Beowulf and the Teaching of Leadership

Tom Loughman, Ph.D.
D. Abbott Turner College of Business
Columbus State University
Columbus, GA 31907-5645
loughman_tom@colstate.edu

John Finley, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Business Administration
D. Abbott Turner College of Business
Columbus State University
Columbus, GA 31907-5645
finley_john@colstate.edu

Abstract

Although it depicts a Germanic warrior culture of nearly 1,500 years ago, the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* contains timely insights into leadership and motivation, trust, respect, loyalty, and sacrifice that could inform current leadership practice and teaching. To help reveal some of these insights, this study has three main purposes: (a) examine the character of Beowulf as a leader of his warrior band and nation; (b) explain the ways in which the hero Beowulf fits into the Conger-Kanungo model of charismatic leadership; and, (c) explore how the epic poem dramatizes risks of an overreliance upon a charismatic leader. The results of this investigation attempt to provide meaningful insights for practitioners of management, researchers, and instructors of leadership with a special emphasis on the pedagogical value of artifacts of popular culture.

Introduction

Presently we are at the confluence of major cultural currents that bring the elements of the *Beowulf* story to the forefront of popular appeal. At the very least, *Beowulf* has three superb monsters, and monsters are everywhere in movies, television, books, plays, operas, software programs, online gaming communities, paperback novels, and comic books. Around every corner appear vampires, zombies, mutants, werewolves, ghouls, devils, King Kong, Godzilla, dragons, and dinosaurs. They creep up from the ground, plummet from the sky, emerge from the seas, and materialize from thin air.

Another major current involves the large number of popular accounts of legendary and mythical heroes, many of whom display their heroism in struggles with monsters. A few recent examples include films such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and the Harry Potter films, all of which are populated with wizards, trolls, elves, and assorted monsters. The popularity of the *Beowulf* story in particular is evident in light of its numerous translations, editions, audio renditions, and films over the past several decades. While perhaps not great in themselves, several very recent films have brought the story and character of Beowulf into full view. In addition, as part of the canon of western literature, *Beowulf* is listed as number 12 on the 2005 list of the top 1000 works by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), a consortium of more than 60,000 libraries worldwide. The *Beowulf* narrative obviously has staying power.

Turning to the scholarly efforts devoted to the epic poem, numerous research articles cover nearly every aspect of the poem's word choice, origin, thematic elements, history, literature parallels, weaponry, versification, and religious influences. And while some research has explored the hero Beowulf as a character, there is little about Beowulf as a leader. Partly to fill that gap in our knowledge of this important work and to further an understanding of leadership in general, the authors (a) review the historical and cultural indicators of the period as they relate to leadership in the poem; (b) recap the three major episodes of the poem; (c) summarize the Conger-Kanungo model of charismatic leadership; (d) examine the character of Beowulf for elements of charismatic leadership; and, (e) explore the risks to organizations of an overreliance upon charismatic leaders. The authors conclude by placing the story of Beowulf's exploits within a larger discussion of teaching leadership through artifacts of the popular culture.

Historical and Cultural Background

Although the heroic epic *Beowulf* was composed in Old English, it deals not with native Englishmen for whom the poem was written but with their Germanic ancestors of around the sixth century. During that earlier period patches of tribal and sub-tribal leadership were beginning to reveal what would eventually become nation states. A major relationship bond in that period involved what Schlesinger terms *gefolgschaft* (*comitatus* in Latin) which refers to "a relationship which is entered voluntarily based on loyalty and which obliges the man to counsel and military aid, the lord to protection and generosity" (Schlesinger, 1953). The *gefolgschaft* or *comitatus* bond itself superseded, according to Bazelmans (1999), a prior organizational structure based on the concept of *kleinstamme*, which entailed group membership based more on kinship or within ethnic groups

(Bazelmans, p. 5). The *comitatus* relationship was based primarily upon "mutual trust and respect" (Bazelmans, p. 15). The thane vowed loyalty to the lord and in turn received affectionate care as well as material rewards for his valor and allegiance. Good kings would be referred to by kennings (poetic epithets) such as "dispenser of treasure" or "ring-giver," while bad kings who were not generous tended to lose thanes as well as the respect and military might the thanes brought with them. To the warriors in numerous small roving groups, in ways similar to those of the Vikings in the ninth and tenth centuries, treasure represented not only material wealth but also a validation of one's worth and honor in the warrior society. It also symbolized the successful bond among the warriors in the band and between the thane and the lord.

