

What do innovative leaders have in common with ancient myths? A view of the archetypal hero within the modern manager

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Abstract

This contribution explores what modern managers have in common with heroes in ancient myths. Myths and religions have always tried to explain truths by means of symbols to some degree. It is the purpose of this contribution to uncover some of the truths behind the figures in ancient myths by investigating some examples and letting the old meaning become apparent by itself.

Innovative leaders need to gain certain competences for several management fields and they have to be flexible in their thinking and acting. One function of a leader is to help the organization define and achieve its purposes. This means formulating strategies, visions, and challenges. Another function of a strong leader is to embody the spirit of the community and help hold it together.

Once it is apparent that the differences between ancient myths and today's myths are much smaller than is popularly supposed, this paper may contribute to those currently working for unification in the sense of human mutual understanding.

Keywords: myths, managers, heroes

Introduction

Today's managers have to face all kinds of problems which deal on the one hand with hard quantitative, measurable facts (operative management) and on the other hand with problems which appear as strategic problems. It is a challenging field for every manager of a company and to keep the business running none of these can be neglected. To cope with both fields, similarly a systemic view helps to understand certain patterns which are often responsible for non-linear functioning procedures of different constellations within a company. Within the complexity which appears with "non-trivial-machines"¹ (*von Foerster, 1971; von Foerster, 1993, 138*) such as human beings, one can discover certain patterns which follow certain legalities. The following will give an idea of a management which is seen from a systemic view of management. The field of systems theory appears thereby as a science with a special approach to problem-solving which can per se be a heroic task. Innovative management and leadership can be considered a modern myth in which modern "heroes" fight for economic survival by facing a reality which very often appears in different shapes, since people act based on what they consider to be reality and not so much what reality is or might be.

In the following the terms "traditional" leader or management are used as well as "modern, innovative" leader or management. This is in order to make distinction between what is meant by used behavior and behavior which has arisen in current times. This does not mean that "innovative, modern" does not follow a tradition in management or leadership which has been developed since Adam Smith but it makes clear that different behavior need different terms.

A Systemic View of Organizational Behavior or the Modern Myth of Economic Power

The purpose of a modern management concept, such as The St. Gallen Management Concept which was already introduced some decades ago and has since become widespread in economic practice, is to make a multi-dimensional classification of management's decision problems. Based on systems theory, it provides a problem-oriented framework and methodology for an integral conceptualization of problem-solving approaches, considering contextual and situational factors of corporate development. Therefore, the main task of a management which is established in a permanently changing environment is to lead a company to a development of new ways of thinking and acting which provide long-lasting survival for the company.

The sentence "innovate or die" (*Peters, 1997*) today puts enough pressure on the organization's leaders so that they sometimes have to undertake strange measures to survive on the market. There are all kinds of machines to ease physical work but there is not yet a machine invented which can ease a manager's work. To be economically effective in problem-solving, a manager's work can be divided into three key questions:

- What is the task of a manager?
- What is the biggest problem? And
- Which principle is behind this problem?

First of all it is the aim of a manager's work to drive the resources and efforts of an organization into one direction to take all the chances which help to get an economically important output. That means that most of the time is invested for problems instead of chances (*Drucker 2000, 105-107*). Traditional leaders are oriented to operative decisions and measures directly connected to profit and growth. So one can say the better the operative dimensions of a company are, the more it becomes dangerous when the strategic situation gets worse.

Second, the main problem is the confusion about the distinction between effectiveness and efficiency which leads people to do things right instead of doing the right things. The main tools of an organization concentrate on bookkeeping and data collection (operative aims) which are both connected

to efficiency. What a company needs is a way to identify fields of effectiveness and a method to concentrate on this (*Drucker2000, 105-107*). Rites of the traditional management culture often force the management to give priority to operative aspects, especially to periodical business transactions, and the accompanied reporting in business press. Thus, the strategic thinking will not be paid attention to in the way that would be necessary (*Malik 2000, 236-238*).

