

## John Deffenbaugh blog: Who is your hero?

**John F Kennedy** was assassinated 50 years ago today. Where were you?

I was off school in Peoria Illinois at home with Bernadine our housekeeper. I can't remember why I was off ill – totally out of character for my mother to agree to such a thing as a day away from school. Must have been serious. Or more likely I put on a good show.

We were listening to the radio when the news flash came through. We looked at each other dumbfounded, and I remember Bernadine crying. Kennedy had not done much for the blacks then, but the expectations were high. As Norman Mailer observed, "For a time we felt the country was ours. Now it's theirs again."

I was glued to the TV over the next few days. Oswald, Jack Ruby, Pennsylvania Avenue, Arlington Cemetery. It was as if the nation was in a daydream. The major controversy was that the NFL did not cancel its football programme for the funeral and mourning.

The daydream has continued to this day. Kennedy was not a one-off, but many factors combined to make his legacy. As Robert Dallek titled his tour de force about Kennedy, it was *An Unfinished Life*. Leadership is about context, and Kennedy was context. Post-Eisenhower, civil rights, Cold War, Cuba, Berlin, Vietnam, Moon. He wanted to play the international agenda, so many people abroad owned Kennedy even more than Americans. Certainly more than Texans.

JFK's legacy resonates even more because we have not seen his likes since in the US. Carter had intellect. Reagan could communicate. Clinton had empathy. Obama has the soaring speech, but not the contemporaneous dialogue. I remember coming home from school and watching Kennedy's news conferences. They were both informative and enjoyable. Riveting.

Kennedy was what we would call a 'hero leader'. There are broadly three schools of leadership:

- **The Great Man** – about leadership personalities and traits
- **Visionary leader** – about behaviour, what leaders do
- **Situational leader** – specific to the context

These schools obviously overlap. Kennedy could be called a great man – a hero leader – who set out a vision (such as going to the Moon), and tailored his leadership to the context, in his case the Cold War.

Let's not be purist about this. The King's Fund published a report a couple of years ago entitled "No more heroes". Good intent, but lousy title. I quite like heroes. We need heroes. Not in the sense of the 'great man' hero, but rather someone we look to or admire for getting things done, for achievement, for progress.

In this sense, anyone has the potential to be a hero, and can find themselves in a position where they are regarded as a hero – by their peers, their patients, their bosses. Who will be the heroes to deliver the post-Francis change?

Kennedy is a hero to many. He inspired people, and quoted George Bernard Shaw when he observed: "Some look at things that are, and ask why? I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?"

Look around your organisation. Seek out and honour the heroes.

**John Deffenbaugh**  
**22 November 2013**