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It Takes More than Public Speaking: A Leadership Analysis of *The King's Speech*

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Abstract

*In a time of global anxiety, a recent internationally acclaimed film aptly shows the development of a leader who never intended to lead. This leadership analysis of *The King's Speech* critically explores transformation shaped by the pressures of war, modernity, and a public figure's speech impediment in the advent of radio broadcasting. Supportive leadership and followership are examined, as the Duchess of York serves as an exemplar of both. The central catalyst of transformative leadership comes from Lionel Logue, who exercises his role with emotional intelligence and key strategies that are invaluable to the eventual King finding his voice. The servant leadership role is discussed, as it resonates strongly with an ongoing need for transformative and shrewd servant leaders in an increasingly fragmented and information-based global economy.*

The King's Speech, directed by Tom Hooper, begins with an agonizing scene depicting a dramatic moment in the history of English monarchy at the advent of radio broadcasting. The film brings the viewer directly to the intent of the story, the life of the Duke of York who would become King George VI on May 12, 1937. His attempt to give the closing speech in the Empire Exhibition at Wembley Stadium, London, in 1925, reveals the Duke's speech impediment to its full extent, as he is utterly unable to state his words before a large crowd. Soon after the event, which ends in humiliation, the Duke of York and his wife Elizabeth seek conventional treatments to remedy his stammer. Though "speeches were meant to be part of the daily routine of the Duke" (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 62), Bertie (as he comes to be known to the viewer) never liked public speaking or broadcasting, but finds himself being thrust into both as a necessary condition of embodying aristocratic leadership in a mass-mediated world.

Positions of leadership are not always roles that one strives to be in, as is the case with the stammering soon-to-be King. However, his key relationships with characters who embody servant-leadership (Lionel Logue) and followership with foresight (Elizabeth) significantly influence the thoughts, behaviors, and feelings of Bertie, empowering him to become a "developed leader" (Gardner, 1995, pp. 36-38) in a period of extreme uncertainty, anxiety, and impending disorder. Drawing upon authors with orientations in values-based trait theory (Greenleaf, 2002), cognitive theory (Gardner, 1995) and chaos theory (Wheatley, 2006), this paper will explore how public speaking, while important, was not the panacea of leadership. Rather, the speech act was the vehicle for Bertie to find his voice as a developing leader with strong interpersonal backing from vital servant-leaders and followers who led him to *autopoiesis* (Wheatley, 2006) and the blinking red light of the microphone.

Overview and Analysis

Disillusioned by his failures with specialists whose methods were similar to those of the ancient Greek orator Demosthenes, Bertie was convinced his chronic stammering lay “in the mind rather than in the body” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 212). It was not until October 1926 that the Duke was interviewed by Lionel Logue. On the fateful day depicted in the film, Bertie introduces himself as Prince Albert Arthur George (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 20), and an unlikely relationship began to sprout, the ground prepared in advance.

Elizabeth, Duchess of York and Bertie’s wife, first met Mr. Logue from her own inquiries, seeking help for her husband’s seemingly insurmountable problem. If one of the arts of communicating (and leading) is to say just enough to facilitate a leap of imagination (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 32), Bertie’s speech deficiency left him desperately lacking not only in verbal traits but in the very crucial art of relating with the people of England and asking them to take a leap in a time of disorder. Elizabeth, intuiting this, knew that she was recruiting more than a speech coach.

Lionel Logue, an Australian, had moved to London with his wife Myrtle in 1924. In stark contrast to the credentialed “professionals” of speaking disorders, Logue had no formal education; he had learned his specialty in Australia from setting up elocution schools in Adelaide and later in Perth. Logue was not a pedigreed speech therapist, but rather a passionate (albeit unsuccessful) actor who thrived and made more important gains on the situational aspects of serving and the connections between acting, living, and leading. After being rejected from entering World War I for medical reasons, Lionel put his passion and burgeoning knowledge, or “attainment of expertise” (Gardner, 1995, p. 29) in the domain of the voice in elocution to work, helping servicemen returning from war who were suffering speech disorders from shell shock and gas inhalation.

In the various scenes depicting Lionel helping others overcome their disorders, the viewer is presented with a dynamic figure who wields chaos into a vision of work as “energy meeting to make something happen” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 72). Logue certainly displays no shortage of energy or ability to see the world anew, traits which serve him well when he takes on Bertie. However, despite his willingness and passion to help others, to gain legitimacy Lionel had to become part of a *discipline*, one that “was still in its relative infancy” (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 40).

