

Praise & Blessing: The Function of the Leader Archetype

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In this article, Gervase Bushe builds on the work of John Weir Perry and Robert Moore to argue that there is an archetypal basis to “good Leadership” and “bad Leadership”. In addition, based on Heinz Kohut he argues that through praise and blessing, appreciative leaders help to build the Self of their followers, which results in people achieving much more than they thought possible.

The great psychologist Carl Jung coined the term “archetype” to describe bundles of image, affect and intention that transcend time and culture. They are like templates “hard wired” into the human mind. Jung’s theory is that we are all influenced by a collection of ancient urges, desires and inclinations. At most times in the history of humankind these have been talked about through myths and stories. These urges and desires tend to have a coherence: e.g., the urge to overpower goes with the urge to protect. When we see a person who tends to overpower we also notice a willingness to protect others. Their coherence gets personified into the characters who populate these stories. In this case Jungians would talk about a “warrior archetype” – a template with common characteristics that appears as a “soldier” or “hunter” or “knight” in the stories and myths of all human cultures. What makes Jung’s and his followers’ arguments so compelling is that the same images and stories reappear time and again, in all economic levels of society and in all cultures. They can be seen in all human art, poetry, scientific discoveries, religion and our patterns of thought and feeling. It is as though the human race projects these deep structures onto things that we create (Hillman, 1975).

I have found the study of ritual Kingship to provide important insights into the Archetype of Leadership. John Weir Perry (1966) first identified this archetype and Robert Moore (Moore & Gillette, 1992) expanded on it. It is as though our beliefs and feelings about the difference between “good authority” and “bad authority” are trans-cultural and hard wired into us as human beings. The table on the following page contrasts some of the key differences in the stories of the “good king” (good authority) and the “shadow king” (bad authority) that seem to exist in all cultures and all the ages.

I believe there is a yearning today all over the world for the good king and queen, for leaders we can trust to put the needs of the whole ahead of their personal interests, who are more interested in their vision of the great team, organization or society than in their own personal grandiosity. There seem to be so few of them in business and government that when one comes along their power to elicit followership appears truly astounding.

One of Moore’s important insights is that a core function of the King/Queen archetype is

to give others praise and blessing. The bad King (or Queen) demands that he be the center of attention, that he be seen as the smartest, the strongest, the quickest, the best. From the shadow king's point of view his employees are there to admire and adore him, to praise and bless him. Such "leaders", however, create a climate of internecine fighting, stifling the potential of the people they have power over and leaving a toxic work environment in their wake.

"Bad" Authority	"Good" Authority
Seeks adoration and being the centre of attention	Adores others and makes them the centre of attention
Self-serving	Serves the people
Has a vision of own greatness	Has a vision of the great society organization, etc.
Blames others	Takes responsibility
Holds onto power	Steps aside when it is appropriate to do so

The good Queen (or King) however, makes others the center of attention. In her presence others feel bigger, smarter, stronger, more able. The Queen's job is to admire and adore her followers, to praise them and in doing so, help them to become more than they thought they could be. Anyone who has ever had a good King or Queen in their life (as a parent, coach, teacher, boss or other authority) knows exactly what I am talking about – that merely being in their presence leaves you feeling more capable and motivated than you felt before. This may be one of the forces unleashed by Appreciative Inquiry and one of the roles indispensable to its effectiveness.

Praise from a leader we look up to has much more significance than simple reinforcement. The noted psychologist Heinz Kohut (1978) has shown that praise from someone we look up to (what he calls a "good enough selfobject") is an indispensable way in which we develop a strong Self. Studying 2 year olds he found it is when our presence is seen and enthusiastically received by the selfobject (e.g. mother) that our core sense of self is strengthened. We continue to deepen and strengthen our self all our lives and I believe this kind of praise is just as necessary to adults as it is to children. It is through a strengthened sense of self that people go out and do things they didn't think they were capable of, take new risks and accomplish what they may not even have dreamed of.

Many well-intentioned leaders, who believe in egalitarian values and in the greatness of the people who work for them are not comfortable with this task or don't realize that one of their jobs is to praise and bless the people who work for them. They would feel pretentious and embarrassed, as if they were putting themselves on a pedestal and destroying the very sense of collective responsibility they try so hard to engender throughout their organizations. They do not understand the ritual obligations of their roles: by ritual, I mean the kinds of acts that awaken the unconscious to opportunities for self transformation (Eliade, 1958). Sometimes the consultant, if he or she holds a position of ritual elder in the psyche of the

client, is also called upon to fulfill this role. Unless the leader or consultant has fed himself – has allowed himself as an adult to create opportunities for and accept praise and blessing from those he looks up to – he is unlikely to feel comfortable providing it for others. Instead he will probably experience those seeking his approval as needy and want to avoid those interactions.

One of the things we, as consultants and educators, need to do is to help leaders understand that praise and blessing is a central aspect of their role in building a container for appreciation to flourish in their systems. Their appreciative presence is like a food required to nourish the system. The good thing is that leaders who hold good king/queen energy are never depleted by allowing others to feed in this way from them. All they are doing is providing the context in which people feed themselves. It is one of the easiest forms of leverage available to leaders.

I started out my career assuming creating collaboration required eliminating authority. After 30 years of trying to create collaborative work systems, however, I conclude that without the right kind of authority providing praise and blessing, collaborative systems are just not sustainable. That's why we need appreciative leaders.

References

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