



## Heroes of modern leadership

25 Feb 2014

*Inspiring leadership can come from anywhere, as John Sadowsky attests.*

The subject of 'heroes of modern leadership' is both interesting and controversial for me. In many of my public appearances and leadership seminars, I refer to the 'myth of the hero', our fascination with the solitary charismatic figure who can 'change the weather', as Winston Churchill said his ancestor John Churchill could. We cling to the myth of the single great man because we want to believe in larger-than-life figures who can inspire us and lead us to the promised land.



ANTONIO RAVANTE/ISTOCKPHOTO/THINKSTOCK

The reality of outstanding accomplishment is somewhat different. Leaders do not change the world, the weather, or their organisations on their own. In nearly all cases, leadership is a transaction between a leader, a group of followers, and a vision of what they can achieve together. Leaders and followers become allies in support of a common cause and a shared sense of purpose.

My own image of heroic leadership is inspired by a quote from Carlos Ghosn. When asked about the difference between a good leader and a great one, the Renault and Nissan CEO opined: "A good leader brings results. A great leader writes a new story." To me, a heroic leader writes a new story for an organisation, a story of change that brings the company and its people to a new place. In the most striking cases, that story is inclusive, engaging, and authentic. It binds the group together by providing vision, meaning and purpose.

With this concept in mind, here are a few examples of modern leadership that I see as having an element of heroism:

### Anne Mulcahy and Xerox

When Mulcahy was named president of Xerox Corp in May 2000, and CEO one year later, the business was in serious trouble. The turnaround she stimulated at the giant company is a striking example of story co-creation. Interviewed in *Fast Company* in 2005, she described how she navigated through the early days of uncertainty, by encouraging Xerox people to write a new corporate story with her: "I got great advice: Write a story. We wrote a Wall Street Journal article, because they had been particularly nasty about us, dated five years out. It was about where we could be if we really stood up to the plate. And people loved it. No matter where I go, people pull that article out. They personalised it... Storytelling is hugely important. At our town meetings, the most frequently asked question wasn't whether we'd survive, but what we would look like when we did."

To redefine her company, Mulcahy tapped into the power of storytelling and story-sharing. A new corporate identity emerged at Xerox because she got the employees to co-create the future story, to buy in to it, and to take ownership of it. She was the 'hero' who began the process of writing her company's new story, and her followers created a future that nobody could have imagined.

### **Paul Dolan and Fetzer Vineyards**

Effective leaders engage others with their stories of purpose. They give us not only a sense of belonging, but also a sense of possibility. Their stories provide the context that makes people feel part of a larger experience. At Fetzer Vineyards, former CEO Paul Dolan transformed the winery by creating a vivid picture of the future that could come to life for others in the organisation. His tale combined a story of identity ('we are special people') with a future story, a story about 'who we can become'. It was all encapsulated in a simple phrase: 'Fetzer people: enhancing the quality of life.' In a more protracted version, Dolan explained the vision to his people: Fetzer would be an environmentally and socially conscious company that produces wines of the highest quality and value, while at the same time embracing, and taking responsibility for, its higher societal mission.

"We are an environmentally and socially conscious grower, producer and marketer of wines of the highest quality and value." This one sentence said that we were going to place our environmental and social concerns on the same level with our business-oriented, economic goals of quality and value.

### **Pope Francis and the Catholic Church**

My third tale of heroic leadership is one evolving today before our eyes. In the less than a year since he ascended the throne of Saint Peter, Pope Francis has demonstrated his desire to change the modern narrative of the Church of Rome.

All seem to agree that he has already modified the tone and the culture of the church's discourse in significant ways. In his personal behaviour, Francis has clearly signalled that he will preside with a style unlike his predecessors. Here is a humble Pope who disdains the pomp of his office, lives in the Vatican guest house rather than the papal palace, and drives an unpretentious Renault 4. Symbolically, he celebrated his 77th birthday over breakfast with four homeless men and a dog.

Pope Francis preaches simplicity, openness, tolerance and outreach; his view of the church's future is a kinder, less punitive one. After several decades of a church that seemed to want to teach by spreading fear and emphasising punishment, this Pope chooses to speak of possibilities rather than constraints, and of mercy for all. In addition, Francis seems to have a deep desire to bring everyone along on his journey, including those who have often felt shut out in the past.

Judging by the millions who have crowded to see him in person, in St Peter's Square or on the beaches of Brazil, his outreach is already proving wildly successful. For the first time in many years, the pews of Catholic churches across Europe and the US are filling up again.

Of course, the great challenges lie ahead, as Francis must walk a fine line between the desire for change and the need to keep continuity with the Church's illustrious and conservative past. Whether or not one has any interest in theology, though, I would suggest we follow this evolving leadership story with considerable interest.

*John Sadowsky is an internationally renowned leadership coach and inspirational speaker with over 20 years experience on five continents. He is the author of several books about the use of narrative in business and leadership. John is Distinguished Professor of Management at Grenoble Ecole de Management. Find more information and read John's blog at [www.johnsadowsky.com](http://www.johnsadowsky.com)*

#### **Previous posts**

[Soft skills and engineers: Google's Project Oxygen pt2](#)

[Soft skills and engineers: Google's Project Oxygen pt1](#)

[Using storytelling to coach leadership self-expression](#)