He leased a consulting room at 146 Harley Street – a street where “the quacks of old had given way to modern, properly qualified doctors” (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 39). In setting up residence alongside credentialed “professionals,” Logue essentially placed himself in the heart of a culture that revered specialization and symbols of expertise, of which he lacked but more than made up for with his experiential knowledge and servant-leader nature.

Lionel’s confidence in his role as speech therapist is first portrayed when Duchess of York Elizabeth visits him on behalf of her husband, introducing herself as Mrs. Johnson. Though Elizabeth eventually refers to her title, prompting perfunctory deference from Logue, he nonetheless maintains his aura—that of man with *savoir-faire* and knowledge in English poetry

and language (by quoting Shakespeare), yet assertive to his role as therapist. The brief snapshot of the map of Australia on the wall in the waiting room simultaneously brings to light for the viewer his life as an emigrant and his role as a speech therapist.

After Elizabeth's shrewd persuasion, the Duke and Lionel have their momentous first meeting and begin working together from significant different statuses in society. Nonetheless, Lionel's emotional intelligence and confidence are further demonstrated as he insists on respect, make small bets and performs other acts to bring the Duke and he to an equal plane. The lifelong friendship that developed between arguably came from the bidding of Elizabeth (in her way an innovative leader as much as a follower), but the result was two strong "great men"¹ with phenomenal qualities, who rose to interpersonal and national relevancy in contextual circumstances, eventually developing a relationship of interdependency, and ultimately sharing "a common value system" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 5).

The first interview between Bertie and Lionel is depicted as uncertain and uneasy. Though the Duchess prodded her husband to make 'just one more try', "the Duke was at first ill-disposed towards the idea of seeing Mr. Logue" (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 213). The first encounter with Lionel "was to be a momentous day in the life of the Duke of York" and, despite what Logue wrote about that first meeting with the Duke, "you could see that there was hope once more in his heart" (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 212).

Bertie had not intended or expected to become King of England; his older brother David was to be next to the throne. As a boy and left-handed, Bertie was forced to write with his right hand. By the age of eight he had developed a stammer. Juxtaposed to his brother David, who was good looking, charming and charismatic (ideal traits for a leader and/or king), Bertie "suffered from poor digestion and had to wear splints on his legs for many hours of the day and while he slept" (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 51). Though the sons' relationship with their parents was distant, it did not help Bertie that "there was no secret the couple would have liked a daughter" (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 48) after the birth of their first son. To make matters worse, Queen Victoria recorded in her diary at Bertie's birth her regret that he had been born on a day of mourning traditionally held sacred in the family as 'Mausoleum Day' (Bradford, 1989, p.1).

The royal family traditions brought strictness and rigidity to parent-child relations, especially between King George V and his sons. Beside his idiosyncratic move to set the clocks half an hour early for punctuality, King George V "believed in inculcating a sense of discipline from an early age" (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 49). King George V did not seem to empathize with Bertie's speech impediment whatsoever, shouting at him with anger, "Get it out boy!" as Bertie attempted to read the Christmas address his father had dictated, broadcast by the BBC. As he became older, Bertie knew he would need to face the reality of the "devilish device"—radio—which his father argued would "change everything if [the Duke] won't" (Seidler, 2010, p. 27).

In the film, as he looks back at his childhood and well-established family rituals, Bertie relates stories of crushing embarrassment when the boys were required to recite poems in English, French and German, only adding to his difficulty speaking. The internalization of humiliation and inadequacy is inferred as one of the main causes of the Duke's fiery temper. These outbursts are well depicted in the movie, and only his wife Elizabeth seems to soften his

behavior, “Temper, Bertie darling, temper” (Seidler, 2010, p. 6). He depends greatly on her, and Elizabeth is not to be understated as anything less than a crucial exemplar of followership; her moral support, presence, and persuasive ability enable Bertie to more easily accept the role he never intended to take. As Greenleaf (2002) notes, “*servants as followers* are as important as servant-leaders, and everyone, from time to time, may be in both roles” (p. 18, original emphasis).

However, before Bertie was even considered as next for the head of the English monarchy, King George V was becoming concerned for eldest son David’s “dislike of royal protocol and tradition” (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 57). It did not take long for the two to clash, where “...their very different personalities and temperaments became more evident to both” (James, 1998, p. 92). By contrast, Bertie was becoming his father’s favorite despite his “certain lack of confidence in [the Duke’s] capacity to meet the responsibilities of a Royal Tour” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, 212). Bertie confessed his hurt to Lionel that his father’s last words about Bertie having “more guts than the rest of his brothers put together” were never spoken directly to him (Seidler, 2010, p. 42).

