



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

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KEYWORDS

Leadership competencies;
Sales excellence;
Superheroes;
Management styles;
Storytelling

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,

dynamic, and critical nature of their jobs” (Longenecker, Ragland, & Mallin, 2014, p. 10). Through the narrative of superheroes, many top leadership characteristics can be translated and absorbed more easily in sales training and in the development of sales managers. We next explore nine of these characteristics.

3.1. Empathy

“And on my soul I swear: Until the day when my dream becomes the reality we all share, I’ll never stop fighting.”

—Superman

Empathy reflects individuals’ ability to identify with and understand others and their situation, feelings, and motives; it is the capacity to recognize others’ concerns and see things through their eyes (McBane, 1995). An important sales leadership characteristic, empathy contributes directly to our ability to foster and develop deep, meaningful, personal relationships with others (Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007). Empathy allows sales leaders to understand the needs and challenges their teams regularly face. Our sales leadership colleagues in this research resoundingly agreed as to the importance of empathy for effective sales leadership.

Consistent with our focus on the use of comic books as a vehicle for the transmission of core sales leadership competencies, we sought to tie this characteristic to a particular comic book hero. Through analysis of the qualitative data we collected from our interviews and question posts with comic book experts, Superman emerged as best exemplifying this quality. Indeed, many experts noted: “He’s not even human, but he cares so much about Earth he’s willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to make sure the people around him survive.”

Although Superman’s greatest challenge is that he is a stranger in a strange land, being an alien from another planet, he is also deeply personally aware of the human plight through the hardships he faced in his adopted home as a child. Superman is slow to judge others yet quick to help those in need because of his understanding and empathy. He recognizes that humankind must raise itself to achieve its destiny and potential, and that his role is to provide direction and guidance rather than to carry us to that destiny.

In the 2013 blockbuster movie, *Superman: Man of Steel*, Superman’s adopted father tells him: “You’re not just anyone. One day, you’re going to have to make a choice. You’ll have to decide what kind of man you want to grow up to be. Whoever that man is, good character or bad, he’s going to change the world.” Great sales leadership depends on empathy,

and a deep understanding of how a leader’s help can and does contribute to those most directly in need of it. With individual followers, empathy can help a hard-driving sales leader to put on the brakes at just the right moment to protect followers from burnout or fatigue, or the firm from talent-pool losses that can result from voluntary turnover.

Empathy can protect followers from leadership that may otherwise be too single-minded in the pursuit of measurable performance goals. At the organizational level, empathy can also help sales leaders to make the right kinds of ethical, broad-spectrum decisions that contribute to environmental sustainability and help forge durable community relationships. Empathy helps great sales leaders stop short of going too far.

Another characteristic of the Man of Steel is his endurance in the face of challenges. Atlas with his super crystal; Atomic Skull with his gene-bomb mutations; Bizarro, the evil inverted duplication of Superman himself; or Brainiac, with the capacity to control computers, time, and space: all represent evil super-challenges that Superman must—through his intelligence, strength, tenacity, and endurance—contend with again and again. The Man of Steel is compassionate and has the fortitude to fight against his many adversaries ad infinitum. The endurance to repetitively contend with a series of seemingly insurmountable challenges is a characteristic of great sales leaders. Challenges and setbacks and disappointments are an operational fact of life, often more the norm than the exception, and great sales leaders have the strength and endurance to overcome these hurdles.

3.2. Humility and selflessness

“Whatever life holds in store for me, I will never forget these words: ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’ This is my gift, my curse.”

—Spider-Man

To foster an organization of consistently high performance, leaders must place the success of the organization first, rather than their own personal success. Indeed, Collins (2001) found that organizations led by a humble CEO were more likely to achieve sustained superior performance. Humility is a leadership trait that very closely mirrors the traditional characteristics that define a superhero. A great sales leader, much like a superhero, is often called on to make substantial personal sacrifices that are necessary for the greater good of their team and the organization as a whole. Leaders must set an example with which others can identify, cultivating positive change to which everyone feels

connected. Through the lens of comic book narrative, if humankind comes to look to one, ultimately all-powerful and accountable character as the sole driver of growth and change, it becomes difficult—if not impossible—to believe in their own abilities to enact positive change. Humility and selflessness are primary drivers of the inspirational quality of comic book heroes and, according to Steven Covey, valuable characteristics of “people at the very top” (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005, p. 1327).

