MEDIA REVIEW

KING ARTHUR'S LESSONS FOR LEADERSHIP AND SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE—FROM SCREEN TO REAL LIFE

ANA SABINO[1,2,3] (iD), FRANCISCO CESÁRIO[1,3,4], LUIS JOSÉ ANDRADE[1,5] AND FILIPE TEOBALDI[1]

[1]Social and Organizational psychology Department, ISPA—Instituto Universitário, Lisboa, Portugal
[2]APPsyCI—Applied Psychology Research Center Capabilities & Inclusion, ISPA—Instituto Universitário, Lisboa, Portugal
[3]Centre for Public Administration and Public Policies, Institute of Social and Political Sciences, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal
[4]Management Department, Atlântica Instituto Universitário, Barcarena, Portugal
[5]Social Sciences and Technology Faculty, Universidade Europeia, Lisboa, Portugal

Over time, different authors have suggested a set of competencies related to leadership and superior performance. We use a cinematic approach to reflect on six theoretical approaches using six King Arthur films from 1950 until 2017. We learn that films can be tools to enhance leadership and superior performance.

Once Upon a Time, there Was a Competence Called Leadership

Human capital is considered an asset that adds value to the organization by developing transferable competencies that enhance performance and employability. Many of those competencies are also associated with leaders' characteristics, being called leadership competencies (Tubbs & Schulz, 2006). The literature identifies the specific personal characteristics that are both transferable and generic competencies (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005) and leadership-related. For instance, communication is presented both as a transferable generic competence (e.g., McClelland, 1973) and as a leadership competency (e.g., Tubbs & Schulz, 2006). In line with previous research (Boyatzis, 2008; Goleman, 1995; Spencer & Spencer, 1993), there is evidence that those competencies, when put in action, result in superior performance and effectiveness. In addition, we based our work on the notion that competencies, particularly those which enhance leadership and performance, could change over time and in different contexts (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005).

In parallel, recently, we have found the use of films to be effective, not only because they contextualize actions, but also because they play a significant role on human behavior (Kuri & Kaufman, 2020) and provide insights into organizational attitudes and behaviors (Bartlett et al., 2020).

Therefore, we performed a cinematic analysis to understand the evolution of leadership competencies presented in King Arthur's films, from 1950 until 2017, based on theoretical models from those decades. The choice to study King Arthur's competencies related to leadership and superior performance was made because allowed us to choose films related to the same character from a longitudinal point of view (through the decades) and because he is considered a proficient leader (Barker, 2001).

Based on the notion that competencies can be assessed and developed (Spencer & Spencer, 1993),

Correspondence: Ana Sabino, ISPA—Instituto Universitário, Rua Jardim do Tabaco 34, 1100-304 Lisbon, Portugal. E-mail: asabino@ispa.pt

using our work, managers, and trainers may be able to use films as a training tool (i.e., Comer, 2001; Kuri & Kaufman, 2020). For instance, they can apply some results in training sessions to discuss and reflect on how each competency is put into action and explore how different proficiency levels are presented. To use films as a training and development tool, the first step is to perform cinematic analysis considering a specific topic that will provide training and development content. In addition, trainers could use these results as a baseline and introduce the specificities of their settings to fit the discussion better.

Film Selection Criteria

We selected the films based on a set of criteria, such as the film had to portray the life of King Arthur as the lead character and be faithful to the classic legend of King Arthur, encompassing some of the adventures present in the classics. We selected theoretical models from each decade that proposed a set of competencies for leadership and superior performance. Therefore, the study comprises 36 competencies, the sum of the competencies proposed in each theoretical model in each decade. Table 1 presents the chosen films and theoretical models with respective characteristics/competencies by decade.

Structured Viewing of Films

We defined each of the 36 competencies in terms of behaviors that can be objectively observed, assessed, and developed (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). To do so, we used both the definitions proposed by the authors from the respective theoretical models (see Table 1) and, for the cases where the authors did not define the competencies, we used competencies dictionaries (e.g., Ceitil, 2016).

All key scenes, incidents, events, and happenings were analyzed and coded, considering all 36 behavioral definitions for each of the 36 competencies. Thus, we were able to quantify each behaviors' absence or presence and each competence's proficiency level. We evaluated each scene considering the proficiency level of King Arthur in all 36 competencies, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("absence of behavior") to 4 ("proficient behavior").

