

Chapter 31 Why Septet Leaders of Theatre are Thesians

I would like to summarize this new theory of leadership is theatre. It is one that I have been developing with a series of journal articles, in these and other book chapters, and conference papers this past decade. It is a theory quite different from the trait, behavioral, contingency, and situation models; what I call leadership in the box (Boje, 2000f).

The essay has three parts. Part one is *The Storytelling of Leadership*, Part two is *The Theatrics of Leadership*. These are two areas that, to me, take us out of the traditional leadership box and into the realm of the performative art of leadership.

I think it is time to step out of the leadership box, and theorize a more postmodern theory of leadership. *The Theatrics of Leadership* is therefore about the power of the postmodern global stage of late capitalism, about actors wearing masks and pretending to be heroes in a free marketplace that is full of sweat, brutality, and greed. There are two parts to Theatrics of Leadership:

1. **PART ONE: The stories leaders tell.** This includes stories that found new ventures and adventures, transformative vision, and restorying the past to create a new story of the future. It also includes the spectacle of story spinning, crafting the mask that is held out as an illusion, a fantasy to cover up the material conditions of labor and ecology. Finally, with every transnational corporation promising to self-police their subcontractors, to implement SA8000, ISO14000 and live up to the CERES Principles, story spinning requires a full time staff of hundreds of PR experts, publicists, and thespians.
2. **PART TWO: The theatrics leaders do.** There are many ways to tell stories. With words and with actions. The leader according to Mintzberg is a figurehead, an actor symbolically dramatizing the mission, values, and strategy of the firm.

PART I - Storytelling of Leadership

I see organizations as occurring and transforming through storytelling, and leaders are one of the tellers, but do not completely control the unfolding storyline, a construction of networks of tellers in and beyond the organization's horizon of action. "Storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders" (Boje, 1991a: 106). There is a struggle between leaders and others to tell the story of the organizations, to make one story stick among competing ones. Storytelling is a part of myth-making, crafting meaning to specific cultural events, rituals and artifacts (Boje, Fedor & Rowland, 1982). Sometimes the founders' story wins out. Other times, there is a storming of the leader story. Getting the storyline straight, or at

least presentable as a rationale and legitimation to customers, employees, investors, vendors, and community is the full time job of leaders. This is what colleagues and I have researched and theorized as the *storytelling organization* (Boje, Fedor & Rowland, 1982; Boje, 1991a,b, 1995, Boyce, 1996; Boje, Luhman & Baack, 1999; Boje, 1999c). The storytelling organization is plurivocal (many-voiced) and polysemous (many-meanings).

Organizations are constituted by storytelling and changed by restorying (Boje, 1991a, b, 1994, 1995; Boje, Rosile, Dennehy, & Summers, 1997; Boje, Alvarez & Schooling (2001). "Stories are the blood vessels through which change pulsates in the heart of organizational life" (Boje, 1991b: 8). Consulting interventions, oftentimes change the telling of relevant tales and help managers, vendors, customers, and employees achieve a retelling of the organization (Boje, 1991b: 16). The leader storyteller crafts stories to integrate disparate organizational elements and make retrospective sense of the present (Weick, 1995: 61). Storytelling is intertextual, with each element of the tale, a line in the inter-connective web of stories and more stories (Boje, 2001a, see chapter on intertextuality and narrative method). Stories give a sense of connection between networks of storytellers, each crafting their own variation and fragments.

But storytelling leadership is not a simple process. One story must be coaxed to win out over another (Boje, 1991b, 1994) and the official story can cover over many other voices (Boje, 1995, 1999c, 2000g).

Early organization studies of storytelling ran into the problem of treating stories as reified objects, ripped from their performance contexts (See Boje, 1998 for a review). My contribution from 1991 to day has been to lead the field from "stories-as-objects" to "stories-in-context" theory and research. I prefer to analyze stories as situated performances rather than surrogate object-measures of other variables such as culture, climate, or knowledge.