Interestingly, before he became king, Bertie exemplified in his position as Duke of York the “guts” and traits of a mindful and capable leader. Not only did he acquire the nickname “Industrial Prince” as he was visiting “coal mines, factories, and rail yards, developing an interest in working conditions”; he also instituted an interesting social experiment: a series of annual summer camps on the Kent coast and in Suffolk to bring boys together from different backgrounds (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 58). It is asserted that the “Duke of York possessed a social conscience and awareness that his elder brother did not” (James, 1998, p. 93). He would exercise these qualities later before his constituents and the microphone, demonstrating a strong sense of integrity and emotional awareness to the causes he defended in the mobilization of Britons before World War II.

Similar to Greenleaf’s (2002) statement that “people who do not live by their conscience will not experience internal integrity and peace of mind” (p. 10), Michael Ray Hopkin, a noted leadership and product management blogger, advances integrity to be “one of the top attributes of a great leader” (para. 1). Bertie’s conscience could not tolerate such indignity in terms of his brother David pursuing a marriage that the royal family deemed illegitimate. He had a “deep interest in the constitution, the monarchy and its symbolic significance” (Bradford, 1989, p. 143). Although his brother David became king for a short period, there was a prevailing sense among the royal court and Britons that it would not last long.

King Edward VIII abdicated after 326 days on December 11, 1936 and immediately Bertie became king. Already being aware of the “dignified, dutiful and domestic life” his father had established as the pattern for the British Empire, which was at its apogee then and would be into his reign (Bradford, 1989), now King George VI was “more than ever conscious of his own physical disability and of what he believed to be his inferiority in comparison with his brother” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 293).

Bertie never intended to be king, and all at once he is handed the role in 1936: with his father’s death, his brother’s short tenure, abdication, and his accession to the throne. His feeling of

unpreparedness for his duties as king is captured well in the film, particularly when he meets with British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to hear his resignation at the advent of the war, thus presenting the king with an even greater challenge—leading in the face of adversity, uncertainty, and global anxiety. Luckily, Lionel demonstrated unconditional commitment to be on board with Bertie through thick and thin, even as others were abandoning ship.

Logue shared H. St. John Rumsey's emphasis on physical explanations and believed that in matters of speech defects, much depended on "temperament and individuality" (Logue & Conradi, 2010, p. 132), in other words, the traits of the individual. During a late scene in Westminster Abbey (Bertie and Lionel are rehearsing for his biggest speech yet), Bertie confronts Logue with an attack on expertise: "no diploma, no training, no qualifications" (Seidler, 2010, p.72). To this angry inquisition, Lionel does not hesitate in replying, "My job was to give them faith in their voice and let them know that a friend was listening. That must ring a few bells with you, Bertie."

Perhaps one may call Lionel's behavior disrespectful—trivializing Bertie's beliefs in the symbolic significance of what it means for an "ordinary Englishman" (Seidler, 2010, p. 46) to sit in the chair of Edward the Confessor (much less an unqualified Aussie), yet Lionel exemplifies the passion and servant nature he had toward the shell shocked Australian soldiers returning from World War I.

Logue's "misconduct" with the royal chair is provocative and it compellingly states what Bertie had not recognized all along: that (whether royal or not) he had a voice, therefore giving him a tie to the community, a certain rhythm of life, a relation between stories and embodiments, and the centrality of choice—four crucial factors in Gardner's (1995, pp. 36-38) conceptualization of the developed leader. Still, in the months leading to his kingship, Bertie was still very much in the development phase, and not as prepared or poised to embrace what he knew what was coming.

Had it been the case that he found his voice sooner, Bertie might have vociferously expressed his feelings when David acted dismissively toward his constitutional responsibilities in his intentions to marry Wallis Simpson before the people of England. As King George V stated angrily at Bertie about his brother, "that boy will ruin himself, this family, and this nation, within twelve months. Who'll pick up the pieces? Herr Hitler..." Bertie was well aware of the symbolism and followership that the "firm" represented as he replied to his father, "Papa, we're not a family, we're a firm" (Seidler, 2010, p. 27-28).

For the firm to be successful, particularly with the rising specter of war with Germany, the identity story of the British monarchy needed to fit the "follower's needs at [that] particular moment in history" (Dean, 2012) and address the diplomatic relations as needed; David's did not fit, therefore Bertie was thrust into a chaotic Europe on the brink of war and heavy uncertainty. It was vital that his voice carry the information and messages that could nourish and mobilize the people of Great Britain and beyond.