Just as strong sales leaders adjust to focus on the goals and successes of those around them, the comic book character Peter Parker—Spider-Man’s alter ego—learns that within his position of semi-ultimate power he must disregard his own desires to serve the greater good. Peter manages the typical struggles of a teenage boy: school, family, friends, social relationships, and caring for his aging Aunt Mae; a job as a newspaper photographer at *The Daily Bugle*; and, after being bitten by a radioactive spider, he adds the dynamic of crime-fighting superhero to his identity. However, he was not always exceptional in balancing his responsibilities and recognizing their unique needs. Early in his superhero role, Peter learned the consequences of focusing too much on himself and capitalizing on his newfound powers. Rather than seeing his abilities as a tool to help others, he saw them as a means to benefit himself. He initially donned the Spider-Man identity to become a celebrity and reap the benefits of fortune. He later discovered that his refusal to respond selflessly ultimately led to his Uncle Ben’s death. Through tragic irony, Peter learns the lesson that every great leader has learned at some point in his or her career: with great power comes great responsibility. Leaders must leverage their power for the greater good of those they lead. Qualitative interviews revealed that many comic experts united around the idea that “Peter Parker never chooses to reveal himself as the hero or reap the rewards of all of his work. . . . He focuses on the people that need him.” Leaders do not ignore the needs of their followers; they recognize and encourage the unique attributes of each individual and situation, and empower their followers to maximize the actualization of their potential.

3.3. Adaptive tendencies

“The most important weapon in your arsenal will be your ability to adapt.”

—Batman

Adaptive leadership reflects the set of strategies, processes, and practices that help leaders—and their followers—overcome challenges and evolve and develop to succeed within dynamic and competitive environments (Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus,

2014). Adaptive tendencies allow leaders to understand changes in their environment and seize opportunities with quick and intelligent responses. Effective leaders must learn to adapt and react quickly enough to maintain an edge in a wide range of competitive scenarios. Some superheroes are born into their leadership role, with powers or innate abilities that allow them to assume leadership. Others are not born with their abilities, but only through tireless struggle, study, and training are able to achieve their super ambitions.

Batman is perhaps the best example of such a superhero. With no inherent powers or superhuman abilities, Batman relies solely on his intellect, skills, broad knowledge base, and martial arts training as underlying drivers of his superhero powers. Our comic book experts agreed, reporting that Batman is “constantly assessing the situation and revising his plan based on. . . unforeseen circumstances. . . . He trained himself to be a master of so many things that he has an arsenal of tactics he can use. It’s hard to put up a fight against everything he can do.” As Batman, Bruce Wayne seeks to avenge the death of his parents and save Gotham City from itself and the criminal masterminds who constantly threaten the fragile metropolis.

Bruce Wayne works tirelessly to enhance his physical and mental skills. Through intense training, he masters the combative and stealth skills necessary to execute his role as Gotham’s savior. He identifies and reconciles weaknesses within himself through unparalleled discipline, honing his knowledge, intellect, observational skills, and logical reasoning to adapt to the unique challenges that emerge in his ongoing crusade against crime. Although his desire for vengeance plagues him, Bruce Wayne recognizes that this obsession also has the potential to cripple him, and tries determinedly to overcome it. In addition to cultivating keen mental, athletic, and martial arts capabilities, Batman also has developed an arsenal of tools—worn on his utility belt—to aide in his conquests. His utility belt yields a seemingly endless array of weapons and crime-fighting advantages. His field equipment, in addition to his extensive knowledge and intense training regimen, allow him to outsmart and overpower his adversaries and repeatedly save the city of Gotham from the evil that plagues its streets.

In similar ways, adaptiveness as a leader also involves preparation, growth, and an element of agility within the leadership role. Adaptive leaders evolve with their sales environment to meet the needs of customers and employees. The dynamic nature of the sales environment demands continuous, and sometimes dramatic, change (Ingram,

LaForge, Locander, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2005). Adaptive leaders embrace rather than avoid uncertainty. When leaders shy away from change in a sales environment, they can miss potentially lucrative opportunities for growth. By equipping themselves for change, leaders can strategically adapt in response to the emergent and complex environments in which they operate (Anderson, 1996). By navigating the sales environment, embracing uncertainty, evolving, and adopting new approaches, great sales leaders can identify more paths toward success and exploit more emergent—and often hidden—opportunities. Like Batman, great sales leaders must also use all of the tools in their arsenal and constantly strive to improve themselves and the people around them to keep ahead of the challenges they face.

3.4. Ability to span boundaries

“For now and forever anyone who needs to know will know, that Asgard and Earth are allies, attempt to defile one and incur the wrath of the other.”

