

Project Management and The Hero's Journey

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Robert.Roan@post.harvard.edu

As legendary Harvard Business School professor Theodore Levitt put it, “People don’t want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter inch hole.”

In the case of intellectual projects such as change management, computer software and system implementations, this maxim is particularly important, because while it may appear that you’re selling a project, your client is really motivated by a dream – a vision in which their organization’s creative energy more effectively synchronizes with the pulse of an existing market or emerging opportunity.

The drill and the hole are, of course, related, so a successful project requires that you both manage what is traditionally thought of as “the project” and tend the dream.

Tending is very different from managing.

Managing happens from the outside in because the project is essentially an empty vessel and people insert intelligence into things like computer programs and organizational charts.

Tending happens from the inside out and acknowledges the dream as a distinct entity with an intelligence of its own.¹ Tending the dream puts you in service to the dream, not vice versa. You meet the dream where it is, you don’t ask it to come to you.

One of the quickest ways to reduce a project’s potential is to interpret the dream from the imaginal into the real realm.

Because there is so much literature about how to manage the “real” project, I’m going to concentrate on how to tend the dream while it aligns your client’s creative energies with the psychological drivers of the world in which they operate. This is a deeply interior process, one that the mythologist Joseph Campbell explored in his work on “The Hero’s Journey.”²

¹ <http://www.dreamtending.com/dreamtending.pdf>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monomyth> (all quotes are from this Wikipedia article unless otherwise noted)

This paper assumes there is a “champion” in the client organization who has dreamt the dream that’s the inspiration for the project. It will describe how the stages of the hero’s journey manifest during a project so you can recognize what your client’s imagination is experiencing and help him or her stay engaged with the dream on its terms so a journey toward organizational renewal isn’t reduced to a checklist of milestones.

The champion’s Hero’s Journey may not include all of these steps, they may occur in a different order and progress will very likely be iterative instead of sequential.

The Call to Adventure’s seed is planted when the champion gets a persistent intuitive sense that the current way of doing things is no longer powerful enough to hold and direct the market’s life force. Eventually the seed grows and summons the champion to make the change necessary to keep the company moving toward its destiny and goals.

Help the champion experience and surrender to the imaginal nature of the call because success depends on letting the dream manage the journey. Your job is not to interpret the dream, but to keep the champion engaged with and listening to it.

Refusal of the Call – First, make sure it’s not a pseudo-call.

If the call survives this critical analysis, reasons to refuse it “may be from a sense of duty or obligation, fear, insecurity, a sense of inadequacy, or any of a range of reasons that work to hold the person in his or her current circumstances.”

The best way to dissolve these blockages is to instill a sense of urgency by helping the champion surface their original sense of what’s at stake. A vision of stifled creativity, loss of market leadership, and an inability to remain vibrant and competitive will reinforce the knowledge that this is a call, not an option.

Supernatural Aid – “Once the hero has committed to the quest, consciously or unconsciously, his or her guide and magical helper appears or becomes known.”

The consultant (possibly assisted by someone else in the client organization) should be this guide and offer reassurance that even though the project-journey will face dangers and threats from many corners of the mundane world, the champion only needs to stay true to the original call and the forces

of the organization's destiny will be at his or her side and s/he will "ride on the great rhythm of the historical process."

Crossing of the First Threshold: The commitment is made, possibly by signing the contract.

Despite all the thinking, discussions, planning, and reasoning, the champion is still "leaving the known limits of his or her world and venturing into an unknown and dangerous realm where the rules and limits are not known."

Take time to get back in touch with the original call and make a commitment to careful listening and psychological change.

The Belly of the Whale "represents the final separation from the hero's known world and self. By entering this stage, the person shows willingness to undergo a metamorphosis."

The project charter is the preliminary list of the tools the champion needs in order to provide the dream with what it's asking for.

Submitting to the needs of the dream acknowledges that the solution is not outside in the field of possible actions by the champion and the only way to renewal is to be swallowed into the unknown and born again.

The Road of Trials "is a series of tests, tasks, or ordeals that the person must undergo to begin the transformation." This is the execution phase of the project.

Since execution will not go smoothly, the champion will be tested and the consultant's role as guide is to help the champion stay connected to the authenticity of their call and recognize genuine victories as glimpses of the future.

The emerging coherent vision will serve as both a lens through which to view the technical problems and a ground that will support the growth of sympathetic powers in the client organization.

The Meeting with the Goddess comes at the end of the road of trials and the goddess represents the realigned creative energy. The final test of the champion is his or her ability to completely embrace both the good and the bad of the realigned energy.

Woman as Temptress: "In this step, the hero faces those temptations that may lead him or her to abandon or stray from the quest, which does not

necessarily have to be represented by a woman. Woman is a metaphor for the physical or material temptations of life.”

The rest of the company doesn't hear the same call and in some significant ways is afraid of deep change.

As the journey nears the end, the champion will start receiving praise, admiration and rewards from the exterior world. The consultant as guide can help the champion resist the temptation to bask in the milestones reached instead of staying true to the imagination and completing the journey.

Atonement with the Father: “In this step the person must confront and be initiated by whatever holds the ultimate power in his or her life.”

Now is the time the champion seeks the boss's approval and blessing of the project by approaching him or her on an imaginal level with faith that the boss will be able to become at-one with these new energies.

Apotheosis – “is a period of rest, peace and fulfillment before the hero begins the return.” The project is done and has been signed off. However, the journey back is just as important as the journey forward and it's good to take time to let the experiences sink in and be absorbed back into the dream before returning home. Some time off would be a good idea.

The Ultimate Boon: “is the achievement of the goal of the quest. It is what the person went on the journey to get.” It is not the project, but the creative energies it has released (“the miraculous energy of the thunderbolts of Zeus.”)

Refusal of Return: “Having found bliss and enlightenment in the other world, the hero may not want to return to the ordinary world to bestow the boon onto his fellow man.”

For all its trials and tribulations, the project-journey was full of the creative juices that represent life at its richest. Now the champion has to return to the regular company and use the energy of that boon to renew an organization that is probably ambivalent about renewal.

There will be a great temptation to stay in this ecstatic state by moving into another innovation or change initiative. “Numerous indeed are the heroes fabled to have taken up residence forever in the blessed isle of the unaging Goddess of Immortal Being”

The Magic Flight: The consultant-guide who has seen other heroes complete their journeys needs to help the champion remember that the call was not to an adventure but to a renewal of the organization's life force.

Rescue from Without: "The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him." The boss should identify a place in the organization where the champion can land and begin radiating.

The Crossing of the Return Threshold: "The trick in returning is to retain the wisdom gained on the quest, to integrate that wisdom into a human life, and then maybe figure out how to share the wisdom with the rest of the world. This is usually extremely difficult."

Here again, the champion's boss plays a crucial role by modeling (or not modeling) a soul that is open to the fullness of a new connection with the market's essence and excited by the prospect of discovering the strategic and competitive energies that have been released.

Master of Two Worlds: The ability to move back and forth between the mundane world of the organization's daily life and the energy released by destiny's call—"not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other"—is the talent of the master."

It's not either/or but both/and. A truly competitive company needs to be energized by a tension of opposites.

Freedom to Live: As the energetic realignment radiates, the organization needs to become the champion of things becoming. Not of the change that has occurred, but the change that is occurring.

Summary

The imagination is the most powerful force in our universe. The project manager who helps their client navigate the imaginal landscape in such a way that their dream becomes not "true" but more alive will have a deeply satisfied client who has undergone the creative transformation for which the consultant was really hired.