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5-3-2024

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#### Recommended Citation

Forbes, R. L. (2024). Leadership Coaching: Enduring Lessons From Mythology. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 11 (4), 275-281. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.114.16894>

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## Leadership Coaching: Enduring Lessons from Mythology

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### ABSTRACT

The juxtaposition of leadership coaching and mythology together in the same sentence is probably enough in itself to set traditionalists on edge. How could a look at the myths of cultures thousands of years old possibly benefit a leadership coach working in a modern, complex, technologically-oriented society? While much of the current literature on leadership coaching takes a non-historical, rational-empirical approach to the subject, a great deal of practical, useful insight can be gained from assessing lessons derived from mythology. The content of leadership coaching typically focuses on the resolution of professional and organizational issues in the present and on the future development of the client. This paper will attempt to show that enduring lessons derived from a look at the mythology of six different ancient cultures are both relevant and useful to the Leadership Coach of today.

**Keywords:** Coaching, Leadership, Leadership Coaching, Mythology

### INTRODUCTION

Leadership coaching has grown significantly over the last decade and has become an accepted subdiscipline of the coaching field in its own right. Today's complex and rapidly changing environment offers particular challenges to completing a successful coaching engagement. The enduring wisdom embedded in historic myths promises to be a fertile and relatively unexplored area for coaches to gain additional insight into the coach-client relationship. The exploration of myths also offers practitioners a non-traditional method for better understanding the complex dynamics involved in working with diverse cultural populations.

This paper challenges the reader to learn from a non-traditional source, that of mythology. It also explores patterns and themes derived from a look at representative myths across six international cultures: the Greek, Norse, Celtic, Egyptian, Japanese and Indian traditions. The work also makes connections to the potential relevance of a knowledge of myths to the practicing coach. Specifically, this article will explore the usefulness of myths to the leadership coach based on an enhanced understanding of recent research findings.

### BACKGROUND

Perhaps the most compelling argument for studying ancient myths and stories can be found in the work of Israeli historian and philosopher Yuval Harari [1]. Harari suggests that it was the capability of homo sapiens to tell convincing stories to other humans that has led to dominance over all other earthly species. Shared belief in the same story enabled large scale cooperation and coordination of operations via agreed upon sets of rules. This storytelling superpower and the attendant ability to collectively cooperate more than made up for the relative human lack of strength, speed, agility, and physical armament. For, no matter how extreme the story, if

thousands of people believe and accept it as true, they can together create tremendous force and overcome the lack of lesser individual physical attributes. Ultimately, mythology provides human beings a means to understand life and death as well as a means to better deal with catastrophe and loss.

Among the leading figures and exponents of the present value of studying myths is the prominent American writer and literature professor Joseph Campbell. Campbell's exploration of the present value of historic myths has influenced the thinking of countless individuals. Current examples include George Lucas, the creator of Star Wars series of motion pictures, and the prominent journalist and TV personality, Bill Moyers. Lucas reputedly wryly commented that mythology is an excavation of our psychology. Based on his lifelong comparative study of cultural myths, Campbell avers that all cultural myths can be reduced to a single common pattern he termed "the hero's journey." [2].

The bridge between mythology and leadership has been established by several authors. Writing in the *Journal of Leadership Studies*, Kenneth Campbell [3] suggested that mythology may actually be the original basis for the development of leadership principles. Additionally, Schedlitzki, Jarvis, and MacInnes [4] proposed that mythology taught within classroom-based leadership development programs may enable the learning necessary to resolve ambiguity and social construction in leadership situations. Kessler and Wong-Minji [5] have also discussed the leadership-mythology effect, suggesting that it provides an important key to understanding the nature, manifestation and dynamics of global leadership. Executive Leadership Coach and Harvard Law School Lecturer Erica Auriel Fox, has also investigated the power of myth and archetypes to transform coaching [6].

### **THE LEADERSHIP-COACHING NEXUS**

Gatto [7] suggests that the practice of coaching itself is thousands of years old, noting that early philosophers, religious leaders and prophets asked coaching-like questions in a deliberate attempt to expand peoples' thinking. In particular, the examination of the lives of historically prominent military leaders has long been a venue for extracting enduring leadership lessons regarding durable human relationships in stressful settings.

Former Canadian Air Force General Scott Clancy in his book *Developing Coaching Leaders* [8] suggests that trust is the fundamental link between leading and coaching. Clancy further notes that the provision of honest individualized feedback associated with coaching acts to reaffirm a leader's competence, sincerity, reliability and care. Transformational coach Matt Thielman [9], in his approach to teaching leadership coaching fundamentals, likens leadership and coaching to using the Global Positioning System or GPS Navigation as a travel guide. However, in leadership coaching, uncertainty often intervenes and the final destination is never final and will likely keep changing along the way.

