

What is the 'Hero Myth'? How is this Evident in Modern Management and Leadership Discourse?

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Introduction

The hero myth, appearing in writing since 380BC¹, describes a narrative of an individual's heroic journey through readily recognisable steps, from a call to adventure, challenges and a transformational return². Despite widespread belief and incorporation in modern leadership discourse, using heroic attributes to predict leadership capacity has been empirically demonstrated to be a myth³.

Drawing on the work of Haslam, Reicher, and Platow⁴, Mintzberg⁵, Sinclair⁶ and Long and Ashurst⁷, this essay explains the hero myth and the process of how the metaphor of heroic leadership has found widespread acceptance in modern leadership writing, development and discourse. The nature of the heroic leadership discourse is also analysed, with respect to language, imagery, power arrangements and discussion, with particular reference to what is, and is not, said and who benefits from the discourse.

The limitations of the hero model for effective leadership are discussed with particular reference to leadership in risk. In particular, conclusions are made about the trajectory that an inherently individualistic model of leadership can put an organisation on.

¹ Haslam, S.A., Reicher, S.D. and Platow M.J. *The New Psychology of Leadership – Identity, Influence and Power* (Psychology Press, New York, 2011), 3.

² Long, R. and Ashurst C. *Following-Leading in Risk – A Humanising Dynamic* (Scotoma Press, ACT, 2014), 10.

³ Mann, R. A Review of the Relationship between Personality and Performance in Small Groups. *Psychological Bulletin* (1959, 56, 241-270). As cited in Haslam, Reicher, and Platow. *The New*, 8.

⁴ Haslam, Reicher and Platow. *The New*.

⁵ Mintzberg, H. *Managers Not MBAs – A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., San Francisco, 2005).

⁶ Sinclair, A. *Leadership for the Disillusioned – Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leadership that Liberates* (Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2007).

⁷ Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*.

The Hero Myth

Haslam, Reicher and Platow cite the example of the great man myth in Plato's Republic dated 380 BC⁸. Flowers contends that there is no distinction between the leader and hero in early stories, because leadership was usually a function of heroism in war⁹.

The common structure of the hero's journey: a call to adventure; crossing of a threshold; challenges and temptations; a supreme ordeal or failure; a transformation; and a return - is identified by a range of authors including Flowers¹⁰ and Long and Ashurst¹¹.

So how has the hero myth become such a dominant metaphor in modern leadership books, development and discourse? Thomas Carlyle's influential series of lectures on *Heroes and Hero Worship*, delivered in 1840, strongly attributed special characteristics to leaders¹². Haslam, Reicher and Platow¹³ identify that from an early age we are told stories of great leaders, whilst Hook argues that in most countries "the cult of the hero and leader is sedulously developed for adults as well as children and students"¹⁴, potentially enabling a conditioned acceptance of the myth in later in life. The unconscious need of followers for psychological security and strong leadership¹⁵ to save them from perceived difficulties can

⁸ Haslam, Reicher and Platow. *The New*, 3.

⁹ Flowers, S. "The Hero Myth" in *Political and Civic Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, ed. Richard A. Couto (Sage Publications Inc, 2010), 56. Accessed June 10th 2015 at DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412979337>.

¹⁰ Flowers. "The Hero Myth", 3.

¹¹ Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*, 10.

¹² For example "all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of thoughts that dwelt in the great men sent into the world: the soul of the whole worlds history, it may be justly considered, were the history of these". Carlyle, T. "Heroes and Hero Worship" in *Thomas Carlyle's Collected Works* (Chapman and Hall, London, 1869), 3. Accessed June 2015 <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044004713939;view=1up;seq=27>

¹³ Haslam, Reicher and Platow. *The New*, 1.

¹⁴ Hook, S. *The Hero in History – a Study in Limitation and Possibility* (the Humanities Press, New York, 1943), 10, accessed June 2015. <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015063789807;view=1up;seq=10>

¹⁵ Hook. *The Hero*. 20.

reinforce, or be exploited by, the heroic leader, a process Sinclair terms “the seduction of leadership”¹⁶. This need for psychological security intensifies during a crisis¹⁷.

