

Clues for experiencing a world when there is no path

Corporate change and the hero's quest

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In the 1990s, executives and their associates will experience an increasingly complex and uncertain world. They will be required to cope with globalization, accelerating changes in technologies, workforce characteristics, and organizational forms.

They will face an expanding number of people riding the crest of the *Baby Boomer Wave* who exhibit a diversity of life styles. Attention will, of necessity, be focused on ecological issues, the new workforce, gypsy workers, and a variety of issues arising from the continuing shift from an industrial to a knowledge age. They must also begin to strategize the issues that will emerge from the commercialization of space.

Traditional planning is a dead end! Planned change has been the process for moving organizations into new conditions. It assumes that the future is predictable and there is an end state to be reached. The last ten years has shown us that these assumptions are no longer valid. Firms which acknowledge that new assumptions are needed have entered into adventurous change.

The changing nature of change... The words used to describe the process of change have also transformed. The words that seem to fit are quest, odyssey and journey rather than strategic change management and planned change.

Our belief is that the reason these words seem more comfortable is more than faddishness and is, in fact, an expression of the archetype of change — the heroic quest. This archetype is best characterized by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. This article presents a discussion of this change process based on Campbell's hero cycle.

We will describe the components of the major stages of the hero's quest with illustrations drawn from both past and current organizational examples. It will also present "clues" from the questing stories which can assist executives, managers, and facilitators in dealing with adventurous change.

The hero's quest

Campbell found the hero's quest involves three stages: separation or departure; the trials and victories of initiation; and the return and reintegration into society. The quest is a transformative cycle; not a linear or logical stage-by-stage process. There can be both processions and recessions throughout the process. While there is an overall cyclical pattern, the way in which this cycle unfolds is always unique. Because no two adventures are ever the same, seeking to replicate the quest of another will only lead to diminished outcomes or disaster.

Hints for navigating in whitewater... The quest is a process of exploring mystery. Chaos, uncertainty, and experimentation are experienced throughout the adventure and are necessary.

The quest is mostly a process of discovery and creation, thus existing theories and techniques play a marginal role in the quest. New theories and techniques arise from the odyssey. It is the quest of the explorer rather than that of the planner. Thus, fears arising from thoughts that you have too little knowledge may lead to rejecting or avoiding the call to adventure.

The quest also involves both self– transformation and the unleashing of organizational members’ creative abilities to discover their own theories and technologies for revitalizing the organization. The key is to trust one’s self and one’s companions.

The quest is both a spiritual and physical process... The spiritual dimension involves an inward renewal. This inward change directs the creation of the physical change. The physical process may involve significant changes in organizational systems.

Quests and paradigms... New rituals based upon a new vision initiates a pattern (paradigm) which in time becomes as rigid and inappropriate as the previous paradigm. Thus the ending of one cycle leads to a new adventure, unless it is suppressed by those who see benefit from the previous vision and associated rituals.

Separation, departure

The first stage involves stepping from the known into the unknown and includes:

- The call to adventure
- Movement into the void
- Discovery of the companion
- The inward journey

The call to adventure — The call to adventure triggers the quest. It can take two forms: inward or outward.

- *The call from within: dissatisfaction and emptiness...* The first form of inward call is “felt need,” experienced as feelings of depression, purposelessness, or a vague sense that something is wrong.

Ralph Stayer, CEO of Johnsonville Food, experienced a sense that something was wrong with his firm, even though it was growing and profitable. This awareness led him to recognize that associates didn’t care when he thought they should be excited about their tasks. He became very aware of a gap between what was and what could be.

- *The call from within: insight or vision...* A second form of inward call may come as an insight or a vision.

Walter Riley, CEO of Guaranteed Overnight Delivery, began his and his company’s quest by experiencing a variety of organizational and personal problems. Riley recognized that he had become a master manipulator only concerned with growth.

He also found that his initial vision of a workplace in which people could be all they could be was nowhere in sight. Riley assumed responsibility for the state of the organization and led a quest to create a new vision.

- *External calls...* The call to adventure can also be triggered by external events.

Triggering events include rapid changes in technology, increased competition, declines in product or service demand, loss of a major customer, passage of legislation, changes in resources, and a decision to close a plant.

Springfield Remanufacturing began its adventure when International Harvester decided to close a the plant. Jack Stack, the manager sent to close the plant, found employees who wanted to work and that the ‘problem’ was the existing management system. Stack developed *The Great Game of Business* and turned the plant around. Not long after, International Harvester decided to sell the plant. Stack and his associates accepted the call and purchased the plant.