### **WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE LEADERSHIP COACH TO STUDY ANCIENT MYTHS?**

Attributed to the philosopher George Santayana is the phrase, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This is often popularly restated as "Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it." The underlying message appears to be that there are regular repeating patterns or themes in human history, which if understood and paid attention to, offer guidance for present behavior. Perhaps the most archaic human history lies coded in

its enduring cultural myths often passed orally from generation to generation in the form of stories. In a similar vein, Carl Jung [10], the father of Analytic Psychology, suggested that the most significant question that anyone could ask is, "What myth am I living?"

Harari [11] has also written extensively on the positive historical role of storytellers. He expresses the view that the study of stories or myths provides a means of identifying common continuously repeating themes and patterns of human behavior across time. If so, the learning embedded in the analysis of myths may be useful in understanding the current behavior of the clients of the leadership coach and suggest useful options for working with it. Barry Goldberg is a credentialed leadership coach who also teaches leadership coaching. Goldberg [12] proposes that a study of mythology enables the leadership coach to access priceless wisdom about human nature and how individuals become self-sovereign leaders.

### **Cross Cultural Examples of Myths**

Lucas Russo, in his epic multiple book work *Uncovering World Mythology: The Ultimate Collection* [13], extensively chronicles key myths in five ancient cultures: Greek, Norse, Celtic, Egyptian, and Japanese. Russo carefully catalogs the essential myths associated with each culture and provides information on all the important characters, primarily gods, goddesses and heroes. Russo also suggests that one of the most awe-inspiring characteristics of humans is the ability to explain the surrounding world through story and pass the information down to succeeding generations. He further states that it is through the medium of repeated oral and written transmission of common aspects of story that cultures and societies are constructed. The following provides examples from each of the six mythical traditions investigated:

#### **Greek Mythology:**

Handy [14] suggested a myth-based relationship between four basic types of organizations and prominent figures from Greek mythology; the Club, the Role, the Task, and the Existential. The Club-oriented culture is ruled over by the supreme leader Zeus the protector of humans and gods. It is oriented around power, connections and respect. The Role culture is associated with Apollo, the patron god of truth and prophecy. This type of culture is typically seen in large bureaucratic organizations. The organization's approach to work is based on a person's role, or a specific task that needs completion. Stability, efficiency and predictability are valued more than individual needs.

The Task culture, owes its allegiance to Athena the goddess of wisdom and righteousness. In this type of organization performance is assessed by the results generated and on the total number of problems resolved. Individual expertise, talent, creativity, and problem-solving ability are valued and rewarded. In the Existential culture, individuals operate under the influence of Dionysus, the god of fruitfulness and vegetation. This is a heavily individual-person oriented organizational culture valuing the pursuit of self-interest over that of the organization's goals.

#### **Norse Mythology:**

Larrington [15] describes the tale of Odin, the chief Norse God, and his alleged discovery of the technology of writing, This story provided a means by which time could be circumvented and human memory supplemented beyond a human's lifetime. Odin also was credited with releasing the liberating power of poetry from the giants who had previously kept it to

themselves. Odin's many adventures appealed to the Norse belief that achievement is only found in self-sacrificing, embracing fate, and never losing hope.

### **Celtic Mythology:**

In Celtic mythology Fionn McCumhail [16] was a well-loved warrior hero connected to esoteric knowledge via his apprenticeship with the mystical Druid priests. Reputedly, McCumhail gained supreme wisdom after catching and cooking a "Salmon of Knowledge." He was also noted as a self-leader known for his creativity and self-deprecating humor. In difficult situations he showed a willingness to act humbly and look foolish in order to achieve challenging goals. McCumhail's capacity, when under situational duress, to demonstrate ingenuity provides an exemplar for modern leaders.

### **Egyptian Mythology:**

From an ancient Egyptian papyrus [17] comes the story of a young privileged boy who didn't like school. His father explained to his son the life of working-class children; an existence characterized by endless dawn-to-dusk drudgery, physical pain, poor nutrition, and ever-subject to being forced by the Pharaoh's soldiers to work for no compensation in public projects. The description was sufficient for the boy to realize his advantaged status and participate willingly in school. This ancient myth demonstrates to the modern leader the dangers of hubris or the excessive pride of self-confidence to the detriment of others.