—Thor

Leaders must be able to manage both the environmental forces external to their role and the internal operations of their team. Because of intense boundary spanning within sales, sales leaders must constantly navigate and span multiple intra- and inter-firm boundaries. Strong leaders liaise between followers and other constituents. Sales leaders must span existing power gaps (e.g., power distance between a sales representative and upper management), diffuse conflicts during negotiations with external stakeholders, and represent and protect followers while advocating for their needs and voicing their concerns. As a guardian, excellent sales leaders shield their teams from outside conflict. Sounds a lot like a superhero!

Many superheroes span boundaries in their own lives: between their human and superhero identities. Boundary spanning requires balancing internal and external needs. Based on feedback from our comic book experts, Thor is the hero who best exemplifies boundary spanning. Examples of the kinds of responses our experts offered bearing on this special identity include: “Thor has to balance his relationships in multiple worlds and the relationships of those worlds with each other,” and “He has to navigate the waters between the people of Earth and his family on Asgard. . . trying to keep everyone at peace with each other.”

Thor, the Norse God of Thunder, exemplifies the boundary spanning critical to exemplary sales leadership, moving between the mortal world and

his home planet of Asgard, managing the boundary between these realms to protect Earth. Thor’s mortal identity is Dr. Donald Blake. Through his identity as Thor, powerful god and heir to the throne of Asgard, Thor initially struggles with arrogance. Thor’s father, Odin, places Thor in the body of a mortal, removing all of Thor’s memories and his place as the thunder god in order to help his son learn humility. As Thor matures into a strong and powerful leader, when he rediscovers his identity and powers, he learns to make sacrifices to balance his role on Earth and affinity toward mortals with the demands and trials of the realm whose throne he’ll ascend to one day.

To be successful, boundary spanning sales leaders must effectively obtain resources and efficiently allocate them across internal and external constituents (Lysonski & Johnson, 1983). Without balance, boundary spanning is impossible. Sales leaders who consider the needs of only external or internal constituents are doomed to fail. Successful boundary spanning requires sales leaders who are capable of delegating the proper time and resources needed for the management of each role, without losing sight of their objective to protect and support their followers.

3.5. Cultivating teamwork

“We’ve all realized this is much bigger than any one of us.”

—Reed Richards (Fantastic Four)

To drive an effective team, sales leaders must cultivate teamwork among their followers; merely facilitating teamwork is not enough. Sales leaders must recognize team members’ different social styles, determine social styles that will work best together, manage conflicts, and balance individual attributes and capabilities to motivate and lead teams toward the achievement of broadly accepted goals. Social styles often do not mesh easily and it is the sales leader’s job to manage these interactions. Under the right leader, sales team members of disparate social styles can not only work together, but also complement and enhance one another to achieve greater overall team performance. When discussing fostering a culture of teamwork, our comic book experts repeatedly identified The Fantastic Four as a prime example: “Despite obvious personality differences they are a team, a great one, and they always come together to take care of what needs to be done.” Specifically, the experts noted the ability of Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) to bring out the best in the team: “The decision he makes isn’t always popular or well received at the time, but he always

finds a way to do what's best for the whole group to succeed."

The Fantastic Four offer a perfect example of leadership in teamwork. The four heroes could not be more different from one another: Sue Storm is amiable, Ben Grimm is aggressive, Reed Richards is analytical and pragmatic, and Johnny Storm is volatile and expressive. While each brings unique characteristics to the team, these "heroes with hang-ups"—as Stan Lee, the creator of the Fantastic Four, once described them—have both positive and negative qualities. With the right leadership and balance, what at first appears to be a dysfunctional team can leverage the dynamics of their social styles to achieve massive collective strength. Sales leaders must not only effectively balance diverse styles, but also the conflicts that arise among them, and use these as a tool to increase the strength and cohesiveness of the team's members.

Sales teams—comprised of individuals diverse in personality, thought processes, and communication styles—can only thrive with team leadership that integrates and accentuates the benefits of these differences. Despite their challenges, the members of effectively led sales teams consider themselves to be family first. The Fantastic Four exemplify how the members of a sales team must each bring unique value to their efforts. Effective sales leaders are aware that creating and maintaining a balanced team is essential to the achievement of a whole that ultimately is stronger than the sum of its highly divergent constituent parts.

3.6. Integrity

"This nation was founded on one principle above all else: the requirement that we stand up for what we believe, no matter the odds or the consequences. . . . Your job is to plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth, and tell the whole world—'no, you move.'"