The story of Mike Weaver, CEO of Weaver Popcorn, illustrates how the loss of a customer can trigger an adventure. The firm’s adventure began when a Japanese firm would not accept a shipment because of poor quality. This led Weaver and his associates on an odyssey to improve quality by transforming the organization.

Encountering a quest companion — The next aspect of the journey’s beginning stage is encountering a companion or helper. A companion can take a number of different forms. The first is the spiritual companion who provides insights, inspiration, and spiritual guidance.

For example, Marvin Weisbord, found insights to deal with the crisis that he experienced in transforming himself and his firm through the writings of Douglas McGregor. William O’Brien, CEO of Hanover Insurance, found inspiration in the works of Abraham Maslow and other developmental psychologists in guiding his firm’s transformation.

A second form of companion is illustrated by Lee Thayer, a professor of communications, who acted as a companion for Ralph Stayer, CEO of Johnsonville Foods. Thayer and Stayer engaged in a dialogue which provided insights for changes in Stayer’s organization.

Entering the void: trials and victories

With the companion (or companions), the CEO and/or the organization pass through the gates of the known into the void: a domain without maps (the hero may be conceived of as the CEO alone or the organization as a whole). Metaphors for operating in the void include being in the mist, rafting the permanent whitewater and leading the troops through the wilderness. Often, organizational members may neither understand nor feel in control of what they are experiencing.

The void can be both a place of terror and opportunity... When the change is perceived as terrifying, the coping or resisting behaviors of Ulysses' companions during his quest may be mirrored in your organization. They may engage in: avoidance, excessive rationality, use ideologies to limit reality, or use a variety of management and administrative tactics to control or deflect information that leads to chaos. These strategies will provide some of the early challenges of the quest.

Seizing opportunities... Rosenbluth Travel's experience with airline deregulation and the ensuing chaos in corporate travel illustrates a case of perceiving the void as an opportunity. The organization's employees, including CEO Hal Rosenbluth, conducted informal gatherings to explore the opportunities presented by the chaos being experienced by their customers. These meetings and an attitude of constantly questioning the status quo led the group to formulate a plan of action to create a new 'game' in corporate travel.

The inward journey — Passage into the void leads to the inward journey. This can be experienced in terms of two archetypes: *the adventure* and *regression into the adventure*. In both cases, the process involves letting go of past habits, embracing emptiness, and experiencing rebirth. For organizations lacking an adventuresome spirit, the inward journey can also involve recognizing limits, experiencing feelings of loneliness, alienation, anxiety, and fear.

Regressing into the adventure... The inward journey may involve an expansion of an individual's or organization's existing identity. Disney, Inc. illustrates this process. The organization had to regress to its initial core myth and evolve it forward to cope with present and future conditions.

For example, Disney needed to recognize that the "childhood fantasies" embedded in its services and products did not appeal to new market niches and that its founder's myth had become ossified within the corporate culture.

Such a regression to adventure may result in a painful, grieving or mourning experience. Since pain is perceived as negative in this culture and to admit pain can be unmanly, it may be avoided and denied. When the grieving process does not take place, a new vision may be stillborn.

Rites of passage... Formal rites of passage may be employed to facilitate the process. For example, to mark the end of an organization within a large automotive firm which was restructuring its components divisions, a wake was organized. Speeches were given by senior managers and other interested parties. Participants in the wake said that it helped them give honor to the work that they had done and prepared them for their new life in the restructured and larger division.

The adventure and the individual... The experience of the organization is mirrored by its members. This may take two forms. Individuals can lose a sense of purpose and the life they have lived may seem meaningless. This form of individual passage is not uncommon when organizations and their members are facing dramatic change. For example, approximately one-third of the managers in the Bell System required professional guidance to cope with the corporate transformation.

The second form is more gradual, less traumatic. Ralph Stayer's inner journey involved a number of insights and struggles with himself. He recognized that he had a high need to be in control. He also had to acknowledge that he had experienced a number of failures.

Stayer experienced several stages of individual passage. He states, "Now the very things that brought me success — my centralized control, my authoritarian business practices — were creating an environment in which I was very unhappy." He also states that he had to let go of his traditional business ways and seek a new way. This was not easy and involved a continuous process of experimentation, mistakes, insight, and new learnings.

