

# A Hero at Work

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The need to be a hero at work is a major cause of executive failure. Insensitivity toward others, unilateral decision making, poor team work and reluctance to delegate, among other dysfunctional behaviours, all flow from the same source. Heroes are rightly admired for achieving great things but their fatal flaw is their excessive self-reliance and focus on their own needs. When they overdo it, heroes become self-defeating. Caught between their self-centred aims and the need to work through others, they often achieve neither. They don't have enough time or hard facts to make good decisions alone and people reporting to them are too disempowered to contribute in line with their full potential. What's worse? The hero mentality infects not only ego-maniacs and narcissists but **all** employees striving to excel and prove themselves.

Heroes undo themselves in two ways:

1. **The Failure to Facilitate:** They make decisions without fully involving others; their identity is that of a solution-generator rather than facilitator.
2. **The Failure to Experiment:** They think in a linear fashion, insisting on deciding before acting, hence not wanting to *discover* solutions through experimentation, trial and error and learning from mistakes.

## The Transition from Heroic Goal Scorer to Winning Coach

Before we explore how heroes handicap themselves, what's the alternative? The key transition is learning to be a hero without needing to score all the goals. Coaches can be heroes too if their teams excel. Being a coach or facilitator doesn't mean *never* making decisions or offering solutions. It's more about being a *playing coach*, hence knowing when to offer solutions and when to draw them out of others, thereby fostering joint ownership. Managers need to redefine themselves as coaches, catalysts, brokers, facilitators, promoters, orchestra conductors, stewards or any similar identity that shifts them away from the debilitating self-reliance of the individual contributor.

Consider the main two ways that heroes set themselves up to fail. Then we can discuss how to modify this self-defeating behaviour.

### 1. The Failure to Facilitate

Heroes strive to offer better solutions to problems than everyone else. This is the only contribution they know how to make. Their career success is based on their analytical ability, insight and experience. They ask questions to gather data to make their own decisions, not to draw solutions out of others. Hence, they ask "What happened?" – a factual question – rather than "What do you think we should do?" Otherwise they see questions as a sign of weakness, so they don't ask them.

In meetings, the hero either has a solution to offer or nothing to say. Quiet team members are just as trapped by the hero mindset. Facilitative questions aren't a valued contribution. Even for quiet heroes, it's solutions or nothing.

The difference between the hero's questions and those asked by a facilitator are shown in the table below. The key point is that heroes gather information to help them develop a solution while the facilitator draws solutions out of others.

<b>Hero's questions: fact-finding mission</b>	<b>Facilitative questions to draw solutions out of others</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happened?</li> <li>• When?</li> <li>• Where?</li> <li>• Who?</li> <li>• Why?</li> <li>• How?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What options do you see to deal with this issue?</li> <li>• What are the pros and cons of those options?</li> <li>• What obstacles might block your preferred option?</li> <li>• How might we surmount those obstacles?</li> <li>• What would you like to see happen?</li> <li>• What are the benefits of your proposal?</li> <li>• What are the costs?</li> <li>• Who else needs to be involved?</li> <li>• What are the next steps?</li> <li>• How can we make sure it happens?</li> </ul>

### **The hero's model of management**

Managers, for heroes, are decision makers. Their job is to make decisions for their teams. To be a manager, you must be the most knowledgeable, smartest or most experienced person in the team, the one who knows what to do. Managers love it when team members or colleagues ask them questions they can answer. They thrive on opportunities to use their experience, insight or analytical ability to tell others how to do things. Heroic managers call the shots, devise strategies and make deals. They regard facilitating, coaching or drawing ideas out of others as not real work or as simply boring. It's no thrill for a hero to be merely a catalyst for the creative thinking and actions of others. Sports heroes have no choice when they can't score goals anymore. They have to get off the field when they become coaches. Managers also hate to give up their hero status, so they just become increasingly poor goal scorers as well as poor coaches.

### **Getting work done through others**

Achieving targets through others is virtually the definition of management. Heroic managers think they're working through others if they delegate extensively. Task delegation, however, simply creates a collection of autonomous heroes, each doing their own thing. Much of the important work in our knowledge era involves creative thinking, problem solving and making strategic decisions. Getting this kind of work done through others can only be done well by asking good questions to stimulate creative thinking in others. This is what it means to be a facilitator, catalyst or coach. Better decisions and broader ownership are the result. Heroic managers delegate with the mindset that doing so frees them to focus on their preferred heroic tasks. But such delegation merely scratches the surface of working through others when the critical work is creative thinking. Task delegation amounts to off-loading, even abdication, rather than a genuine effort to work through others.