—Captain America

Integrity encompasses sales leadership characterized by honesty and the decision to maintain core attributes in what you say and do. Sales leaders with integrity value righteousness, moral principles, and a sense of duty above all else. These leaders stand up for what they believe, even when it is difficult or seemingly impossible to do so. Individual sales leader integrity has the potential to impact not only follower satisfaction and trust, but also organizational performance and the integrity of followers within the organization (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009). Integrity as an integral element of effective sales leadership has seen extensive research

attention and a comprehensive review can be found in Palanski and Yammarino (2007, 2009).

The superhero that best personifies integrity is Captain America. This was the most broadly agreed-upon illustration by our comic book panel. These subject matter experts resoundingly singled out The Captain as an exemplification of integrity. For example, they reported: "Even in the face of corruption, he continued to fight and do what was necessary to uphold truth and justice," and "He has the will to do what is right, no matter what." Captain America is the alter ego of Steve Rogers, son of Irish immigrants. Due to his frail physical stature, Rogers is initially rejected in the process of enlisting in the U.S. Army during WWII. However, his dedication and resolution caught the attention of the Army and Rogers became a test subject in the *Super Soldier* project, which resulted in his being enhanced to the pinnacle of human perfection. With that, Captain America was born.

Captain America is grounded by intense honesty and a sense of justice that he maintains even when he begins to question the role into which he has been cast by the government. Rogers embodies his patriot values so fully that he eventually abandons the Captain America identity when he feels it has become a symbol of corrupt government rather than a symbol of true American values. A great sales leader cannot allow identity or values to get lost to the power or prestige of the leadership role. A sales leader must remain 'of the people,' supporting followers' values and maintaining their trust. Great sales leaders choose their battles and fight only for the things that matter: combatting injustice, cynicism, and intolerance. A strong sales leader upholds and fights for not only personal goals but also the greater good. Integrity is the keystone in the ability to command respect, to inspire, and to motivate followers.

3.7. Enhancing others

"We have it in us to be the better man."

—Professor Charles Xavier (X-Men)

In today's increasingly complex and dynamic sales environment, proper sales training is a critical element of sales success. Sales leaders must be aware not only of their own training and development needs, but also of the needs of their followers, ensuring the latter have access to the training necessary to excel. Developing the strengths of the sales force is essential for the success of the individual, the sales team, and the organization. Training and developing a sales force requires constructive, needs-driven, and goal-directed attention geared

toward maximization of individual salespersons' abilities to succeed in their unique role. As a sales leader, focusing on training and development ensures that salespeople can learn how to do their jobs the right way first, diminishing the emergence of problems and bad habits later on. Driving the development of a sales force is critical for today's sales leaders.

The subject matter experts we collaborated with identified Professor Charles Xavier as the comic book character that most closely personified enhancing others and building their capacity. These experts noted: "Founding Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, he provided the necessary training to let mutants grow into themselves and learn how to use their powers at their highest potential to help society. . . . Without his training and guidance many mutants never would have understood how to control their power." Professor Xavier recruits and trains mutant students (i.e., people born with super abilities) to use their gifts; he opens his home to the mutants, assists in their training, and closely monitors their development. Within Xavier Mansion, the Danger Room houses the tools and information necessary in coaching, monitoring, and developing the abilities of the mutants who later become known as the X-Men. Professor X, Xavier Mansion, and the Danger Room provide a safe environment for learning and growth. Professor X realizes that he cannot send young mutants out to fight evil without proper training. Likewise, great sales leaders do not dispatch new salespeople on high-profile calls without training them first and equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and other tools they need. Great sales leaders also help their followers develop their abilities and confidence before being thrust into an uncontrolled environment, conveying that "there's so much more to you than you know" and bringing out a stronger, focused, and more actualized employee than textbook training could ever accomplish.

Under the guidance of a strong sales leader, team members come to understand how their individual knowledge, skills, and behaviors can contribute to achieve a larger purpose. As Professor X explains to his students: "Here, you have a chance to be a part of something much bigger than yourself."

3.8. Sourcing new talent

"We're brothers, you and I. All of us, together, protecting each other. We want the same thing."

—Magneto

Great sales leaders must identify and recruit the best talent to form the strongest team possible. As the demand for well-qualified salespeople has in-

tensified (Shannahan, Bush, & Shannahan, 2013), recruiting high-quality talent has increasingly been recognized as essential to effective firm operation. To recruit talent to satisfy core organizational needs, sales leaders must be keenly aware of the current state of their organization, the selling environment, and the available sales talent pool. They must be able to navigate the external environment to find and recruit talent that both compliments and extends the extant internal organizational network (i.e., the current sales force, sales team members, and other relevant organizational players). They must also be able to navigate these networks to add value by compiling the most qualified and high-performing candidates.