Initiation: its trials and victories

The next stage of the adventure is the initiation. This form of initiation should not be confused with being initiated into some existing concept or way. It is being initiated out of the past and into the future. And it may involve experiencing countless trials. These trials transform the individual and the group. They also are opportunities for learning which tend to take the form of failures and challenges.

The trials can evoke the humaneness of organizational members who re-learn compassion from their suffering. Initiation also leads to the final victory — the new vision.

The creation of community... These trials can lead to sense of community; the feeling that “we’re all in this together.” This spirit may lead to deep feelings for the organization and for each other.

William Peace expresses how his trials at KRW Energy Systems created a deep sense of commitment within himself for his associates and the organization. Jack Stack also discusses the depth of feeling at Springfield Remanufacturing and the commitment of employees to each other.

A few examples of possible trials and the critical issues associated with coping with them are presented below.

The rational and irrational mirror... The super rational manager must consciously integrate the irrational within or it may come forth unconsciously and conquer the rational mind. Such executives may well become confused or angry when they realize that planned change is irrational in an uncertain environment and that extreme rationality may seriously interfere with the quest.

Again, Stayer illustrates this issue. Stayer thought that to achieve his vision he would have to engage in strategic planning and organizational design — that he would need to create an organizational structure which he would implement in two years. Over time, he learned that structure actually evolves from day-to-day and cannot be implemented trying to push the firm into a pre-designed organizational chart.

The analysis/intuition mirror... The quest requires rapid decision making, non-routine activities, innovation, and acceptance of high levels of uncertainty as much as it does carefully planned

strategies and steps. The analytic manager may confront a need for using and developing intuitive abilities. The intuitive manager may have to develop a better understanding of their analytic associates.

Fred Smith, founder of Federal Express, illuminates the role to be played by intuition by comparing it with the analytic activity of market research. Smith observes that market research is often biased by the questions that are asked under experimental designs where conditions are controlled.

The problem, observes Smith, is that people act differently outside the lab. He suggests that at best analysis confirms and at worst it dictates. He says intuition can bring together the countless variables that can’t be controlled allowing for leaps in understanding, creating a gestalt which is greater than the sum of the parts.

Atonement and synergy — The process of integrating shadows creates the conditions for atonement — the process of creating synergy. David Hurst describes his firm’s experience of atonement in this fashion. “In the heat of the crisis, the management team jelled quickly. At first each member muddled in his own way, but as time went by, we started to gain a new understanding of how to be effective. Even now we do not completely understand the conceptual frame that has evolved, and maybe we never will.” He states that while conceptual models can be useful, they have limited descriptive power to guide the process and tend to be developed after the process has emerged.

Discovering the vision — Vision discovery is the final aspect of this stage. In the fires of atonement people discover opportunities in the chaos, gain commitment, and become energized. It is at this point that the new vision often emerges.

Ken Hendricks, founder and CEO of ABC Supply, illustrates the importance of experiencing trials before creating the new vision. Hendricks comments that his earlier business experiences led him to recognize that business wasn’t about profit and success but about having fun and serving people. He envisioned an organization based on eliminating waste, having fun, developing people through education and responsibility, and giving them time to practice new skills.

Visioning and continuous improvement...

Some will come to the realization that visioning can and perhaps should be a continuous process of creative improvisation — that last month's vision may not be appropriate in today's context. Visioning can be a real time activity involving both stability and flux.

For example, Hendricks gave away one of his businesses to his biggest customers after turning it around. He recognized that the context had changed and that competing against his largest customer didn't make sense. In short, he transformed his vision as a result of his sensitivity to changes in the environment.

The power of a vague vision... Some find that they need not be concerned about the lack of a clear vision before engaging in the adventure. Peter Vaill points out that oftentimes high performance systems unfold from within the mystery of action. People have a vague dream of where they want to go and what they will be. That is what might be called non-directive visioning. The value of it is that it provides the space required for imagination and creative improvisation. It also prevents the development of fixed expectations about how the process must unfold which can limit visioning.

Recovering from a stillborn vision... Some questors may create a vision only to discover that it is not viable. They will have to return to the void to create a new vision. For example, a manager of a division of a *Fortune 500* firm dreamed of transforming his unit into self-managing teams while attending an Ecology of Worklife conference. Upon his return from the conference, he conducted a day long session on self-managing teams and then began to manage as if such teams existed. This created hysteria leading to a crash.

