

# The drama of leadership

**Sartaj Garewal** identifies pieces of drama that have lessons for leaders

**W**hile it is common to think of time spent in the theatre, library and cinema as leisure time, and the tales we encounter there as a luxury to be indulged in, the lessons to be learned in the recounting of narratives, whether on stage, page or screen, are many. A good number of these lessons apply to the themes of leadership, status and ambition. These motifs are writ large in the rousing speeches to be found littering the pages of Shakespeare's plays and are found seething beneath the surface of *Glengarry Glen Ross*'s acerbic, witty dialogue.

Think how compromised Macbeth becomes as valour morphs into ambition, then greed, leading inexorably to his ultimate fall from grace. It is when Macbeth departs from his beliefs and values, when he sacrifices his integrity on the altar of an ambition that isn't even his to begin with, that his grasp fails him, and his leadership dissolves along with his grip on reality.

Theatre, cinema and literature provide a forum for us all to discuss, develop and negotiate a framework of accepted principles and values. There is simply nothing more potent than effective storytelling to illuminate this.

Now given our recent financial and economic turmoil, perhaps it's time we returned to the lessons of Shakespeare, theatre and cinema for a refresher course in how to be truly authentic leaders with a strong and genuine sense of purpose.

Drama in all its guises presents us routinely with conflicts of interest and moral dilemmas. The choices made at these crucial transition moments in the lives of characters determine the quality of their future leadership.



The power of a film or play is that it requires, even demands, a reaction from the audience. The audience's presence and contribution is vital. We are presented with myriad choices. Watching a film, we see characters presented with those same choices and evaluate the decisions that they make, comparing and maybe reframing our own would-be choices along the way.

Shakespeare gave us extraordinary insights into human nature. Coupled with a flair for language and a genius for storytelling, we have inherited a canon of work that could be as valuable a resource for management and business leaders as it is already for writers and actors.

Shakespeare brilliantly illustrates the consequences of decision-making and the ensuing impact on leadership. For example, Hamlet illustrates the dos and don'ts of decision-making as, mired in depression, he finds it impossible to actually make a decision. Utterly tortured by indecision, procrastination and inertia, the lessons for bloated and indecisive management are obvious enough.

The dogmatic Polonius is extremely keen to dish out advice, agony-uncle style. Various snippets of advice to his son Laertes, who is about to make the transition to manhood and independence, follow: "Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice." "Neither a borrower, nor a lender be." "This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man." Or in other words, you cannot hope to succeed in anything by pretending to be that which you are not. Be authentic, be you.

Hamlet lauds the skill and relevance of a troupe of travelling players: "...to hold as t'were the mirror up to nature..." In other words, the very function of drama is to reflect back man's virtues, warts and all.

Drama should arguably be considered as a path to truth and not just showmanship or light entertainment. Thus if action, dynamic and text are employed free of exaggeration, ego or ambition, art will give us a true reflection of ourselves.

Well known for his rousing speeches, Henry V's innate leadership skills provide key learning for anyone needing to understand and motivate a group of people.

Henry V chose to lead by example. In disguise, so he wouldn't be recognised, he walked among his exhausted and weary troops so he could see and hear their condition first-hand. Similarities exist with a TV reality show in which the CEO of, say, a cleaning contractor returns to the floor as a temp for a few days to really understand where the business is at.

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In reality, how many middle managers, let alone C-level directors, actually do that? Surrounded by his men and now fully informed of how they feel (because their feelings and emotional responses are utterly crucial for him to absorb), Henry launches into the famed St Crispin's Day speech. "All things are ready if our minds be so," he implores his followers passionately. By contrast, the French leaders are depicted as adopting a hierarchical approach, with little communication with their battle troops, which leads to a rather inevitable conclusion. Indeed, the French King is shown, in the Branagh film at least, to be cossetted in luxurious Paris while his men are faced with an almighty ruck.

"But we in it shall be remember'd;  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he today that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile..."

In declaring that "we are a band of brothers", Henry reduces his own status and elevates the status of his followers by proclaiming a brotherhood. This has the effect of uniting and galvanising his men. Much can be learned from this moment when we consider the status games that are played by competing managers and teams within the same organisation.

In order to win hearts and minds and instigate change that sticks, you absolutely have to meet with all groups who have a vested interest and take on board their fears, hopes and concerns. Only then, after you have really listened, can you attempt to align people with whatever new direction you may have in mind.

With *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare probes the effectiveness of those in charge.

Although to many his was a legacy of brutal conquest, Caesar was hailed as a hero by his legions as he led them towards power and glory. Yet he learned his trade the hard way, soldiering with the rank and file to begin with. Had he not worked from the shop floor up, would he have become the same visionary leader? "Experience is the teacher of all things," he remarks.