While we do not necessarily advocate for the values of supervillains, they are similar to superheroes in that much can be learned from their leadership approaches. Here, our experts did not chose a superhero as the best exemplar of recruiting and rallying a strong team in this context, but rather a supervillain. Our subject matter experts overwhelmingly named Magneto as the comic book character most directly reflecting this core attribute: "Magneto recruits and motivates each person on his team for a specific purpose; no one's talent is wasted because he delegates all of the tasks by the mutant's talents, powers, or his/her desires."

Magneto is the founder of The Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, whose members share Magneto's desire for world domination. As the group's leader, Magneto consistently reorganizes the team to align its resources with the challenges it faces, while concurrently operating an ongoing recruitment campaign that is always in search of new talent and mutant followers. A key driver of Magneto's success is that he keeps his goals in focus as he recruits mutants, seeking only potential Brotherhood members with powers capable of matching and combating their biggest adversary: The X-Men.

Magneto also recognizes the importance of recruiting followers that share similar goals and values. Sales leaders who do this can create teams that align with their organizational culture. Identifying shared values allows great sales leaders to recruit members who embrace group culture and norms, which goes a long way toward establishing a cohesive team. Sales leaders must identify candidates most likely to buy into team and organizational goals.

Members of sales teams should be recruited with specific goals and values in mind, and combined to create a cohesive unit specifically fitted to the achievement of these goals. The Magneto storyline demonstrates that when sales leaders lose sight of

team goals and become too entrenched in a personal agenda, their team can fracture. Magneto's Achilles' heel is anger. When he gets angry or frustrated, Magneto loses sight of the team goal and loses control of his team. Consistent sales leadership is essential. As teams grow, sales leaders must help to maintain focus; balance emerging conflicts; and add, replace, and modify membership as needed—always while keeping firm goals in focus.

3.9. Multi-faceted leadership

"The Professor used to tell me. The most important part of leading wasn't personality, tactics, or training. It was doing whatever it takes to get your team back alive."

—Cyclops

The dynamic sales environments that firms navigate today increasingly call for hybrid leadership. Hybrid leaders are effective doers who identify the needs of their followers and do whatever is necessary to ensure those needs are met. Hybrid leaders maintain an active, functional role within their team; rather than direct, hybrid leaders guide through example, preserving a hands-on approach. They are simultaneously a part of and a leader of their sales teams: a difficult but highly effective balance of power. These leaders occupy roles in both an organization's formal (i.e., organizational structure and hierarchy) and informal (i.e., connections and relationships between organization members that are often vital to actual performance) networks.

The comic book experts we drew on for this research identified Cyclops as the character most intensely embodying multi-faceted, hybrid leadership. Many comments referenced Cyclops being "a stronger leader because the X-Men knew he was 'one of them': a member of the team and the strongest member of the team." A born leader, Scott Summers (Cyclops) was the first student of Professor Xavier. However, unlike Professor Xavier, who led his team remotely, Cyclops is the team's field leader, commanding alongside them in battle. He is a leader that walks the walk and leads by example, encouraging open team communication and adopting a transparent leadership style. He is first and foremost a team member, doing whatever is necessary to help his team succeed.

Cyclops often finds his dedication to Professor Xavier's ideals and the extreme loyalty he feels toward his mentor burdensome; this can be a source of conflict between himself and his team, descending to formal leadership. Sales leaders face similar challenges balancing formal and informal influences. As sales leaders move further from their roles as salespeople, they tend to rely increasingly on formal

organizational networks and lose their connection to the front lines. Cyclops exemplifies the strategic and tactical nature of hybrid leadership and demonstrates the advantages of leading alongside a team. Hybrid or multi-faceted leadership is well-suited for cross-functional groups characterized by greater variation and volume of opinion, which can ultimately yield innovative and comprehensive decisions.

4. What hero will you be?

Leadership is one of the most critical tools organizations have for maintaining competitiveness and maximizing the potential of salespeople (Carter, 2013). With this core lever in focus, organizations must continue to inspire, train, and empower their sales managers to be leaders and to embrace sales leadership within the workplace. Although novel, we believe that comic books and the characters and stories inhabiting them offer a unique perspective for understanding and conveying the qualities and core attributes of excellence in sales leadership. As superheroes encounter both earthly and otherworldly challenges, their strengths and abilities help them succeed and grow personally and professionally. Firms are increasingly searching for creative and innovative approaches to leadership training and development. It is our hope that the analogies between superheroes and sales leadership offered herein provide inspiration as a teaching tool capable of enlightening and engaging sales leaders in ways that conventional methods cannot. As a summary, Table 1 highlights some key takeaways and examples of managerial challenges where superhero leadership behaviors and characteristics manifest themselves in effective sales leadership action.

