



Supporting a hero's journey

Dorothy Nesbit outlines what coaches and other L&D professionals can do to help people on their journeys to better leadership

Research offers great insights into what differentiates the most outstanding leaders – but is it enough? Theoretical models, however well-founded, can make us lose touch with the essentially human activity of learning to lead. By contrast, the work of Joseph Campbell, mythologist, lecturer and author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, brings us face to face with our humanity as leaders.

In this article, I introduce his model of the “hero’s journey” and explore what it means for leaders and for those who support them in their development.

What is the “hero’s journey”?

Sandra started her career with a bang. Highly motivated – driven, even – she was passionate about high standards and quickly gained a positive

reputation for her ability to identify and act on opportunities to improve business results. She was soon promoted to lead a team and brought the same passion for improvement to her role as team leader, turning a rather lack-lustre group of people into a motivated and high-performing team. She was quickly assigned to turn around a second team, which she did successfully. She became highly visible as a rising star in her organisation.

Sandra’s early success depended in large measure on her own energy and efforts. Following a second promotion, she gained responsibility for three teams and relished the opportunity to expand her reach. Soon, though, things started to go wrong: as the leader of one team, she was able to maintain a tight hold on the activities of its members but, as a leader of three teams, the only way she could sustain this strategy was to work longer and longer hours. She was increasingly exhausted and





irritable. What's more, while some responded well, the rumour was that her rather 'pushy' leadership style was increasingly alienating team members.

Suddenly, Sandra's star was no longer rising: she was at the beginning of what Campbell refers to as the "hero's journey".

At the first stage, the hero experiences the Call to Adventure, which may come in many forms. Sandra knew, for example, that she was increasingly ineffective and exhausted. She could also see that, instead of high levels of motivation and strong business results, her new team was failing to engage or improve. She could hear the Call to Adventure. Like many heroes at the beginning of a journey, she was scared about the implications of the call and felt more vulnerable than she had ever felt before. Motivated to succeed

and unused to failure, Sandra feared she might be unable to overcome the challenges she faced. She didn't know how to do things differently and this uncertainty was new to her.

Many heroes hear the Call to Adventure repeatedly before they respond – like Harold Ramis's anti-hero in the witty and compassionate film *Groundhog Day*.

Let's assume that Sandra decides to answer the Call to Adventure. Campbell calls this second stage Crossing the Threshold. On accepting the calling, the hero – Sandra and other leaders like her – steps into new territories that are outside her past experience and 'comfort zone', and does not have answers to essential questions. The hero is forced to grow and to seek assistance in order to successfully complete the journey.

Early in her career, Sandra was able to leverage her motivation, confidence and certainty to achieve results. Stepping over the threshold, however, she is forced to recognise that she doesn't have all the answers at a time when she is poorly equipped to handle uncertainty.

It is a feature of the hero's journey that "when the student is ready, the teacher appears". Only when Sandra is ready to cross the threshold – to confide in a trusted colleague, perhaps – does a

At different stages of the heroic journey, leaders need a fine balance of both challenge and support



The hero's journey is an everyday part of our experience

guardian or mentor become visible to her. Finding a Guardian is the third stage in the hero's journey.

In myth, the hero often faces some external challenge – a dragon that must be slain, for example. Facing a Challenge (or 'demon') is the fourth stage of the journey. Often, the demon is within: Sandra's attachment to high standards, for example, was such that she found it hard to delegate to others and harder still to accept that she, too, might be capable of making mistakes. At the same time, facing a challenge or demon is essential if the leader is to progress.

By facing his demon, the hero acquires a resource that is needed to complete the journey. Transforming the Demon is the fifth stage of Campbell's hero's journey. For Sandra, for example, finding compassion for her own and others' mistakes opened up a new route to making improvements and achieving high standards. Effectively, she needed to integrate something she valued highly (high standards) with things she had previously dismissed (acceptance of mistakes, compassion) in order to fulfil her full potential as a leader.

At the sixth stage of his journey, the hero is concerned with Finding the Way. Building on the work of Campbell, Robert Dilts and Stephen

Gilligan highlight that finding the way to fulfil the calling is achieved by creating a new set of beliefs that incorporate the growth and discoveries brought about by the journey¹. At this stage, the hero or leader often needs skilled and sympathetic help to examine his past beliefs and to create new ones which are better adapted to his current aspirations. For Sandra, it was precisely the beliefs that made her successful in the early part of her career that needed to be reviewed.

The fulfilment of each key step brings the hero to the seventh stage of the journey, Returning Home. In myth, there is often a physical departure and return. In the workplace, the leader undergoes transformation in the full gaze of his employing organisation in order to 'return' as a transformed or evolved person.

So, to recap, the seven stages of the hero's journey are:

- **the Call to Adventure** This is the first sign of the hero's journey and may come in many forms. The hero hears it – and may choose to accept or refuse this calling
- **Crossing the Threshold** On accepting the calling, the hero steps into new territories outside his past experience and 'comfort zone'. In this new arena, he is forced to grow and to seek assistance

Reference

- 1 Dilts R, Gilligan S *The Hero's Journey* Crown House Publishing (2009)





- **Finding a Guardian** “When the student is ready, the teacher appears”. Only when the hero has crossed the threshold will the guardian or mentor appear
- **Facing a Challenge** (or ‘demon’) Often the demon is within. The hero has to face the challenge or demon in order to progress
- **Transforming the Demon** By facing his demon, the hero acquires a resource that is needed to complete the journey
- **Finding the Way** Creating a new set of beliefs that incorporates the growth and discoveries brought about by the journey
- **Returning Home** Finally, the hero completes the journey by Returning Home as a transformed or evolved person.