What is the basis of "*in situ*" storytelling theory and research? First is a research focus on the *in situ* performance context of storytellers influencing one another. Second, is the historical context of local embeddedness of "micro" stories in wider "macro" stories of grand political, economic, social, and ecological context. More recently I am looking at "microstoria" the effort of the Italians to trace the historical social and contextual networks of stories. In making the postmodern narrative turn, I assert that stories and storytelling are constitutive of organizations rather than mere measures of organization. this is a move I owe to my mentor, Lou Pondy. Storytellers in the 1970s and 1980s were objectified as they recited bits of organizational lore as mere "in-place metering devices" of other abstract constructs (Pondy & Boje, 1980). This is the basis for "storytelling in situ organization" research.

The current thinking on strategy, is that leaders construct, communicate, and enact strategy as storytelling (Barry & Elmes, 1997). However, since there are multiple leaders and many stages, we are also now into the Tamara of leadership (Boje, 1995), the work

of the storytelling organization, to chase the wandering storylines from stage to stage. At any given moment stories are being performed by corporate actors on different stages (hallways, customer and vendor offices, board meetings, shareholder meetings, training sessions, and all across the global stage).

In the postmodern turn, the WWW is used by fragmented and disparate interest and protest groups to critique the abuse of corporate power. Web sites are constructed to post and circulate stories, organize boycotts, and critique the stories crafted in corporate web sites. Corporations such as Nike trade barbs with a league of web critics, and the media journalists cruise the web debris to concoct their own tales of corporate resistance (Boje, 1999c, 2000g). Often times, the consumer does not know whose story to believe, which for some corporations may be the point of story spinning.

In sum, as a field we have moved rapidly from the study of stories of corporate founders that would inspire and motivate, to stories of the contested corporation, with many more voices constituting the storytelling organization of the modern and postmodern corporation. Leadership is a storytelling art, and some leaders are better storytellers than others. We are no longer in an era where one leader can be the voice of the organization. There are at least four voices of leadership. The First, is the bureaucratic leaders speaking for the firm. The Second voice, is learning to dialogue with the other, be it employee, customer, or radical critique. The Third voice, is what Adam Smith wrote of in the Moral Sentiments, the internalized spectator, who is the the ethical conscience. And the Fourth voice, is more postmodern, the voice of the voiceless. This can be an aesthetic voice, communicating not in word but in presences and absences. Or, this fourth voice can be the voice of the voiceless, the people toiling in the inner city and Third World sweatshops or even the voice of the animals.

Brisset (1998) comments that there is a new network of resistance to the exploitation of children. Activists on university campuses are organizing to insure their college apparel is not being made in sweatshops (Boje et al, 2000). Citizens from around the world are resisting the story spinning of transnational corporate leaders, and circulating their own stories.

PART II - Theatrics of Leadership

When we unmask the Theatrics of Leadership, we find Machiavellian Princes pretending to be heroes, or just plain bureaucrats pretending to be Princes. And here and there there are superman and superwoman leaders that Nietzsche (1883-1888 in Will to Power) sought after.

Beyond Universal Theories of Leadership - Instead of a universal theory of these or those behaviors, traits, or situations, the Theatrics of Leadership Theory looks at how leaders act, the masks they wear, the situations that they manipulate, exploit, and run from. _ Corporate capitalism is played out on the global stage (Boje, 2000b). What does leadership theory have so much unexplained variance when comparing traits or behaviors of leaders with effectiveness?_

1. One-dimensional, ignoring how characters change their personality and behavior from scene to scene.
2. Romantic expectations that leaders are heroic, rather than also highly flawed, tragic, or human figures.
3. Either too abstract or some overly simplistic guru theory, ignoring the chaos and complexity of the leader situation.
4. Ignoring the preponderance of absurdity in leadership and organizations.
5. Assuming away the politics of power in models that are a bit too nice and rational for the real world.