Do the attributes of heroic leaders enable a capacity for greater leadership? A 1959 study by Richard Mann evaluated attributes commonly associated with heroic leaders (intelligence, adjustment, extroversion, sensitivity, masculinity, conservatism and dominance) and empirically demonstrated that any correlation between these attributes and leadership capacity was, at best, weak¹⁸. Mintzberg reviewed the performance of nineteen graduates of the 1990 Harvard University program who had been identified as having “made it to the top” in corporate roles. Fourteen had left or been dismissed following poor or questionable performance¹⁹. Mintzberg also reviewed the results of a 1999 article by Charan and Colvin that reviewed the failure thirty-eight CEOs²⁰.

Despite any factual basis, the heroic leader has become the dominant paradigm in leadership²¹, particularly leadership in risk²². Sinclair²³ argues that it can be “difficult to stand outside that regime and question it” whilst, similarly, Haslam, Reicher and Platow note that “its intellectual shackles are both tight and heavy”²⁴. Sinclair provides insight into the process by which myth becomes accepted wisdom – by the discourse framing and limiting understanding of what leadership can be and persistently and habitually

¹⁶ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 8.

¹⁷ Hook. *The Hero*, 20.

¹⁸ Mann. “A Review” as cited in Haslam, Reicher, and Platow. *The New*, 8.

¹⁹ A further four were evaluated as successful and there was no clear evidence relating to performance for one of the graduates. Mintzberg. *Managers*, 115.

²⁰ Charan, R. and Colvin, G. “Why CEOs Fail” *Fortune*, cited in Mintzberg. *Managers*, 113.

²¹ Manz, C.C. and Sims, H.P. “SuperLeadership: Beyond the Myth of Heroic Leadership”. *Organizational Dynamics* (,1991, Spring 91, Vol. 19 Issue 4), 18.

²² Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*, 8.

²³ Sinclair, *Leadership*, 26.

²⁴ Haslam, Reicher and Platow. *The New*, 2.

canonising heroic leadership²⁵. From a social psychology perspective, commitment to a leadership approach based on assumptions is an example of groupthink. The sunk cost of investment in heroic leadership can create further resistance to change within an organisation.

In subsequent sections this essay discusses how the hero myth is evident in modern management and leadership discourse and the limits of an inherently individualistic approach to leadership in risk.

²⁵ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 26.

The Hero Myth in Modern Management and Leadership Discourse

The dominant view of the heroic leader is evident in modern leadership discourse, including how leadership is written about, discussed and power arrangements. This section identifies this discourse, including what is overtly written or stated, what is hidden, the meaning carried by the words, power arrangements and how the discourse can frame and prime perceptions of what leadership is²⁶ and could be²⁷.

Leadership writing often reflects a traditional hierarchical approach to leadership, founded in the hero myth and led by an individual with the right attributes. Long and Ashurst identify an overwhelming majority of 120,000 books returned in an Amazon search for 'leadership' as reflecting this traditional view of leadership²⁸. Similarly, Haslam, Reicher and Platow report 80,000 results when typing the phrase "the leadership secrets of" into a search engine²⁹. Flowers identifies the consistent theme of individuals bravely following their own dreams in books and tapes on leadership³⁰. Mintzberg³¹, Bligh and Kohles³² and Hook³³ all identify a tendency to attribute achievements to an individual leader even where there is no direct evidence to support this belief. Similarly, Sinclair argues that "CEOs magnified by media profile – have come to represent leadership, to speak for it, to be held up as experts in it"³⁴ and that the extent of writing on heroic leadership, citation of

²⁶ Bligh, M.C. and Kohles, J.C. "Romance of Leadership" in *Encyclopaedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, ed. John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg (California, Sage, 2009) 2.

²⁷ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 26.

²⁸ Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*, 4.

²⁹ Haslam, Reicher and Platow. *The New*, 10.

³⁰ Flowers. "The Hero Myth", 8.

³¹ Mintzberg. *Managers*, 106.

³² Bligh and Kohles. "Romance of Leadership", 1.

³³ Hook. *The Hero*, 4.

³⁴ Sinclair. *Leadership*, xxi.

big name companies and endorsement of well-known people create a “weight of authority”³⁵.

Mintzberg reports on a similar perception in MBA programs – that of the inherent superiority of the abilities of managers - “a professional managerial caste that considers itself trained - and therefore destined – to take command of this nations corporate life”³⁶.

Sinclair notes “palpable hostility” from a group of executive MBA students when teaching a unit based on reflection, experiential learning and critical perspectives on leadership³⁷.

Sinclair argues that the leadership development industry “sits within a regime of truths supported by interlocking systems of expert and economic power”³⁸. Those who profit from leadership development and writing have a vested interest in promoting heroic leadership over alternate models of leadership³⁹.

