

Innovation, Leadership, Change: Lessons from Heroes

by Gillian Williams

We often assume that innovation, leadership, and change go together; connected by a person. We rest our faith on a leader who acts as innovator to make change happen. This facile assumption appears in my field, education, as well as most others. But is that the way things really work? For some insight, let's consider an arena in which we celebrate the romance and simplicity of human single-handedness: the movies. A look at one classic heroic figure in American cinema sheds light on the more complex picture of leadership and change agents in the adoption of innovation.

He rode into our valley in the summer of '89. I was a kid then, barely topping the backboard of father's old chuck-wagon.¹

Thus appears in print, Jack Schaefer's mysterious, buckskin-clad hero later immortalized in the Academy Award winning 1953 film, *Shane*. The story is of a lone gunslinger who happens upon a small settlement of homesteaders trying to scrape out a hardscrabble living in a Wyoming valley. Before he leaves, we are treated to a treatise on the distinction between leaders and change agents and their respective roles in innovation.

The story is a simple one. Shane arrives unannounced at the homestead of the Starrett family: Joe, his wife Marion, and their young son Joey. He is a gunfighter trying to put away his weapons and settle down. He soon takes up working for Starrett on the farm. Unfortunately, Ryker, the local cattle rancher, is using a host of intimidation tactics to drive Starrett and the other fledgling homesteaders off the land. Shane becomes drawn into the conflict, though continues to refrain from using his guns.

When Ryker becomes frustrated with his inability to throw the homesteaders off the land, he brings in Wilson, a notorious hired gun. Wilson provokes and subsequently kills one of the more hot-headed homesteaders. As Starrett prepares to avenge the homesteader's death, Shane interrupts him, saying, "This is my kind of game, Joe." He and Starrett engage in a fistfight over who will go, which Shane eventually wins—albeit unfairly, by knocking Starrett in the head with his gun. In the town saloon, Shane outdraws and kills Wilson and Ryker. He then rides out of town with little Joey crying the now-famous lines, "Shane! Shane! Come back!"

Let's establish the innovation. Its first element is the simple presence of the settlers as part of the innovation known as The Homesteading Act. Opposed to the innovation are the ranchers who see the clear challenge to the open space on which they depend. In one of the standoffs with Ryker, Starrett tells him, "That ain't the way the government sees it." There is a new law and emerging culture, but virtually none of those involved see the broader picture. Like most characters in innovation dramas, they are preoccupied with the dynamics before them: change and its resistance at a personal level. The second and related innovation involves making the area a viable place for farming and family life. As with many modern day innovators, Starrett and his colleagues take a bootstrap approach to pursuing an opportunity only they have the vision to see. Even without human opposition, the natural forces against homesteading are strong.

Who's who in this innovation drama? Starrett is the leader. It is his vision, his stamina, and his credibility with the other farmers which have prompted the need for change and which will sustain it. But Starrett needs help of the kind that cannot come from within his own context. This is Shane's role, the intervention agent. In counterpart to Starrett's permanence, Shane faces impending obsolescence.

As a deft and heroic agent of change, Shane knows the difference between influence and leadership. He knows when to arrive, and he also knows when to leave. It is time for a change in the West and Shane is trying to support these changes, even though it means divesting himself of his heroic status. In a confrontation with Ryker, Shane tells him, "Your kind of days are over." Ryker counters, "My days? What about yours, gunfighter?" Shane's response, "The difference is I know it."

In his role as an agent to create an innovation, Shane challenges a number of homilies. Unlike the generalists that many deem necessary for a holistic approach to change, Shane is a specialist. "Guns are a tool," he says and proceeds to use their force when no other force for change will work.

Shane also avoids the homily of mass participation. He does not ask that everyone "buy in" to his methods before employing them. Indeed, he is aware that a vote might well end in a passive resistance doomed to more death and deportation.

Another film, *Norma Rae*, provides the same juxtaposition of leader and change agent. Here we see as the protagonist for change, a union leader from outside the factory and the factory town, who is totally dependent for change on establishing and working with a local leader, Norma Rae. Like Starrett, she has the spitfire and the loyalty to make things happen, but only with some outside help.

Shane's diagnostic capacity is as strong and useful as his skill with a gun. He clues in immediately to Starrett's pivotal role among the homesteaders, recognizing from the start that if the valley is to have a future that the first challenge is not to deal with the incarnate evil—Ryker—but rather the dispirited homesteaders. Without Starrett's leadership and willingness to fight on the part of all the settlers, there will be no successful innovation.

Shane purposefully builds up Starrett, not himself, as the man for long seasons. He knows that it will prove easier for the homesteaders to have faith in a person than a plan and carefully builds the relationship between Joe and the residents.