The warrior bands had to be highly adaptive units whose members were ready to pick up at a moment's notice, alter course as sea winds changed, and opportunistically choose proper targets. Organizational membership involved sharing the band's values, norms, and standards of behavior. Commitment to the groups' cultural values and organizational goals was fostered through clan control, and members were acutely and intimately aware at all times how variable commitment to goals would result in equally variable success rates. In brief, feedback was swift, and a warrior band consisting of cowardly warriors would not long endure. Dissolution of an unsuccessful group often meant very unpleasant outcomes for the individual members.

Thus, from an organizational perspective, given the obvious high risk involved in their enterprises, the warriors came to depend upon the others in the group for their lives, livelihood, and sense of honor. Cunning, strength, and courage were obviously prized in the warrior, and especially in a leader who maximized these warrior traits and upon whom the band depended. As the following synopsis of the three episodes of the *Beowulf* poem reveals, Beowulf epitomized these traits and for a long while successfully led his people against all foes.

Synopsis of *Beowulf*

In episode 1, a band of 15 Geatish warriors led by Beowulf arrives at the homeland of the Danes to rid that country of Grendel, a seemingly invincible, man-eating monster possessing the strength of 30 men. In the mead hall of Heorot on the first night, after introductions, drinking, and boasting, the Danish King Hrothgar and his retainers go to their bedchambers while the visiting warriors bed down in the mead hall. As he had done many times before, Grendel breaks into the hall, creates a general panic, and greedily devours one of the warriors. Although Beowulf's thanes attempt to subdue the monster, their efforts are

useless. Grendel then attempts to seize Beowulf's arm, but the warrior instead grabs him, and in the ensuing struggle Beowulf wrenches Grendel's arm off as the monster escapes. The following morning Grendel's arm is prominently displayed to awestruck onlookers as a trophy on a wall in Heorot.

Episode 2 treats the second night in Heorot during which there is great feasting and giving of gifts and praise to Beowulf and his companions. After the celebration, however, Grendel's mother sneaks into the hall, grabs one of Hrothgar's most worthy retainers, retrieves the arm of her son Grendel, and retreats to her foul den across the moors. The next morning, Beowulf, who had not slept at Heorot the previous night, vows to avenge the death. He and his retainers, as well as members of Hrothgar's court, track Grendel's mother to the foul mere containing her den. Beowulf descends alone into the mere and is attacked by Grendel's mother, who drags him into her bone-strewn den and stabs at him repeatedly with a blade. Beowulf attempts to kill her with the sword Hrunting, but to no avail. Finally, Beowulf locates an ancient sword on the cave wall and kills Grendel's mother with it. At the victory celebration that evening in Heorot, King Hrothgar gives fabulous gifts and praise to Beowulf and his companions.

The third and final episode reveals Beowulf's having ruled wisely and well for 50 years as king of the Geats. Unfortunately, because someone disturbs its treasure trove, an enraged dragon wreaks havoc on the countryside and even destroys Beowulf's own dwelling place. Beowulf vows to slay the dragon. With several of his thanes he goes to draw it out and kill it. Although Beowulf wounds the dragon, he is himself mortally wounded. While all the other thanes run to the woods, Beowulf's nephew Wiglaf remains and delivers the fatal wound to the dragon. Wiglaf then foresees much trouble for the Geats because their great hero is dead and most of the Geatish warriors who still live are cowards. A funeral pyre is built, and as Beowulf and the dragon's treasure are consumed by the flames, an old woman bewails their loss and looks gloomily into the future, for surely, now the Geatish people will suffer invasion, enslavement, debasement, and death.

