

Management and the Classics: selective listening and the Julius Caesar Saga

What can the classics say to the modern manager and executive? What can he or she gain from reading Shakespeare's Julius Caesar? **One lesson that immediately springs to mind is, does unfettered ambition naturally lead to a selective listening process?** Gaius Julius Caesar's unrestrained ambition to match or outperform the achievements of Alexander the Great eventually led him into the selective listening syndrome trap: a syndrome whereby a leader only hears what he or she wants to hear and ignores the other advices. Caesar's blatant ambition eventually resulted in outright arrogance, which blinded him to reality and ultimately cost him his life.

A second lesson from Shakespeare relates to managers' use of language. They have to negotiate, create and maintain good interpersonal relationships and deal with their various publics. Effectively they have to master the languages of meaning, feeling and action (which we have covered in a previous technical note). An exceptionally good example of this mix of languages can be found in the speeches of Brutus and Mark Anthony. This technical note uses the Julius Caesar saga to illustrate the importance of avoiding selective listening habits and successfully mixing the language of feeling, meaning and action in communicating our message.

The flamboyant Julius Caesar, as seen through the pen of William Shakespeare, demonstrated not only his brilliance on the battlefield, but also his personal magnetism and natural flair for politics. Indeed, history shows us how politically astute and focused Caesar was in following his ambition to be the 'First Man in Rome' and the leading figure in the world as he knew it. **But, we have to ask, did the arrogance of such ambition lead to his eventual downfall? Did his success give his opponent no alternative option but assassination?** Caesar wanted not

only to be the 'First Man in Rome', but also Rome's dictator, as Sulla had been before him.

William Shakespeare: a master of language and of people

William Shakespeare, through historical characters in his plays, touches on practically every trait of human behavior. These traits, in turn, can easily be related to the behavior of people in the modern business corporation. We can find in reading these plays that they provide an opportunity for reflection on our own behavior, on that of our colleagues, and, more especially, on that of our own CEOs. Shakespeare, in fact, raises some very interesting human dilemmas through his characters.

Motivational speech

For example, in another of Shakespeare's plays, Henry V, the 'Agincourt' speech is often seen as one of the great speeches in history, but it is actually fictitious; Shakespeare himself wrote it. The King never made this speech. Shakespeare used Henry's historical position in the Hundred Years War to show how we can raise men's sense of pride and honor against the greatest of odds through words and good delivery style. This speech is not primarily about history or kings and soldiers; it is about the power speech has to enact changes of attitude. It was one of our first examples of a motivational speech.

From a historical point of view, England in the age of Henry V was emerging as a national state, and a shared vision was important, just as a shared vision is important for any corporation today. If we read and analyze the text of the Agincourt speech, it can be a learning experience in the use of motivational language to sell a common vision. But inventing a shared vision is one thing; the other part is having the political astuteness to see it through.

The bard in his historical plays and tragedies helps us to think about the choices available to us, the conduct of the people we work and associate with, and the impact of our own behavior on the world we live in. The bard invents clever and

misguided strategies, struggles for leadership and power, prudent and imprudent decisions, and lies and deceptions. Although Shakespeare wrote under vastly different circumstances, on reflection, many of these struggles are similar to the politics of almost every contemporary business organization. We can see these struggles and dilemmas in the play, Julius Caesar.

Julius Caesar: a selective listener

Examining Julius Caesar's campaign in what is modern day France, Switzerland, and Belgium, the theme is not about the millions of people who died or were enslaved in his campaigns or about his accumulation of wealth, but about how Shakespeare wants us to think about the pursuit of ambition. The assassination of Julius Caesar and the resultant confrontation between Brutus and Mark Anthony could be very instructive from the point of view of the use of the **languages of feeling, meaning and action**. An analogy can be drawn of a board room conspiracy over a disagreement on the future governance of a company. In the case of Rome, it came to a head and heads began to roll and Caesar was brutally removed.