While Shane knows he will never be a homesteader, his own role also depends on widespread perception that he is credible, competent and trustworthy. He thus begins by chopping at a large and symbolic stump in Starrett's yard that has proven impossible to remove. Shane leads by example, giving Starrett the impetus to solve the problem by attacking it himself and for doing it on Starrett's own leadership terms. Starrett tells his wife, "I'm not going to use the team [of horses]" to pull out the stump.

In casting himself in a temporal support role, Shane avoids the trap of so many change agents who think they must also be long term leaders who spark and sustain change by their personality and their will. Consider Gregory Peck in his role as General Savage in another film, *Twelve O'Clock High*. Savage, as the iron-handed, workaholic savior simply cannot sustain the burdens he has assumed. In his studies of change patterns, Michael Fullan talks about the inevitable drawbacks for innovative leaders whose success depends solely on being a "lone, impassioned martyr who beat all the odds in order to make a difference."² As Shane shows us, if the lone, star change agent is needed, it is often best that he or she not also be the leader.

Another example of this comes from the film *Tucker: A Man and His Dream*. Preston Tucker tries to be both change agent and sustaining leader using the same self-consuming, isolated approach. Too late, he finally sees that he has missed his opportunity for collaboration and further inquiry that might have sustained his innovation. While we sympathize with his plight and denounce the system that stopped the innovation, we remain frustrated with Tucker's refusal to rely on Abe, his connection to inside information—as Shane does so aptly with Starrett:

ABE: You made the car too good.

TUCKER: That's the whole point - build a better mousetrap.

ABE: Not if you're the mouse.

Shane readily understands the need to not only push Starrett to the foreground but to put himself into the shadows. Everett Rogers, the renowned expert on diffusion of innovation, describes the change agent as someone who "seeks to shift the clients from a position of reliance on the change agent to one of self-reliance."³ Early on Shane rides to town and orders a "soda pop," refusing to respond to taunting by Ryker's thugs. At an early meeting which Starrett calls for the homesteaders, one of the men, disgruntled at Shane's presence, brings up the incident at the saloon as evidence of Shane's lack of commitment to helping the homesteaders. Starrett asks for an explanation and Shane leaves the room, saying: "Let him say it...I figure you can talk fair if I'm not around."

In the simple act of his leaving the meeting, Shane provides the impetus for the farmers to join together in a decision to make trips to town as a group. Throughout the film, he gently but insistently reminds people of their stake in the valley, and the ability of Starrett to help them to persevere. This fits the Louis and Miles profile for exceptional leadership:

Some of the greatest leadership may be provided by individuals who do not simply provide others with a vision of what they could be, but who coach members of the group to begin to articulate their own individual and collective wisdom.⁴

Shane persists in this quiet support until Wilson, the hired gun, shoots a homesteader. At the funeral, a family whose home was burned by Ryker not minutes after they packed and left decides to stay and the others join together to help out. At this juncture, Shane can be confident that his first issue of rallying the dispirited homesteaders has been solved. Perversely, Wilson provides the opportunity, which Shane seizes. He is free to strap on his gun and solve the technical problem: Ryker's firepower.

In shooting Ryker and Wilson, Shane knows that he has passed a point of no return for his life and his presence in the valley. The homesteaders want no more guns. Yet one person, Shane himself, still carries one. There is no room for his skills in the new circumstances he has been instrumental in creating.

At the movies, it's often easy to see good and evil, but not as easy to reconcile the issues of power that underlie their interplay. Preston Tucker may have been "right" but he lacked the insight to ensure that the locus of power moved to his own court. Even Shane's role is not simply that of a righteous person. His power is no more his commitment to a community than it is his ability to shift the balance of power. When all is said and done, the innovation persisted because Shane had the fastest gun.

Shane is a western movie, created far from the realm of contemporary organizations. But it leaves implications for innovations that are highly relevant to us today. **Leaders, innovation, and change** may not ever have been synonymous, even in those golden days of heroism on the silver screen.

FOOTNOTES

1Jack Schaefer, *Shane*, Bantam, 1949 (1980), p. 1.

2Michael Fullan, *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform*, Bristol, PA: Falmer Press, 1993, p. 76.

3Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, NY: Free Press, 1995, 4th ed., p. 337.

4Karen Louis and Matthew Miles, *Improving the Urban Highschool: What Works and Why*, NY: Teachers' College Press, 1990, p. 220.

Gillian Williams is a teacher in New York City and a practitioner of educational reform. She wishes to thank Professor Mary Driscoll of New York University for her insights into leadership and innovation. She welcomes cinematic insights to innovation at (518) 797-3783.