For more Links to Theatrics, please consult:

 **Theater of the Absurd**

Theater of the Oppressed

Existential Theatrics of Leadership

Leader model of Prince, Hero, Superman/ woman & Bureaucrat

 **Global Theatrics of Leadership**

How do we get beyond One-dimensional Leader Theories?

First, the approaches are too one-dimensional, and even when studying two or three dimensions, this is still the case. From a theatrics point of view, such as in the play, Tamara (Boje, 1995) what we find is highly complex characters, who change their personality (traits) and actions (behavior strategy) from one scene to the next. We do not need to look to postmodern theatrics to make such a claim, we can look to Shakespeare, the master storyteller. Shakespeare's theatrics of leadership reveals that it is most often the one-dimensional leader (King Lear, Richard II, or Mark Antony) that fails to perform effectively. Shakespeare's plays include multi-dimensional leaders such as Henry V who are participative (learning the ropes from the troops) in one scene, a hero giving a rousing speech to motivate the troops in another scene, and in the same act, become the ruthless Machiavellian Prince, threatening to rape all the women and kill all the babies if the town does not surrender immediately. Here he motivates his troops at Harfleur:

KING. Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; Or close the wall up with our English dead.

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility;
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger:
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;
Let it pry through the portage of the head

Like the brass cannon: let the brow o'erwhelm it
As fearfully as doth a galled rock
O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
Swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean.
Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide;
Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit
To his full height. On, on, you noblest English,
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof-
Fathers that like so many Alexanders
Have in these parts from morn till even fought,
And sheath'd their swords for lack of argument.
Dishonour not your mothers; now attest
That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you.
Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
And teach them how to war. And you, good yeomen,
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
The mettle of your pasture; let us swear
That you are worth your breeding- which I doubt not;
For there is none of you so mean and base
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
Follow your spirit; and upon this charge
Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'
(Source, Henry V).

At one point he has a friend executed to make an example of him to the troops, lest they too loot a French town (see below). Even when behavioral leadership went to two dimensions (consideration and initiating structure) or even three (including participation), the complexity of the leader character is reduced to simplistic dimensions. What is also simplistic is the romantic and bureaucratic idea that leaders are consistent from scene to scene, with universal traits or behaviors.

Second, the romantic heroic theories of leadership assume away everything that is political and powerful about the leader. A possible reason for so much unexplained variance in leadership studies, is that leaders are acting, followers are making (false, exaggerated, or wishful) attributions about their trustful, ethical, and good nature. but is Rupert Murdoch, Robert Maxwell, or Bill Gates so good natured?_ Leadership theory, to date, expects its leaders to be heroic figures, who engage in rational action. Yet, if we look again to Shakespeare, the heroic leader usually has many tragic qualities. The point is that if we just focus on the socially desirable, heroic qualities we end up telling fairy tales of leadership.

Third, leadership theories are oftentimes, highly abstract concept and variable schemes that are removed from the concrete practice of leadership. Or, they descend into simplistic guru pronouncements reducing "leadership to words like "trust," "vision," or

"empowerment." Leaders, I assume, live in a chaotic, ambiguous, and contradictory world that requires compromise and negotiation. In Shakespeare, power is personified in complex people, characters with tragic flaws (Richard III's ambition, Macbeth thirst for blood, Coriolanus' separation from his troops), a point Corrigan (1999: 2-4) makes. Corrigan makes a point, well traversed in leadership studies, that leaders who rely only on their position, or one way of being in times of change, can get blindsided. The problem with Corrigan's (1999) reading of leadership facets of Shakespeare is he turns to leadership gurus such as Peters, Kanter, Drucker, McGregor, Deming and Handy - to make his ties to leader theory and practice. The result is much of complexity of Shakespeare is reduced to trite categories of the gurus (an exception in the inclusion of Philip Selznick).

Fourth, perhaps people assume leadership is happening when there is only absurdity. The theater of the absurd, (notably Eugene Ionesco) and the play "The Leader" highlights the wishful attributions of those who expect someone to arrive and be the leader. People hear the commentaries passed through the crowd about all the different leader behaviors and attribute each one to an act of great leadership. But what arrives in this play is a headless leader (see Boje, 2000c).

