

## Of Shakespeare, leadership and coaching

by Terry Fewtrell

Shakespeare is a name known around the world. In modern marketing terms the Shakespeare brand is instantly recognised as a teller of compelling stories of the human experience. Wherever a Shakespeare play is produced, audiences ponder anew the foibles and failings of their fellow man. No matter how many times we may be exposed to the stories, no matter how many times we may read or watch a play, they throw up fresh insights and reflection on the human condition, at its best and at its worst.

Australia's own Bell Shakespeare company has established a unique place in the cultural life of the country with its annual touring of various plays. Certainly many of the Bell productions have brought that freshness of insight and compelling relevance. Part of their appeal is being able to translate a story for its historical context to a post modern setting, with contemporary allusions and references. Often the result can be riveting and extremely powerful. I was recently reminded of the timelessness of Shakespeare while browsing the net, specifically the Amazon.com site, in search of recent publications on business and corporate leadership. Shakespeare figures prominently there in texts on management, leadership and business. While the medium for his communication may be more prosaic, Shakespeare translates well to today's world and to the modern corporate and organisational context, as the many volumes attest.

Shakespeare gives us a fascinating mosaic of characters who grapple with the challenges and enticements of power and authority. The lessons drawn from these characters are often vivid and powerful, as Shakespeare tells his stories of politics, power and love through the experiences and personalities of those involved. A key to their effective communication is that they don't just deal in abstract concepts, but rather they are drawn from the lived experience of the characters.

It is a repertoire of great experience and insight. Storytelling is a powerful medium, especially so when the stories take us across a threshold to confront today's realities. For instance some

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contemporary leaders seem to believe, if not initially then eventually, that the title of leader or manager provides sufficient authority of itself – that leadership can be personalised and abstracted from the organisation. In today's parlance we often characterise this as the **cult** of the leader, the person who ultimately believes that they are themselves the source of their authority and of all wisdom. Shakespeare cites his own examples:

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**Richard II:** believes having the title of king is sufficient to ensure that everyone will obey him automatically

**King Lear:** assumes that his authority will simply continue even when he has given away the land that is the source of his power

**Antony:** believes that his power is not derived from another source but rests in him to be used as he wants.

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Other Shakespearian leaders provide case studies of believing that authority resides in the ability to manipulate and gain power and then use fear to maintain their authority:

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**Richard III:** creates a world in which nobody trusts him and he becomes isolated

**Macbeth:** is driven by ambition to the extent of murdering numerous previous allies

**Coriolanus:** leads by example but lets himself become isolated from his supporters, until alone and vulnerable he is finally overcome by his emotions.

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It is probably the case that each of us has experienced some or all of these styles and dispositions, although hopefully not with the same calamitous outcomes! They are all examples of how human frailty and ambition can destroy the individual and the group. They are examples, writ large, of leadership gone wrong.

For Shakespeare the model leader is **Henry V**. He presents Henry as pre-eminently a manager of people, who fully understands the culture and thinking of his followers and then inspires them to achieve extraordinary things. Shakespeare presents Henry as the leader who 'grows people'. His key speeches are presented as masterpieces in communicating a vision. He grapples with big moral dilemmas and prevails with integrity and loyalty. In simple terms Henry is the great leader who must first know the people he is to lead. That involves working on the relationship between leader and those led. Henry sees his subjects as preparing him for his role as king – a process that is on-going. A good model for an engaged and enabling leader.

But not all leadership stories are drawn on such a large and symbolic canvas. For most of us the world is the smaller organisational unit – the department, division, branch or section. While the scale may be reduced, it often means we are closer to leaders and able to observe them in detail. And when we are ourselves those leaders we feel the scrutiny of our colleagues, knowing that our motives and manoeuvres are on display and form the basis of everyday judgments and discussion.

It is interesting to ponder what Shakespeare would make of present day business and organisational culture. On scanning the current field of international and national leadership, he may well feel that he has plenty of raw material with which to work. He would probably be bemused by the range of self discovery and leadership instruments available today, as aids to deconstructing and understanding leadership styles. That in no way diminishes their legitimate place in interpreting and understanding individual styles. Most likely however, Shakespeare himself would be an author, commentator on leadership and espousing the principle of mentoring and coaching.

There is strong rapport between the insights on Shakespeare's characters and the role of the executive coach. Shakespeare was adept at holding up a mirror to the individual and letting them see the reality of their own position. A coach is someone who draws out of the individual the focus and strength to be successful and achieve their goals. Coaching is not about imparting skills and knowledge from outside. Rather it is about tapping inner strengths and awareness of the client, a knowing oneself and learning from within.

As Covey says, 'seek first to understand and then to be understood.'

It is possible to imagine a reincarnation of Shakespeare excelling on the book and speakers' circuit of today. He would run the video replay and use the stop button to talk through the issues at key points, where a decision is taken or a course is embarked upon that leads to major outcomes (or tragedies). Essentially what he would be doing is drawing out of the individual the knowledge that is already within, reflecting on core values and focussing as much on the 'how' as the 'what'.

In this approach he would be drawing on the richness of our cultural and linguistic heritage. Our words are the currency of ideas and indeed shape ours and others' reality. However we are rarely conscious of how they evolved and the substantive meaning on which they are based. For instance the derivation of

the verb to educate is the Latin, *e duce*, meaning to 'lead out of'. In ancient Greek the verb to 'know', was the word *heurisko*, the real meaning of which was to encourage the individual to discover for oneself. In our language today we use the word *heurst* to denote teacher, but perhaps it is more apt to describe a coach. The emphasis in each case is really on self knowledge and self discovery. In this sense Shakespeare is pre-eminently a meta-coach.

Coaching services typically emphasise the understanding of self, building on ones own strengths and ensuring alignment between individual values, corporate roles and meaningful work. Andrew Podger, Australian Public Service Commissioner, speaks of leadership and values as being 'components of the cement used to build a sustainable APS that delivers innovation with integrity'. The bracketing of leadership and values takes our thinking beyond just the technical perspective of leadership skills. Rather it goes to the centre of what is important to the individual's way of 'being', and to the APS values.

Shakespeare's mirror can have real application here. Understanding oneself and the values that inform our very being is as relevant to today's corporate world as it was to Shakespeare's time. The insights may be fresh. The learning is timeless.

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