What Was Possible to Observe

In "Knights of the Round Table" (Thorpe, 1953) and "Excalibur" (Boorman, 1981) we cannot find behaviors that represent the competencies proposed in those decades. Furthermore, in those films and in

Table 1 Association between film and the theoretical approach			
Film	**Theoretical approach**	**Studied characteristics/competencies**	**King Arthur' proficiency level (fit between film and theoretical model from those decades)**
Knights of the Round Table (Thorpe, 1953)	Tannenbaum and Massarik (1957)	Personality, social sensibility, psychological map, action flexibility, appropriate communication	Low proficiency level
Camelot (Logan, 1967)	Jennings (1961)	Vision, power, confidence, personality, and communication	High proficiency level
Excalibur (Boorman, 1981)	McClelland (1973)	Communications, patience, moderate goal setting, and ego development	Low proficiency level
First Knight (Zucker, 1995)	Boyatzis, Goleman, and Rhee (2000)	Emotional perception, confidence, adaptability, results orientation, empathy, vision, influence, communication, and conflict management	Low proficiency level
King Arthur (Fuqua, 2004)	Tubbs and Schulz (2006)	Understanding the big picture, influence, leadership, communication, innovation and creativity, leading change, and teamwork and followership	High proficiency level
King Arthur: Legend of the Sword (Ritchie, 2017)	Webb and Zehr (2018)	Strategy creation, results orientation, inspiring others, adaptability, influence and networking, and optimizing talent	High proficiency level

"First Knight" (Zucker, 1995), King Arthur had a low level of proficiency in the competencies related to the respective decade and theoretical approach. In "Knights of The Round Table" (Thorpe, 1953), King Arthur had the lowest proficiency level, followed by "Excalibur" (Boorman, 1981) and finally "First Knight" (Zucker, 1995).

On the other hand, in the films "Camelot" (Logan, 1967), "King Arthur" (Fuqua, 2004) and "King Arthur: Legend of the Sword" (Ritchie, 2017), not only were the competencies from that decade present, but also King Arthur had a high level of proficiency. Therefore, the competencies assessed were present, and King Arthur was proficient when demonstrating them in his actions. Table 1 sums up these results.

Although it is crucial to analyze the fit between the film and the theoretical model from those decades, we also looked at the 36 competencies per film. The results showed that King Arthur is pictured differently considering all six films. Thus, each film contributes in different ways, highlighting specific competencies and ways a leader can be featured. These insights will allow a better understanding of the contribution of each film for the demonstration of leadership competencies.

Starting with "Knights of the Round Table" (Thorpe, 1953) we found that King Arthur is pictured as a Great Man (Jennings, 1961), in the sense that the personal characteristics proposed by the author are the ones more present in the movie. Thus, this King Arthur is someone highly confident, with a clear vision, and influence.

The film "Camelot" (Logan, 1967), like the King Arthur from "Knights of The Round Table" (Thorpe, 1953), is also a King with high levels of confidence and a sense of vision, but he is not yet a leader with an orientation toward people and carrying out tasks. Both Kings Arthurs can be characterized as leaders through their traits and positions, not because of their proximity to the followers.

The film "Excalibur" (Boorman, 1981) is one of the most renowned films about the legend of King Arthur, encompassing the most characteristics of the original legend (https://www.imdb.com/). The results suggested that Jennings (1961) and Tubbs and Schulz (2006) are the theoretical approaches more related to the King presented in this film. We see that this King Arthur continues to be visionary and very confident, but he

is starting to become closer to his followers; thus, we identify the presence and proficiency of teamwork and followership (Tubbs & Schulz, 2006).

In our analysis of the film "First Knight" (Zucker, 1995) the results suggest that the competencies that are more present in the actions of King Arthur are those proposed by Jennings (1961), followed by the approaches of McClelland (1973) and Webb and Zehr (2018). We see a shift in King Arthur's behaviors because those theoretical approaches had lower proficiency levels in the previous films. This King Arthur is someone who starts to create networks and optimize the talent of his followers (Webb & Zehr, 2018), engage in moderate goal setting (McClelland, 1973) and maintains a strong vision (Jennings, 1961). However, he still lacks a sense of empathy, communication, and conflict management Boyatzis, Goleman and Rhee, (2000).

King Arthur obtains the highest evaluation in the film "King Arthur" (Fuqua, 2004); However, we were not able to observe the skills of patience (McClelland, 1973) and networking (Webb & Zehr, 2018). In addition to being a strategic (Webb & Zehr, 2018) and inspirational leader (Tubbs & Schulz, 2006), he is a team-oriented King. He presented higher levels of teamwork and followership (Tubbs & Schulz, 2006) and conflict management skills (Boyatzis, Goleman & Rhee, 2000). Although he lacks patience (McClelland, 1973), he is also an empathic King Boyatzis, Goleman and Rhee, (2000), with a high level of social sensibility (Tannenbaum & Massarik, 1957).

