

Book Review

Book review of *The Myth of Themanus: 21st Leadership in Action*, by Christopher M. Conroy

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The Myth of Themanus presents workplace conversations amongst staff members from all levels of the "Olive Groove" company hierarchy which explain and challenge rationales for how staff regard and treat each other. The work primarily narrates the story of newly appointed manager Themanus, poached from the "Totally Stuffed Olives" company to manage and improve "Olive Grooves'" production. Themanus embodies dichotomous "them-and-us" relationships evident in modern workplaces characterised by questionably effective leadership programs and poor staff morale, related to perceived individual self-serving interests across organisational ranks. Team Leader, Serendipitus, demonstrates wisdom and grace by helping Themanus to reconsider his dictatorial ways of treating disaffected staff, despite also being a disaffected, belittled employee as a result of actions by Themanus. Conversations acted out depict styles of how people may individualistically survive and sometimes thrive in work environments, for example, by promising but not delivering employee incentives, transferring blame, obsequiousness, "parsimony", and undermining colleagues to garner personal promotion.

The text is in tragicomedy, play script form, comprising a prelude, two acts and postscript. Act One, "Blind Faith - Whatever it Takes", sets up the leadership dilemma for the main character, Themanus. Act Two, "The Quest for Grace", raises a number of questions that certainly prompted reflection about workplace issues experienced across my own work-life. The text is punctuated with classical quotations and illustrative diagrams.

Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all (Aristotle)

Without ethical culture there is no salvation for humanity (Albert Einstein) (page 5)

The diagrams, described as being hand-drawn on a whiteboard, engaged me with the characters creating them and triggered recognisable work-place behaviours. During a discussion with Themanus, Serendipitus draws the following in Act two:

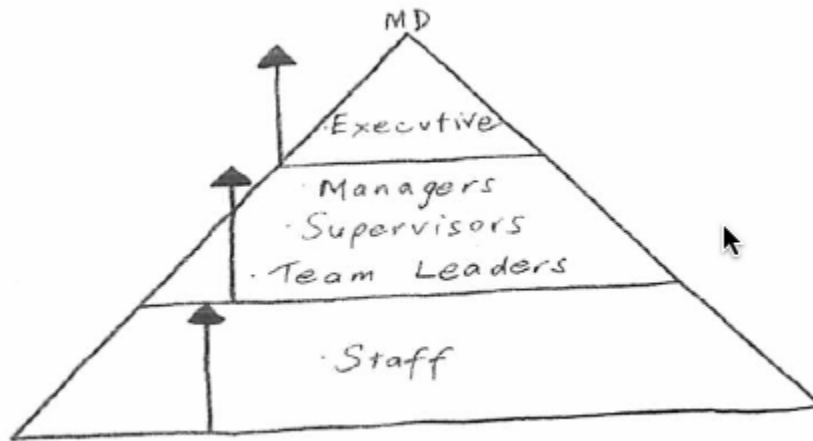


Figure 5 – Serve Your Boss (p. 80)

Overhearing the conversation, appropriately named Grace, a junior member of the team, requests permission to offer an alternative. Serendipitus hands her the whiteboard marker:

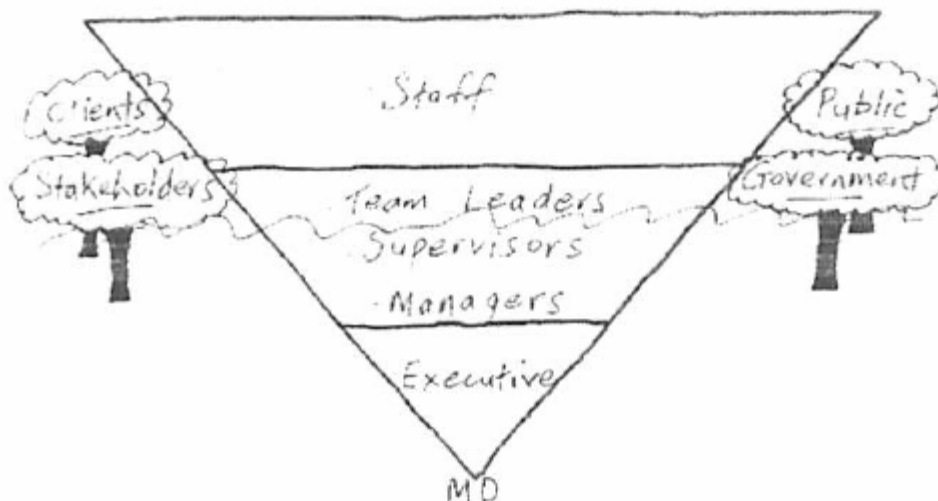


Figure 7 – Leadership as the Foundation (p. 87)

The conversation continues:

GRACE [*suddenly becoming embarrassed*]: I'm sorry, but what I'm trying to say is that I think that one of the roles of Leaders is to provide the foundation for us to get the job done. That provides the best possible support and stability for staff.

THEMANUS [*studying the model*]: That certainly turns leadership on its head, Grace! ...

But it couldn't possibly ever work, surely? I mean, could you imagine Hoadley and the Executive ever seeing themselves at the *bottom* of the organisation?

Ongoing dialogue reflects an unexpected creative awareness:

SERENDIPITUS: That is truly beautiful Grace. *[Pausing to reflect.]* I'd never exactly thought about things in that way. *[Reflecting again.]* Sincerely, Grace - thanks for sharing your wisdom. And your artwork!

The unexpected ending also elicited personal reflection on who really are the achievers in work-place environments.

A strength of this text is its capacity to affirm readers' appreciation of empowering work environments, "empathise" with those struggling in unfair settings, and simultaneously encourage personal leadership responsibilities for establishing workplace cultures "where service of others is elevated above ambition or self-interest" (p. 69). By serving shared common humanity in our workplaces, Conroy cogently argues (through Serendipitus and Grace), our personal lives and organisations are bettered.

Alongside revealing that there is, indeed, also an "I" in "TEAM", *The Myth of Themanus* expanded my view of workplace winners, losers, and environments conducive to ethical collegiality. It was a humorous, engaging, albeit sometimes confronting read, eliciting and reframing many personal work-life memories. In an accessible, artistic form *The Myth of Themanus* reinforces that leadership is a privilege with serious consequences for the lives of others and the welfare of organisations. Art, in this case applied theatre, allows different ways of hearing, seeing, and tolerating the actual (Gersie, 1991). *The Myth of Themanus* compels us to challenge non-empowering work settings and to consider how we all share responsibility for improving our workplaces' positive cultures.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in learning about and humanising workplace environments. Its performance in leadership and staff development contexts alongside facilitator support could also generate valuable self-reflection, discussion, and improved collegiality amongst any organisation's employees and employers.

Reference

Gersie, A. (1991). *Storymaking in bereavement: Dragons fight in the meadow*. London: Jessica Kingsley Pub Ltd.

About the Author

Clare O'Callaghan PhD has worked as a music therapist in cancer and palliative care settings for over thirty years and has published extensively in these fields. She is also an (honorary) Associate Professor with the Department of Medicine, St Vincent's Hospital, The University of Melbourne, Australia.