

Applying the Heroic Journey to Today's Wounded Workforce: Helping People Make Sense of Life Transitions on the Job

By Peter H. Bailey, Senior Vice President, Prouty Project

Today's human resource (HR) and organization development (OD) executives are grappling with a new realization — “wounded people” are coming to work. From receptionists to CEOs, employees are struggling with both personal and professional challenges in their lives. The issues range from a myriad of situations such as sick children, elderly parents, returning to work after cancer treatment, a death in the family, promotions that require cross-country moves, executives returning from overseas expat assignments or returning soldiers — with or without visible injuries.

Without a perspective framework or roadmap to manage these issues, productivity can be lost, morale can be impacted and focus on the business at hand hard to sustain. Too often good people are lost in the process. At every level within an organization, more and more employees are struggling to make sense of what is happening in their lives. While these life situations are not new, various approaches have been applied to help employees handle change and challenging life issues:

- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)** have been around for decades to help people deal with personal issues ranging from substance abuse to work-relationship issues and concerns about aging parents.
- **Wellness Programs** have long supported employees with stress reduction, recovering from addictions, as well as promotion of proactive good health.
- **Change Management Programs** have run the gamut from brown-bag lunch workshops to full-blown retreats in an attempt to give people the support they need to go through change.

Despite these organizational efforts to help, many people who have become “wounded” still exhibit a wide range of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual struggles, often manifested as anger,

bitterness, confusion, and fear of the unknown.

Need for Inner Processing

World-renowned transitions guru, William Bridges, defines “transition” to understand the “wounded” concept in the following way:

“Transition is not just a nice way to say change. It is the inner process through which people come to terms with a change, as they let go of the way things used to be and reorient themselves to the way that things are now. In an organization, managing transition means helping people to make that difficult process less painful and disruptive.” (Article: *Transition as the Way Through*)

HR and OD practitioners are starting to recognize the need for ways to develop “resiliency” — an inner-process approach for helping wounded people integrate challenging circumstances into their day-to-day lives. Rather than minimizing this need, more professionals are embracing the image that people in transition are on a journey and they could benefit from a roadmap to help them better understand their choices and navigate their way forward.

Roadmap for the journey

Drawing from Joseph Campbell's work with global cultures, modern mythology and the cycle of life, the Prouty Project has expanded Campbell's Hero's Journey stages by adding inner processing tools and questions for deeper conversations within the workplace. This “Heroic Journey Model” is a metaphoric roadmap that enables organizations to help their people in transition heal inner wounds, interpret the landscape of their job situations and more clearly see ways to navigate the ambiguous paths ahead.



Graphic adapted from work derived from Joseph Campbell, Robin Van Doren, Peter Bailey

Stepping through the Journey

Starting at the top of the Heroic Journey Model and following counter-clockwise, brief descriptions of each step are provided here along with key questions for individuals to ask themselves. A more comprehensive process is available through the Prouty Project, which offers more depth of insight, reflection and activities customized to each organization's or each person's specific circumstances.

Step One: Beginning the Journey

When a person realizes that he or she is on a journey, that awareness becomes a significant "point of origin" from which to start asking questions and move forward. When a new journey begins, people can lose their sense of direction and purpose. They sometimes put their previous experiences in a box and leave them behind. If they don't figure out how to share their past experiences, they are at risk of internalizing their thoughts and feelings, which can be

isolating, potentially unhealthy, and at the very least, limits the integration of the learning from their last experience they can bring into their current situation.

- **Beginning the Journey Reflection:** "What can I do to shift my perspective so I better understand where I am right now and how everything is supposed to be? What might my life journey's next steps be?"

Step Two: Preparation

The preparation phase helps to enhance one's resiliency for the journey ahead. By developing oneself — physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually — people are better able to face whatever the future "new normal" brings. And, ideally, if they are aware of the various stages and practice the application and reflection exercises of the Heroic Journey Model, they will have the benefit of a perspective which, in itself, can better prepare them for the ups and downs of life. This will make reentry and inte-

gration back from any experience less tumultuous.

- **Preparation Reflection:** *“What can I do to better prepare for the unknown challenges that may lie ahead? What can I do to bolster my resiliency on physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels?”*

Step Three: Call to Adventure

It’s important to discern with care the “call” to the next adventure where people can apply their learnings from previous experiences. It could be a new civilian job, starting a new business, an offer to move across the country for a new position, or a myriad of other possibilities. Some people are more “tied to their moorings” than others and need to determine how the call fits into their lives, and whether the new adventure is compelling or not. This is the point of either acceptance or refusal.

