

The Resurrection of the Heroic Leader—Sort Of

If heroic leaders are an outmoded idea, how do you explain Barack Obama?

Those of us in the leadership development field have been saying it for a while now: The days of the heroic, larger-than-life leader are over. And good riddance. We told leaders not to be heroes and followers not to expect one. Then along came Barack Obama.

This one individual has captured the hearts, minds and imaginations of not just his country, but the world. Even before the current economic crisis hit, Obama was seen as a knight in shining armour, the kind of leader who can single-handedly guide us all (and, yes, I include myself in that number) to a better future. On November 4, 2008, people did not vote for the Democratic Party—they voted for one man. This is more than media hype. We are smitten. We are inspired. We want a hero.

Perhaps it's time to revisit the heroic leadership model.

Not all that long ago, the Great Man theory of leadership was alive and well. In business, politics and the military, leadership was seen as the domain of the strong, charismatic, and (seriously) tall. We gladly lay our hopes in the hands of such great men (yes, they were always men) as John F. Kennedy, Lee Iacocca and Jack Welch whose style of leadership was one of unabashed confidence, fearlessness and resolve. Vulnerability, doubt and modesty were for followers not leaders. Heroic leaders didn't ask for help; they made tough calls based on what they knew to be right. As Richard Nixon once said, "The decisions that are important must be made alone." Great Men of the past willingly shouldered enormous responsibilities, and we were grateful for it.

But over time, the Great Man theory got stale. In the business world, we began to question the notion that we should—or even could—rely on a single individual. Then younger generations demanded a different style of leadership, one in which their voices are counted. As our world became more complex and faster paced, we shifted our faith to a more collaborative and adaptive leadership style in which an effective leader is a facilitator who brings out the best in his or her team. Followers are no longer seen as passive spectators, but active participants with valuable ideas and insights. As Harvard leadership scholar Ron A. Heifetz told us in 2003, "Instead of looking for saviours, we should be looking for leaders who can move us to face the problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions—the challenges that require us to learn new ways." It was official: The all-powerful, all-knowing Great Man was out.

How then do we account for the election of Barack Obama, would-be saviour to millions around the world? While those of us in the business world have gone about the challenging work of developing hero-less organizations, the political system has remained stubbornly attached to the heroic model. Despite changes in society, technology and organizational structures, political parties everywhere continue to seek out and promote heroic leaders with mixed results—until now. Which makes me wonder if those of us in the business world have been wrong? Was the Great Man model ever truly outmoded or were we all just waiting for the emergence of someone worthy of the title?

Am I suggesting that executives should be heroes again? Not exactly. The election of Barack Obama offers all leaders a great opportunity for learning, but those who take it as license to revert to heroic leadership behaviours will have missed the point. Because there is something different about this Great Man called Obama. As Heifetz reminded us, the work of the leader is to drive the decision-making process with self-assurance, intelligence, and courage. We may look to Barack Obama to be our hero, but I'd argue that such heroism lies not in the decisions he arrives at but how he gets there. Compassionate and modest, he inspires confidence with his individual strength, but also his willingness to share his power, to trust differing points of view, and to park his ego at the door.

So am I suggesting that executives should strive to imitate Barack Obama? No, not that either. In the case of Obama, refreshing and much-needed leadership skills come packaged in one individual. He is, by all indications, an exceptional leader, one to be admired but not easily imitated. Rather than begin the frantic search for Obamas of their own, organizations should work on developing an executive team that, together, can share the responsibility for intelligent Obama-style leadership that demonstrates the humility, honesty, empathy and vulnerability we need in those at the helm.

In essence, what separates the Great Men of yesterday from the effective leaders of today is not the person so much as the process. It's time, in other words, to replace the Great Man model of leadership with the Great Team model. Yes, we all want heroes. What could be better than a boardroom full of them?

©This article was written by Dr. Rosie Steeves, co-principal of The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc., a Vancouver - based consulting company. The Refinery is interested in hearing from readers on leadership issues in the workplace. All information is treated confidentially. E-mail your questions, comments and ideas to rosie@refineryleadership.com