Third, what principle is behind the problem? An economic organization is not a natural phenomenon but a social one. However, events in social situations do not appear as natural events which are connected to a natural, normal distribution of the universe. In social situations a very small number of events – maximum 10 to 20 percent - is responsible for about 90 percent of all events while the major part of events is responsible for the 10 to 20 percent. An example of that is the market: very few customers demand the majority of orders. Another example concerns personnel problems: the majority of complaints come from a very small group of collaborating people (*Drucker 2000, 105-107*).

Business schools teach that good managers have to take into account all aspects of organizational tasks, operational as well as strategic. However, the complexity of living systems such as organizations has to be accepted. By dealing with “non-trivial machines“, such as collaborators, customers and soon, it will hardly be possible for a manager to make all decisions by outside steering. And it is barely possible for a manager to know everything that has to be known to have solutions for all emerging problems. Top-down directives have very limited effects and disregard the momentum of a system. And “systems“ are called systems because of their inherent dynamic dimension. This cybernetic view of a complex, real living system such as a company explains the steps which have to be taken to keep a company alive.

Outgoing from that systemic idea that everything that exists has once become one has to realize that today’s state of the world is the tentative result of evolution (socio cultural and economic-political development integrated). It has always been a process of development which has become and ongoing, becoming development which effects the technical achievement of human beings but is not measurable by human standards. The development of each organization independent of its size and economic power is widely determined by the structure of this evolutionary process. At the same time this development is one of the uncountable machines which keeps the evolution going (*Malik 2000, 240*).

Innovative Leaders or Modern Heroes?

Today’s managers increasingly accept the fact that to lead a company means to deal with complex systems. The continuous necessity to adapt to changed conditions and the permanent pressure to develop into unknown areas are problems which are beyond the operative leadership of a company and put special demands on the management.

A modern, innovative manager who is aware of his or her company as a complex system which does not function by “cause and effect thinking“ always solves problems in a broader sense.

- He or she creates knowledge in ecological issues as well as in social matters.
- He or she realizes that strategic aims very often have priority over operative goals.
- The modern, innovative manager has different risk behavior than managers of the “old school”.
- He or she improves emotional intelligence as a basis for social competence.
- He or she takes into account having an uncomfortable state.
- To be a good leader means to serve a community permanently.
- A leader’s role is accepted within a community as long as he or she provides security. Instead of top-down directions, social competence is the key elements within a modern, innovative management.
- A good leadership has to motivate all members of a team and has to strengthen people’s personal resources. It is a question of autopoietic action, which means to regenerate oneself and to cope with a permanent changing environment.

So one further question is which qualities must a modern, innovative manager have to do well in a company? Questions about persons who should be able to lead other persons deal with abilities, knowledge, personal characteristics, attributes, experiences, qualities and competences. An analysis of more than 600 of the largest companies in Germany has shown that a manager has to be: entrepreneurially thinking, team-oriented, communicative, visionary, internationally oriented, ecologically oriented, socially oriented, have integrity, charismatic, multicultural, intuitive and last but not least customer-oriented. A bulletin of a globally operating bank wrote that the managers of tomorrow have to be interrogative-integral, integrating-intermediate as well as intercommunicative-instructive (*Malik 2001, 16*)

One conclusion to this might be: The modern manager has to be a universal genius, or in other words a hero. Or do these expressions tell us something about a modern myth which makes us believe that all these attitudes generate a competent manager?

The Functions of Myths in the Society

Myths have always existed to explain scary and inexplicable phenomenon such as acts of nature. However, myths were also there to express elemental feelings like love, hate, jealousy and so on. Fate ordained heroes and gods fought for their survival, fame and honor. Myths were always and still are fascinating stories which are told in a lively and pictorial style to explain indefinable phenomenon. On the one hand they have entered our every day language (e.g. Oedipus complex or narcissism) and reflect the structures and values of the society. The following refers to Joseph Campbell’s² (*Campbell 1968*) point of view about the myth and the society, which is a kind of confrontation of individuals and the society of ancient mythological times and today’s demystified time. It is necessary to have this view of a myth-based society of former times and anon-mythological society of today to get an idea of what the specific orientation of the modern hero-task must be, and to discover the cause for the disintegration of all of our inherited religious formulae.

