

REQUIEM FOR THE HEROIC MANAGER

By Dave Zielinski

New notions on the nature of effective leadership.

When it comes to our preference in leaders, many of us are still smitten by the heroic archetype. We like those who lead to possess almost super-human traits, to have the ability to do and see things the rest of us cannot. We've been taught to equate effective leadership with a chin-in-the-wind decisiveness, a go-it-alone problem-solving bravado and a general knack for performing near the deity level.

We know, of course, that these leaders aren't without faults. But we're quick to shrug off an absence of humility, shortage of sensitivity or an aversion to collaboration as long as they deliver results – and continue making the tough decisions we ourselves often dread.

Organizations have had their own love affair with the heroic leadership model. And why not? When business conditions were more stable, work more routine and workforces less educated, these leaders were able to almost single-handedly steer their organizations to market success.

But according to many top leadership researchers, the heroic model now lingers on its deathbed, relevant only for a dwindling set of circumstances. Faced with a more complex global business environment, and on the heels of high-profile scandals tied to leaders who cast themselves

in larger-than-life ways, organizations require a new style of leadership for a new age.

Indeed, research conducted over the past few years challenges much conventional thinking about how leadership style influences company performance.

The Changing Nature of Leadership

What skills and attributes does this post-heroic leader possess, and how will they serve him better than his predecessor archetype? Recent research sheds intriguing new light on the leadership traits most closely affiliated with sustained organizational success. In the best-selling book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*, author Jim Collins and his research team studied companies that made the jump from “good to great” financial results and sustained them for at least 15 years. Collins attributes much of the success of these companies to what he calls “Level 5” leaders, the highest level in a hierarchy of executive capabilities. These leaders blend extreme personal humility with intense professional will and exhibit a workman-like nature that Collins says made them – contrary to the heroic model – “more plow horse than show horse.” In contrast, two-thirds of the comparison companies in the study – those who didn't make the leap to greatness – had leaders with “immense personal egos that contributed to the demise or continued mediocrity of their organizations,” Collins says.

Level 5 leaders aren't devoid of ego or self-interest. They are supremely ambitious, “but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves,” Collins says. Rather than pursuing personal glory or star turns in



TV reality shows, these leaders seek to build something larger and more lasting than themselves, and most set up their successors for even greater success than they had (as opposed to Level 4 leaders, who often set them up for failure.).

How rare are Level 5 leaders in organizations? Collins believes they can be found throughout the management ranks, not just on mahogany row, but they're often difficult to identify. What are the telltale signs they walk among you?

"Look for situations where extraordinary results exist but no individual steps forth to claim excess credit," he says.

The Power of Shared Leadership

Few organizations possess as much collective wisdom about leadership as the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in Greensboro, North Carolina. The Center, whose leadership training programs regularly rank among the top

offerings in the United States, has been studying the changing nature of leadership practices around the world. One of the study's major early findings is that more organizations today perceive leadership as something that happens at all levels, not just within the executive suite. "Leadership has traditionally been about 'position' power, but it is becoming more about 'knowledge' power," says Andre Martin, a senior associate at the CCL who is leading the study.

Leading has grown more complex in fast-moving, rabidly competitive global environments, and organizations

increasingly realize that they can't solve new challenges with old approaches – in other words, strategies that relied on the heroic efforts of a few top leaders. As a result, leadership skills like collaboration, relationship building and influence across functional boundaries have gained new currency. “We’re finding leaders are being asked to do less on their own, and more to create an environment where others can help them succeed,” Martin says. “Leaders realize many of the challenges they face in managing in global environments are beyond their individual capabilities, and they need to be more adept at reaching out to other people in order to help solve them.”

In their book, *Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership*, authors David Bradford and Allan Cohen argue that a new model of “shared” leadership has grown even more essential in today’s markets.

“The assumptions of heroic leadership contribute to a mutually reinforcing system that causes and perpetuates

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the leadership trap of control

and passivity,” they write. “In assuming overall responsibility for the results of their units, leaders overmanage their subordinates. When issues are discussed, the topics are carefully restricted; the leader consults with subordinates when it seems appropriate but has the last say on critical decisions. This causes subordinates to constrict their focus to their own areas, blame others, pass responsibility up to the boss and protect their flanks. Observing this, the leader thinks, ‘Just as I expected, those people cannot accept responsibility or do more than stick to their own narrow assignments.’ This observation results in still greater control, which induces even greater passivity in employees. ‘The boss doesn’t want us to take responsibility,’ they conclude, ‘so we’ll do only what we’re told.’”

