

Escaping Hazing

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This is an excerpt from Chad Ellsworth's forthcoming book:

Building up without tearing down: How to cultivate heroic leadership in you and your organization



"Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many... Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it."

-Buddha

In the previous chapter, we identified five common defenses for hazing: A combination of a desire for bonding, for instilling discipline, an opportunity to prove one's self, demonstrating respect for the organization, and a mechanism for ensuring that only the best become members of our organizations.

On the surface, are any of those five defenses evil or harmful in and of themselves? No. In fact, each of those motivations are natural and neutral, that is, neither positive nor negative. These motivations also are present through historical and traditional rites of passage.

The basic components of a rite of passage include: separation, initiation, and return. We can find these same components in the stories and mythologies we share.

For example, in the *Harry Potter* book series, Harry learns he is a wizard and leaves the Dursleys, he

undergoes an initiation into the wizarding world and its unique threats at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and then returns to the Dursleys each summer.

In a second example from the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is separated from her home in Kansas, comes face to face with her own doubts and insecurities in the Land of Oz, and finally learns that she already possesses the power to return to her home.

It is no coincidence that formal rites of passage follow this very same formula.

In the separation phase of traditional rites of passage, initiates are oftentimes physically removed from their families, their homes, and their normal roles. This is a signal to the community and to the initiates themselves that they are going through a period of transformation.

When used in hazing organizations, the separation phase is oftentimes accomplished by limiting contact with non-members, as well as by using special roles and rules exclusively for new members.

All too often, this separation is used as a weapon against the new members and as a shield for the hazing organization, rather than as an incubator that facilitates the growth and transformation of the new member.

Then, as initiates enter the initiation phase of a traditional rite of passage, the initiates go through emotional, physical, and psychological challenges. The point of the challenge is not to punish or tear down the initiates, but rather to provide an opportunity for the initiates to grow themselves to new levels and rise.

When we examine the initiation phase in hazing organizations, too often the new members are harassed, ridiculed, and subjugated by the older members, and the challenges presented to them often include activities that are illegal or violent, having little or no connection to the purpose of the organization they are joining.

Why is a clear purpose imperative to a productive and successful rite of passage?

As initiates reach the end of the initiation phase and prepare for their return, having exhausted themselves in that process, they will reflect on what that experience means for them and their future. This is the threshold between the initiation and the return.

In productive and successful rites of passage, the challenges presented in the initiation phase are others-centered and purposeful. The rites prepare the new member to care and provide for others, rather than merely “making it through” punishment and subjugation. The answer about the larger meaning of a productive rite of passage is self-evident, and that larger purpose is embraced by the initiate.

But, in hazing organizations, the answer about the larger meaning of the experience is absent, or muddled, at best, resulting in cognitive dissonance. In the absence of that purpose, their minds will determine that the experience itself is the larger purpose, a phenomenon that psychologists call the “justification of effort,” which then perpetuates a culture of hazing that counters and undermines the larger purpose of the organization. Hazing effectively substitutes for the organization’s and the ritual’s true purpose.

During the return phase of traditional rites of passage, new members are wholly accepted as full members because they have proven they possess the skills and values necessary to serve in the roles of the elders and protectors of their communities.

In hazing organizations, new members are accepted as full members simply by virtue of “making it through” or surviving a series of tasks that are disconnected from the larger purpose of the organization. The possession of this new identity as full members also confers on the new members the duty to continue the hazing tradition.

In examining the execution of these three phases of rites of passage, to say that hazing organizations follow these phases is akin to completing a painting by number and calling yourself an artist.

While hazing processes possess the basic outline of productive and successful rites of passage, they lack the details and development-focused delivery that

make true rites of passage successful in building better people.

The focus in hazing organizations is on tearing down, rather than building up. In his book, *Adam’s Return*, Richard Rohr outlines the five right ways to do rites of passage.

When have you had a transformational experience? At its core, a transformative experience is a self-upgrade. In the beginning, an idea or a skill is not part of who you are. Afterward, however, that idea or skill becomes a part of who you are. You have been transformed through the experience.

STRENGTH THROUGH STRUGGLE

Allow me to be clear: If you hurt people during an initiation or rite of passage, you are doing it all wrong. But, that does not mean that the experience cannot be challenging. At the end of the experience, the initiates should be exhausted from their labor, but that labor must serve a larger purpose.

As adolescents become adults, it is important that they learn how to do things that are emotionally and/or physically demanding. For example, children occasionally allow emotions such as anger or fear to drive them to fight. However, as adults, one of our most important developmental tasks is to learn to control and direct our emotions, and to fight at the most opportune times and only for those things worth fighting for. Abraham Maslow referred to this developmental task as “managing one’s emotions.”

STRENGTH THROUGH SERVICE

The second developmental task present in rites of passage is to develop mature interpersonal relationships, characterized by a freedom from focusing only on ourselves, as well as a shift from dependence or dominance toward interdependence between equals.

We, as human beings, are first and foremost social beings.