Heroic deeds and grim narrative, but what type of leader is Beowulf? Our contention here is that Beowulf exemplifies charismatic leadership as detailed in the model detailed by Conger and Canungo (1994) in their article, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*. A brief summary of their main points is presented below.

Conger and Kanungo's (1994) Charismatic Leader Model

Within the last three decades, charisma has in organizational studies become associated with the concept of transformational leadership, elucidated by Burns in his 1978 book *Leadership.* One major similarity between the charismatic and transformational leaders is their ability to empower employees to exceed normal expectations of achievement. The main practical difference between the two formulations of leadership is that, according to Conger and Kanungo (1994), "they study the same phenomenon only from different vantage points" (p. 442). Research into transformational leadership, they maintain, focuses on *follower responses* while research into charismatic leadership focuses on *leader behaviors*.

Partly as a response to the "complexity of the phenomena" and the "construct ambiguities and validity issues" associated with the concepts of charisma and transformational leadership, Conger and Kanungo (1994) developed their own model of charismatic leadership. Its main behavioral components are revealed in three distinct stages: (Stage 1) Environmental assessment – followers perceive the manager's greater desire to change the *status quo* and a heightened sensitivity to environmental opportunities, constraints, and followers' needs; (Stage 2) Vision formulation – followers perceive the manager's formulation of a shared, but idealized future vision and effective articulation of this vision in an inspirational manner; and, (Stage 3) Implementation – managers who are perceived as charismatic are seen to be engaging in exemplary acts that subordinates interpret as involving great personal risk and sacrifice. Through these actions such managers are able to empower subordinates and build trust. In addition, managers in a charismatic leadership role are also seen to be deploying innovative and unconventional means for achieving their visions. In essence, charismatic leaders differ from other leaders by their "ability to formulate and articulate an inspirational vision and by behaviors and actions that foster an impression that they and their mission are extraordinary" (p. 442).

Beowulf as Charismatic Leader

In the case of Beowulf, we witness a good example of the heroic ideal that in several important ways fits well the Conger-Kanungo charismatic leader model summarized in the previous section. He is absolutely fearless and supremely confident in his own abilities. The boasts he makes before the fight with Grendel (Heaney, 2001) signal a public, inspirational articulation of confidence in his own and in his companions' abilities to overcome adversity in the form of the monster. This goal is no ordinary one because up to that point Grendel had been invincible, breaking in wherever and whenever he pleased, slaughtering at will. In his three

contests with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, respectively, Beowulf is portrayed as the very model of the warrior hero. His comrades willingly go with him because of their confidence in his ability to lead them and to achieve their objectives. For his part, Beowulf, through his heroic exploits, is an abundant fountain of treasure during his years as the leader of his warrior band, and as king of the Geats he is a renowned ring-giver. Through his own strength and in his capacity as role model, Beowulf ensures that his band and tribe achieve their goals.

Ironically, however, as the synopsis above indicates, the essential social and psychological bond between King Beowulf and his thanes ultimately breaks down when the dragon appears. Although Beowulf has treated them with respect, praise, and rewards – as a good king should – his retainers (except for his nephew Wiglaf) leave him high and dry to suffer his fate with the fire-breathing "wyrm." This breakdown, a total repudiation of the loyalty owed a lord by his thanes, is significant for the Geatish people as well because their impending fate is sealed along with the fate of their warrior representatives who escaped to the woods (Stanley, 2005).

Potential Drawbacks of Charismatic Leadership

In his article *Beowulf: The Heroic, The Monstrous, and Anglo-Saxon Concepts of Leadership*, Napierkowski (2005) describes *Beowulf* as a "premier example of literature as a form of leadership instruction" (p. 503). However, the grim fate of the Geatish people at the demise of their king invites questions about relying upon charismatic leaders such as Beowulf as models of leadership.