However, he didn't give up and a new approach was initiated. After two years, some groups are still experiencing hysteria while others have developed a commitment to the process and are continuing to evolve their working environment. Other units have developed an interest in evolving their work system and are beginning the quest.

The return

The third stage of the journey is the return. The primary theme is the hero's or heroine's return, and the renewal of the community with the wisdom of the vision.

The final trials and traps — Upon returning, the hero may encounter numerous obstacles in articulating, communicating, and implementing the vision. These obstacles encountered may be:

1. *The bliss trap*
2. *The chase with demons*
3. *The final temptations.*

The bliss trap... The trap of vision bliss arises when the visionaries see only their vision and are blind to other important issues. Steve Jobs' behavior towards the Macintosh as a product and Apple as an organization illustrates the bliss trap. Jobs was so entranced by the new computer and his vision of Apple that he refused to come to grips with changes in the environment and the fact that the Macintosh could not be purely a home computer. His being caught in a bliss trap led to a decline in organizational effectiveness.

Organizations may become trapped in the bliss of past successes. Past successes inhibit some from undertaking necessary changes. Ralph Stayer states that Johnsonville Foods' greatest enemy was its past success.

The demon chase... It is not uncommon for the hero to be chased by demons bent on destroying the vision. Demons can be various organizational stakeholders. Union leaders or mid-level managers may resist innovation efforts and Wall Street analysts and stockholders may emphasize quarterly returns over the long term and thus reduce the time needed to support innovations.

Internal demon behaviors may take the form of: excessive controls, rigid structures, demands for conformity, excessive rationality, lack of commitment, emphasis on short run results, and a devotion to rituals over the real work.

Egoism is another demon. A dramatic example of the negative results of the egoism demon is the decline of Computerland. It's CEO, Bill Millard, believed in focusing only on positive thoughts and developing egoism in his associates. His charismatic personality and the dependency on him by many of his followers reinforced an overall optimistic way of thinking about the company's situation. He ignored associates who pointed out real and potential problems. He spent large amounts of cash on personal items in the midst of a financial crisis. Finally, Millard's illusions drove the company into disaster.

Demons based upon inner fears and anxieties associated with the change process may lead to blame games, win-lose strategies, over promising, simplistic solutions, and quick fix change programs.

Demons may also take the outward forms of consultants. For example, executives may be tempted by consultants claiming to have a magic wand: a quick fix through canned programs for creating organizational effectiveness.

The final temptations... The vision can also be destroyed by temptations to not engage in sacrifice. These temptations are illustrated by the experiences of Christ and Buddha. Christ experienced three temptations: politics/power, economic, and spiritual growth or expansion. Buddha was tempted by desire, social duty, and fear.

A classic example of this is found in the story of employee involvement at McGuffey's Restaurants. The firm's vision was to create a restaurant organization that did not mistreat its employees. A number of employee oriented programs were developed. However, management lost contact with employees because the managers suffered from the temptations of power, economics, and ego-inflation when the firm began to prosper.

McGuffey's CEO states, "Success breeds ego and ego breeds contempt". However, they recognized that they had lost their vision and recognized their temptations. This led them back to their quest to develop a high involvement firm.

Overcoming temptations with sacrifice... Sacrifice in this context involves the root meaning of this word: to make holy, and to make sacred. An example of sacrifice is the ending of the illusion that managers don't make mistakes and have all the answers by the executives at Levi-Strauss. This sacrifice led them toward wholeness.

Another example of sacrifice involves a personal letting go of the idea that everyone must be the same and/or that the change must unfold in a certain fashion. Marvin Weisbord's actions in his own organization illustrate this aspect of sacrifice. He has said, "Our best shipper, Sidney, a world class miracle of efficient distribution, had about as much interest in participation as a gourmet chef would have in McDonald's... He never missed a day, and as long as I had my job, Sid's was secure too. I thought that I would find a way to reach him. Of course I never did."

Sharing the vision

Campbell observes that for the hero to bring the vision into the world he or she must create a ritual. American Indian visionary, Black Elk states, "A man who has vision is not able to use the power of it until he has performed the vision on earth for the people to see." This is the final aspect of the quest — enactment of a ritual of creation.

Creation rituals — Rituals of creation are unique to the conditions of the organization and can take a variety of forms. They range from ones of very limited purpose to ones symbolizing total organizational change. An example of the former is the ritual of initiation at Rosenbluth Travel during which new associates experience two days of orientation.

