'Why pressure to be a "hero leader" is holding you back and what you can do about it'

Being a leader is rarely a breeze. There are times when it is easy, clearly, and others when the pressure is on to earn your corn. In moments like that, it is surprising that many do not simply throw the towel in and find a beach to lie on with a cocktail and a good book (preferably mine).

Temps de lecture : minute

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If you do choose to stay and wrestle with the mess of organisational life, the question arises as to what kind of leader you want to be. Despite the plethora of theories, thought leaders offering advice, books, leadership programmes and articles on the subject, one flavour stubbornly refuses to go away.

We all love a hero until we don't

The modern malaise of leadership and leading is that we are (still) addicted to the crack cocaine of heroic leadership. Our archetypes and exemplars of 'great leaders' remain grounded in a masculine narrative that they must be fast, decisive, confident, heroic, charismatic and, yes, tall. Putting politics to one side and just thinking about the men in question, we didn't see much public discourse about Boris Johnson's skill set in respect to managing a country; instead, it was dominated by abstract notions of whether he is a 'good leader' or not – with constant reference to the fact that he is an admirer (and biographer) of Churchill, who remains the leadership lodestone for much of the UK.

As a fractal of wider conversations about leadership, it is interesting that discourse around Johnson was polarised into a camp identified with the 'heroic' myth that completely disregards any questions of values, morality and personhood – the cult of personality is what matters – and another that sees morality, values, principles and personhood as central questions in defining what constitutes (good) leadership.

Given that these debates about leadership permeate civil society, no wonder organisational leaders feel under pressure, to an extent that can bend them seriously out of shape. It is worth noting that leadership development, rather than helping, often makes this worse. As Prof.Jeffrey Pfeffer, a notable critic of the field of leadership development, has commented: "[it has] become too much a form of lay preaching, telling people inspiring stories about heroic leaders and exceptional organisations, and, in the process, making those who hear the stories feel good and temporarily uplifted while not changing much of what happens at many workplaces". (2015: 6). Ouch.

What holds leaders back, then?

It is too easy to say it is the context within which they operate. Whilst that is partially true, we need to consider the narratives at play that set the conditions. By this I mean not just the expectations of others, where often the failure of a leader is not an invitation to engage in an inquiry into what could be learned, rather it is a catalyst for the wheeling out of one saviour and the wheeling in of another. This is also about self-narrative, the stories that leaders tell themselves, the ideals and standards they create which they then go onto imagine they have to live up to, even if they are sometimes disconnected from/not fully grounded in reality – some profoundly human stuff that is as real in a school playground as it is in a boardroom. When Allan Katcher, an American psychologist, asked senior executives what they would "least want their subordinates to know about them, in nineteen out of twenty cases [they] feared that their

subordinates would learn how inadequate they felt in their jobs"
(Micklethwaite & Wooldridge, 1997: 60).

The impact of all this

The emotional load on leaders is therefore considerable, and, regardless of whether lumped on them by others or an internalised anxiety, often fed by the need to be seen to know what to do and have all the answers, leaders need to find ways to work with these all too human tensions. At the heart of this is the need to get more comfortable with not knowing. This is a key leadership competency, but at odds with the dominant narratives that surround leadership. Much of what is termed 'thought leadership' on how execs should lead focuses on *external* factors and talks superficially about things like confidence. Leaders are scarcely provided with the resources to consider their emotions, the true circumstances they face and what it means if there is no obvious way round an unresolved problem. The taboo surrounding shame and anxiety prevents open discussion. In confronting uncertainty, leaders should focus on four things:

1. Develop reflexivity – the ability to notice your own beliefs, judgments and practices and what influences these (e.g. psychological, social and systemic factors)
2. Cultivate a both/and mindset – when all around are asking for either/or, yes/no, or stop/start binary responses, getting comfy with not knowing requires the ability to see and hold nuanced positions.
3. Ask questions – especially when you are amid the unknown. That is place for sensing and responding, not heroic leadership.
4. Experiment – and be prepared to fail and learn. If you do not know what is going on or what to do, to expect to be right as a default it an absurdity.

Crucially, leaders must be more self-compassionate and practice

courageous humility – it's impossible to know everything, and pretending otherwise simply piles even more pressure on them, making it harder for others to help and, ultimately, denies reality.
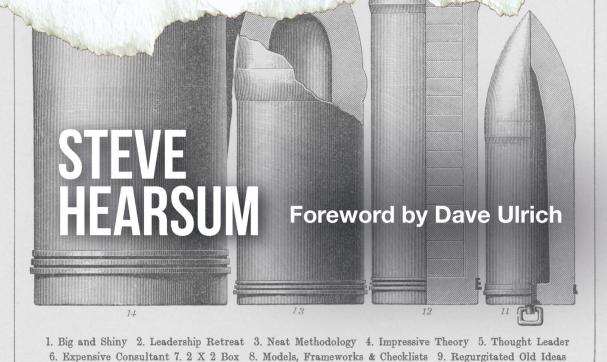
A final warning

Heroic leadership still holds us largely in its (mostly hairy and ever so masculine) vice-like grip, and the attempts to encourage more reflective and reflexive practices run up against the need to assuage conscious and unconscious anxieties. That means the work here is developmental and requires leaders to work not just at a cognitive and 'thinky' level: it is whole body learning, and requires you to consider who you fundamentally *are*, how you *show up*, and the *impact* you want to have on others.

Steve Hearsum is the founder of _Edge + Stretch_ and the author of _No Silver Bullet: Bursting the bubble of the organisational quick fix_.

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