Shakespeare created this crisis situation of the greatest magnitude for us to ponder over. How had this happened? Did Caesar become negligent in watching his competitors? **Did success dilute his political astuteness after he returned to Rome?** Why didn't he listen to those who warned him about going to the Senate that morning? **Had his arrogance reached a level where he was unable to listen to advice?**

Mark Anthony was one of Caesar's most ardent supporters, but was he the dependent number two? Anthony was a skilful player both in battle and in the political arena. His whole career was built round Caesar and he had everything to lose by Caesar's departure. In fact, his career was basically over unless he took power himself. But he hesitated. As this was no secret, what should Brutus have done? Should he, as the leader of the republican faction, have driven Mark Anthony away from Rome immediately after the assassination and not have given him the opportunity to fight back? **Should he have followed the advice of Cassius and**

had Mark Anthony killed at the same time as Caesar was assassinated? Was Brutus unable to read the writing on the wall? Shakespeare portrays Brutus as a person who was acting for the best. But does Brutus' attitude make political sense? It was obvious that Mark Anthony would have to make a move, but why didn't Brutus anticipate this? Was he so naive? Everyone knows that in any conspiracy there is only one winner. **We could, for example, ask ourselves here, had I been Brutus, what strategy should I have followed?**

Even when Brutus refused to remove Mark Anthony, the gesture of his providing Mark Anthony with a public platform is intriguing. Why did Brutus allow Mark Anthony to speak on the steps of the Senate? Even after giving this permission, why did he allow Mark Anthony to have the last word? Surely he must have realized this was a dangerous step and that he, Brutus, should have the last word? Was this due to a lack of political astuteness on the part of Brutus?

The speeches: how they mixed the three languages

Then Shakespeare presents us with his two fictional speeches. Brutus starts his speech with a high level of credibility and respect from his Roman audience. He sets out to use this credibility (ethos) and his rationality (logos or the language of meaning) to persuade his audience of the righteousness of his actions. A question that does arise from Brutus' speech is whether we can rely on the language of meaning and a strong personal reputation alone in a crisis situation.

A noble appeal based on a speaker's positive credibility and rationality demands respect. But is it enough to survive the onslaught of a skillful emotional appeal by an opponent speaking the language of feeling? We know that persuasion in a crisis situation has more to do with action and emotion than rationality. Reason, therefore, must be highly tempered with emotion to achieve the right action. We must mix the language of feeling and meaning. Brutus' speech fell widely off the mark. Mark Anthony's speech, on the other hand, is one of the best examples of a crisis speech that one can find, because it arouses the right emotions in the audience while providing them with the hard evidence they need to be convinced. The result we all

know, since the noble Brutus and Cassius were forced to flee as the Roman mob gradually turned against them.

Was Brutus naïve?

But there are many other lessons to be learned from the bard in this play. **For example, how should we deal with a conspiracy? Can co-conspirators cohabit after the event? Shakespeare poses this question. How seriously should Brutus have taken Mark Anthony's known ability to seek revenge, especially considering Mark Anthony's current position as Consul? Did Brutus have an alternative strategy? How did he plan in the circumstances to reinstitute a republican form of government based on the senate in that chaos? Is there anything we can learn from Lepidus's demise?**

From Mark Anthony's position, Shakespeare gives us many questions. Mark Anthony had to rule along with Caesar's adopted son and heir, Octavius, and with Lepidus. Later we have the struggle between Octavius and Mark Anthony to substitute Caesar, especially after they agreed to divide the Empire. If Mark Anthony had not struck up his relationship with Cleopatra and returned to Rome, would the outcome have been different? We have Octavius' successful strategy to gain power. He confronted Mark Anthony and his new partner, Cleopatra, on their territory, and won, which eventually allowed him to establish himself as the new Emperor of Rome.

Conclusions

There are many other questions. The senate had declared Caesar a god outside Rome. Octavius then declared Julius Caesar a god inside Rome. This gave him the status of a god's son. Octavius styled himself "**Son of the divine Julius**". This allowed him to change his name to the exalted name of Augustus. He was beyond reproach.

In just one play Shakespeare gives us much to think about. In just one play, we have ideas that could affect our own positions in our organizations. We have examples of

successful and, more especially, of unsuccessful strategies; we have uncontrolled ambition, we have lies and deception as well as their opposites. We have the example of an upright virtuous man like Brutus failing because of his lack of practical wisdom. Are we aware of the reality that surrounds us in our companies?

