Are you your own worst enemy? If you excel at devising great solutions and enjoy being a hero, you might fail to foster dialogue, collaboration and joint ownership of decisions.

You need not be a narcissist to want to be a hero. Just be an individual with a drive to differentiate yourself. If you are from the U.S., Australia, Canada or the U.K., you are more individualistic than people from other cultures according to Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede. This means you value self-reliance and autonomy more than collaboration and teamwork.

While accountability and self-reliance are clearly preferable to avoiding responsibility, excessive individualism has a downside. The increasing need for faster innovation and employee engagement demands closer collaboration.

The hero virus infects even quiet, less confident employees, so they sit in meetings saying nothing because they cannot think of solutions to offer. They do not think of acting as a catalyst or facilitator because this way of working does not feel like making a “real” contribution.

We need to recognize that excessive individualism must go the way of the dinosaurs in complex, fast-changing businesses.

The Hero’s Key to Success

Being a heroic solution generator works in early career stages, but it can block the shift to a more facilitative style of working in management. Individualistic managers want to continue scoring goals instead of asking their team members what they think.

They are not wholly to blame for their drive to keep scoring goals. It is what gets rewarded. And leaders are expected to have a vision, a more compelling answer to “Where next?” than anyone else.

The hero’s rise through the ranks brings greater visibility and pressure to get it right, leading to increased anxiety to have the answers. No wonder that alpha male and narcissistic types are overrepresented at the top.

The Hero’s Model of Management

Managers, in heroic cultures, are decision-makers rather than catalysts, coaches or facilitators. The manager is required to be the most knowledgeable, smartest or most experienced person in the team, the one who knows what to do at all times.

Confidence

Because their identity is bound up with being a solution generator, the confidence of heroic managers suffers as they rise too far above their functional backgrounds. They fail to make the transition from solution generator to facilitator, coach or catalyst.

It is a great relief to some such managers to learn that a small set of facilitative questions (i.e., What do you think?) can be used repeatedly regardless of the content—a much easier skillset on which to base one’s confidence than knowledge given today’s complexity and rapid pace of change.

Effectiveness in Meetings

Only one form of contribution is recognized in a meeting—making statements about the content under discus-
Heroes prepare for meetings, wanting to have their answers ready, to be seen as knowing what they are talking about and being able to make firm decisions. If they have no content to contribute, they remain silent, not seeing engaging questions as a valid form of contribution.

**Delegation**

Delegation is the classic tool of heroic managers. To devote their time to scoring goals on strategic issues, they offload mundane tasks to others. In such cultures, individuals do tasks in relative isolation and are held accountable accordingly. Delegation is thus not a tool to facilitate collaboration or joint ownership.

**Managing People**

Heroes reward self-reliance and individual effort. Teamwork might be encouraged, but it is individual goal-scoring that earns the most points. Because heroic managers want to devote most of their time to doing interesting work (scoring their own goals), they prefer employees who are as maintenance-free as possible.

While some employees may need a little direction and motivation, heroic managers do not want to spend much time actively coaching and developing people as it distracts them from doing “real” work, scoring goals, that is.

To be more effective, managers need to reframe their roles to recognize that being a catalyst, facilitator and coach is their real job, not scoring goals.

**Time Management**

Being self-reliant, heroes assume a high degree of personal ownership for their time and output. Sharing ownership does not come naturally for them, but taking it all on their own shoulders is stressful.

By conveying the impression that everything is their territory (the buck stops here), heroic managers create a vicious circle because their team members respond by taking less ownership, which confirms to managers that they need to be the responsible ones.

Time management is a problem for heroic managers, not because there is too little time or because they cannot prioritize, but because they take too much ownership instead of fostering shared responsibility. This does not call for better delegation, a heroic manager’s solution, but more shared psychological ownership.

Deeply shared ownership can only be achieved by involving employees in making all key strategic decisions. Fully engaged employees should initiate taking on more and not need to be delegated to as in the heads-and-hands metaphor.

**Communication Style**

Heroic managers prefer one-way communication because they feel they have important messages to deliver and they need people to listen. Further, they see it as their role to deliver information rather than to engage people in dialogue. Their influencing style is “tell and sell,” and they are poor listeners. Feeling that they have more important things to do, they allow themselves little time to get a message across. They regard having to listen to questions as a nuisance, which shows in their body language. The result: silent but grudging compliance at best. At worst, their listeners simply tune them out or fail to absorb their message.