When such passivity is no longer tolerated by leaders, it “enlarges the psychological ownership of everyone in the business,” Cohen and Bradford say.

Shared leadership approaches don’t eliminate the leader’s role or abandon hierarchy. Leaders still remain accountable for a group’s performance and make many final decisions. But leaders and their direct reports now collaborate more openly and frequently in the management of a business unit.

Moving from an autocratic to a more participative leadership style isn’t for the weak of heart. Leaders must be prepared to cede some control and live with the inevitable mistakes as employees begin to influence more key decisions. Subordinates who only want to “do their jobs and go home” will need to be persuaded to become more invested in the business. Managers also must protect against going through the motions with such change.

“Heroic leadership can cloak itself in the language of empowerment, consensus and teams,” write Cohen and Bradford in *Power Up*. “The words may have changed, the degree of participation may have increased, and the boss may have found that soft talk is more effective than harsh orders, but everyone still assumes the boss is responsible for the group’s success.”

Yet when shared leadership is patiently and authentically implemented, the two say the payoffs can be huge for organizations in terms of a more engaged and committed workforce and improved decision making throughout the company ranks.

Credibility Reigns Supreme

Since they began their research 20 years ago, Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, preeminent leadership researchers and co-authors of the best-selling books *The Leadership Challenge* and *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It*, have had one finding reinforced for them time and again. Survey participants continue to say that personal credibility, or the belief others have in leaders and how their actions match their words,

“is the very foundation of leadership,” says Kouzes.

But he’s quick to point out that authority and credible leadership aren’t the same thing. People can continue to hold onto their titles for many reasons – power, ownership or money – but that doesn’t make them credible. “Leadership isn’t about the position, it’s about the behavior,” Kouzes says. “Doing something willingly because you trust or respect someone is different from doing it because they have authority to give you orders.”

Through thousands of surveys and business cases, the two researchers identified “five practices of exemplary leadership” that separate great from garden-variety leaders. The practices are:

1 Model the Way. Leaders create standards of excellence and then set an example for others to follow. They put up signposts when people are unsure of where to go or how to get there, and set interim goals so employees can achieve small wins as they work toward larger objectives.

2 Inspired a Shared Vision. Leaders envision the future, creating an ideal and unique image of what the organization can become. Through their magnetism or quiet persuasion, leaders enlist others in their dreams.

3 Challenge the Process. Leaders search for opportunities to challenge the status quo. And because they know that such risk taking involves mistakes and failures, they accept the inevitable disappointments as learning opportunities.

4 Enable Others to Act. Leaders foster collaboration and build spirited teams, and understand that mutual

respect is what sustains extraordinary efforts. They strive to create an atmosphere of trust and human dignity.

5 Encourage the Heart. Accomplishing extraordinary things in organizations is hard work. To keep hope and determination alive, leaders recognize contributions that individuals make. Leaders celebrate accomplishments and make people feel like heroes.

These five fundamentals have changed little over the years, Kouzes says – but what has changed is the context for applying them. Because of more unstable business conditions, more of today’s managers are forced to lead their organizations through difficult transitions, which places a greater premium on the “emotional” side of management, Kouzes believes. The greater the stress an organization is facing, the more important “soft” or interpersonal skills like showing empathy, building trust and inspiring others, become. In times of downsizing, reorganization or strategic change, leaders often struggle with striking the right balance between soft leadership skills and more bottom-line approaches traditionally relied on in these scenarios. “When leaders fail, it’s usually due more to a failure to develop good relationships with those around them than for any lack of intellect, experience or technical skills,” he says.

Kouzes also believes that instilling a strong sense of mission and direction in workers may be more vital now than ever. The faster leaders ask employees to move, the

clearer they need to be about where they’re heading – or else it becomes like accelerating through the fog.

“Employees want to know why they should be getting up in the morning to sell more insurance or write software code,” says Kouzes. “There’s nothing more demoralizing than a leader who can’t clearly articulate why we’re doing what we are doing.”

Leader, Know Thyself

The notion of *authentic* leadership, which holds that the best leaders possess the kind of self-knowledge that enables them to acknowledge weaknesses as well as strengths, and act in ways congruent with their core belief systems, also has gained currency in leadership development circles. A top evangelist for this thinking is Kevin Cashman, founder and CEO of Leadersource, a leadership development consultancy in Minneapolis and author of the best-selling *Leadership From the Inside Out*.