Finally, leadership theory, with a few notable exceptions (McClelland) ignore the theatrics of power, the daily politics of power that constitutes leadership in complex organizations. If you look at most leadership theory, it is more static than dynamic, ignoring the politics of power over time. Yet, ask anyone working in a complex organization and they usually confess that leadership is about politics, plotting and scheme, in quite Machiavellian ways. While we would all like to have corporate, government, and university politics disappear, burying our head in the sand does not make it so.

It is for these five reasons that leadership research, in my opinion, is not able to increase its explained variance. Further, too much leadership theory is about safe and rational behaviors, such as initiating structure, consideration, participation, and only complicated by looking at various contingencies and situations when one works better than the other. Yet, this, to me, is bureaucratic leadership, what we train managers to perform in MBA programs and Business Colleges. And recently, there has been a call for more heroic action, to transform, craft an inspiring vision, and even call for charismatic leadership (making Weber a bit uncomfortable). But, even these refinements ignores the politics of power, a topic that too many seem to assume died with Machiavelli.

Leaders, I assume develop multiple characters (heroic, prince, bureaucratic, and superman or superwoman) are some to start looking at. I further assume that one-dimensional, uni-character leaders are the exception. That is, most leaders display a mix of characters, and can be measured as one or the other, by self-report or observers' notes, at one time, but not at another. Perhaps in a messy complex and chaotic world there are few heroic moments, even rarer superman/superwoman events, many bureaucratic ones, and more than a few political power tactics of the Princely leader. In short, the leader is a complex character, full of contradiction when studied over time. Leaders, such as

Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) come to mind. _ `Definitely a heroic figure, leading troops into battle, other times quite tragic, obsessed with his own greatness, given to egotism. Still MacArthur was able to change himself in order to manage a wide variety of situations, from battle field general, WestPoint headmaster, transformer of Japan into a liberal economy, and presidential candidate. MacArthur was more Prince than Hero, more Superman than Bureaucrat (but obsessed with details, background briefings, and strategic planning). Again, as stated above, Shakespeare's Henry V is another example of a leader able to exhibit multiple persona in various situations. Both expected their troops to work hard and bravely for them (Corrigan, 1999: 142; Manchester, 1978: 15). "Such a variety of actions from the same leader [Henry V or General MacArthur] in the same battle raises important question of morality for senior managers" (Corrigan, 1999: 145, additions mine). How flexible should a leader be in adapting their character?_ Do leaders violate moral ethics?_ Henry V, for example, condemns his old friend to be hanged so the troops will know he is serious about his invading army refraining from looting and raping (a common practice to compensate otherwise poorly paid soldiers by letting them pillage). Ironically, Henry V, had once participating in a mugging with that same friend. When learning that his friend had been caught looting, Henry replied:

KING HENRY. We would have all such offenders so cut off. And we give express charge that in our marches through the country there be nothing compell'd from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom the gentler gamester is the soonest winner (Source, Henry V).

This is the politics of power, to hang a friend to control an invading army. If he would hang a friend, what would he do to a common soldier, or an enemy?

___ Perhaps most other leaders are not so adaptive and flexible, but neither are they one-dimensional, and quite so predictable and ordinary. As Philip Selznick (1957: 149-150) observed, the leader is able to transform technical and bureaucratic relationships into what motivates people to value and commitment. ___ Transformative, charismatic, heroic, supermen and women, and even bureaucratic leadership involve theatrics and spectacle. In sum, the leader is at heart a thespian, able to communicate through act and scene to the people being led. Yet some are better performers than others. And theatrics can be learned.