**Addressing Personal Development Needs**

Heroes want to address their personal weaknesses or development needs in themselves rather than regard them as team functions. Heroes need to be all things to all people, thus pushing themselves to excel on all of the organization’s leadership competencies rather than relying on others to fill in their gaps. For example, instead of fostering creativity in the team as a whole, heroic managers struggle to be more creative themselves, which is self-defeating if it discourages team-wide creative thinking.

**Managing Performance**

Heroic managers feel that they need to carry the full weight of delivering performance messages. Not thinking in facilitative terms, they do not ask supportive questions to help team members acknowledge their own performance improvement needs and devise their own development plans.

A facilitative performance discussion with a team member who performed 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 do differently next time?”

Team members are more committed to improvement when they express, in their own words, what they will do differently in future. Heroic managers over-rely on one-way communication, which is rarely effective.
Heroic managers avoid performance discussions like the plague because their normal one-way communication style is always resented and reacted to defensively. Taking too much individual ownership is clearly self-defeating in this case.

**BEING ASSERTIVE**

People with a heroic mindset hesitate to assert themselves because they know how infuriating it is for another hero to be challenged and how it can provoke a defensive reaction, leading to a lose-lose outcome. Alternatively, feeling that they are right, they blow people away with an overly strong, overly emotional blast.

Less heroic managers assert themselves by asking supportive questions to help the other party explore options. 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.” So, it is possible to be assertive without being confrontational.

Asking, rather than telling, generates dialogue from which both parties can learn. But heroic managers like to get their feelings off their chests, confirming a focus on their own needs first and foremost.

**RESOLVING CONFLICT**

When two heroes debate, they focus exclusively on those aspects of the other party’s position that they find objectionable. This is because they are driven to win, to be right. Another option is to preface their own input with statements about what aspects of the other party’s views they think are worthwhile. Also, they can then express disagreement using questions that ask whether an alternative approach might better meet the other party’s needs. Heroic debaters focus mainly on their own needs.

**MANAGING CHANGE**

Heroic managers over emphasize one-way communication. They think that lots of it, offered frequently, is the best way to get people on board. They do not think of generating dialogue where those on the receiving end of change are asked what steps they can take to implement a change or how they think a new way of working might be tailored to their work requirements.

Heroic managers disengage people by making it clear that management is in the driver’s seat when it comes to making decisions about change. People then feel devalued because it is clear that their opinion is of no relevance in planning the change. Often, people react to feeling devalued more than to the change itself.

**EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT & INNOVATION**

Heroic cultures stifle employee engagement and innovation because of the intense pressure for those at the top to be right, to avoid admitting mistakes. No wonder it feels lonely at the top.

The cult of leadership portrays leaders as having magical insight that others lack. To maintain their aura of magical power, it is hard for those at the top to admit being wrong until it is too late.

While a sports team cannot have too many great goal scorers, organizations are hierarchies of authority where, the higher up you are, the more you are expected to have the right answers.

Knowledge workers want to contribute their own strategic ideas, but they face a brick wall as it is not their place to do such thinking. Real engagement does not happen because employees are not invited to think beyond their immediate jobs.

**BEING LESS HEROIC BUT MORE EFFECTIVE**

You need not score all of the goals to be successful. Coaches can be great achievers if their teams excel. Being a coach or facilitator does not mean never making decisions or providing input. You can be a playing coach, hence knowing when to offer your solutions and when to draw ideas out of others.

The first step is to reframe how you see yourself, moving from individual goal-scorer to coach, catalyst or facilitator. This means basing your confidence to handle diverse situations and problems on your ability to ask a small set of repeatable questions, such as:

- What options do you see for addressing this issue?
- What are the pros and cons of your preferred option?
- How will that solution meet your (or the business’s) needs?
- What steps do we need to take to implement your solution?
- Who else needs to be involved?
- What obstacles do you foresee and how can we get around them?
- How will we measure success?

Organizational and career success in a more complex, interdependent world increasingly depends on striking the right balance between the needs of others and your own. Focusing too much on your own needs is ultimately self-defeating even though scoring goals gets you a temporary spot in the limelight.

We need to recognize that excessive individualism must go the way of the dinosaurs in complex, fast-changing businesses that need to capitalize on the “wisdom of crowds” to prosper.

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