

The act becomes real

Drama study and leadership development

Being the best company means having the best leaders at the helm. Effective leadership development should therefore be high on any organizational agenda. But that might not be enough. Today's global business environment makes wide ranging demands on leaders to the extent that only training of the highest quality will ensure they measure up to the task.

Why drama?

Standing out from the crowd often involves doing things differently. With regard to leadership development, that can involve looking beyond the usual context in order to succeed. Many organizations realize this and some are recognizing the potential of drama to make a valuable contribution to training programs.

According to Harvard University professor George P. Baker, "drama is a great revealer of life". One translation of this in business terms is that it helps highlight the skills and qualities needed to turn ordinary people into great leaders.

A unique blend of mythology, drama and psychology has given rise to a powerful learning intervention. Termed mythodrama, the course was launched in 1997 following a hugely encouraging response to workshops held at the time. Not surprisingly, those involved needed little persuading to make the subsequent transition from theater to business.

So what does mythodrama involve? It essentially offers an interactive approach to leadership development through the exploration of plays written by William Shakespeare. The celebrated English dramatist is considered ideal because:

- the characters and situations that figure in his works provide a remarkable insight into human behavior;
- leadership features as a recurring theme within much of his work; and
- the plays present a wealth of study material about leaders and followers.

For instance, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest* and *Macbeth* are regarded as key texts as they respectively explore inspirational leadership, power and influence, leading change and disruptive behavior.

How mythodrama works

Those who deliver the mythodrama program tap into accepted wisdom about the power of story telling. Since time immemorial, telling stories has been recognized as inherent to human nature and a valuable learning aid. Little has changed in the interim.

Within this context, story telling is employed to demonstrate how leaders use their skills, qualities and behaviors to influence others and achieve results. Course facilitators initially explain the play storyline and then invite executives to involve themselves with its content. The level of interaction is naturally greater when the events and issues bear relevance to a participant's individual circumstances.

The old adage informs us that a change is as good as a rest. That being the case, removing business leaders from their usual environment where rationality rules the roost could prove something of a masterstroke. The reason? Because involvement with drama stimulates such individuals and provides an opportunity for them to:

- experiment through the use of new and unfamiliar styles, ideas, language and behaviors;
- explore how they might react within similar circumstances;
- reflect on their personal situations, experiences and challenges; and
- be more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and the unanticipated trials and tribulations that will ultimately define whether or not their leadership is successful.

Building awareness of different leadership issues

Many scenes and actions within the plays present similar challenges to those faced by leaders in the business world. *Henry V* is regarded as an especially symbolic text in which a number of leadership issues are examined. For instance, there is King Henry's decision to wage war against France only after his nobles approve the action as being justified and proper. Prior to the battle is equally significant. Here, we witness a disguised Henry walking the camp listening in to ordinary troops in order to ascertain their doubts and fears. This is followed by a rallying speech from Henry before the Battle of Agincourt.

These examples illustrate:

- The value of leadership founded on consultation rather than command and control. A willingness to collaborate is crucial with today's business world becoming increasingly more dependent on technology, innovation and talent.
- That good leaders recognize the need to show understanding and empathy, especially towards their followers.
- How emphasizing togetherness helps promote solidarity and shared purpose.

Such actions also nurture trust and increase the likelihood that people will actually want to follow their leader and not just do so because it is expected of them. In any context, that can only help where motivation and commitment are concerned. Business is no different.

The night before the battle represents a particularly significant metaphor as it sees a troubled Henry doubting his ability to succeed. Business leaders must likewise face up to similar uncertainties, particularly during critical times. Such occasions are arguably when true leaders discover strengths and abilities hitherto unrecognized. Finding this extra inspiration from somewhere is crucial. Because without it, how can any leader realistically expect to inspire others?

The king's experiences also serves to illustrate the importance of reflecting on aims and intentions. Many leaders surprisingly fail in this respect with one consequence being an organization that lacks clarity of purpose. Furthermore, an articulate leader able to personally communicate his or her vision will resonate more with employees than any abstract mission statement can ever hope to achieve.

“Since time immemorial, telling stories has been recognized as inherent to human nature and a valuable learning aid.”



“ Furthermore, an articulate leader able to personally communicate his or her vision will resonate more with employees than any abstract mission statement can ever hope to achieve.”

Leadership is more multi-faceted than many of us imagine. Through Henry, course participants are able to appreciate that different leadership issues demand different approaches. For instance, any strategy deployed for doing battle with competitors will have its limitations when it comes to nurturing talent, generating ideas or restoration of the company following a setback.

For most organizations, survival and prosperity in a rapidly changing world depends on being able to galvanize the imagination and ability at their disposal. This, however, cannot be taken for granted. But effective leaders able to demonstrate openness, honesty, courage and passion can help stimulate those around them and inspire them to achieve business goals.

Comment

The review is based on: “Rehearsing tomorrow's leaders: the potential of myethodrama” by Richard Olivier and Julie Verity. The authors provide an interesting account of how myethodrama has emerged as a viable learning instrument within leadership development programs. They show how the concept functions and reveal how interactive drama study enables course participants to explore a wide range of leadership issues free from the pressures of their usual environment. It is also revealed how the experience allows leaders to examine their own actions and decision making and helps them develop the qualities and leadership style necessary to best influence those around them. Business practitioners will find Olivier and Verity's insight into this learning intervention extremely useful.

Reference

Olivier, R. and Verity, J. (2008), “Rehearsing tomorrow's leaders: the potential of myethodrama”, *Business Strategy Series*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 138-43, ISSN 1751-5637.

Keywords:

Leaders,
Leadership development,
Training,
Drama

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints



Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.