How can we support the leader on his “hero’s journey”?

Many readers of *Training Journal* work with leaders. We are in-house HR and L&D professionals. We are external professionals – trainers, coaches, consultants. We may be on our

own hero’s journey in some form of leadership role or as line manager to other leaders.

How can we support the leader on his hero’s journey? I outline some ideas below based on my own experience both as a leader and as trainer, coach and consultant to other leaders.

Balancing challenge with support

At different stages of the heroic journey, leaders need a fine balance of both challenge and support. This is about our own personal attitudes and also about the broader culture we foster within our organisations.

At the beginning of a journey, leaders are called to respond to a challenge: support at this stage can, paradoxically, take the shape of providing data to show them where they need to learn and grow as part of the Call to Adventure. At the same time, bringing attitudes of compassion, acceptance, trust and understanding help us to show empathy for an individual’s feelings of vulnerability in the face of the Call to Adventure.

Understanding what it takes to be a leader

The more we know about what it takes to be an outstanding leader in a particular role and about how individual leaders can develop in key areas, the more we can support leaders on their heroic journeys.

Competency frameworks are most valuable if they are grounded in effective research. Leadership development needs to be grounded in an understanding both of what it takes to excel as a leader and of how individuals can develop in key areas.

Effective processes and the supply of data

Standard processes such as the annual appraisal or the assessment process for promotion or selection are an important source of data for leaders. They can help the leader to identify a gap between what’s needed to excel and what he is bringing in practice, in effect offering a Call to Adventure at particular points in a leader’s development.

The same processes can help leaders to Return Home at the end of the journey, supplying up-to-date information that shows the leader that he has completed the journey and has acquired valuable resources.

Playing the role of ‘guardian’ or ‘mentor’

Campbell highlights the critical role of the guardian or mentor to the hero who has crossed

the threshold. *TJ* readers are often well placed to play this role or to help individual leaders to connect with others who are.

At the same time, we need to understand that we cannot fulfil the role of guardian until an individual has crossed the threshold. Until this time, our role is to provide the data that constitutes the Call to Adventure and witness the response of the leader.

Providing skilled support to the hero's journey

In the field of neuro-linguistic programming, Dilts offers a process that is designed to help the individual on his hero's journey. Providing support to leaders requires a range of skills including the ability to empathise and to bear witness to individuals on their journey, and the ability to coach others, particularly around their beliefs.

These skills, together with our attitudes and experience, equip us to fulfil the role of guardian or mentor.

Leveraging our own experience

Whether we recognise it or not, the hero's journey is an everyday part of our experience. In different areas, we may be at different stages of this journey at any one time – while Sandra may be standing on the threshold of a new journey as a leader, for example, she may already have faced demons in order to put herself forward for the role.

Our ability to provide support to others at various stages of their hero's journey depends fundamentally on our own willingness repeatedly to respond to the call to adventure by crossing the threshold.

Supporting the leader at different stages of the hero's journey

- **The Call to Adventure** At this stage, performance feedback is an important input, raising the leader's awareness of the need for new learning. While it may be tempting to 'rescue' the leader from feelings of discomfort, it's more helpful to witness those feelings and to explore with him the current and future consequences of responding – or not – to the Call to Adventure
- **Crossing the Threshold** Once the leader has crossed the threshold, he will still benefit from empathy for the uncertainties of standing outside his comfort zone. We are best placed to do this if we know from our own experience that it's possible to face uncertainty and learn new things. Questions such as *what is it that you need to learn?* and *what support do you need?* can help the leader to focus on the nature of the journey and to seek appropriate guardians

- **Finding a Guardian** You may be the right person to act as a guardian or mentor or you may be well placed to help individual leaders seek out the right support. At this stage, it may be your address book that counts
- **Facing a Challenge (or 'Demon')** At this stage, the leader needs skilled support from the right source, which may or may not be you. Here, too, it's important to resist 'rescuing' him from his feelings of discomfort. Instead, a skilled witness or coach can help him face a challenge or demon and recognise the importance of overcoming it
- **Transforming the Demon** At this stage, leaders need to transform a challenge or demon into a valuable resource that is needed to complete the journey. The leader may be able to complete this stage alone or with the help of a skilled line manager. Sometimes, though, transforming the demon requires additional support from a coach or mentor
- **Finding the Way** At this stage, the leader finds a way to fulfil the calling, drawing on the growth and discoveries he has made. Sympathetic line management, mentoring or coaching can help the leader stay on track, both by recognising the occasional 'wobble' on his part and by reinforcing progress and success
- **Returning Home** Finally, the leader (or hero) completes the journey by returning home as a transformed or evolved person. The organisation may acquire – or lose – a valuable resource: many talented leaders choose to move to a new organisation because they continue to be seen as a younger, less experienced and less skilled version of the leader they have become. Both the leader's supporters and the organisation's standard processes need to reinforce to the leader that he has completed the journey and that the organisation recognises and values this progress.

In the field of leadership, there is a great deal of valuable research that highlights what differentiates the most outstanding leaders. Campbell's work helps us to understand the essentially human journey that leaders undertake each time they need to acquire new levels of insight, competency and emotional intelligence. His concept of the hero's journey helps us to understand this journey and to support leaders in their development.

More than anything, our personal experience of our own heroes' journeys provides the key foundation for providing effective support. **TJ**

Dorothy Nesbit

is a leadership coach and director of Learning for Life (Consulting). She can be contacted at dorothy@learningforlifeconsulting.co.uk