The Issue with Heroes

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Everyone likes heroes. They make for great movies, stories, and sporting events. They are responsible for successful startups. They give captivating publicity to cities, organizations, and even countries. They provide great endings to otherwise not-so-great circumstances. In the workplace, however, they are not always so great. The problem is when an organization becomes dependent on a single person or few people. What does it do to the rest of the people? What happens when the heroes are gone?

While not so good for movies, the obvious better alternative is when everyone contributes. When everyone performs at or above expectations. Then the performance of the organization is balanced and resilient. The odds of consistent success are higher and the risk of failure lower.

Yet a balanced and consistent performance isn't the reality for many organizations. Many depend on the sales, engineering, marketing, negotiation, delivery, or leadership ability of just a few people. While this may work for a season, it isn't sustainable or scalable. At some point people burn out. The skills aren't transferred. The approach becomes ineffective. Or the luck runs out.

Organizations who lead their industries, especially over long periods of time, command the highest valuations. They earn the most respect because they have a consistent, sustainable, and scalable model. They go well beyond good timing, leveraging a few relationships, exploiting a few contracts, or depending on a few people. They don't rely on a fleeting circumstance. Luck isn't part of their strategy. They perform based on repeatable capabilities. They follow well-designed best practices. They might have a great starting lineup, but also a bench of people who regularly contribute. They flip the 80-20 rule. Rather than having 80% in a supporting role, they have 80% who are performing.

How well would your organization perform if you lost a few top performers or contracts? How dependent are you on temporary circumstances? If just a few people are contributing 80 percent of your results, be forewarned. Your results may look fine at the moment, but for how long? As the cliché goes, even a broken clock is right twice a day. Don't depend on heroics if you expect to be successful for the long term.

If you are leading a team, evaluating an organization to work for, or a company to invest in, look beyond the outward results. Dive deeper and evaluate how well the organization accomplishes these performance enabling practices:

1. Implement a competency model that clearly defines the skills, knowledge, and attitudes people need to be successful.
2. Define best practices that people consistently follow that produce the desired products, services, and outcomes.

3. Equip people with systems, tools, and resources that enable maximum productivity and effectiveness.

4. Deliver frequent coaching by managers and training that keeps people growing and learning at a steady pace.

5. Create an incentive system that doesn't just reward heroics, but consistent effort and desired behaviors.

6. Foster a collaborative team spirit that places the highest value and respect on helping the whole team succeed.

7. Involve, encourage, and motivate everyone rather than giving most of the attention to the star performers.

8. Track and highlight everyone's progress, not just the final results of the few who hit the proverbial home runs.

9. Maintain a sense of organizational pride and confidence based on deep and broad capabilities rather than fortuitous circumstances.

10. Implement consequences, both reinforcing and correcting, based on people's behaviors in addition to their results.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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