

Hello Tuesday #33: The Infant King

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Hello, Tuesday.

So, you wanna be king? God save you. Kings run the risk of living as infants, behaving as infants, and being treated as infants.

Strip kingship of its historical aura, and what you have is a man who has everything done for him. He doesn't cook or clean or weave or build, He doesn't shoe his own horse. He doesn't choose his own wife. He doesn't dress himself, or bathe himself or wash his own hair. He doesn't even wipe his own bottom--- he's as helpless as a baby.

This king sees himself in an infantile way---as the center of the universe. As a being whose desires are imperatives, whose perceptions are reality, and whose will is law. Like an infant, he's barely aware of any reality outside his own.

He is insulated from his world by fawning caretakers who control who he talks to and what he hears. Like an infant, he's shielded, patronized, and manipulated.

This isn't leadership. It's social status. True leadership—mature leadership—is service.

Mature leaders think outside-in, not inside-out: they recognize their biases, and strive to correct them by comparing their perceptions with the perceptions of others. We begin to develop maturity the moment we realize that we're not the center of the universe. We find direction when we step out of ourselves and look honestly at the world around us. We reach fulfillment when we take responsibility for the needs of others.

Businesses have traditionally been king-like: centered on their own needs, activities, and goals. They've linked to the outside world in a top-down, masters-of-the-universe sort of way, as though they could control what people see, think, and want.

But businesses are beginning to grow up. They're starting to suspect that the executive board doesn't always know what happens to their name and their products out there in the world. The once avant-garde idea that the traditional org chart might be upside down is gaining currency. Who's more likely to know what people really want, the CEO or the customer? Who has a greater influence on people's perceptions of the brand, the CEO or the people on the front lines?

It's not as though this is a new idea. Shakespeare described it neatly in Henry V, when this king (who did at least fight his own battles), uncertain of his strategy and unsure who he could trust, disguised himself beneath a cloak and walked the encampment, speaking to foot soldiers and sentries. The next day his army, ably led, carried Agincourt and routed the French.

Climb down from your throne out there,

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