"King Arthur: Legend of the Sword" (Ritchie, 2017) is the film where all 36 competencies were observed in King Arthur's behaviors. The King Arthur pictured in this film is someone who demonstrates, through his actions, power, and confidence (Jennings, 1961), moderate goal setting capability (McClelland, 1973), vision Boyatzis, Goleman and Rhee, (2000) and ability to inspire and to optimize the talent of others (Webb & Zehr, 2018), to adapt and to work side by side with his followers Boyatzis, Goleman and Rhee, (2000).

Final Remarks and Key Takeaways

This work allowed us to revisit different theoretical approaches related to leadership and superior performance and its applications in different settings

(i.e., different films) and over time (i.e., different decades). Analyzing different films from different decades, but related to the same character, also allowed for an understanding of how a leader is featured over time. Because King Arthur is considered a proficient leader (Barker, 2001), we can understand how the general public pictures this leader emphasizing different leadership facets over time. Table 2 resumes the highlights of King Arthur leadership profile in each film.

From a more practical and managerial point of view, HR practitioners and trainers can use these insights to develop training sessions that will allow leaders and future leaders to develop leadership competencies, discussing and reflecting on how each competence is portrayed in each film and what changed over time. However, it should be noted that these discussions should be aligned and adjusted to the characteristics of the context, such as cultural differences, gender, or age diversity. To do this exercise, we provide some *key takeaways* regarding our analysis.

Our analysis suggested that the way King Arthur is featured as a leader changed over time. Thus, *leadership and superior performance competencies have changed, highlighting different facets of the leader* (Table 2).

Looking at the results from a broader and theoretical point of view, we can conclude that the approaches by Jennings (1961) and Tubbs and Schulz (2006) proposed competencies that better fit the King Arthurs profile over time. This result is very relevant because both approaches were directly related to leadership. Jennings (1961) proposed the Great Man Theory and Tubbs and Schulz (2006) proposed a taxonomy of leadership competencies. We can conclude that this analysis also emphasizes leadership competencies present in the representation of King Arthur. Jennings' (1961) Great Man Theory assumed that history is shaped by the leadership of great man which drew attention to the specific qualities of leaders. Therefore, research concentrated on measuring and quantifying leadership traits and the relationship between such traits and leader effectiveness. On the other hand, Tubbs and Schulz (2006) focused on the importance of leadership development to organizational performance and presented a model

Table 2 King Arthur's profile, per film	
Film	**King Arthur's profile**
"Knights of the Round Table" (Thorpe, 1953)	King Arthur is pictured as a Great Man, with a clear vision, confidence and influence, being distant of followers
"Camelot" (Logan, 1967)	King Arthur is pictured just like the King Arthur from "Knights of the Round Table." Both Kings Arthurs can be characterized as leaders through their traits and positions, not because of their proximity to the followers.
"Excalibur" (Boorman, 1981)	Most related to the original legend. King Arthur continues to be visionary and very confidant, but he is starting to become closer to his followers mainly through the presence and proficiency of teamwork and followership and moderate goal setting
"First Knight" (Zucker, 1995)	King Arthur starts to create networks and optimize the talent of his followers and engage in moderate goal setting and results orientation
"King Arthur" (Fuqua, 2004)	Most proficient King Arthur; King Arthur is seen as being a strategic and inspirational leader, he is a team-oriented. Although he lacks patience, he is also an empathic King with a high level of social sensibility.
"King Arthur: Legend of the Sword" (Ritchie, 2017)	The King Arthur demonstrates, through his actions, power and confidence, moderate goal setting capability, vision, ability to inspire and to optimize the talent of others, to adapt and to work side by side with his followers.

that identifies 50 Global Leadership Competencies in a taxonomy of Global Leadership Competencies and Meta-competencies, being the Meta-competencies the ones studied in current paper.

On the other hand, Boyatzis, Goleman and Rhee, (2000) presented less presence in the King Arthur films. Therefore, King Arthur is not a leader who represents leadership's emotional side. This result may have two possible explanations. First, the authors did not propose a leadership model but rather an emotional intelligence one. Second, the way King Arthur was pictured did not emphasize his emotional intelligence side. Of all the films, "King Arthur" (Fuqua, 2004) depicted the most, but medium level, emotional side

of King Arthur. Thus, we suggest that if managers and trainers want to use this approach to develop emotional intelligence, we recommend using "King Arthur" (Fuqua, 2004), but with caution.