If we fail to have meaningful, purposeful relationships

in concert with others, we fail to live up to our purpose as social beings.

If we cannot respect others, we cannot respect ourselves.

If we cannot demonstrate our compassion and guidance for the initiates in our care, we cannot provide them with an effective rite of passage.

In our world, it is all too common and easy to find faults, to knock others down, or to respond with a sarcastic or superficial thought. Reactions like these take so little effort that we can spout them without even thinking about them.

On the other hand, it is challenging to give from our strength, to lift others up, and to reach deep inside ourselves to offer others the depth, encouragement, and support they need.

Our world is dominated by leaders who would prefer to win at all costs, rather than to find a common ground and a shared purpose with their ideological opponents. Is it any wonder that the rest of us cannot find the courage and strength to believe in others?

STRENGTH THROUGH SACRIFICE

The third principle builds on the idea of becoming others-centered and gaining “strength through support.” When we connect in meaningful and purposeful ways with others, we take the next step by becoming responsible for someone or for something else.

One of the defining characteristics of assuming a leadership role, whether in your community, in your organization, or even in your own family, is becoming responsible for others, whether children, partners, or our own parents. To put it a different way, if everything you do is for you, how does your purpose differ from a newborn who seeks to fulfill only their own needs, regardless of the impact on others.

This principle reflects the developmental task of developing purpose. In short, there is a level of responsibility and self-discipline that comes when you realize that somebody else is counting on you.

Ask yourself:

How would our world be different if others looked at us and saw our greatest potential?

How would the world be different if we looked at others and gave of ourselves so they could reach their greatest potential?

STRENGTH THROUGH SUPPORT

In a contemporary rite of passage, it is not only necessary for you to learn to listen, learn from, and honor others with authority or experience, but also to align your journey with the learnings of others.

In productive and successful rites of passage, mentors guide initiates, equipping them with the physical and psychological tools to continue and to complete their journeys. The initiates honor and respect the mentors and the insights they share, but ultimately align those lessons with the initiates’ own unique journeys.

By aligning your authority, you can handle criticism and feedback from others, having developed the skill of articulating and solidifying one’s own values, part of Maslow’s developmental task of establishing identity.

STRENGTH IS SHOWN

The fifth and final component is illustrated by a quote by Friedrich Nietzsche, “The snake that cannot shed its skin perishes.”

This does not, of course, refer to a physical death, but a transformation. In the final stage of the initiation, the initiate experiences a symbolic death, and a new adult emerges.

We understand that through the challenges, frustrations, setbacks, or triumphs that we traverse, we develop, we grow, and we become stronger. When we break through and succeed despite those obstacles, we are in fact building skills and a new sense of self that we can call upon again in the future. In this way, this principle parallels Maslow’s developmental task of developing integrity.

HAZING OFFERS NO MIDDLE GROUND

An awful lot of people are asking an awful lot of hard

questions in the aftermath of an increasing number of hazing-related deaths, and Timothy Piazza's death on February 4, 2017, at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house at Pennsylvania State University, in particular, has shaken a lot of people's assumptions about protecting people from such tragedies.

The alumni, the chapter, the university, etc. employed every best practice in the hazing prevention playbook: Alcohol-free housing? Check. Live-in advisor? Check. Excellent educational programs? Check. Security cameras? Check.

But those measures were not enough, and it was not even close. If it were possible to create a physical environment that was hazing-proof, you could not imagine one much stronger than the one at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house at Penn State.

Environments are not enough. We need individuals and organizations who are empowered to confront hazing and cultivate leadership.

In a letter released May 12, 2017 by the North-American Interfraternity Conference, Judson Horras, NIC President & CEO, outlined a combustible environment that exists in every hazing organization on any campus:

- Existence of dangerous traditions
- History of substance abuse and hazing in high school
- Proliferation of media glorifying substance abuse and hazing
- Self-preservation in the threat of severe consequences
- Technology that disrupts traditional forms of authority and accountability
- Culture of instant gratification and self-indulgence
- Lack of openness and transparency

There are no easy answers here.

There is only resolve.

We resolve to create meaningful, positive, and yet challenging, rites of passage. We have the power and

the responsibility to instill the courage, skills, and strength that not only protect our members and organizations, but also power the future of our communities and organizations in increasingly fragmented and turbulent times.

SUMMARY

Hazing fails to connect participants to the larger meaning of the experience that is essential for successful rites of passage. In the absence of that purpose, the experience of hazing itself becomes the larger purpose, effectively replacing the organization's true purpose.

To find success in this fight for the soul of our organizations, we not only need environmental, social, and systemic solutions, but also courageous individuals and groups with the conviction, integrity and will to lead the way.

Chad Ellsworth is a board-certified Coach through his company *Caped Coaching* (capedcoaching.com). *Chad believes there is a hero in all of us, and by stepping out of our average, ordinary lives, any of us can have an extraordinary impact on our world. He is also a Career Coach in the Undergraduate Business Career Center at the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. He formerly served as President of the Board of Directors for HazingPrevention.Org.*