Some calls, it is important to note, are worth refusing. There is also the possibility of a “precipitating event” that people cannot easily refuse — something that happens or a change in circumstances, such as a loved one getting sick, a sudden lay-off or a call to duty in Afghanistan. In these cases, the “Call to Adventure” challenges people to go where they might not otherwise choose to go, but they are thrust into this new experience nonetheless.

- **Call to Adventure Reflection:** *“Is this next call to adventure truly serving my highest good? How might I find a way for this “precipitating event” to best serve my life, family or community?”*

Step Four: Crossing the Threshold

The next phase is about taking steps to move forward. Whether the soldier has arrived in Fallujah from Fridley, Minn., the executive reaches his apartment in Bangalore or the sales team has returned from the annual kick-off meeting, this is when reality has set in. However, this is also the point when the “Guardians at the Gate” appear, and whose job it is to challenge each person’s intentions and convictions of the choices made. These symbolic guardians often seem adversarial as they jab pointed questions at the person, such as “Where do you think you’re going?” “Why have you come?” “What good do you think you will do?”

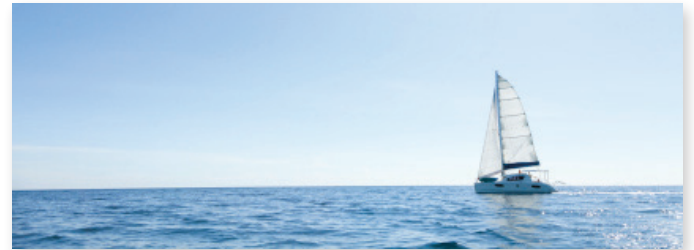
Each person needs to know the answers to these questions and to find ways to handle the resistance that comes from people who may appear to be road blocks on their journey. These insights can be learning

opportunities to keep in mind as the journey continues.

- **Crossing the Threshold Reflection:** *“As I cross the threshold into this new experience, what barriers (human or situational) are presenting themselves and what can I learn from them?”*

Step Five: The Road of Challenges

Along the journey, each person meets new teachers, the hardest assignments, and faces tests that can be viewed either as opportunities or setbacks. Whether jetlagged overseas on a business trip or undergoing chemotherapy, the “Road of Challenges” is



where each person faces the most difficult trials — , mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Without preparing well for this, having not “circled the wagons” around allies and support group members, a person can be in for a truly difficult spell.

While some people seem to weather the storms with grace and dignity, others, sadly, do not recover from the “Road of Challenges.” As Viktor Frankl beseeched in his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, one’s attitudes in times of hardship are truly the only aspects over which people have control.

- **Road of Challenges Reflection:** *“How well am I handling this “Road of Challenges?” What can I do to improve my attitude such that I can better handle the challenges I am facing?”*

Step Six: The Gift, The Accomplishment

Those who are fortunate enough to have survived their “Road of Challenges” need to determine the gift imbedded in the experience. This is often a deeply internal and sometimes difficult search — to discover the gifts inherent in hardship. It is when one’s skills have matched the presenting challenges and the person has climbed the proverbial mountain and stood on the summit, filled with purpose, gratitude and even joy. Something magical has happened. It’s like coming through the “dark night of the soul” and turning the bow of the ship towards home. It is criti-

cal, however, at this point in the process that people understand what the gift is — name it and protect it in order to carry it forward into their next endeavor.

- **The Gift and Accomplishment Reflection:** *“What was the gift given to me from this experience?”*

Step Seven: The Magical Return

Upon return from the summit of a mountain, people are sometimes elated with their accomplishments and also at-risk with the down-climb dangers. Such an oxy-moron can mean loss of focus from powerful experiences. Each person benefits greatly through more intentional processing time in the return phase. Too often, North Americans’ fast-paced work life denies time to process or assemble learnings from one experience to another.

- **The Magical Return Reflection:** *“In what ways can I take the best of the gifts and accomplishments I have gained and internalize them, so I can carry them forward with integrity?”*

Step Eight: Coming Home



Upon return from the adventure, one’s self-focused elation meets the “Guardians of the Gate,” who once again question a person’s intentions and convictions. As Kevin Cashman emphasises in his book, *The Pause Principle*, North American society is very good at sending people off to new experiences, but lacks sensitivity, care and adequate time for reflection when bringing them back home.