Fear not, aspiring superhero leaders! Strong leadership does not require perfection across all of these capabilities, but rather demands a willingness to embrace these ideals, evolve management practices, and implement lessons when and where possible. What is clear, as with any archetype or aspirational target, is that just as no one superhero has all of these powers, no sales leader can embody all of these characteristics. A productive approach toward adoption of the lessons at the intersection of superhero and sales leadership is that managers cannot expect to exemplify all 'superpowers' in equal measure. Perhaps what is most important is to recognize that while great sales leadership does in fact call for these heroic attributes, it does not call for them all at once, and not across all occasions or situations. A situational approach toward sales leadership can facilitate leverage of

Table 1. Sales leadership challenges and potential application of superhero narratives

| Leadership Characteristic | Application of Superhero Quality |
|----------------------------|--|
| Empathy | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Listening to and understanding subordinates</p> <p><i>Problem:</i> Sales managers often struggle to understand and sympathize with the challenges and needs of their sales force.</p> <p><i>Importance of Empathy:</i> As an empathetic leader, sales managers can engender stronger performance from their subordinates by listening to and understanding their needs, working directly with them to overcome challenges, and acting as a role model for success.</p> <p><i>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</i> In order to understand and share in the feelings of humans, Superman works with them to listen, understand, and help them overcome their challenges. Just like a strong sales leader, he knows that to protect and enhance those who follow him, he must empathize with them, listening to and understanding their unique perspectives and needs.</p> |
| Humility & Selflessness | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Passing on credit for success and shielding subordinates from failure</p> <p><i>Problem:</i> Oftentimes within the sales environment, rewards and accolades are given in response to organizational performance. These performance outcomes can be partially or fully attributed to the strategies, decisions, and/or actions of the team leader.</p> <p><i>Importance of Humility and Selflessness:</i> In fostering a strong and capable salesforce, leaders must understand the importance of allowing recognition for success to fall on members of their sales team. In a similar vein, they must also understand the importance of protecting team members from the negative consequences of failure.</p> <p><i>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</i> Spider-Man recognizes the importance of allowing his city to celebrate his victories as their own, and allows the media to cast him as a villain to society when the city needs to be protected. Like a strong sales leader, he understands that these supportive and protective actions can help build a stronger, more committed, and confident following.</p> |
| Adaptive Tendencies | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Managing a dynamic selling environment</p> <p><i>Problem:</i> Not all employees or situations can—or should—be handled the same way.</p> <p><i>Importance of Adaptive Tendencies:</i> Leaders must consider the situations they encounter and adjust their approach to smooth the myriad disruptions that evolve in the sales environment.</p> <p><i>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</i> Just as Batman develops new tools and reassesses his strategies with each change in his environment, effective leaders must assess each situation independently and determine the responses and actions that will be most effective for achieving success.</p> |
| Ability to Span Boundaries | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Communicating the vision and goals of upper management to frontline employees</p> <p><i>Problem:</i> Different levels within an organization often fail to effectively communicate, collaborate, and align goals.</p> |

| Table 1 (Continued) | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Leadership Characteristic | Application of Superhero Quality |
| | <p><i>Importance of Boundary Spanning:</i> Providing a seamless transition of organizational goals, from the vision of upper management to the actions of frontline employees, requires that leadership be able to balance the multiple organizational levels and span the boundaries between them.</p> <p><i>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</i> Much like Thor spans the boundaries between worlds as an advocate for humans, today's sales leaders must translate the needs of the organization in a concrete and operational context that resonates with their sales teams and must also act as an advocate for the needs of their subordinates to upper management.</p> |
| Cultivating Teamwork | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Managing organizational fault lines</p> <p><i>Problem:</i> When multiple groups interact within the workforce, fault lines can emerge where group differences occur.</p> <p><i>Importance of Cultivating Teamwork:</i> Building an environment of collaboration and facilitating cooperation among individuals allows teams to overcome the inevitable frictions that emerge within sustained group interactions over time.</p> <p><i>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</i> Similar to the actions of Reed Richards, leader of the Fantastic Four, strong leaders must implement both preemptive and responsive actions to foster teamwork and collaboration within the workplace.</p> |
| Integrity | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Building trust and commitment among subordinates</p> <p><i>Problem:</i> Strong sales leaders must foster an environment of follower support, trust, and commitment.</p> <p><i>Importance of Integrity:</i> In order to gain and maintain the respect and faith necessary for this following, it is critical that leaders 'say what they mean, and mean what they say.'</p> <p><i>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</i> Captain America garners support as the true personification of the vision of the American Dream because he is unwilling to compromise the values that define him. In the same way, sales leaders must earn their leadership by upholding the same ideals and actions that they ask of their subordinates.</p> |
| Enhancing Others | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Recognizing coaching opportunities and providing constructive feedback when they arise</p> <p><i>Problem:</i> Strong sales leaders must be aware of the needs of their followers.</p> <p><i>Importance of Enhancing Others:</i> Sales leaders must recognize when traditional sales training—or lack thereof—is leaving their subordinates without the proper tools to be effective and without the opportunity to achieve great things.</p> <p><i>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</i> Much like Professor Xavier of the X-Men, sales leaders must be proactive in training and enhancing the capabilities of the individual salespeople they lead to increase the unique, individual strengths of each subordinate—and, as a consequence, the cumulative strength of the entire team.</p> |