Theoretically, communication is the competence most present in nearly every theoretical proposal, but its definition evolved over time. It started as a competence more focused on the ability to clearly express ideas, objectives, and convictions (until the 90s) to the definition proposed by Tubbs and Schulz (2006), which emphasized active and non-defensive listening, appropriate use of verbal and body language and negotiation.

Patience (McClleland, 1974) was the competence that was less present when compared to the other 35 competencies. This result can be justified because demonstrating this competence in audiovisual format is less dynamic and, therefore, not seen in films, which are usually quite dynamic and with a lot of action.

In the 50s and 60s' films, little is seen of King Arthur demonstrating competence through behavior. Therefore, those films are not recommended to study competencies through the behaviors. It is perceived that King Arthur is a man with great leadership capabilities, but that is not translated into actions in the film. In these films, King Arthur's leadership ability is almost innate, so much so that his character, in these films, has little evolution since all the problems that arise are solved due to his extraordinary aptitudes.

Among all films, there was a particular highlight in the last two decades, 2000 and 2010, portrayed, respectively, by the films "King Arthur" (Fuqua, 2004) and "King Arthur: Legend of the Sword" (Ritchie, 2017). *Both films presented higher proficiency levels, whereas both are the richest to analyze and have examples of how a set of leadership and superior performance competencies are portraited*. It is important to note that there was a tendency for proficiency to increase as we progressed through the decades. Therefore, from the first decade analyzed, there was always an increasing behavioral demonstration of the competencies until the last decade.

To sum up, the results support the notion that the competencies associated with leadership and superior performance, its definition, and some other facets of a leader have evolved. We learned with King Arthur that,

when facing similar contexts, over time, King Arthur acts in different ways, highlighting different leadership approaches, being from a distant leader to a leader closer to his followers. Considering his evolution, one question arises: Which leadership competencies would characterize King Arthur from today?

Acknowledgements

Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally.

References

Barker, R. A. (2001). The nature of leadership. *Human Relations*, *54*(4), 469–494.

Bartlett, K. R., Jang, S., Feng, Y., & Aderibigbe, E. (2020). A cinematic analysis of the leadership behaviours of Robin Hood. *Human Resource Development International*, *24*(2), 1–22.

Boorman, J. (1981). *Excalibur* [Film]. In *Cinema '84*. Orion Pictures.

Boyatzis, R. (2008). Competencies in the 21st century. *Journal of Management Development*, *27*(1), 5–12.

Boyatzis, R. E., Goleman, D., & Rhee, K. (2000). Clustering competence in emotional intelligence: Insights from the emotional competence inventory (ECI). *Handbook of Emotional Intelligence*, *99*(6), 343–362.

Ceitil, M. (2016). *Gestão e Desenvolvimento de Competências*. Edições Silabo.

Comer, D. R. (2001). Not just a Mickey mouse exercise: Using Disney's the lion king to teach leadership. *Journal of Management Education*, *25*(4), 430–436.

Fuqua, A. (2004). *King Arthur* [film]. Touchstone Pictures, Jerry Bruckheimer Films.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. Bantam Books, New York.

Jennings, E. E. (1961). *The anatomy of leadership*. *Management of Personnel Quarterly*, *1*(1), 2.

Kuri, S. K., & Kaufman, E. K. (2020). Leadership insights from Hollywood-based war movies: An opportunity for vicarious learning. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *14*(1), 53–61.

Le Deist, F. D., & Winterton, J. (2005). What is competence? *Human Resource Development International*, *8*(1), 27–46.

Logan, J. (1967). *Camelot* [Film]. Warner Bros.-Seven Arts.

McClelland, D. C. (1973). Testing for competence rather than for "intelligence". *American Psychologist*, *28*(1), 1–14.

Ritchie, G. (2017). *King Arthur: Legend of the sword* [film]. Warner Bros.

Spencer, L. M., & Spencer, P. S. M. (1993). *Competence at work models for superior performance*. John Wiley & Sons.

Tannenbaum, R., & Massarik, F. (1957). Leadership: A frame of reference. *Management Science*, *4*(1), 1–19.

Thorpe, R. (Director)(1953). *Knights of the round table* [film]. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer British Studios.

Tubbs, S. L., & Schulz, E. (2006). Exploring a taxonomy of global leadership competencies and meta-competencies. *Journal of American Academy of Business*, *8*(2), 29–34.

Webb, P., & Zehr, N. (2018). *2018 global talent trend study: Unlocking growth in the human age*. Mercer, Marsh & McLennan Companies.

Zucker, J. (1995). *First Knight* [Film]. Columbia Pictures, First Knight Productions.