Why is authenticity so important in leaders? “An authentic leader is trusted by employees because they know that leader understands what his strengths and vulnerabilities are, and won’t put the company at risk by stepping into something he or she isn’t prepared to deal with,” Cashman says. “We trust them because we know they won’t put up a façade.”

We first need to grow as people to grow as leaders, Cashman believes. Too many organizations focus only on technical skills in leadership training programs at the



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The Strengths Revolution

By Dave Zielinski

Does a fixation on our weaknesses drain power from our strengths? Are organizations wasting precious resources trying to improve leaders' shortcomings when there's a bigger payoff in trying to nourish their talents?

These questions are at the heart of *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, the controversial book by authors Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton of the Gallup Organization. The authors suggest that most organizations operate based on two flawed assumptions about people: 1) Each person can learn to be competent at almost anything. 2) Every person's greatest room for growth is in his or her areas of greatest weakness. Their conclusions are based on thousands of interviews conducted by Gallup with managers and employees around the world.

An earlier book by Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break All Rules*, caused a similar stir with its premise that the world's great leaders share one trait: they break almost every rule held sacred by conventional wisdom. For example, great leaders don't believe that with enough training a person can achieve anything he sets his mind to, they don't try to help people overcome weaknesses and they don't believe everyone has unlimited potential. The one insight the authors heard repeated by tens of thousands of managers in their study was this: "People don't change much. Don't waste time trying to put in what was left out. Try to draw out what was left in. That is hard enough."

The idea is that we all have enduring or timeless talents as well as more changeable skills and knowledge. Being naturally inquisitive, competitive, strategic or empathetic are talents – recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behavior. The authors believe organizations should spend more time trying to identify strength "themes" in individuals, then match them to jobs where they can fully capitalize on those God-given talents, and less time trying to train employees to improve weaknesses that don't interfere with their strengths.

Buckingham says only 20 percent of people that Gallup surveyed for *Now, Discover Your Strengths* – overall, some 1.7 million employees in 101 companies from 63 countries – could say they strongly agree with the statement, "At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day."

Is the book's premise suggesting weaknesses be glossed over altogether? Hardly, says Buckingham. But rather than fixating on chinks in their armor, leaders should find ways to manage around them, ensuring they're surrounded with complementary talent and delegating tasks in areas of acknowledged weakness, so they're free to focus on areas of greatest strength.

Focusing on weaknesses and working to manage them, the authors believe, "will only help us prevent failure. It will not help us reach excellence." (For more on Buckingham, see next page.)

expense of helping executives identify values and purpose – what Cashman calls "personal exploration and mastery." While many organizations use 360-degree performance assessment tools to help leaders get an "outside-in" view of their leadership ability by surveying subordinates, peers and bosses, Cashman says they should use "720-degree" approaches as well. "This is the 'inside out' feedback that helps leaders connect with their intentions by getting to know themselves better through inner exploration," he says.

Authentic leaders also tend to be more ethical leaders, Cashman says. "When leaders split off principles and purpose from profit and performance, the effects can be devastating," he says. "Because of how dramatic the devastation was at Enron and other places, I think boards and executive teams have made the connection that ethics are no longer just a 'nice to have' to place on top of great bottom-line performance, but that they're essential for sustainability. Without ethics, they've seen how whole businesses can collapse."

Cashman says ethical leaders also have a vision that extends beyond Wall Street. "If your only constituency is shareholders, there is a greater chance of ethical breaches," he says. "The more 'others' there are in your equation, the better the chance you will lead more ethically."

The "triple bottom line" approach favored by some European managers is a good example of how to broaden

leadership perspectives, he says. These managers not only use financial yardsticks, but employee and customer "bottom lines" as well in measuring their yearly success. The latter metrics gauge things like customer and employee satisfaction and retention.

Cashman recently experienced firsthand how ethical leaders can change the fortune of an organization. He was attending a presentation by a chief operating officer at a client company when the COO began detailing a major operational mistake that had caused the company's stock price to plummet. The COO was suggesting ways the company might wriggle out of the mess and essentially "spin" the problem for industry analysts when the CEO abruptly stood up and said, "Do you want to look good or do you want to make a difference?"

Says Cashman: "It was a chilling moment because the CEO penetrated the situation and reminded everyone of what was really important and what was at stake. It wasn't a popular move, but it was the right one." The company decided on full disclosure, informing the market about the mistake and how it would promptly fix it. "They took a hit for it, but they bounced back," Cashman says. "But long term, a cover-up could have been far more devastating." **T**

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