| Table 1 (Continued) | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Leadership Characteristic | Application of Superhero Quality |
| Sourcing New Talent | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Finding and maintaining a balanced and capable team</p> <p><u>Problem:</u> As sales leaders begin to develop an understanding of the challenges and needs specific to their particular sales environment, establishing a proper alignment of people and resources will yield the highest performance potential for their sales team.</p> <p><u>Importance of Sourcing New Talent:</u> A strong sales leader must be able to recognize critical needs and recruit, organize, and manage their sales teams to best meet these needs.</p> <p><u>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</u> Just as Magneto recruits talent that matches the strengths of his opponents, a great sales leader must build a team that collectively counters the demands of the environment in which it operates.</p> |
| Multi-faceted Leadership | <p style="text-align: center;">Leadership Challenge: Meeting individual goals while ensuring team sales goals are met</p> <p><u>Problem:</u> In a dynamic selling environment, sales leaders are often tasked with the dual demands of meeting their own sales goals while simultaneously ensuring that the goals for their sales team are met, too.</p> <p><u>Importance of Multi-Faceted Leadership:</u> These complex demands call for dynamic sales leaders that can execute within their own leadership roles and meet the demands placed on them personally, while also enhancing their team and meeting the needs of members.</p> <p><u>Narrative Example of Leadership Behavior:</u> In much the same way that superhero Cyclops acts as a field leader—both leading and fighting alongside his team—great sales leadership requires that leaders not only direct their team but also enthusiastically engage in the sales field tasks wherever needed.</p> |

these capacities in measured ways, depending on circumstances and followers’ needs. This is the only way that mere mortal leaders, with finite resources and human limitations, can hope to embody a superhero within their leadership role.

While it is tempting to prescribe a focus on all of these characteristics at once, of course, this would doom the project to failure. A leader must recognize the importance of each of these characteristics of great sales leadership in different environments and situations. Through this lens, leaders must identify and adopt a transformative approach in their leadership philosophy. Our goal in identifying nine critical leadership characteristics, and offering narrative examples of each, is to provide a broad understanding of the importance of each leadership characteristic as well as an understanding of the situations within which these are most applicable. As sales leaders grow, their ability to adopt, implement, and dynamically exchange between these leadership characteristics will facilitate utilization of a broader range of applicable approaches

and more effective simultaneous management of multiple characteristics. Through a self-evaluative process, managers can strengthen their leadership capabilities across the spectrum of great sales leadership characteristics and develop the ability to apply these in complementary ways.

It is impossible not to recognize the growing, global popularity of comic book superheroes. Despite this popularity, some will most certainly be skeptical regarding importance of the example offered by superheroes and their role in a sales teaching or training environment. Nevertheless, organizations and universities worldwide employ the case method as an accepted pedagogical approach to enhance learning in a range of domains. Part of the popularity of case studies is based on the fact that many people are inductive rather than deductive learners. Inductive learners are better able to grasp new concepts from examples as opposed to logical development starting with basic principles. Case studies provide an avenue for an inductive approach to learning. Fundamentally, the

storytelling and characters embedded within comic books offer a dynamic, fantastic, graphic leadership case study that often bears on scenarios and topics that readers are actually more familiar with than those encompassed by standard business cases. Leaders are called on to use a variety of approaches to influence others (Sims, Faraj, & Yun, 2009), and the nine leadership characteristics of superheroes we present here provide one tool for conveying and implementing such approaches.

The superhero and comic book genre will only continue to grow in popularity over the next

decades as our capacity to engage readers, viewers, and consumers of media becomes more complex and sophisticated. With limitless story potential and unending plot line vectors, Marvel and DC will continue to release summer blockbusters that will be nearly impossible for the millennial generation—the next generation of business leaders—to ignore. When looking for the next training topic or exercise to share with your team, look no further than your local comic book store. All you ever needed to know about sales leadership can be learned through comic books and the dynamic heroes inhabiting their pages.

