Sales leadership icons and models: How comic book superheroes would make great sales leaders

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Abstract Developing strong leadership within the organization is one of the most valuable pursuits any firm can undertake. Considering the many demands on the resources of leaders, developmental opportunities must be efficient and effective to truly impact leadership ability. Comic books and their role in storytelling can offer unique insights regarding core leadership characteristics underlying great sales leadership and act as a tool for growth in leadership capabilities. With the recent explosion in superhero awareness through blockbuster movie releases and increased comic book readership, this article presents a series of leadership characteristics and their embodiment within superheroes. A list of top sales leader qualities from a panel of practicing sales professionals is first provided. Specific examples of these leadership qualities as evidenced by a particular superhero are then offered. These examples are solicited from a panel of superhero subject matter experts and yield insight into how managers can use superhero narratives as a learning tool. We summarize the findings from our research and propose specific managerial challenges and actionable recommendations offered by the exemplars we review.

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1. Sales leadership

All leaders within organizations are positioned to provide focus and planning and to execute key elements of operational and strategic activities. However, because they serve as a liaison between the sales force directly generating revenue and the top management team responsible for setting firm strategy, sales leaders occupy a particularly critical role in organizations. Of all organizational leaders, sales leaders may be best positioned to impact both short- and long-term firm performance. Despite a great deal of scholarship bearing on the critical impact of the sales leadership role, it still needs to be better understood by those accepting the

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mantle. Through extensive applied research with a focus on deepening understanding of the sales leadership role, this article identifies core sales leadership behaviors and offers sales executives a comic book context for better relaying the relevance and importance of these behaviors to emerging sales leaders in their firms.

> "Basically, comic books are a manifestation of popular culture, and as such deserve study in their own terms. But comics can also be studied as a reflection of our society, and their study can be part of our attempts to understand ourselves and our society."
> —Michael Uslan, author (*The Comic Book in America*) and director (multiple *Batman* films)

Jerome Bruner (1986) argued that wrapped in a story, otherwise bald facts are 22 times more memorable than these same facts presented alone. Since the beginning of language, every culture has employed vivid narrative to entertain, educate, transmit knowledge, preserve history, and instill core societal values. Stories and the archetypal characters that inhabit them play an integral role in defining the fabric and character of our personal and professional lives, enabling individuals to understand and identify with core values and ideals (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1978; Nash, 2005). Narratives can be used to motivate, inspire, and educate employees, as "stories engage both reason and emotion to influence behavior, pilot change, advance knowledge, and guide decision-making" (James & Minnis, 2004, p. 23). Storytelling in all forms can be used to illustrate a wide range of phenomena (Morgan & Dennehy, 1997), and can help sales leaders—and emerging sales leaders—to better understand their roles and the core competencies needed to excel within them (Brown, 2005).

2. The comic vehicle

With origins dating back to the early 20th century, comic books are a popular cultural art form that directly taps into the most fundamental elements of storytelling: they convey values, normative ideas, cultural insights, descriptive contextualized lessons, and character dialogue. As an extremely contemporary narrative vehicle, comic books are used to communicate, frame, and critique a broad range of societal values and social issues. While the comic book form is fundamentally embedded in an architecture of fantasy, stories in comic books often draw from our most established societal origins, folklore, and religion, tapping into our cultural identity. Although it is by definition fantastic, foundationally

the comic book narrative reflects contemporary concerns, desires, and imperatives.

Comic books' ability to communicate cultural insights and social ideals through narrative is universal. A broad array of superheroes can be found across many different countries, carrying with them a global flavor and having a broad cultural influence. Superheroes have a truly international voice, and some of the most famous—or infamous—comic book characters have legions of fans worldwide. The popularity of heroes such as Superman, Spider-Man, and Batman has led to the emergence of heroes that more characteristically represent a global perspective. The most recent example can be found in the guest appearances of multiple internationally anchored superheroes—with American comic book origins—in a new Islamic comic book series, *The 99* (Curry & Soffel, 2013). While the top-grossing superhero movies star heroes originally conceived in the United States, these superheroes have generated a global fan base and confront issues that are universally relevant. Indeed, looking at the average box office for a top-performing superhero movie, almost one-third of the global gross is generated outside of the United States (Rentrak, 2012).

In addition, comic books often provide social satire bearing on current societal trends and events. As a form of social history, comics can impart knowledge of particular historical eras and deliver insight into our past. For example, early issues of Captain America, Superman, and Wonder Woman are time capsules of the World War II era. In light of their potency as a vehicle to shape ideas, define identity, and influence perceptions, there is a rich history of comics being used for social engineering. The use of comics and cartoons in educational settings has exploded over the past 20 years. Teachers, professors, and university instructors increasingly adopt comic books to illustrate underlying realities about gender, history, sociology, philosophy, mathematics, and even medicine. In educational contexts, it is no longer a question of whether comics *should* be used to transmit ideas, but rather *how* they can be used most effectively and toward what purpose.

3. Leadership behaviors/characteristics

While no single trait alone is sufficient in creating a strong sales leader, research has long supported the notion that certain traits do differentiate leaders from nonleaders (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Indeed, to be effective or achieve excellence, sales leaders need an understanding of a variety of behaviors to combat the "broad, diverse,