What assumptions of traditional leadership theory does the Theatrics of Leadership Violate?_ Several come to mind. First, there is universalism, the idea that there is a set of consistent and identifiable traits, behaviors, or principles that define leadership. Theatrical leaders are not character actors, typecast into just one role and one persona. A Theatrical Leader can play many roles, and become many characters. _ Second, Theatrical Leaders, while attentive to situations, are not determined by them. Third, a Theatrics of Leadership would partially revise the study of great leaders, an approach that was killed off and assumed dead by the behavior and situation schools. I say partial, because, one problem we do not want to repeat is studying romantic biographies of leaders like Henry Ford and Walt Disney, thereby missing the complex

aspects of their character, and changes in their character over time and circumstance. Fourth, while traditional theory is about static patterns, that can be measured in surveys, a Theatrics of Leadership model will require a more time-sensitive, and information rich method. Finally, leaders need to be studied over time to trace the complexity of character and situation, and the multi-dimensions of their personality.

Before developing more of the theory, I need to say something about a method appropriate to the study of Theatrics of Leadership; for theory and method are intertwined.

Intertextuality - Each text is an intertextual system that has a genealogy and sociology and does not cease to evolve. Bakhtin (1973), Barthes (1977) and then Kristeva (1980a, b, 1986; and Foucault (1979) move us from text to intertextuality and the historicity, productivity, and genealogy that make up an intertextual system of relationships.

Carnival and Theatrics of Leadership - There is no leadership, certainly not a Theatrics of Leadership, without resistance. And resistance comes in many forms, but one of the more noticeable is Carnival. The second aspect of carnival relevant to leadership theatrics is the disorder, chaos, and indeterminacy of the social. For Bakhtin (1973), carnival and intertext were intertwined. The leader's discourse (text verbal, written, and acted out) sways a crowd that has its own devices and ways. Carnival was a way for the masses to communicate what being led or not led was like, and in some sense communicate the material conditions of oppression. But this was no tidy process of communication. In the Middle Ages carnival brings to mind startling and outrageous images:

Medieval fools hatched from eggs, pigs
roasting butchers on spits, dwarves wielding
enemas, a 16th-century mock- religious
diptych that opens to reveal a grimacing face
and a naked bottom, horses riding in man-
drawn carriages, women riding on cockerels,
battles between pots and pans, a transvestite
performance artist and a tattooed lady._

(Web [Source](#))

For Kristeva (1980: 46) drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin says, "the scene of the carnival introduces the split speech act: the actor and the crowd are each in turn simultaneously subject and addressee of discourse."_ Each intertextual system is constituted within carnivalesque spectacle performative of which the corporate authoring of textual or narrative accounts is only one participant. For Bakhtin, the carnival was not 'irrational'._ Several sign systems compete for representational authority, to sell one way of interpreting otherwise polyphonic subject positions, including legitimating labor practices and idea struggles. Bakhtin used the term "carnival" to identify an atmosphere of revelry, contempt of authority, and somatic anti-intellectualism in literature. Following Lukas,

Sartre (1963: 54) also invokes carnival “to suggest color, agitation, noise” and to act out one’s position in a society that for a moment is open to parody.



The Spectacle of Leadership - Spectacles are enacted to be read as texts along corporately and leaderly controlled points of view (Debord, 1968). With the invention of TV and Internet the spectacle that Foucault (1979) describes for the torture of Damien by the Crown (and Prince) has left the stage. In its place are the spectacles of political convention, OJ Simpson Trial, and the Survivor.

In sum, a Theatrics of Leadership would focus on performance, how leaders engage in performance, especially when there is a crowd. We have known since Mintzberg went beyond abstract questionnaires that managers (and leaders too) do not do the behaviors leader theory says they are supposed to be doing. Instead their day is buzzing, blooming confusion, and rich in communicative arts and multi-tasking. And the roles of a leader have always included the figure head, a sometimes headless leader has no figure. A Theatrics of Leadership is not a science of behavior or a determinist accounting of contingencies. Rather, in theatrics there is spectacle, carnival, and here and there some festival. But science, that variance is very small, almost immeasurable. Leaders put on their masks, more functionally so in the case of bureaucrats, but the princes wear masks of a different color, and the supermen and women leaders long to wear no mask at all.