Appendix: About our research

Determining Competencies and Narrative Examples

In harmony with this tradition, we are very excited about the role that comics can play in helping to transmit understanding to emerging organizational leaders of the core competencies necessary to excel in the essential sales leadership role. To explore this leadership development opportunity we conducted in-depth investigations of sales leadership competencies and corresponding superhero narratives.

Sales Competency List Development

In order to fully leverage this vehicle, it was first important to establish the boundaries of the leadership domain in focus. Thus, before seeking to define the comic book parameters available to transmit core sales leadership competencies, we engaged in an exhaustive research effort to triangulate on exactly what these competencies are. In order to determine the characteristics, behaviors, and abilities (competencies) underlying the sales leadership role, we began by conducting a comprehensive review of the sales and sales leadership literature.

We first generated an exhaustive list of 459 distinct sales-related activities drawn directly from research articles published in journals in the academic sales literature between the years 1979 and 2014. We then reviewed 57 different sales processes, leadership frameworks, and competency maps published in academic textbooks, corporate websites, and training reports. We also drew from the results of 17 meta-analyses reporting parametric statistical relationships between sales and leadership predictors of performance from a cumulative sample of more than 410,000 salespeople and leaders. We used this broad, encompassing approach in an effort to encapsulate the entire body of what is currently known about sales leadership.

By reviewing this comprehensive, secondary research, we were able to identify 71 'themes' or consistent narrative threads that were indicative of specific skills, activities, and characteristics associated with excellence in sales leadership. Once we developed these themes from the body of available sales knowledge, we drew on an independent group of 22 sales and sales management experts. These experts reviewed the themes we identified, compiled summaries of the specific sales leadership competencies that emerged from this analysis of the literature, and removed those competencies they identified as less important for achieving excellence in sales leadership. The end result of this iterative process was the development of clusters of similar core attributes and a substantially reduced list of 42 elements corresponding to specific sales leadership behavior categories.

Following the completion of the secondary research portion of our evaluation, we conducted primary research following standard survey design protocol, data collection, and analysis procedures. We provided the list of competencies developed by the group of 22 sales and sales management subject

matter experts described above to a sample of 1,000 sales professionals from both the United States and abroad. Our final sample consisted of 782 sales professionals who provided us with a rating of the 'top sales leadership competencies' associated with sales leadership excellence from the list they were provided. The results from this primary research are presented in the following table.

Top Leadership Qualities

| Characteristic | Definition | Percent Reporting in Top Ten |
|----------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Empathy | The ability to understand and share the feelings of others. | 79% |
| Humility/Selflessness | Modesty; not believing you are superior to others. Putting the needs of the team before yourself. | 92% |
| Adaptive Tendencies | Adjusting leadership actions or behaviors in response to environmental stimuli to benefit performance outcomes. | 86% |
| Ability to Span Boundaries | The capability to direct, align, and foster commitment across boundaries in pursuit of a higher goal or vision. | 72% |
| Cultivating Teamwork | Fostering an environment where collaboration and combined effort can flourish and the managing team interfaces to maintain positive interactions. | 91% |
| Integrity | Consistency between words and actions. | 89% |
| Enhancing Others | Using constructive, needs-driven, and goal-directed attention to train and maximize the abilities of subordinates for the success of the team. | 82% |
| Sourcing New Talent | Identifying, enlisting, and engaging the best talent to form a strong, diverse, and well-balanced team. | 86% |
| Multi-faceted Leadership | Maintaining an active, functional role within the team rather than merely directing subordinates. | 87% |

Superhero Example List Development

Given our focus on the use of comic books specifically as a vehicle to communicate sales leadership competencies, in an effort to go beyond our own knowledge of superheroes and their abilities to personify these sales leadership competencies we also chose to tap into the knowledge of true fans of the comic book genre. To generate insight from this population of content experts, we first conducted qualitative interviews across nine different comic book stores and two separate comic conventions. We then posted questions about the heroes who best embodied or exemplified sales leadership qualities to multiple online comic book fan sites and web forums.

We received an overwhelming response to our request for help and cataloged 256 specific examples of heroes and their leadership abilities. Responses within these qualitative interviews ranged in length from a few words to multiple pages per example. For each competency identified in our analysis, we defined the associated sales leadership competency, related each competency to a specific hero, described a storyline representative of that hero's characteristic or ability, and offered representative quotes from our comic book subject matter experts.

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