

THE HERO & THE SEA SQUIRT

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Who doesn't love a hero? He flies in on the largest dragon. His chin is dimpled. His muscles rippled. He's kind, yet firm. Aggressive, yet understanding. He turns the other cheek as he destroys evil. He adds value. Puts others first. Is funny and witty. Is stylish and strikingly gorgeous. Never wrinkled. Always humble. Gregarious. Brave. Faithful. Goes it alone. Ever-steadfast. Adventurous. Innovative. Tried and true.

Basically, *he's* about perfect. Nothing we could possibly live up to. Still most of us cloud our expectations for our own leadership with hero myths of one type or another. This isn't to say that leaders shouldn't be courageous and committed to the good of the community. They should. But there is no such thing as the perfect leader and there certainly isn't a formula to follow or suit you can don to become a great leader.

We're not saying that there aren't good books, great research, and smart theories of leadership out there—in fact, we encourage you to dive into them. The point we want to make is that too many of us get stuck thinking leaders need to be some hybrid of Steve Jobs and Superman. Leadership isn't martyrdom, a popularity contest, or a bullying match. It's not about self-denial, power, or prestige. It *is* about being your best self.

Sure that sounds a little hokey, like we've been to too many yoga retreats. Still, fact of the matter is that you can't be anyone but yourself—no matter how many books, theories, or seminars you devour. And so we define leadership as your ability to grow authentic connections that inspire collective action. We believe a leader is an individual

- who has vision and the passion to pursue that vision;
- who can articulate and share her vision to inspire others; and
- who can act upon that vision by challenging and empowering others to build community and achieve a positive net impact.

MAKE AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS

Millennia before our ancient human ancestors even uttered a rudimentary word, their brains were evolving in ways that allowed them to commune and survive in a harsh and dangerous world. Thanks to those pre-human cousins running around on the Pleistocene savannahs, you are programmed to connect with others.

As climatic changes drove pre-human species out of the trees onto the grasslands, where everything had bigger teeth, sharper claws, and more snarl, survival of the early hominids depended upon adaptability and cooperation. While scientists are still guessing at the evolutionary cause motivating our ancestors' altruistic cooperation, evolutionary biologists think that cooperative behavior, based in reciprocal altruism, is the core principle of human social life.

Research has traced our cooperative social interactions to a series of consistent brain activity in areas linked with reward processing.¹ In fact, theorists propose that social emotions—pride

¹ Rilling, J. K., Gutman, D. A., Zeh, T. R., Pagnoni, G., Berns, G. S., & Kilts, C. D. (2002). A Neural Basis for Social Cooperation. *Neuron*, 35, 395-405.

or gratitude, for example, evolved to preserve community and relationships. But it gets even deeper. Beyond its ability to reward you for altruistic behavior, your brain contains additional adaptations that evolved to help you exist in community. One of the really cool adaptations is a specialized area for reading faces, the fusiform face area. The fusiform face area recognizes facial patterns unique to humans in any object, animate or inanimate.

Ever seen the man on the face of the moon? It is your fusiform face area deriving meaning from patterns, finding the familiar in the new—a function undeniably useful in communication. But the fusiform face area is not the only part of your brain that reads and recognizes patterns in the faces and actions of others. Throughout parts of your brain there are miraculous little motor neurons whose only job is to track and mirror action and sensation. Seriously, that is their only job. More importantly they make up a full 20% of your motor cortex.

As we interact with people, our mirror neurons engage in an intimate dance, joining the self and other in an interdependent simultaneity. Mirror neurons are fundamental to our motor function, and some believe for our ability to learn and make meaning. Neuroscientist Michael Arbib goes so far as to hypothesize that mirror systems are the evolutionary link that made early language possible for early humans.² In other words, mirror neurons are critical to your ability to understand, be understood, and lead.

Why should this matter to leadership development? Well, if you can't connect and build rapport with others authentically and honestly, you won't be successful. The fact that "no man is an island" is truer than John Donne ever imagined. As we continue to figure out more and more about the science of human interactions, research in numerous disciplines measures and tracks the amazing subtlety and complexity of human connection and communication.

Leadership gurus Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis, studied Herb Kelleher, co-founder and Chairman Emeritus (and former CEO) of Southwest Airlines. They analyzed and documented Kelleher's ability to "light up" his employees and customers alike,³ concluding along with numerous other researchers that the leader-follower dynamic is not a case of our brains reacting consciously or unconsciously in response to one another. Instead, what's at work is the fusion of our individual minds into a single system.

