

This is an advance chapter from *The Secret Language of Leadership*, a book written by Steve Denning to be published by Jossey-Bass in September 2007. Comments welcome at steve@stevedenning.com

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Annex II:

Interactive leadership and the “hero’s journey”

Leadership is an interaction that turns people into new leaders. It is profoundly at odds with the notion of leader as lone hero—the Superman or Wonder Woman view of leadership.

In the heroics of leadership genre, the charismatic leader comes, makes changes, performance improves and the leader gets the credit, deservedly. Charismatic leaders and their gallant acts are center stage. Everyone and everything else are at best cast in minor, supporting roles. Even when others are cast in prominent roles, the focus is on the heroic actions of each individual. By adding together their individual heroic efforts, one gets an account of leadership.¹

Letting go of the myth of individualism is difficult even when leadership takes the venture beyond the single hero or heroine to acknowledge the part played by supporting players.

Thus it’s possible to view my story in terms of “the hero’s journey”, although this is a profoundly misleading as a total account of what happened.

Joseph Campbell in *The Hero’s Journey*, and by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer’s Journey*², among others. They are spelled out here in metaphorical terms:

Steps in The Hero’s Journey	Equivalent component of Denning’s story
<p>1. The hero is introduced in his Ordinary World</p> <p>There are however Heralds of Change: e.g. a Mentor or an Enemy, who flings a gauntlet of challenge in the hero’s face or tempts the hero into danger.</p> <p>Hero’s Disorientation or Discomfort: The</p>	<p>I see myself as having a flourishing career in the World Bank, having many accomplishments and innovations to my credit. I see the prospect of further promotions in my career at the World Bank.</p> <p>The president of the World Bank dies. My boss suddenly retires. Another person is appointed to my position.</p> <p>I am asked in the street whether I am about to be pushed aside from my</p>

<p>hero may be uncomfortable in his current situation, either from his own knowledge, or because he is warned by a Herald of Change.</p> <p>Reconnaissance: A villain checks out the hero's territory.</p>	<p>position. My boss tells me that the environment is turbulent.</p> <p>(The president and the managing directors—off-stage—decide that I am not to be offered a position.)</p>
<p>2. The hero receives a Call to Adventure:</p> <p>Hero's Lack or Need: The hero may be lacking something in his life which serves as a spur to action.</p>	<p>The managing director tells me I have no position. I am still looking at this as a career thing, not realizing that this is an empty goal.</p>
<p>3. The hero is Reluctant at first or Refuses the Call</p>	<p>I am distraught. My career is in ruins</p>
<p>4. But the hero is encouraged by a Mentor</p>	<p>I initially play the lone hero, drawing on my own inner resources to believe that I can overcome the setback. My mentor has been internalized.</p> <p>Later on, the vice-presidents and the staff at IMD act as mentors.</p>
<p>5. To cross the First Threshold and to enter a Special World</p>	<p>I look into information and discover knowledge.</p>
<p>6. The hero encounters Tests, Allies, and Enemies.</p> <p>Threshold Guardians Challenge the Hero: The hero is tested by powerful figures who question whether he should even be in the game, or try to block the hero before he has even begun.</p> <p>Meeting with the Mentor: Heroes almost always make contact with some source of wisdom before committing to the adventure.</p> <p>The Hero Enters Through The Forbidden Door: The hero is warned never to enter the forbidden door, or open the forbidden box, or never look on a certain person.</p>	<p>I make my presentation to the change management committee and to the entire senior management, and find allies among the vice presidents. The managing director rejects my gambit. The vice-presidents invite me to work with them. Once again, the managing director blocks my gambit and invites me to apply for lower level positions in the field, far from headquarters.</p> <p>I reflect on my situation in Lausanne and find a mentor in the IMD staff.</p> <p>I am warned not to approach the president, but he calls my ally the vice-president and the deal is sealed.</p>
<p>7. The hero approaches the Inmost Cave, crossing a second threshold. The Inmost Cave is the place in the Hero's Journey where he will encounter supreme wonder and terror, and be tested to the limit. It's the central ordeal of his adventure.</p> <p>Threshold Guardians Block the Hero's Way: As the hero approaches the threshold,</p>	<p>I am charged with inspiring people to make knowledge sharing happen.</p> <p>The managing directors continue to try to block the initiative. First, the strategy paper ignores knowledge. Then it inflates knowledge.</p>

powerful figures pop up, to block the hero's path or test him in some way.	
<p>8. The hero endures the Ordeal, I.e. the central event, where the Hero and the forces opposing the hero are at their tensest and most critical moment.</p> <p>There are complications: The hero can't just walk into hostile territory, claim the prize and walk away. Parts of the status quo will rise up to question, challenge or attack the hero and prevent him taking away the prize.</p> <p>The Hero Finds Allies: The hero finds someone, possibly someone with more experience, i.e. a Mentor, who can help him find the way.</p>	<p>I am given a position, but without staff or resources or authority.</p> <p>The IT group tries to turn the initiative into a system.</p> <p>Some people wait for signals.</p> <p>Others scheme and become Machiavellian.</p> <p>But champions spring up all over the organization, As I learn how to inspire people to buy into the vision, i.e. the secret language of leadership</p>
<p>9. The hero takes possession of the Reward (Seizing the Sword):</p> <p>Having survived death, or slain the Minotaur, the hero have cause to celebrate. The hero takes possession of the Reward.</p>	<p>The knowledge fair demonstrates that we are on the road to our success.</p> <p>After so much adversity, there is cause for celebration.</p>
<p>10. The hero is pursued on the Road Back to the Ordinary World: the hero is not out of the woods yet. The hero still has to come to terms with dealing with dark forces of the ordeal.</p>	<p>The managing directors ask for an external review to correct the errors that committed by the program.</p>
<p>11. Resurrection: The hero needs to be purified to return to the Ordinary World.</p>	<p>The external review endorses what we are doing.</p> <p>We are benchmarked as a world leader in knowledge management.</p>
<p>12. The hero returns with the Elixir to the Ordinary World. The return is meaningless he brings back some Elixir, treasure or lesson from the Special World.</p>	<p>I leave the World Bank to take my message of storytelling to the world at large.</p>

¹ Spillane, J. *Distributed leadership* (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2006)

² Vogler, C.: *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, (1998, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City CA)