In the corporate world, as in *Beowulf*, the over reliance on a charismatic leader unfortunately can result in a problem of succession because no future leaders have been groomed to take the place of the departed one. A more frequent occurrence, as Bazelmans (1999) suggests, is that because a vanquished leader's succession is "not a predetermined event," struggles can take place among pretenders or potential successors (p. 129). The case in *Beowulf* is quite different, however, in that nobody is claiming nor is likely to claim the throne. A vacuum of leadership has been created by Beowulf's death. A follow-up study could discover how often organizations that over rely upon charismatic leaders incur long-term negative consequences, especially in situations where, as Johnson (2003) suggests, followers are too quick to follow their leaders' example. Is the *Beowulf*-type problem of succession common in companies with charismatic leaders? To bring this point into a present context, what is likely to happen with a company such as Apple when Steve Jobs finally decides to give up the reins? Would Google be

able to survive the loss of either Larry Page or Sergei Brin, or both of them? The potential consequences of relying upon charismatic leaders need to be explored further by researchers and organizational decision makers.

Pedagogical and Management Implications

Given the enormous popular interest in large, menacing beasts that terrorize and devour humans, such as the ones that inhabit the film *Jurassic Park*, *Dragonslayer*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Reign of Fire*, *Godzilla*, and many others, the story of *Beowulf* should appeal to modern audiences. Additionally, in *Beowulf* the themes of leadership, self-sacrifice, achievement, and working in teams for a common goal are ready-made for researchers and instructors. As the writings of Shakespeare, Sun-Tzu, and Machiavelli have been gleaned for their insights into a host of management concepts (Kaplan, 2002), *Beowulf* can also reveal insights into leadership, motivation, and organizational behavior. This point is reinforced by Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin (2007) who maintain that "storytelling has been a vehicle for teaching, learning, and sensemaking throughout history; one need only think of epic tales such as Beowulf or the Odyssey to be reminded of lessons taught through stories" (p.153). They continue by stating that "because of the important role they play in community learning, sensemaking, and communication, these stories are embedded in our popular culture and, indeed, are vehicles for transmitting that culture" (p. 153). Stories form the basis of numerous "popular culture artifacts," written and visual media emanating from popular culture, recommended by Callahan et al. as "ideal for teaching leadership because they allow learners to both identify with current trends and process concepts by using tools that capture their interest" (p. 147).

As a case in point, one of the authors has for several years in a management principles course included details about the *Beowulf* story in a module about leadership. In the course, the instructor uses a process similar to what Cartwright (2002) (citing Chris Argyris and Donald Schon) recommends that attempts to get "underneath the starting perceptions about leading and managing" (p. 70). Discussion of the story and the character of Beowulf raise numerous connections with leadership types, limitations of leadership, the role of followers, and how myths, legends and narratives in popular culture can serve as vehicles for understanding leadership. As with other stories related to leadership, discussions of the Beowulf narrative, in our opinion, exemplifies well what Colvin (2003), in his endorsement of leadership studies in liberal education, calls the "symbiotic relationship between liberal education and leadership studies" (p. 34).

Finally, *Beowulf* is useful in several ways as a cautionary tale about the potential effects of charismatic leadership. Because of their potency, charismatic leaders often occupy positions of authority, trust, and respect. Reliance upon them comes easily to their followers. However, precisely because of their competence and power, charismatic leaders could easily generate overreliance as well. This overreliance could pose significant risks for an organization, whether warrior band, tribe, nation, or Fortune 500 company. When the leader is gone, who in the organization will have the necessary leadership ability to carry on? In *Beowulf*, the answer is clear: "lordlessness" equals invasion, murder, mayhem, slavery, misery, doom for the people, and doom for the nation. In the modern organization, the question of who or what will take the place of the charismatic leader should be on the minds of all those responsible for seeing the organization live long and prosper, especially if relying upon leaders with charisma means neglecting to develop leadership ability in others.

The powerful, memorable story of Beowulf has value as a vehicle for leadership instruction. Its numerous manifestations in print, audio, and visual media attest to its staying power in its own right, and it fits well in the current cultural context of ubiquitous monsters and the leaders – mythical and legendary – who attempt to vanquish them.

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