Embracing the servant-leader identity story, chaos, and the search for hope

Gardner (1995) writes that the expertise required for leadership comes from the personal realm or “personal intelligences”, which involves being highly aware of or having a strong sense of self, having sensitivity to the needs and interests of others, and having a social expertise or the ability to understand others (Dean, 2012). Lionel serves as a shining example of expertise from lived experience, apt emotional intelligence, and confidence in what he could do and how he could help others in their trauma. He achieved his “effectiveness chiefly through the stories [he] related” (Gardner, 2002, p. 9). His stories indeed “constitute a uniquely powerful currency in [his] relationships” (Gardner, 2002, p. 42).

An element of Logue’s orientation to servant leadership that added to this relational currency was his recognition and mindfulness of emotions in others and his keen sense of “the pattern which connects” (Bateson, 1980, p. 8). To co-construct the inspirational message needed to get through to someone like Bertie, Lionel gained legitimacy by going out on the limb in his field and in his practice, not just by sitting in the “divine” chair. He was time and time again persuasive, a key leadership trait, in that “not only did he believe in his own power of healing but he was able to inspire [people] with a similar belief both in him and in themselves” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 213).

Through the course of the film, Lionel lifts his patient, eventually telling Bertie, “your impediment isn’t a permanent part of you” (Seidler, 2010, p. 22). The coronation rehearsal scene at Westminster Abbey is tumultuous, but it marks a key point in the film when Bertie asserts himself and begins to sense who he is in his process of becoming. Though Lionel has to construct and reinforce his role as a speech therapist, he grounds his worldview from experiential expertise, emotional intelligence, and moxie. Lionel exerts courage and sincerity that function to heal Bertie in his search for wholeness (a la Greenleaf, 2002, p. 50), removing many of the trepidations encroaching on his increasingly public life and empowering him to be in touch with his voice. From this, Bertie is able to gain the level of emotional intelligence he possesses as a person and as a leader, even if only in the monarch figurehead sense at times.

Drawing on factors of legitimacy described by Bernstein (2003, p. 25), Lionel exercises civic leadership from his technical expertise associated with the morality in his service and ethical decision-making in his positive influence on those who suffered and survived the horrors of Gallipoli in World War I. The selfless devotion he demonstrates to others further leads to his influence as a servant-leader. His identity story, over time, resonates very powerfully with Bertie, and with the element of challenge it presented before him was commonality in spite of social/class differences, as they both had keen interest in social issues. Lionel’s “approach was both physical and psychological” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 213), aligning well with cognitive and trait theories of leadership and conceptual frameworks of an “effective” leader (as well as Heifetz’s (1994) conceptualization of adaptive work).

Lionel also embodies a good listener, engaging his patients to understand their needs and striving subtly to be perceived as credible, rather than trumpeting credentials. He has no title, but his magnetism is not to be constrained by the presence (or absence) of a credential. His power, which speaks to both Bertie and the viewer, is in the cause for “the patient to believe in

the certainty of a cure” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 213). Lionel brings values and excellence to a seemingly superstitious and antiquated profession by giving back through service in the field of speech therapy. As he recites his favorite dictum that “there is only one person who can cure you and that is yourself” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 213-214), the viewer is reminded that servant leaders do not need letters preceding or following their names to inspire positive change.

It is noted that Bertie was “deeply impressed by Lionel’s confidence and sincerity... he placed himself unreservedly in his hands” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 214). Lionel’s perennial sense of hope constitutes the crucial ingredient that wins Bertie over and unleashes the new king’s public speaking potentiality. Just as Greenleaf (2002) describes, “hope is a moral imperative, ... by our effort, we become a big part of the solution” (p.13).

Elizabeth is also to be considered in the solution that plays out through the film. In her intuitive support of Bertie, the Duchess of York knew there was something different about Lionel’s modus operandi, visiting Harley Street often to acquaint herself with the pedagogy of the Australian speech therapist. Her influence and support are undeniably crucial in the development of her husband as a leader facing the challenge of leading a country into war. In an early scene, soon after they visit a quack that forced Bertie to place sterilized marbles in his mouth, she emphasizes, “You can’t keep doing this, Bertie” (Seidler, 2010, p. 6).

Had she not sought out other help, it is hard to speculate what the outcome would have been. Due to Elizabeth’s deft handling of the role of servant follower, her husband developed the emotional awareness needed to become “the most influential and significant British monarch of the [twentieth] century” (James, 1998, p. 221). Not only had Elizabeth been a strong guide to his becoming, he was heavily relying on her as she “was a very real factor in the success in their [Royal] Tour.” She complemented her husband’s “greater shyness by a radiance which carried all before it” (Wheeler-Bennett, 1958, p. 219).