There is no final system for the interpretation of myths, and there will never be any such thing. Mythology has often been interpreted by the modern intellect as a “primitive [...] effort to explain the world of nature“, as a “product of poetical fantasy“, as “a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche“, and as “God’s Revelation to His children“. And there will be answers to all the questions concerning these ideas as long as one does not ask what a myth “is but of how it functions“ and “how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today“.

The tribal ceremonies like birth, initiation, marriage, burial and so forth translate the individual’s life-crisis and life-deeds into classic, impersonal forms. They disclose a person to him or herself, not as this personality or that, but as the warrior, the bride, the widow, the priest; and at the same time rehearsing for the rest of the community the old lesson of the archetypal stages. All participate in the ceremony according to rank and function. The whole society becomes visible to itself as an imperishable living unit. By an enlargement of vision to embrace this super-individual, each discovers him or herself enhanced, enriched, supported and magnified.

All of which is far indeed from today’s life. The invention of the power-driven machine or the computer, and the development of the scientific method of research have so transformed human life that the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed. The dream-web of myth fell away; the mind opened to full waking consciousness; and modern man emerged from ancient ignorance, like a butterfly from its cocoon. The social unit of today is not a carrier of religious content, but an economic-potential organization. It is a hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and resources. Therefore, the problem of today’s society is, that all is in the individual –but there the meaning is totally unconscious. One does not know toward that which one moves.

Conclusion

Today many of the mysteries of ancient times have lost their power; their symbols no longer interest modern people. The descent of the Occidental sciences from the heavens to the earth - from astronomy in the seventeenth century to anthropology and psychologies in the twenty-first century mark the permanent prodigious transfer of the focal point of human wonder. “Not the animal world, not the plant world, not the miracle of the spheres, but man himself is now the crucial mystery. Man is that alien presence with whom the forces of egoism must come to terms, through whom the ego is to be crucified and resurrected, and in whose image society is to be reformed“ (*Campbell 1969, 391*).

Joseph Campbell’s point of view at the end of the 1960s on society and the interests of humans is still popular. Transferring this to traditional management practice one can conclude that in order to be successful, organizations often follow the causal principle “if – then“ and forget that one still deals with living systems, with people who – to say that with respect –do not function like “trivial machines“.

The modern, innovative manager or leader is a hero of today who follows old mystic paths. He or she often takes into account fighting a battle which may seem impossible to win. He or she shows – for management behavior – a very strange kind of risk behavior and the most important thing about today’s heroes is that they listen and talk to their collaborators in a “systemic“ way, which implies that they care for themselves affectionately in the same way they would care for a newborn baby.

Notes

- ¹ Von Foerster’s famous distinction between trivial and non-trivial machines is a starting point to recognize the complexity of cognitive behavior. A trivial machine is a machine whose operations are not influenced by previous operations. It is analytically determinable, independent from previous operations, and thus predictable. For non-trivial machines, however, this is no longer true as the problem of identification, i.e., deducing the structure of the machine from its behavior, becomes unsolvable. One interesting comparison, for example, can be made to ancient myths in which the role of the hero follows a consistent legality.
- ² Campbell relied on the texts of Jung as an explanation of psychological phenomena, as experienced through archetypes. But Campbell didn’t agree with Carl Jung on every issue, and certainly had a very original voice of his own. Campbell didn’t believe in astrology or synchronicity as Jung had. Campbell’s true study and interpretation is in the melding of accepted ideas and symbolism. His iconoclastic approach was as original as it was radical.

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