The Leadership Wheel

Five Steps for Achieving Individual and Organizational Greatness

By C. Clinton Sidle

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Introduction

To be human is to become. As human beings we have a hungry spirit and an inherent need to find our place in the world and relevance for what we do.

This urge to become can be traced to something in our psyche that says we’ve fallen from grace or lost our original home, and that the only way back is by making ourselves and our world whole. In Western tradition, it’s expressed in the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden and striving to find a return home.

The attempt to harness this evolutionary urge to become and find meaning is what comparative mythology scholar Joseph Campbell called the heroic journey. He saw this journey as a spontaneous production of the psyche and an archetypal process expressed in the myths and traditions throughout our ancient world cultures. It’s a universal truth that portrays humanity’s
search for meaning in a tale of separation, initiation, transformation and return.

In these myths, the hero ventures forth into the unknown, faces miraculous tests and ordeals, wins mighty victories, and returns with the power to bestow boons upon others. Examples in Western culture include Odysseus’ struggles on his return from Troy to release his family from bondage, and Percival in his 20-year quest for the Holy Grail to save King Arthur’s Kingdom.

**Leadership = To Go First**

The heroic journey is very relevant to how we frame leadership and live our everyday lives. Leadership is about movement and change, and change begins at a personal level. The root meaning of leadership is “to go first.” Every act of leadership is an act of courage.

Thus a heroic person is anyone able to face the risks and challenges of change despite fears and uncertainties. For us, it’s about mobilizing
ourselves to tackle the challenges in our lives. Once we cross the threshold into change we leave our comfort zone and cross into unknown territory. Successfully meeting these challenges requires us to let go of old ways of doing things — relationships, perspectives, even identities — and enter new beginnings.

The heroic journey begins as an inner process but gradually unfolds as an outward caring for the community. Once we’ve discovered our inherent wisdom, the final destiny of the heroic journey is to return to the world to bestow the benefits upon others. The desire to find a better world and lead from a place of goodness is inherent in all of us — it just needs to be awakened. Creating a more enlightened world represents the culmination of our search for meaning and possesses important messages

A heroic person is anyone able to face the risks and challenges of change despite fears and uncertainties.
for leadership and business. Since this urge is inherent in everyone, we can awaken it and make it a common goal.

The Leadership Wheel

The shape of the circle has been an important symbol of unity and wholeness for cultures throughout the world from almost the beginning of time. The mandala, or medicine wheel, the most sacred form of the unifying circle, has long been a universal image of the cosmos and the nature of existence.

The wheel generally consists of five primary energies or aspects of existence placed in the four cardinal directions of the compass with one in the center. Carl Jung studied versions of the wheel in Asian, African and Native American cultures. He considered it a human archetype, a pattern occurring across cultures and representing the cosmos as well as the self.

The ancient belief is that an individual is born
with a preference for a single archetype and so enters the world imperfect, with little wisdom or understanding of the others. However, since the purpose of life is to venture beyond habitual preferences, to learn and grow toward wholeness, the heroic person is to make an effort to access the unique and complementary wisdom in each of the four directions.

Those four directions in the leadership wheel are:

- **East** – The way of the teacher: knowing the world.
- **South** – The way of the nurturer: awakening the heart.
- **West** – The way of the visionary: seeing the way.
- **North** – The way of the warrior: embodying the way.
At the center of the wheel is the way of the sage: learning to learn.

The Teacher

For the teacher, the archetypal energy of becoming is about intellectual intelligence. It’s the place of first illumination where our senses first recognize an object as it appears in our experience, like waking in the morning to the breaking dawn. It’s where the mind is used to observe the world just as it is, coolly and objectively, without bias or projection from past experience, or hope or fear of the future. It’s also the place of inquiry, where the intellect is used to grasp and analyze experiences with a sharp and powerful logic and turn it into knowledge.

Teachers are logical and rational in solving problems and providing critical viewpoint and attention.

The learning routines are:
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• **Curiosity** – Teachers inquire and investigate openly and honestly into the nature of reality.

• **Logic** – Teachers are logical and rational in solving problems, evaluating opportunities and providing the critical viewpoint and attention to detail necessary for grounding actions in reality. They’re pragmatic when dealing with others and realistic in addressing problems.

• **Objectivity** – Teachers remain coolly observant of the world, neutralizing emotional reactions in order to help themselves and others see reality clearly and face it peacefully.

The shadow side of the teacher arises out of a fear of being wrong, or not knowing. They can be fixated on what they perceive to be right or wrong, self-righteous and inflexible when challenged, and fall prey to analysis paralysis.

**The Nurturer**

The archetype of the nurturer is one of emotion-
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The place where our first contact with the world through the teacher is enriched and deepened through a feeling and emotional reaction. It’s the place of feeling, emotion and encouraging the heart, which creates a sense of confidence, wealth and abundance that’s shared with others. Nurturers see everyone as equal, so they’re communal and concerned with making relationships work.

The learning routines are:

• **Empathy** – Leadership research overwhelmingly shows that the ability to relate and work well with others is critical to success. Effective relationships are based on empathy and the ability to listen well and put oneself in the shoes of another.