Such plays raise fundamental questions which make us think about people's behavior. We could ask ourselves why Brutus, who had a noble heart, didn't succeed. Yes, Brutus was a virtuous man but he lacked one important virtue, prudence or practical wisdom. What about us?

Can we point to a situation where there was a lack of practical wisdom in our actions? How differently would we have acted in hindsight? Can we point to a situation where one of our managers or our colleagues lacked wisdom?

But what has this to do with modern life? It has everything to do with it. **Because corporations are where ambitious people gather in a competitive environment.** By their very nature, they must be political. Anthony began by losing, as the events before his speech show, then experienced success, but finally threw this success away with his Egyptian adventure. It is interesting to know the reasons for their success and failures. Maybe this understanding of such questions and their possible answers is a better way for managers to understand management politics than by the advices of many leadership gurus.

References

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Wordsworth Classics, 1992

Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar: The life of a Colossus*, Yale University Press, 2006

Exercise

Appendix 1 contains extracts from both Brutus' and Mark Anthony's speeches. Brutus' speech uses the language of meaning to justify his actions. Mark Anthony's speech, on the other hand, is a clever use of the languages of feeling and action combined with the right degree of the language of meaning. Brutus's speech appeals to the audience's mind, while Anthony's speech appeals to their feelings.

Each of these speeches should be practiced in accordance with the language they use.

Appendix 1

Brutus.

Romans, countrymen, and dear friends, hear me for my cause, and be silent, so that you can hear.

Believe me because of my honour, and respect my honour, so that you may believe.

Judge me in your wisdom, and pay attention so that you may be a better judge. If there is anyone in this crowd, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say that Brutus was as concerned about Caesar as he was.

If that friend then demands to know why Brutus turned against Caesar, this is my answer:

Not because I cared for Caesar less, but because I cared for Rome more.
Would you rather Caesar were living, and you all die slaves, than that
Caesar were dead, and you all live as freemen?

Because Caesar was my dear friend, I weep for him; because he was
fortunate, I rejoice at his good fortune; because he was valiant, I honour
him; but--because he was ambitious, I killed him.

There are tears for his friendship; joy for his fortune; honour for his valour;
and death for his ambition.

Which of you is so low that you would prefer to be a slave? If any of you is,
speak, for I have offended that person.

Which of you is so uncivilized that you would prefer not to be a Roman?

If any of you is, speak, for I have offended that person.

I pause for a reply

Good countrymen, let me leave alone,

And, for my sake, stay here with Antony.

Give your respects to Caesar's corpse, and listen respectfully to the speech

About Caesar's accomplishments which Mark Antony,

By our permission, is allowed to make.

I beg you, not one of you leave,

Except for me, until Antony has spoke¹

Mark Anthony

¹ Shakespeare, William. Julius Caesar, Wordsworth Classics, 1992

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.

The evil things that men do live on after them;

The good things are often buried with their bones.

Let it be this way with Caesar. The noble Brutus

Has told you that Caesar was ambitious.

If that were true, it was a terrible fault,

And Caesar has paid for it terribly.

Here, with the permission of Brutus and the rest

(For Brutus is an honourable man;

So are they all, all honourable men),

I come to speak in Caesar's funeral.

He has brought many captives home to Rome,

Whose ransoms filled the government treasury.

Did this seem ambitious in Caesar?

Whenever the poor have cried, Caesar has wept;

Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.

But Brutus says he was ambitious;

And Brutus is an honourable man.

You all saw that on the Lupercal

I offered him a kingly crown three times,

Which he refused three times. Was this ambition?

But Brutus says he was ambitious;

And surely he is an honorable man.

I am speaking not to disprove what Brutus said,
But I am here to say what I do know.
You all loved him once, for good reasons.
What reason keeps you from mourning for him, then?
O judgment, you have run away to dumb animals,
And men have lost their intelligence! Bear with me,
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause until it comes back to me.²

² Shakespeare, William. Julius Caesar, Wordsworth Classics, 1992