Despite his stammer, Bertie was attuned to the values Europe needed to consider during the war, wondering “why [they] did not let Hitler have SE Europe” (James, 1998, p. 173) as he was looking at the war from a viewpoint embracing uncertainty and inevitable disorder (Wheatley, 2006). In fact, it was Bertie’s cognitive capacity and emotional intelligence that enabled him to transform his image to English society. With the help of Elizabeth and Lionel in resolving important life issues in his own mind, the King made manifest, at the end of the film, the factors that contribute to a developed leader (Gardner, 1996): namely, a tie to the community, a rhythm of newfound self-reference, and a solidifying relation between stories and embodiments of a strong king in times of adversity.

Clearly, *The King’s Speech* intimates that it takes more than public speaking for exemplary leadership in times of great crisis: it involves servant-leaders in the wings, followers who play a crucial role in co-constructing and altering the course of history, and individuals who are able to inform, mobilize, and stand through the dark moments, the chaos, the microphone of uncertainty. A single leader cannot tame ambiguity and national unrest about the purposes, processes, or products (read: consequences) of war, not even in a compelling address to millions of people. But s/he can harness the changing contexts and chaotic underpinnings with

the underlying support and development provided by key leaders of different natures (who may not be conceived of in the traditional myth of the lone figure at the top).

As always, leadership is a blurry mix of factors, relationships, stories, and acts that occur “behind the scenes.” What happens when King George VI broadcasts his voice and vision to the masses is important, but not as important as the agents who are largely backstage during the speech itself but front and center for the formation, development, and maintenance of the identity story playing out. For if King George did not have help in relating his story, a very different one may have been told.

Discussion and Conclusion

The threads of trait theory, cognitive theory, chaos theory, and modernism are woven into the tapestry of leadership in the face of international adversity depicted in *The King's Speech*. Arguably, leadership (especially in the forms of developed leader, servant-leader and follower), relationships, and disorder are more important than the speech act itself. Public speaking is not the panacea it is made out to be in the trailer of the film. As “Prime Minister Gladstone called the British throne the greatest of all inheritances” (Bradford, 1989, p. 5), and King George VI became “the most influential and significant British monarch of the [twentieth] century” (James, 1998, p. 221), we can surmise that Bertie did not develop influential mobilizing leadership from a speech alone. The relationships with Lionel Logue and his wife (Duchess) Elizabeth are vital and undergird the support, empowerment, and directness necessary for the kingship of a crucial leader in Europe during that period.

If foresight is the “lead” that a leader has (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 46), then Lionel and Elizabeth both demonstrated intuitive and apt foresight in their acts of supporting, challenging, and sometimes prodding Bertie in their own distinct methods of people-building. They were both able to effectively harness the key clusters of traits needed for leadership and unlock them in Bertie, ultimately showing the stammering Duke that he had them all along, was only lacking a voice to articulate his vision to the people.

More incorporation of behavioral theory (especially the work of Heifetz (1994) and his treatment of adaptive problems and mobilizing people to tackle tough problems) would have been useful to further informing the rich theoretical connections in *The King's Speech*. Also, a more thorough discussion of legitimacy (a la Bernstein, 2003) could strengthen future analyses of this film. Indeed, every leadership theoretical frame from contingency theory to political theory, from modern to postmodern, could be utilized in analyzing the plurality of leadership perspectives evident in the movie. Just as the “inclusion of competing value perspectives may be essential to adaptive success” (Heifetz, 1994, p. 23), multiple analytical angles advanced through (seemingly) competing theories may be essential to gaining a more nuanced understanding of the many ways leadership is exemplified, glorified, and sometimes vilified in film.

This essay has mainly explored three characters, which, by the end, emerge as distinct leaders in their own right through the lenses of trait and cognitive theory (with chaos theory serving as a backdrop to the events and historical exigency). There is Lionel, an exemplar of servant

leadership, who knows well that “every once in a while a leader needs to think like a scientist, an artist, or a poet” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 36). Elizabeth goes above and beyond the reserved role of Duchess to provide the most important support of Bertie in his self-making, making her as much of a leader as an indispensable follower. As Wheatley (2006) notes, “Roles mean nothing without understanding... the resources required to support the work of that person” (p. 72).

And Bertie, with the help of Lionel and Elizabeth, finally learns to relate his story with his own voice, coming into the role of a developed leader with the “capacity to take risks... implacability in the face of opposition” (Gardner, 1996, p. 33). By influencing his cognitive processes, solidifying his identity story, and embodying servant leadership and followership, Lionel and Elizabeth became the other two legs on which the legacy of King George VI would be built.

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Footnote

¹ This is in reference to the “Great Men” theory, which precedes trait theory orientations to leadership with its emphasis on manhood and masculine traits as defining attributes.