “working conditions.” There is probably greater uncertainty than in any other type of human activity. “Workers” may need to perform their duties with little food and irregular sleep. All must take great risks. Most followers and leaders alike would prefer to be somewhere else and doing something else.

While there are true military geniuses in battle, the vast majority, as in most organizations, are ordinary men and women. In most battles, many are not professionals. Not all are suited to their jobs. Professional or amateur, all are stressed far more than almost any other situation or occupation. Moreover, leaders must not only carry out the mission, but do their best to protect the lives of those they lead at the same time. So, battle probably represents a “worst case” condition. Traditional motivators such as high pay, good benefits, and job security aren’t much good. There is no “business as usual” on the battlefield.

To those unfamiliar with it, military leadership is running around shouting orders as in a Hollywood movie. It is obeying stupid orders simply because someone else is in authority. Those who have been there know better. As in any organization, there are some combat leaders that do a poor job of leading. They operate as martinets and provide the models for those who assume this is universal in this environment. However, good combat leaders are Heroic Leaders of a special type. They enable ordinary people to routinely accomplish the extraordinary. In battle leadership, leaders help their followers to reach very difficult goals and complete very arduous tasks. Since conditions of leadership in battle represent the worst that any leader might encounter, people in combat most definitely cannot be managed. They must be led. They are. That is, a battle leader must not only strive for efficiency in leading. Effectiveness is even more important. And in leading under these terrible conditions, successful combat leaders build and lead amazing organizations which get things done ethically, honestly, and for the most part humanely.

Although I appreciated the value of what I personally learned about leadership in battle, which formed the basis of most of my recommendations in my first book on leadership, I wondered whether there were underlying principles or lessons from warfare which were at the root of all leadership success.

If general principles of leadership from the worst case scenario of warfare could be uncovered, this could have an extremely important impact on Heroic Leadership in general. Leaders from all organizations could use these principles to dramatically increase productivity and the likelihood of success in any project in which they were engaged. I sought to uncover the highest and most effective principles of Heroic Leadership.

The foundation of my research was a survey sent to more than 200 former combat leaders and conversations with hundreds more. I especially sought those who had become successful in the corporate world or in other non-military organizations after leaving the armed forces. Among the responses I received in the initial phase, 62 were from generals and admirals. I asked these extraordinary leaders what they had learned from leadership in battle. I asked about the tactics they used, about the importance of their style and the most important actions a leader must take. I asked about adapting these lessons in their civilian careers.

I found that while there were successful leaders practicing many different styles, there were universal principles that successful leaders followed to dramatically boost productivity and achieve extraordinary success in all types of organizations. With so many respondents listing three or more principles, I expected a

huge list. The Emperor Napoleon, one of history's preeminent military leaders, developed and published 115 maxims on the conduct of war. How many hundreds of leadership principles would I uncover after analyzing and tabulating the input from such a large number of respondents?

Surprisingly, I discovered that ninety-five percent of the responses I received could be reduced to only eight basic principles. However, each of these leaders had seen one or more of these eight principles help them to achieve extraordinary results in their careers.

In a later phase of my research, I interviewed other successful senior business leaders and reviewed dozens of corporate situations and the actions taken by these corporations' senior leaders. Some had combat backgrounds. Some did not. Some had developed their own lists of principles of leadership over the years. While their lists differed from each other, they invariably included the eight responses I had previously developed from my surveys. I also looked at 7000 years of recorded history to confirm these concepts. There was an abundance of evidence to support these principles.

The Eight Principles which Define Heroic Leadership

That was almost twenty years ago. My research since then has been expanded to include hundreds of scenarios in both the military and civilian worlds which have further confirmed my initial work. There are numerous techniques and rules that people may follow in leading others. But these eight principles are essential. I believe they are the very essence of true Heroic Leadership. These eight principles are simple, but they can make the difference between success or failure in any project in any organization. This is because you can make a lot of mistakes and still succeed as a leader. But if you violate these principles of Heroic Leadership, you are likely to eventually fail, even if you are at first successful. No one can guarantee success, because there are other factors which might override anything a leader may be able to do. But, there is no question that if you follow Heroic Leadership, your chances of success are much increased. Here are the eight principles which define Heroic Leadership from my research and elaborated on in my books. (Cohen, 1998, 2000, 2010):

1. Maintain Absolute Integrity
2. Know Your Stuff
3. Declare Your Expectations
4. Show Uncommon Commitment
5. Expect Positive Results
6. Take Care of Your People
7. Put Duty Before Self
8. Get Out in Front

To summarize, Heroic Leadership is doing what is right while for the most part ignoring the potential benefit or harm to the leader. It entails leading a group with absolute integrity while raising individual performance to a personal best, and building a team spirit of sacrifice for the common good. The principles are simple, but are sometimes difficult to apply in that the Heroic Leader must put the interests of those he leads and for the mission of the organization before his own wellbeing. However, the payoff of applying Heroic Leadership to your organization and those with whom you lead and interact with is immeasurable.

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