### **Excessive ownership**

Heroic managers feel passionate ownership for their team's objectives and wonder why no one else in their team is this committed. They worry about getting things right, pounce

on the deficiencies in everyone's output and seethe if a team member is behind schedule. They need to learn how their behaviour creates a self-fulfilling prophesy. By taking too much ownership, they snatch it away from everyone else. They want team members to be accountable but they disempower them by telling them what to do and by monitoring too closely while they do it. They need to see that asking the right questions could help team members think through how to approach issues for themselves. It doesn't occur to them that the only way to spread ownership is to show that the thinking and planning of others is valued. Asking for advice is the best way of showing that another person's thinking is worthwhile and appreciated.

## **Confidence**

Because they define themselves as solution generators, heroic managers lose confidence as they move beyond the functional content of their roles. Offering great solutions moved them up the ladder and they see no reason to drop the formula. But at higher levels, their team members have more and better answers. This undermines the confidence of heroic managers and drives them into a counterproductive level of detail. They need to learn how much easier it is to base their confidence on facilitation skills. It comes as a revelation that a small, repeatable set of questions (i.e. "What do you think?") can be used over and over again regardless of the content of an issue. This means less need to prepare for meetings because solutions can emerge through dialogue fostered by good questions. Facilitators know how to support open dialogue. They don't try to solve all of the problems using their own analytical skills. Confidence is improved when it is based on a repeatable process rather than on the ability to generate solutions.

## **Emotional Intelligence and Team Work**

Emotional intelligence requires awareness of self and others. Heroic managers have low emotional intelligence precisely because they focus on their own needs. They aren't aware of how excessive self-reliance hampers their ability to work effectively with and through others. They may participate in meetings in a lively, friendly manner, seeming to be good team players, but they fail to reap the full benefits of what others can contribute because they major on proposing their own solutions to problems. When two parties in a meeting both want to be right, the probability of really open, creative thinking is slim. Lively debates encourage combatants to cement their positions, which is not a recipe for open exploration of a range of options. Low emotional intelligence leads to the assumption that a logical argument based on hard facts should carry the day because everyone is rational. People object to one-way solutions, not just because there may be better ones but because they feel devalued. One-sided solution generation, no matter how rational, conveys the message to others that their input is unnecessary or not worth articulating. People object to good ideas simply because they had no say in developing them and because they are made to feel that they don't count. The hero shines by putting everyone else in the shade. The hero does not have to be bombastic or arrogant. Even modestly stated good ideas make one person look good at the expense of others. Emotionally intelligent managers know how to strike the right balance between their own suggestions and ensuring that the views of others are appreciated.

## **Time Management**

A major cause of poor time management is excessive personal ownership. Heroic managers take on more and more because of their insatiable appetite to prove

themselves, to show that they can still generate the best solutions. Their confidence isn't what it used to be at lower levels so they dare not turn down any new project they are asked to do. They operate in reactive mode because they don't invest time to think strategically about how to allocate the resources at their disposal. They need to learn to view management as investment, which means investing their own time and that of everyone reporting to them to get the best return, to add the most value. The key transition is to move from doing to facilitating, working through others much more fully to divest themselves of excessive psychological ownership.

### **Engaging with clients**

With both internal and external clients, heroic managers feel a sense of urgency to offer solutions. They ask fact-gathering questions to develop answers to a client's problem rather than asking facilitative questions like: "What would you like to see happen?" or "What sort of solution would best meet your needs?" When heroic managers propose their own solutions, their first attempts are often rejected. Instead of switching to facilitative mode, they simply try harder until something is accepted. This is hard work and, in the end, clients may not feel it is their solution. Their commitment might be limited as a result. Heroic managers feel trapped in these situations because they have conditioned themselves and their clients to expect them to have all the answers. Even taking time to ask questions about client needs before proposing a solution is still to operate in analytical mode. It is only when questions are asked about what clients would like to see happen that they are fully engaged in a shared effort to develop solutions.

### **Managing change**

Heroic managers are on one-way communicators. They think that lots of communication, offered frequently, is the way to get people on board. They need to put more emphasis on generating real dialogue where those on the receiving end of change are asked what steps they could take to adapt to a change or how they think that a new way of working might be tailored to their work. Heroic managers disengage and demoralize people by making it clear that management is in the driver's seat making the decisions about change. People then feel not only expendable during change but totally unvalued because it is painfully clear that their opinion is of no relevance in planning the change. Often, people react more to feeling devalued than to the change itself. Who wouldn't react negatively to being made to feel that his or her views were of no consequence?

### **Managing performance and giving negative feedback**

Heroic managers feel that it is up to them to deliver negative messages rather than using questions facilitatively to draw improvement plans out of subordinates. Hence why performance feedback is done so badly, usually generating defensiveness. Facilitative managers ask supportive questions to help team members acknowledge their own weak performance and devise their own corrective actions. For example, a facilitative approach with a team member who communicated badly in a meeting would be to ask: "What do you think went well and not so well in the meeting?" and then "What could you have done differently to avoid that?" Or "How do you think you could manage situations like that more smoothly in future?" Team members are more likely to be committed to improvement if they devise their own development plans and express in their own words what they are going to do differently in future.