Later, after turning dictator, he is assassinated by a group of senators keen to make an example of him and dissuade others from adopting a command-and-control style of leadership. The lesson is clear: managers need to influence, not control, their people. The play contains many other moments of inspiration for leaders: "Cowards die many times before their actual deaths" so take risks and accept what comes. Nobody got anywhere by only playing it defensively. "It is not these well-fed long-haired men that I fear, but the pale and the hungry-looking." Perhaps managers need to be as aware and understanding of smaller, more agile competitors as they clearly are about the market leader in their particular industry. "The die is cast." Once you've made a decision, accept the responsibility for having done so and live with the consequences, whatever they could be. Having the courage to stick with things and to be transparent about decisions is in stark contrast to the backside-covering, manipulative behaviour so common place in corporate life.

## Drama in all its guises presents us routinely with conflicts of interest and moral dilemmas

Other Shakespeare plays provide food for thought as well. *King Lear* teaches us about the virtues of loyalty, in *Othello* a lack of simple trust gives rise to dangerous betrayal and Macbeth's journey from newly-promoted protégé to devil incarnate is the ultimate fall from grace.

However, Shakespeare does not have a monopoly on dramatic learning when it comes to exploring principles of leadership.

In the ancient Greek drama *Antigone* by Sophocles, the key conflict of state versus individual is explored and Antigone demonstrates her leadership credentials. By refusing, somewhat stubbornly, to ignore her conscience and insist on a proper burial for her brother, who opposed the ruling king, she is condemned to death. She accepts the death sentence stoically.

The question that arises for leaders is how to be firm and appropriately authoritative yet flexible and open enough to embrace open dialogue and debate. True leaders these days need to be able to listen to any and all dissenting voices from within their organisation, be pragmatic enough to go with the best idea (even if it wasn't theirs to begin with) and to display genuine humility – they really aren't all-knowing seers and shouldn't feel they need to appear as such.

In *Waiting for Godot*, frequently cited as the single most important piece of theatre of the 20th century by theatre practitioners, Beckett explores failed and absent leadership. Godot, who we never see in the play, represents the ruling political



class and a symbol of hope for the common man (represented by Vladimir and Estragon, who are utterly dependent on the mysterious Godot for a sense of purpose). While Godot inspires optimism in them, he cunningly keeps his distance – instantly reminiscent of a host of decadent, failed political and corporate top-down leaders that we have witnessed over recent decades.

Films also provide us with a ready platform for the observation and debate of conflicts, choices and consequent decision-making. In *Citizen Kane*, early integrity, noble intention and a genuine desire to help those around him slowly evaporate as Charles Foster Kane becomes a tyrannical example of that which he originally opposed. *Viva Zapata!* is a very similar lesson in how power corrupts a once honourable leader.

The takeaway lesson is abundantly clear: leaders must resolutely treasure and protect their underlying principles and values; when those are for sale, corruption erodes all else. This goes way beyond having some loose affiliation with the mission statement on a company's website that few within the organisation can remember, let alone actually align themselves with.

Henry Fonda's character in *Twelve Angry Men* shows phenomenal leadership ability. To begin with, he listens intently to all that is said with a detached calmness. He maintains the courage of his convictions in influencing the other jurors that a reasonable doubt may exist in the murder case (which initially seemed like an open and

shut case to all except Fonda) that they are to deliberate upon. The film shows that decisions where the stakes are high require as much composure and clarity as possible and the power of asking challenging questions is much greater than automatically hitting tell mode.

Fonda builds his case compellingly by making it visual, making alliances and skilfully exposing the hidden prejudices and agendas of those who were quick to judge and resisted thorough exploration.

“ABC – Always Be Closing.” The line from Alec Baldwin’s swaggering, high-achieving sales executive in *Glengarry Glen Ross* has become a cinematic classic. Despite the overflowing hubris of Baldwin’s character, the nugget of a takeaway lesson exists, namely before you enter any meeting or negotiation, ensure you know the vital co-ordinates, exactly what you want to get out of that meeting and how you’re going to close the deal. How many pointless meetings have we all had in which absolutely nothing was achieved or progressed?

Overall, though, *Glengarry Glen Ross* shows characters, actions and words that are pretty much the opposite of effective leadership, so it is a useful reminder of what not to do.

Even Chris Nolan’s *Batman* trilogy offers a leadership lesson, namely the concept of learning through failure. While trapped in a subterranean prison, Bruce Wayne attempts a number of escapes – the only means of exit being a considerable, and potentially fatal, leap from ledge to even higher ledge. He fails to make the jump a number of times before an inmate proffers the following advice: “How can you move faster than possible, fight longer than possible without the most powerful impulse of the spirit: the fear of death?” Reinvigorated by fully accepting the fear of mortality, he makes the leap to freedom. Challenge yourself and take risks. It’s better to take risks and fail, perhaps, as only then do you nurture a sense of necessary resilience.

Fundamentally, acting and drama are all about relationships. The mirror held up to nature enables us all to assess our actions and behaviours and see how they could be changed for the benefit of everyone in our organisation. As a means of communicating principles of leadership, theatre and cinema are highly effective. Storytelling is challenging, entertaining and memorable. Everyone can recall scenes or favourite pieces of dialogue from plays and films. Consequently, those dramatic themes and actions are open to discussion and debate from which arise our values and principles. **TJ**

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