People engage in skits to experience the firm's vision of the importance of happiness. This ritual bring the firm's vision to life for new members.

Other examples of organizational rituals of creation are: GE's *work-out* process; Levi-Strauss' leadership week; and Springfield Re-manufacturing's *Great Game*.... These rituals are designed to support change throughout the whole organization.

GE's *work-out* process is designed to transform the culture from one supporting low involvement, conformity and energy to high participation, creativity and an energetic spirit. It is also designed to break old habits and to enrich and expand the information executives receive by exposing them to a wider diversity of organizational members.

Rituals of creation... Rituals of creation can also be developed by workteams and individuals. These activities can be viewed as rituals of creation for community or task accomplishment. An example of the former is Weisbord's observation that people in his firms began holding spontaneous parties to celebrate birthdays with the advent of employee involvement. An example of the latter is Semco S/A's hunter spirit. CEO Semler states that for most of human history hunting bands were the dominate economic organizing form. At Semco, the hunting spirit, is expressed by associates who self-organize their group structure to work on identified opportunities.

Quest clues

The quest is one metaphor for transforming organizations, developing high performing systems and embracing change in high novelty environments.

This quest has provided clues for executives and associates for their odyssey.

First clue — The first clue was the need for continuous awareness of the call to adventure and recognizing of the factors which inhibit the hearing and accepting the call.

Second clue — Be aware of the relationships between organization members and internal/external change agents — companions. Companions do not assume responsibility for the journey, nor do they direct the change process. They do support the expression of creativity and challenge the organization members and leadership to continue the quest. They act as friends and provide concepts, theories, and ideas when requested.

Third clue — Accepting the idea that the adventure is filled with mystery is the next clue. Executives need to recognize that there will be times when they don't know what to do and should be willing to express this.

The example of Rosenbluth Travel provides additional clues for dealing with the void:

1. Recognize that chaos is the natural state of the void
2. Challenge the status quo
3. Scout the void for opportunities
4. Envision a variety of scenarios for dealing with the void using dialogue rather than analysis
5. Create order through action based on direct contact with the environment.

Fourth clue — Be aware that both individuals and the organization will experience identity change and growth. This is critical to the process of change and cannot be avoided. Dealing with this process requires a compassionate attitude when dealing with feeling issues and in providing support. Organization members ought to develop a state of self-compassion and not feel guilt about their experience of trauma and psychological confusion.

People also must be provided with the time to experience the change process and discover whether they are suited to it. If not, they should be provided with support through counseling, outplacement assistance, and transfer.

Discovering strengths... People also will discover strengths which were previously not expressed. The associates of Springfield Remanufacturing illustrate this phenomenon. They had been judged losers by the management of International Harvester. Managers and executives need to recognize their tendency to depreciate the potential of their associates based on past conditions and their failure to recognize that people can rise to the occasion when given the chance. Associates also need to become aware of their *Jonah Complex* — the tendency to self-diminish rather than actualize their fullest potential.

Fifth clue — Visioning is not a ritual or analytic process. Visioning is both a real time and long term process. It involves human development and an in-depth assessment of the organization and its environment. Successful visioning requires cutting the cord of paternalistic practices. It can also involve an awareness and transforming of the organization's core mythology and the revitalization of values and mindsets.

Sixth clue — Creating synergy is similar to Hurst's metaphor of integrating of bubbles and boxes. Bubbles are the symbolic expression of the soft, intuitive, acausal, and *Theory Y* nature of organizational effectiveness. Boxes are the formal, hard, logical, and *Theory X* functions of the enterprise. Hurst states, "organizational effectiveness results when you find the bubble in the box and put the box in the bubble." Hurst's metaphor suggests that synergy arises from the interplay of soft and hard. Play is creative improvisation which leads to creating a new game rather than learning to play someone's game: methodology. Play also leads to spontaneous unlearning and the end of influencing which is necessary for creating a new context.

A seventh and final clue

The final clue is the importance of inward change. Inward change is not learned in training nor developed through the use of techniques. It cannot be imposed by management. In fact, the quest warns that an attempt to "brainwash" the quest participants reflects an expression of inner demons and will only lead to disaster. The experiencing of trials and facing the external and internal demons led to inward change. Successful inward change arises only when organizational members are encouraged to be "free spirits" and to think for themselves. ♦

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