In other words, in a successful leader's brain all those billions of neurons fire up and connect with others in a way that two people (or more) end up thinking as one. In that moment, true leadership takes place. Thought is literally infused into a powerful connection that goes beyond empathy into shared vision or pure and powerful understanding.

When you get right down to it, leadership is about deep and authentic connections that inspire action.

INSPIRE ACTION

If we consult the ultimate authority, *Wikipedia*, an "action is what an agent can do."⁴ Catching

² Arbib, M. (2008). Primate vocalization, gesture, and the evolution of human language. *Current Anthropology*, 49, 1053-63.

³ Goleman, D., & Boyatzis, R. (2008, September 1). Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership. *Harvard Business Review*.

⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Action_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Action_(philosophy)). Retrieved on Dec. 31, 2013.

the flu *isn't* an action. Hitting your brother *is* an action. Actions require an agent. Agents make an intentional or unintentional decision to act or not, which leads to a reaction. Where all this action stuff gets tricky is when you get into the question of agency and empowered action. So, let's put the socio-cultural complications aside for a moment and agree that things happen because someone or something chooses to act. It's that simple. Your dog can do it. She sees the bagel. It looks tasty. No one's looking. Yum!

But, we'd like to begin to make a distinction between you and your dog. Beyond your inferior olfactory system, you differ in your level of consciousness. Consciousness refers to the relationship between the mind and the world, the state of awareness and selfhood. It's this awareness of self that makes us feel guilty when we eat that third piece of cake at a birthday party or steal a bagel off the counter. It's this awareness that allows us to define a self.

What selfhood and awareness *are* and *how* these phenomena arise brings on heated debates. From theologians to neurobiologists, different theories and interpretations of consciousness clash or meld. Scientists study it. Artists question it. But the rest of us just live with it. Recently, there's been resurgence in popular literature about consciousness.

Learned folk from philosophy to neuroscience weigh in on the debate about consciousness and what makes a mind and a self. Undoubtedly, this discussion has been fueled by great leaps in our understanding of how our brains work. And while the great philosophers have waxed poetic on the subject for millennia (the likes of Plato, Descartes, Kant), we'll begin our conversation in the hot topic du jour, brain science.

Looking to the neural realm, many scientists posit that consciousness is linked to the neural processing of sensory and perceptual data. This makes sense. After all, you feel like your personal perspective of our world is informed by what you see, smell, taste, hear and feel.

However, neurophysiologist Rodolfo Llinas,⁵ from NYU doesn't accept this idea as the only answer; he posits that consciousness emanates not from sensory input but, rather, from the motor system—which, remember, is 20 percent mirror neurons.

Heady stuff. Think about it: if your consciousness emanates from your motor system, it is rooted in movement and action. Your sense of selfhood and awareness grows *not* from what you perceive, rather it grows from what you *do*.

You have to admit this is a tantalizing concept: one that has the potential to make your head hurt. So let's take a brain break for a moment and think about the sea squirt Llinas uses to illustrate his point. Sea squirts are cute jellyfish-like creatures that live in the sea (surprise!). What's so remarkable about sea squirts?

They devour their own brains. A seriously weird thing to do, but it works for them. After birth, a sea squirt has 12 hours to find a cozy place to live on the coral reef. Once it's picked a home and attached itself to the reef, the first thing the squirt does is have a little snack, Hannibal Lector style. The rest of its life is spent in a vegetative state. How clever is that?

Beyond the marvel of the sea squirt, Llinas' theory that the motor system is at the root of

⁵ Llinas, R. (2013) *I of the Vortex*.

consciousness has serious implications for what leadership means and how we define it. And, let's face it, the brainless sea squirt is a perfect metaphor for poor leadership and lack of action. The person who has fixed himself into one spot can perceive the world, but he loses his ability to bridge time and space to connect with others, loses his ability to act or empower.

In a professional landscape where only 30% of the workforce is actively engaged⁶ and where the nature of work is changing rapidly, it makes sense that authentic leadership is about taking action and, more significantly, providing the space and opportunity for others to act—inspiring collective agency through authentic connections.

⁶ Gallup Inc. (2013). State of the American Workplace.