



Henry V

SHAKESPEARE'S SEMINAL WORK ON CORPORATE TURNAROUND

CEOs and Clinical Directors may draw inspiration from this classical tale of organisational leadership.

The situation in England is tense. Several bitter civil wars have left the people of England dissatisfied and the treasury depleted.

The previous king allowed vested interests to flourish. And Henry is seen as inexperienced. His powerbase is weak.

But Henry is clear about two things he needs revenue and to strengthen England's borders. His focussed plan is to reclaim territory in Northern France that will generate tax revenues and create a buffer zone between foreign interests and Britain.

He tries diplomacy first by securing the Church's support. But this does not prove decisive. The King of France refuses to meet Henry, sending instead his teenage son who compounds the insult with a gift of tennis balls.

In Henry's eyes England has no choice but to defend its territory - and he his reputation - or both will be soft targets for invasion. He prepares for war.

Support from his noblemen is half hearted since Henry is neither wealthy nor powerful. So he works with what he has, raising a modest army comprising for the most part peasants trained as archers and light infantry.

During the preparations Henry studies his senior staff closely. And before setting sail for France he confronts a conspiracy to betray him. He knows his country needs leaders with integrity. He also understands the value of a clear demonstration of intent. So, despite the fact that the conspirators include a close friend, Henry has them executed and sets sail for Harfleur.



*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.*

Once in France Henry leads his army from the front; going again and again to the breach in the castle wall to show his men how conviction and courage can win against incredible odds.

As his campaign proceeds, he builds a new team, promoting talented field leaders who fight with courage and preserve rather than expend lives. He is unconcerned with their pedigree only their ability. He also ruthlessly weeds out ill-discipline and dishonesty. In this way he earns the confidence of his men and they start to believe.

The decisive battle is Agincourt where the British are outnumbered five to one by an experienced army of French knights and heavy infantry.

Henry spends the evening before the battle amongst the men, presenting himself as a common soldier. He hears their fears and hopes with an open heart. Later, as he reflects, he is overwhelmed by the responsibility and loneliness of leadership.

But the next morning he talks to his soldiers of fraternity, dignity and pride. He understands why they fight and gives them what they need.

On the day Henry gets some luck – torrential rain and heavy armour bog the French down on the field and the British win.

Having accepted the French surrender, Henry does not gloat. He eschews the past, secures peace and marries Katherine de Vallois - the French king's daughter – consolidating his position and securing a strategic alliance.

This tale seems strangely familiar and current.



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