### **Japanese Mythology:**

One version of the famous Momotaro, or Peach Boy, folk myth [18] ascribes his birth to an older couple whose youth and vigor are restored after eating a mystical peach. In an alternative account young samurai Momotaro, with the assistance of a giant dog, a clever monkey and a courageous pheasant journey to a remote island to battle evil ogres and rescue embattled captives. The stories emphasize important values such as teamwork, common goals and the collective overcoming of challenging obstacles.

### **Indian Mythology:**

In Hindu folklore [19] a sovereign is not the owner of the kingdom; he is only the caretaker. The suggested analogy is that the kingdom is a cow that gives milk. The king is the cowherd. A cowherd cannot exist without a cow and a cow isn't safe without a cowherd. The derived model of leadership is one of dependency and reciprocity; a leader is required to take care of the organization and the organization, in turn, takes care of the leader. The leader also protects and defends the organization and can significantly influence the culture and functioning of an organization on a once and done basis. Today, in modern India, the President is called Rashtra (nation) Pati (guide/protector/provider).

## **DOES PRESENT DAY LEADERSHIP HAVE ITS' OWN MYTHS?**

Edwards [20] and Nilsen [21] have suggested that the whole concept of leadership itself may be a myth. Employing the paired comparison approach of ancient Greek philosopher and historian Plutarch, retired U.S. Army General Stanley McCrystal examined a wide range of leadership myths in his well-received book *Leaders: Myth and Reality* [22]. McCrystal used the leadership stories from his research as a vehicle to identify and examine prevailing leadership myths and to explore how leadership actually works in practice.

Here is a sampling of current leadership coaching myths derived from a review of the literature. Leadership Coaching:

- Assumes all managers are, in reality, leaders
- Clients need fixing
- Only works in face-to-face settings
- Must start at the top of the organization
- Is only for weak or struggling leaders
- Is very expensive and time-consuming
- Is primarily a passive process
- Is unnecessary for experienced leaders

All have been subject to challenge by successful contemporary leadership coaches.

### **LESSONS FOR THE LEADERSHIP COACH**

A thoughtful consideration of the impact of myths allows the leadership coach to think more critically about vexing issues that affect the day-to-day lives of their clients and the consequences of a failure to learn from their own experience. Concerns such as how to best deal with boss-subordinate issues, challenges to authority, organizational succession, the forced dissolution of organizations, and the creation of new authorities all have parallels in ancient stories. Additionally, myths can offer suggestions on how to deal with problematic interpersonal problems such as envy, deception, lying and cynicism that have their parallels in mythical lore. How mythical characters resolved concerns about the concept of honor, leadership style, change, masculinity and the role of women can also provide resolution options for today's leadership coach. Perhaps, even more importantly, myths provide the coach information on seeing into their clients more deeply and holistically. Coaches may also benefit their practice from observing repeated age-old historical courses of actions that typically resulted in negative consequences for both individuals and organizations.

### **SUMMARY AND WHAT'S NEXT**

This paper has introduced the idea of the perceived value of mythological study for the practicing leadership coach, provided background information on the discipline of mythology, explored the leadership-coaching nexus, and provided six examples of cultural myths. Additionally, this work has also looked at what's in it for the leadership coach to study mythology, discussed whether leadership has its own myths, and provided a set of useful lessons for the practicing leadership coach.

Explanatory stories relating to human existence evolved as our ancient ancestors attempted to make sense out of what appeared to them to be an inexplicable and unfathomable world. Myths likely provided a degree of hope, comfort and predictability as our human predecessors confronted the difficult and trying circumstances related to survival. Stories served as a type of cultural glue, offering people a vehicle for a shared sense of identity. They may also have acted as a rallying point for collective action. Myths may have also helped provide a degree of continuity to their lives, offered a plausible explanation of what happened after death, provided positive exemplars to follow, helped tell them who they were, and what was really important. Recent cross-cultural research indicates there is a lot of commonality between the enduring myths of many of the major cultural traditions across the world. Often these myths will contain

similar patterns that describe an origin story of the culture, supernatural entities that influence human behavior, and great heroes that successfully faced and overcame a series of major challenges.

Myths also appear to contain repeating human patterns of behavior passed down through the generations across various cultures. In evolutionary terms, the use of shared-belief stories eventually allowed for large-scale coordination of human activities and dominance over the other species on the planet. When ardently believed stories conflicted, war was sometimes the bloody result.

A knowledge of these mythological patterns, their consequences, and ways to influence them are potentially invaluable to the leadership coach. This acumen also pays tribute to the power of the human mind to alter its own circumstances by choosing what to believe and then acting on it. In words attributed to American author and motivational speaker, Napoleon Hill, "Whatever Your Mind Can Conceive and Believe, It Can Achieve." Myths shape minds. Minds enable behavior. Behavior can change the world.

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