## **Assertiveness**

Managers with a heroic mindset are often afraid to assert themselves because they know how infuriating it is for another hero's judgement to be questioned and how it can provoke a defensive, angry and vindictive reaction that creates a lose-lose outcome. If they could think like a facilitator, they would assert themselves by asking supportive questions to help others explore options for themselves and by selling those options in terms of the other person's interests. For example, a question like "What would be the advantages for you of doing X?" is less confrontational than the statement "I think it would be better to do X." In addition, such questions encourage the other person to think of the *advantages* of X, which is much better than the open-ended question "How would you feel about doing X?" The focus is also on the other person's interests, a much more productive way forward. So, it is possible to be assertive without being confrontational, but it takes a less heroic mindset to think in terms of supportive questions instead of making contradictory statements.

## **2. The Failure to Experiment**

Heroic managers cherish their ability to analyze issues and make decisions. To be fully in control, they exert themselves to make the right decision before taking action. The culture of "right first time" fosters risk-aversion and celebrates individual problem solving skills. But, the world is too complex to make important decisions in such a linear (albeit seemingly rational) manner. The alternative is to experiment, to learn from mistakes, to act before devising a 100% solution and to improvise on the basis of feedback.

### **Making career decisions**

Managers who can't say where they are going in their careers make the mistake of thinking that they should be able to make such decisions in their heads. The rational ideal is to decide first and then act, as we do when we decide where to go for our holidays. But making career decisions is like house-hunting. We make a list of the main features we want in a new house, but when we start looking at houses we see things we hadn't thought of previously. We might even develop a very different idea of what we want in a house. This example shows that some decisions need to be *discovered* through action, not decided before acting. The key is to use an exploratory process to discover a way forward rather than to rely exclusively on prior analysis. Many business decisions, such as how to improve a product, are even more complex. Not only do we not know how the market will react, we don't know what competitors are about to do. Making such decisions require heroic managers to let go of their reliance on their analytical ability and learn to make decisions on a more experimental basis.

### **Strategic thinking**

There is a controversy over the relative merits of conventional strategic planning and emergent strategy development based on organizational learning. The former is rational and linear – action follows exhaustive analysis. The latter says that strategy formulation is more of a learning process. It is somewhat irrational in that less control is possible but it is more adaptable and entrepreneurial because of its greater openness to feedback. The classic example of emergent strategy development is Honda's plan to sell large motorbikes in California while their executives rode around town on small scooters. They

“discovered” that the public were more interested in the scooters than in the large bikes, so their strategy evolved accordingly. Developing strategy on an emergent basis can still be systematic and guided rather than random but it relies more on discovery and improvisation than on definitive, prior analysis. The heroic manager needs to learn how to be more comfortable with the associated ambiguity of this approach and to learn how to deal with complexity. The key point is to let go of excessive self-reliance conceived as being in complete rational control of the decision making process.

## **The Development Plan – Minimizing Excessive Self-reliance**

To become less counterproductively heroic does not mean giving up your competitive urges. It's about getting the balance right. Being competitive sets a positive example to help the organization beat its competition. Great coaches are also fierce competitors. Heroic managers simply need to learn how to be heroic playing coaches. This means continuing to score some goals while facilitating the scoring of goals by others. Learning starts with self awareness, recognizing how much your identity and confidence are based on the need to generate your own solutions. The next step is to think strategically and regularly about how best to deploy your resources. This doesn't mean dividing up tasks based on what you find most and least interesting but rather thinking about what needs to be achieved. Where it is important to foster wide ownership, create the best solutions and develop others, the heroic coach excels in asking good questions to draw ideas out of others. Supportive questions are an effective influencing tactic. Asking the other person to articulate the benefits of a plan is more likely to win support than telling the person the benefits as you see them.

To become more of a question-asker and less of a solution provider, it is important to manage the expectations of stakeholders. One senior executive, upon taking a new job with a different employer, asked his team members individually what they thought were the issues and how they might be tackled. One older team member asked the new boss: “Do you want me to tell you how to do your job?” This team member was operating with the model of management that according to which managers must have all the answers. Similarly, if your boss and colleagues expect you to have ready answers to questions, it is hard to fight the temptation to give them what they want. Most organizational cultures reward and celebrate heroic individuals despite calling for more team work. Hence, personal development should be combined with managing the expectations of stakeholders and a shift in the model of leadership or management that prevails in your culture.

The difference between the heroic manager and the heroic coach is similar to the difference between level 4 and level 5 leaders as defined by Jim Collins in *Good to Great*. Level 4 leaders develop their strategy, then get the team on board (first WHAT, then WHO). Level 5 leaders (first WHO, then WHAT) get great teams together first and then grill them to draw new strategic directions out of them. Executives who are overly self-centred can work well with people on a superficial level by being outgoing, personable and approachable. But they can still fail to capture the full potential of others if their primary mode of contribution is to push their own ideas rather than draw them out of others along the lines of the level 5 leader.