Preparation for return is as important, if not more important, as the preparation at the beginning of a journey. For example, when returning from an overseas assignment, it’s essential for executives and military veterans alike to remember they have had an incredible experience — and one many others have not had in the same way. They have been caught up in the sights, sounds and smells of another country. Yet others may dismiss it as a world travel perk or a “vacation” and simply minimize the experience because they don’t comprehend all that may have happened for the person.

- **Coming Home Reflection:** *“How can I best prepare for ‘re-entry’ by bolstering my resiliency on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels?”*

Step Nine: Choreographer of Two Worlds

A perspective that is critical for re-entry is that of a “choreographer of two worlds.” Those on the journey know what they have just been through, but it is difficult for people back home to understand. So, in a sense, they are now living in two worlds. While it is critical to take time to evaluate their own journey, they also need to be sensitive to what the journey has been for people who were back home or back in the office.

- **Choreographer of Two Worlds Reflection:** *“How can I improve my capacity to see ‘both worlds’ and learn to speak ‘two languages’ to better ease my re-entry?”*

Step Ten: Begin the Next Journey Here

Beginning the next journey starts with integrating what one has learned from the last journey, seeking and recognizing that there are allies everywhere to help. One of the greatest gift of all can be when a person realizes that he or she can serve as an ally for others. Once people have been on an adventure, and see it as a Heroic Journey, then they can be more readily available as allies to help others on their journeys.

- **Begin the Next Journey Reflection:** *“Having completed this adventure, this Heroic Journey, how can I take what I have learned and be more intentional about my experience on my next journey and more available to help others on their journeys?”*

Applying The Heroic Journey Model

While many of today’s HR and OD executives are grappling with an invisible “wounded workforce” among their employees – there is a solution. By introducing and supporting a new perspective — The Heroic Journey Model — to their employees’ personal and professional lives, organizations can help their people better manage life’s challenging issues, improve productivity and morale, and better sustain a healthier business culture.

To illustrate potential applications of the Heroic Journey Model, here are a few examples of where this model is currently being applied:

- Erik Weihenmayer, the first blind man to summit Mount Everest, leads an organization called No Barriers USA www.nobarriersusa.org and Soldiers to Summits www.soldierstosummits.org where he helps people recognize and eliminate

barriers in their lives, especially those who are physically challenged. He's adopting the Heroic Journey Model to help returning veterans re-gain their lives and recognize that they have no barriers in serving in another capacity.

- A global Fortune 100 company is using the Heroic Journey Model to provide a global perspective to an executive who is embarking on an overseas assignment. Such a journey requires a myriad of adaptations, such as language, food, work habits, and a keen sense of the differences in which people go through life in another country versus the United States.
- A U.S.-based services corporation with a large sales team created a cohort leadership development program to grow success from the inside out with people who face huge pressures every day. They have high expectations, high pressure for quotas, and must balance their home life with sales cycles. The Heroic Journey Model has helped to map their personal and professional lives and to make sense of the competing demands they face every day.
- A new CEO of a billion-dollar company comes into a struggling organization and starts the process of getting the right people on the bus, as referenced by Jim Collins, in order to grow the organization to the next level. This transition means some painful staff moves and layoffs. The Heroic Journey Model helps this new CEO to see his professional career as a journey with predictable highs and lows, a perspective that can prepare him and his leadership team for the road ahead.
- A four-star General in the National Guard returned recently from combat but had a very difficult time finding a job in the private sector. In his 50s, he struggled to put his years of leadership experience onto a resume for this marketplace. Although his re-entry was a painful one, it was significantly

aided by the Heroic Journey Model, which helped him to integrate or "assemble" his experiences in a way that made him more valuable to his new position for which he was recently hired.

The Heroic Journey Model has proven to be an extremely useful philosophical approach to build resiliency and help make sense of people's life transitions. It offers a unique global perspective on human performance improvement and change management. Innovative HR and OD professionals can apply this roadmap as a tool to prepare individuals and teams for new challenges or to help bring them back from difficult experiences.

The bottom line: Fewer "wounded people" coming to work, and more heroic people making better, healthier choices with their personal and professional lives.



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