• **Values-guided** – A strong sense of values builds trust. Our moral and ethical code leads us to regard some goals or ends as more important than others. The values can become a powerful force in an organization for guiding
decisions and learning how to work together.

- **Resilience** – Being grounded in wellbeing provides nurturers with resilience and a source of strength that frees them from doubt, liberates them from self-interest and opens them to care for, support and serve others.

The shadow of the nurturer arises out of a fear of not being or having enough, and manifests itself in an insatiable need to hold on, proclaim and aggrandize the sense of self. The attachment to feeling and emotion is turned inward to the point of over-identifying with the self, and results in indulgent pride, defensiveness and even arrogance.

**The Visionary**

The visionary gathers the sensing and feeling impressions of the first two directions to form a conceptual understanding of the experience. It’s the place of intuitive intelligence, where the sensory input from the world is collected, assimilat-
ed and transformed into deep insight and broad understanding that inspires a commitment and passion for moving forward. Visionaries are able to step back and see the whole and the interrelationships of all things while also discerning the uniqueness of every individual and situation.

The learning routines are:

- **Judgment** – Visionaries are able to challenge the existing thinking and zero in on ideas and issues that have the most promise. They’re able to take stock of a situation, connect the dots and, being comfortable with ambiguity, make judgment calls on effective courses of action.

- **Perspective** – Visionaries also conceptualize broadly, taking a systemic perspective of the world and understanding how things work together. They see issues and problems from multiple perspectives.

- **Creativity** – All those characteristics enable visionaries to be creative and to synthesize new
concepts and mental models. Even if not inherently creative themselves, great leaders develop processes and environments that encourage fresh perspectives, nurture breakthrough thinking and identify directions and purposes that capture the imagination, ingenuity and commitment of others.

**Visionaries are able to take stock of a situation, connect the dots and make judgment calls on effective courses of action.**

The shadow side of the visionary arises out of a fear of emptiness or loss of purpose in life. Visionaries then overcompensate by becoming attached to the pursuit of meaning and fanning the flames of becoming to the point of arousing a constant desire to attract, and possess, the next best idea, thing or possibility. They can be scattered, take on too much out of a fear of losing out on an opportunity, and become addicted to the constant seeking of the new.
The Warrior

The warrior is the archetype of action intelligence. Warriors absorb the formative and conditioning force of the previous directions and take conscious, volitional action for achieving a desired result. They possess the will and determination to get things done as they know they should be done, even in the face of risk and obstacles. They represent the ability to actualize plans, internalize the lessons and close the gap between knowing and doing.

The learning routines are:

- **Courage** – Warriors are driven, learn by doing, and experiment in trying new things to move forward. Often this places them in tough situations and forces them to make difficult decisions, but they have the courage to take risks and make those tough choices.

- **Integrity** – Warriors also possess integrity and understand that what they do is far more
important than what they say.

- **Discipline** – Finally, warriors are disciplined in staying on task and serving those beliefs. This discipline comes from a certain internal strength and perseverance that flows from consciously connecting to what’s truly important to them.

The shadow of the warrior arises out of fear of being left behind, of not being adequate, or of losing control. Warriors can become so attached to accomplishing goals that they constantly compare their results to the achievements of others, and become compulsively ambitious and competitive. They can become too inclined to busyness, intimidate others, and micromanage.

**Warriors possess the will and determination to get things done as they know they should be done, even in the face of risk and obstacles.**
The Sage

The archetype of the sage is about spiritual intelligence, and it’s both the first and last step in the five-step cycle of becoming. It’s a place of consciousness where wisdom develops, and the latent, driving and governing urge to individuate and realize the potential for higher states of understanding and being awakens. Sages, through their awareness, can be calm, serene, open and easygoing. It’s a place of optimism and self-mastery.

The learning routines are:

- **Awareness** – Awareness comes from observation and reflection, and is essential to self-knowledge and the root to improvement.

- **Optimism** – Awareness gives insight into personal strengths and weaknesses, and provides the impetus to want to make changes, take charge of life and make a difference. Sages see the opportunities that life provides.
**Agility** – Sages learn how to learn and work to become fully free and conscious, seeking challenges and reaching beyond their comfort zones to learn, grow and develop. They draw on all the powers of the other directions in their learning, to seek data, work with others, find purpose and act in service of their growth and development.

The shadow of the sage arises out of a fear of powerlessness over life. The shadow can make sages feel victimized and withdraw from taking responsibility for their lives. They can shrink from reality and lose focus on who they are and what they’re experiencing. They can become complacent, assume a victim mentality and delude themselves.

**Conclusion**

In addition to being a model for leadership, the leadership wheel serves as a model for action learning. It’s both a leadership wheel and a learning wheel. As a model for learning, the five
directions of the wheel become a dynamic five-step process for personal development that can be used by individuals or an organizational developmental program. The wheel can also be used as a model for team development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: C. Clinton Sidle is director of the Roy H. Park Leadership Fellows Program at the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University and a consultant in strategic change, team building and leadership development.
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