This discourse of heroic leadership is inherently individualistic, about self and centralisation of power to an individual - with limited reference to the perceptions, needs or contribution of followers. The discourse is about leadership and control over others, rather than with others⁴⁰, by a leader with the superior attributes, reinforced by the imagery of a hero leading others against all odds.

³⁵ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 26.

³⁶ Mintzberg. *Managers*, 144.

³⁷ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 42.

³⁸ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 27.

³⁹ For example, Mintzberg describes US business schools as “complicit” in the depiction of heroic CEOs as fully responsible for achievements of the organisation. Mintzberg. *Managers*, 106.

⁴⁰ Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*, 5.

What is not said is as informative as what is said. A clear omission from the discourse of heroic leadership is the role of women^{41 42}, or others perceived as not having the right attributes. This is in contrast to the empirical research of Mann who found no association between heroic attributes and leadership ability⁴³. Similarly, Mintzberg cites numerous of examples of male leaders who have created substantial damage to the Organisations they led⁴⁴. In contrast, Fletcher notes that relational attributes, identified as important in post-heroic leadership models - such as empathy, community and collaboration, are culturally assigned as feminine⁴⁵.

Power arrangements inherent in the discourse are also not stated. The hero myth centralises power to the individual and dissent is not tolerated⁴⁶. The power is transmitted through the leaders' vision in to systems, rules, procedures, internal regulations and are reinforced through selection procedures, succession planning, performance reviews and personality testing⁴⁷. Sinclair describes a cyclic process, whereby aspiring leaders need to be compliant and perform within the accepted structure and tools of leadership⁴⁸.

Not only is dissent from the vision of the leader not tolerated, power structures are reinforced through an in/out group mentality and binary opposition⁴⁹. The tendency to not

⁴¹ Fletcher, J.K. "The Paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change" *The Leadership Quarterly* 15 (2004), 650.

⁴² Sinclair. *Leadership*, xxi.

⁴³ Mann. "A Review" as cited in Haslam, Reicher, and Platow. *The New*. 8.

⁴⁴ Mintzberg. *Managers*, 115.

⁴⁵ Fletcher. "The Paradox of postheroic leadership", 650.

⁴⁶ For example, Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple Computers fired leader of a product called MobileMe in front of an audience. In Isaacson, W. *Steve Jobs* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2009), 369.

⁴⁷ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 27.

⁴⁸ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 20.

⁴⁹ For example, in attempting to coerce support for action against terrorism by coalition countries, the President of the United States, George W. Bush stated that "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror." CNN. "Bush says it is time for action" (6.11.2011), accessed 2nd July 2015. (<http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/ret.bush.coalition/index.html>).

question or raise counter opinions to the leader can be further entrenched by an individuals' obedience to authority – where the pain caused by cognitive dissonance of not belonging to the group is greater than the pain caused by disagreeing⁵⁰.

The language supporting the dominant paradigm in safety risk leadership (zero, control, compliance, non-compliance, requirements, systems, hierarchy of control, penalties, regulation) identify, normalise and prime a discourse and ideology of control, power, non-questioning and a system of thought whereby the transformational leader and regulator are focussed on saving idiots from their own mistakes. The discourse in safety leadership creates an appearance of involvement and consultation whilst providing limited input by followers and masking what is not said (engagement, people, learning, relationship, you don't have any power). As Long and Ashurst note⁵¹, the hero myth is represented even more starkly in risk related leadership literature. Sinclair describes the cyclic nature of the power arrangements, whereby "only those most compliant to the overall purposes of the organisation rose to the top"⁵². The discourse of control and fear⁵³ is also reflected in the power, communication and language of regulators⁵⁴.

The critical question of the trajectory this discourse sets an organisation on is further discussed in the next Section.

⁵⁰ Long, R. *Unit 2 - Language & Discourse. Introduction to Leadership and the Social Psychology of Risk* (Human Dymensions, 2014) – video (1.05) accessed June 2015: <https://vimeo.com/95934331>.

⁵¹ Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*, 5.

⁵² Sinclair. *Leadership*, 20.

⁵³ Long, R. *For the Love of Zero – Human Fallibility and Risk* (Scotoma Press, ACT, 2012), 32.

