

# The Actuary's Leadership Journey – from Technical Specialist to Trusted Adviser

"The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are."

– Joseph Campbell

A catalyst is added to the beaker, a chemical reaction occurs and the contents are miraculously transformed, particle-by-particle. Transformation of compounds, transformation of human beings. The first time I heard the story of the Hero's Journey, I had a similar transformational experience. My own past story, my triumphs and struggles seemed to shift and change, previously unseen connections between events became apparent and gave new meaning to much of my own journey. Looking through the lens of the Hero's Journey, life would never seem the same again.

The Hero's Journey, often referred to as a leadership journey, is a narrative that describes the challenges we face and how we overcome these. It is based on the work of Joseph Campbell, a social anthropologist who studied different cultural groups throughout history and their central myths. What he discovered was a common story, which he described as the Hero's Journey. His ponderings on why disparate cultures that evolved separately would have one central story led him to a hypothesis – as human beings we are all hard wired to seek out meaning, to adapt, to grow and to learn.

What are the stages of the Hero's Journey? What kind of journey may be necessary to traverse the actuarial path from technical specialist to trusted adviser?

### STAGE ONE – A CALL TO ACTION

The hero's journey begins with a call to action, as their life circumstances change and they are called to be in the world in a different way. It may be that great opportunities emerge and they have the opportunity to explore these, or it may be that they are becoming less relevant or effective as they currently are - if they do not change they will face a diminished future. On the journey to trusted adviser, it may be feedback from key clients or a manager that you have to take

development opportunities from in order to progress or to overcome current limiting perceptions that people may have.

### STAGE TWO – REFUSAL OF OR ANSWERING OF THE CALL

Refusal – often when the hero is called to action, they initially refuse the call. The effort and hardship of change often don't appear to be worth the benefits. The ground the hero currently stands on appears safer than the invisible bridge in front of them. For the actuarial journey to trusted adviser, the refusal of the call may sound like "...technical is enough", "...our audiences need to change, not us!", "...it's too hard, we aren't wired like that", "...there's nothing much else we can do." And there may be circumstances when these responses are appropriate! But we need to be careful to discern between hiding behind these as reasons not to change and when there is genuine value in maintaining the status quo.

Answering the call and crossing the first threshold. The hero truly begins their journey when they accept that there are better options available than maintaining the status quo. In an actuarial context, this may be the realisation that to fulfil your career aspirations will require a breadth of capabilities well beyond the capabilities taught through the examination system.

### STAGE THREE – TRIALS, ENEMIES AND ALLIES

In this stage, the hero embarks earnestly on their journey, only to find challenges they didn't imagine as they set out. Trials and enemies seem to block progress and the road gets harder and harder. A mentor appears just at the moment that all seems hopeless.

Trials that may appear in an actuarial context include building new capabilities or operating in new markets. We may need to dip our toes into areas where we won't have expertise (e.g. communication, engagement, emotional intelligence, and may come across obstacles that we didn't





even see. For professional groups that are defined by their expertise, this may feel like a near death experience, like we are venturing into areas where we are no longer the expert.

**Enemies** – those that are closed minded to the profession, or people who have already begun a course of action to which the actuarial analysis may be an obstacle, or people that see actuaries as competitors. Enemies will reveal themselves through the subtlest of means – stereotyping of actuaries, limiting the involvement of actuaries in certain initiatives, or asking the actuary to sign-off on a proposal after recommendations have already been made. Sometimes the enemies may be within the profession.

**Allies** – Actuarial mentors and mentors from outside actuarial profession who respect understand what we bring to the table. These are people who have a vested interest in the actuarial viewpoint being expressed.

#### STAGE FOUR – THE ABYSS, FACING INTO THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL, THE SECOND THRESHOLD

In the darkest abyss, the hero faces their greatest enemy, themselves. At this moment the hero truly awakens to the realisation that they are responsible for their own future. They paradoxically discover their own extraordinary power when they let go of the desire to change the things they cannot change and focus on what resources they have. This journey of self-discovery leads to beating their own unique path and opening out to the world as a new expression of their original self. This truly is the leadership moment, the moment that defines the hero.

On the path to trusted adviser, the dark night of the soul may be letting go of the text book, the technically correct solution, and diving into the water of the client's challenge. This means exploring the deep and murky myths of the client's underworld and helping them discern a way forward. This doesn't mean turning our back on all that we have learnt, though it may mean

applying our wisdom from a deeper context within which the challenge lies. It means finding our powers as applied business people and building a solution from there.

#### STAGE FIVE – THE ASCENT

Once the hero discovers their own way, the universe appears to open up new possibilities. While there are still many trials and enemies, the hero has sufficient efficacy to continue on and face these trials successfully. What were previously major obstacles become hurdles to clear on a much broader horizon.

**Actuarial context** – clients begin to open up and see the actuary as a business professional. Colleagues, superiors and clients start seeking advice, listening, trusting, and bouncing ideas. Partnerships begins to form. The most difficult of clients become opportunities to develop further capabilities.

#### STAGE SIX – RETURN TO THE NORMAL WORLD

The hero crosses the third threshold back into the normal world, bringing with them the gifts of the journey, their new found wisdom and insights, to share with their community.


When I have used the hero's journey in personal leadership programs, the most challenging concept for many people to accept is that all significant change journeys have gifts – particularly people who have been through dramatic life changing experiences

When people are in the middle of change, they can often only experience the pain of loss, and aren't ready or able to see any possibility of gift. It is often only with the benefit of hindsight and distance from the event that we can learn to appreciate what we have gained rather than be consumed by what we have lost. One gift that comes up regularly is resilience.

**Actuarial context** – the gifts that the actuary brings as they become the trusted adviser are many at both an individual level and for the profession as a whole –

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increased credibility of the whole profession, mentoring others who are on the same journey, opening career doors that weren't open previously. There is also a realisation that a technical basis is the foundation for trusted adviser – how our expertise is applied and shared is what evolves through the journey.

At the heart of the *Hero's Journey*<sup>1</sup> is the opportunity to find real meaning in the life's work we have chosen and to beat our unique path. In the words of Joseph Campbell: "**Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors for you where there were only walls.**" 

<sup>1</sup> *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on his Life & Work, 2003*