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Leaders in Today's World and Their Parallelism to Shakespearean Characters in *Henry V*

by Aly Gentile

(Honors Seminar English 2228)

The most influential playwright of all time recently celebrated his 445<sup>th</sup> birthday, or at least his many fans did. Of course this man is the one and only William Shakespeare. To this day it is an amazing accomplishment to see how we, as a culture, have used his literary works in a variety of ways. His plays are commonly taught in the classroom and used in the arts, and very often performed on stage in theater. It is not just the storylines and themes that make his works so memorable, however. Shakespeare's many characters provide the reader with the knowledge of how diverse some of these roles he wrote were. Shakespeare's characters have been known to represent love, sex, power, and wealth, just to name a few characteristics. It is with these characters that the reader can also draw comparisons to the people of today's world. This paper will examine the parallelism between Shakespeare's character Henry V and business executives/ CEOs of today regarding leadership.

The world of business is growing at a rapid pace, even now with the current downturn in the economy, because business is one field that will continue to expand. With new jobs being created, many positions also will need to be filled and therefore many applicants for these jobs. But, what do employers look for when considering a top position in a corporation? The answer among other factors is leadership. To lead, by definition, is to influence, induce or to guide in a direction, course, action, opinion. In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, this ruler holds a highly regarded position as King. There are many types of leadership, however, like many business executives utilizing different strategies in today's world. Such strategies show some people excel as leaders, while others do not. Having the knowledge of what makes up a good leader by examining the character Henry V should inspire others like me, thinking about entering corporate America.

Henry V, the play's protagonist and hero, is one of the most highly regarded of Shakespeare's characters to be evaluated. Henry possesses intelligence along with charisma, making him a good candidate for King. According to William Frank of the *Denver Business Journal*, there are ten competencies that comprise good leadership in the business world. These leadership qualities can also be applied when we judge Henry V. While Henry V is a well-respected king, he possesses many of these core criteria of leadership competency that Frank lists. The first competency Henry V exhibits is vision. Indeed, one of Henry's great aspects is the fact that he is driven and has a great ability to resolve. Once Henry sets his mind to accomplishing a goal, he utilizes every resource available to see that it's accomplished. This is present throughout the play as Henry attempts and eventually conquers France. Here, for example Henry is speaking to the governor of France, trying to get them to surrender: "What say you?/ Will you yield and this avoid or, guilty in defense, be thus destroyed?" (3.3.42-43).<sup>1</sup> Along with the competency of vision, Henry also possesses strategy, focus, while he is tactical. Henry exhibits these competencies even when he is outnumbered during the Battle of Agincourt: "There's five to one/ Besides, they are all fresh" (4.3.4). Henry counterattacks and wins the battle with the superiority of his army's weapon, the long bows that would launch far into the French army in order to keep his men out of physical combat. This tactic proves to be a great success, leading his army to victory. Not only is Henry tactical during times of war, but he also makes a bold move to marry Katherine, using her as a "political pawn" to bring together the English and French kingdoms as well as to ensure that their son will have the legal rights to Henry's throne. Henry's persistence and intelligence made him an extraordinary leader for

England.

Leadership is not just determined by vision, strategy, tactics, and focus, however. Many other qualities are listed by William Frank of the *Denver Business Journal* to make leaders successful, and once again Henry V demonstrates that he can execute these competencies. Henry is a great speaker and has a way with language to influence others around him. Frank describes that a leader should be inspirational:

Once a vision is established, great leaders can inspire everyone in the company to get onboard. Employees in great organizations are passionate about what they do. This inspiration extends to customers, investors, suppliers, boards of directors and all other stakeholders. This doesn't mean good leaders have to be charismatic or great public speakers, though some are. Leaders may inspire by example or in low-key ways. Every word and action demonstrates their passion for the vision.

Like the people of today's business world, Henry uses his speaking abilities to inspire his troops and raises the morale before going into battle, a great way to show leadership among a group. Another quality related to Henry's speaking ability falling in place with leadership in the business world is the art of persuasion. Along with his speaking abilities we see Henry use his rhetorical skills as a forceful weapon, inspiring followers, intimidating enemies, and persuading practically anyone that will listen to him. Persuasion is such an important factor in the business world as Frank discusses: "Not necessarily salespeople, good leaders can bring others to their point of view using logic, reason, emotion and the force of their personalities. They motivate by persuasion rather than intimidation. The key here is the leader speaking from his or her heart." Frank's analysis is found to be very true in Henry's personality as he speaks truthfully as well as manipulatively.

One of the last competencies to be applicable to Henry V may be one of the most important factors in the business world. Ask anyone in the corporate world if they truly like their boss. Most, I'm sure, would probably say no. Part of being a good leader is being likeable as Frank notes: "[T]hey recognize interpersonal skills are paramount. They display high degrees of emotional intelligence, and thrive on finesse and likeability." Henry, in disguise, makes a great effort to feel out what the soldiers think of the King and to learn if he as king has been doing a good job. Likeability in general makes work situations easier for everyone, whether you're in an office in Chicago or fighting for England with King Henry, a key to a successful leader is likeability.

How is leadership obtained? Some are lucky enough to be natural born leaders, a phrase thrown around quite a bit in the business world. However, that's not always the way leadership is obtained. It has been thought as a learning experience according to Ben Mulvey:

This king believes that to become a great leader he has to learn how to do it. As alluded to above, Henry learns how to communicate with his troops well, thereby allowing him the possibility of motivating them. Corrigan identifies this as a "vital part of management" that "still remains the one issue managers flee from."

By using Henry's observing tactic in which he is disguised to observe his troops in order to communicate with them, business leaders can follow the same procedure. Before entering the corporate world, after years of school, you usually need one more thing to be considered for a position, and that is usually an internship. Before taking part in an organization, it is beneficial to observe what it may be like to be a part of it. Even though his French enemies point out that Henry has had little opportunity for an internship as King by stressing Henry's wasteful youth, Shakespeare shows that Henry has learned his king's business quickly and that he uses his wits to learn more about what his citizens want in a King and is able to learn and become a better leader through this

experience.

Many qualities, like the ones listed by William Frank, indeed make a good leader and, to be honest, I'm not sure many business executives follow these criteria, much less know about them. This could be the possible reason some view business executives/CEOs as heartless and therefore not great leaders. Because I am thinking about majoring in the business world with a specific focus in advertising/marketing, I believe there is a lot to be learned about what makes a good leader. We should realize that no one is perfect, just like Henry V's younger, rebellious years as the French justifiably point out. But we should also take into consideration that many people change over the course of their life for the better as Henry proves himself. It is also true that we need more people like Henry in corporate America as we can all learn from the way he leads England to victory during their war, the way he ruthlessly conquers France, as well as the way he is able to gain united support from the subjects of his country. Henry V is a great example of what we all could obtain. With some determination, strength, and intelligence, I think we can all learn how to be a great leader thanks to Henry V.

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Note

<sup>1</sup> All the line references of the play are drawn from the edition listed in the Works-Cited listing.

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