⁵⁴ For example, WorkSafe Victoria 2015 campaign reinforcing that "WorkSafe is inspecting a workplace every 12 minutes. So if your workers aren't safe, neither are you." accessed July 2015: <http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/about-vwa/campaigns/>

Limitations of the Hero Myth for Effective Leadership in Risk

Long and Ashurst contend that the hero myth is represented more starkly in literature relating to risk management⁵⁵. This section examines the limitations of the heroic approach to leadership in risk, how it can enable significant risk events and the trajectory it can set an organisation on.

The individualistic nature of the hero model is inadequate for managing the complexity and dynamic nature of risk in a modern business context^{56 57}, and as Sinclair argues, “impedes meaningful public engagement with the complexities of political and social reality”⁵⁸. It is a model that relies on the assumed powers of an individual that simply do not match reality⁵⁹. The individualist model almost inherently limits cultural change because, as Long notes, culture is determined by the group⁶⁰ and ignores the expert knowledge of those performing workplace tasks that create risk.

Haslam, Reicher and Platow identify heroic leadership as an old psychology and articulate a new, relational model⁶¹. Sinclair also argues that leadership is socially constructed and relational⁶². Similarly, Long and Ashurst suggest a relational following-leading approach to leadership in risk⁶³, whilst Long identifies a hidden social contract between leaders and followers, which provides leaders with, and can remove, their moral authority⁶⁴.

⁵⁵ Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*, 5.

⁵⁶ Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*, 5.

⁵⁷ Flowers. “The Hero Myth”, 10.

⁵⁸ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 5.

⁵⁹ Raelin, J.A. *The Myth of Charismatic Leaders* (EBSCO Publishing, 2003), 5.

⁶⁰ Long R. and Long J. *Risk Makes Sense – Human Judgement and Risk* (Scotoma Press, ACT, 2012), 108.

⁶¹ Haslam, Reicher and Platow. *The New*, Chapter 1.

⁶² Sinclair. *Leadership*, 30-31.

⁶³ Long and Ashurst. *Following-Leading*, 10.

⁶⁴ Long, R. *Unit 2 – Followership and Hero Myth Part 1* (Human Dymensions, 2014) – video accessed June 2015: <https://vimeo.com/96462355>.

Haslam, Reicher and Platow identify that cults of personality often enables corruption⁶⁵, or actions that set the organisation in a direction that creates significant risk with limited oversight or accountability⁶⁶. Similarly, Sinclair cites the centralisation of power at Enron, prior to its collapse, as a “sort of collusive seduction, which can become so powerful as to forestall any criticism”⁶⁷. This seduction of followers by leaders, in conjunction with obedience to authority, has enabled leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini to exploit followership for evil purposes⁶⁸. The transfer of such substantial power to an individual also creates unrealistic expectations of the individual and can enhance their sense of infallibility, inflexibility, entitlement and a perception of themselves as outside the constraints applied to ordinary people⁶⁹.

The discourse of heroic leadership creates a hidden trajectory of perfectionism, self and control – leaving no room for human judgement⁷⁰. However, the outcomes are predictable – the creation of in/out groups, under reporting (such as the creative management and recording of potential lost time injuries)⁷¹, lip service and a tick and flick approach to compliance, subversion, scepticism⁷² and a preclusion of culture change - which is determined by the group⁷³.

⁶⁵ Haslam, Reicher and Platow. *The New*, 15.

⁶⁶ For example, Mintzberg cites a pressure to make the stock price look good giving CEOs unfettered levels of power to fire employees, manipulate financials and drive spin. Mintzberg. *Managers*, 104.

⁶⁷ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 5.

⁶⁸ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 19.

⁶⁹ Sinclair. *Leadership*, 6.

⁷⁰ Long, R. *For the Love*, 32.

⁷¹ Authors' personal observation.

⁷² Long R. Lecture to Unit 2 participants, 28/5/2015.

⁷³ Long R. and Long J. *Risk Makes Sense*, 108.

Conclusion

Despite the predictable outcomes of a perfectionist trajectory, and heroic leadership being a demonstrated myth, heroic leadership continues as the dominant paradigm in leadership, particularly leadership in risk.

Why organisations continue on this trajectory is, in some cases, simply a lack of understanding of social psychology. Even where the limitations and risk of the hero model are recognised, change can be resisted by those in power, through the dissonance and sunk cost associated with admitting failure in a strategy and through a tendency to stick with a dominant paradigm that is normalised and accepted as fact.

Alternate models, identifying the fundamental social and relational nature of *leading* rather than just leadership, provide a model more suited to management of risk in complex business environments. They also enable harnessing of the expert knowledge of the group and facilitate commitment and human judgement in risk.

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