

# Heroes II: Attack Of The Process Clones

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A recurring theme in Spiderman comics is newspaper editor J. Jonah Jameson's animosity toward the webslinger. Even though Spidey is a bona fide hero with a solid track record of saving the girl, the city, and the day, Mr. Jameson is determined to unmask and discredit him.

Since even comic book heroes can be polarizing, the divided response to our "Heroics" article (*Program Manager*, September-December 2003) shouldn't have been a surprise. Still, the volume of e-mail we received on this article exceeded any of our previous writing efforts, with readers expressing strong feelings on both ends of the spectrum.

To those who loved the article, we thank you and hope you enjoy this one too. To those who were less than enamored—let's try again.

## Heroism: One Word, Too Many Definitions

Our first article was a response to the negative connotations many people assign to heroism-related words, and most of the objections we received reflected that negative perspective. That's unfortunate, since "hero" and "heroine" are perfectly fine words that can be used to de-

scribe a person who performs admirably, who inspires people, and who is worthy of respect. Indeed, that's how we intended the word to be understood.

Apparently, not everyone accepts that definition. One reader described heroes as people who simply clean up messes they made in the first place. Given the percentage of people who don't clean up their own messes, that type of hero may not be so bad, but we agree that simply fixing a problem you caused isn't exactly optimal behavior. Real heroes also fix problems they *didn't* cause, and we contend their contribution to an organization is a net gain.

Other correspondents seemed to think heroism is defined by working long hours—a serious misunderstanding. Heroes are focused on producing results, and work hours are not a result—they are a *means* to a result. Some people work long hours because they are slow, inefficient, or reluctant to go home for any number of reasons. Real heroes often produce results without spending all day doing it. Their well-honed skills and ability to empower others to assist, along with their superhuman strength, may create the illusion of ease, particularly if they work quickly. But make no mistake: when you see a hero do the im-

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possible in record time without breaking a sweat, you are watching a master at work. Simply working late on a regular basis or struggling and sweating a lot is something less than heroic.

### Heroism and Process: Sworn Enemies?

The most frequent misunderstanding was based on the idea that heroics and process are mutually exclusive. In fact, a program manager needs both, and our point was that heroes and heroines are ignored or disparaged at the PM's peril. PMs need a healthy respect and deep understanding of the role both types play.

A few readers offered anecdotal evidence of situations where process replaced heroics, much to the benefit of the corporate bottom line. It is tempting to reply with even more anecdotes of successful heroes, but arguing by anecdote is not, ultimately, a convincing approach. And in fact, when an individual finds a way to make the process work, that individual may indeed be ... a hero.

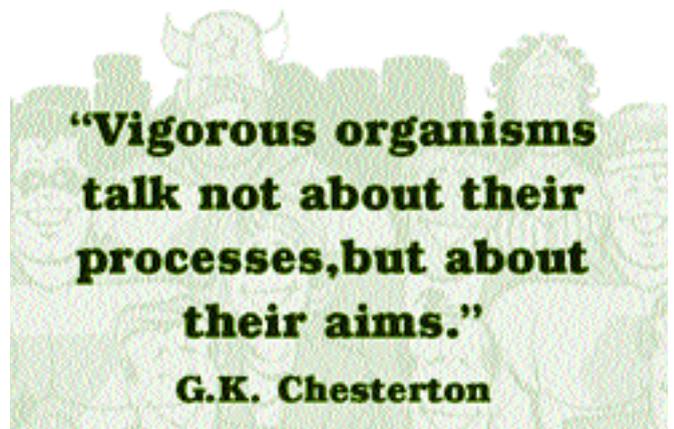
Retired Hallmark creativity guru Gordon MacKenzie's 1996 book *Orbiting the Giant Hairball* is practically a how-to guide to heroics. More accurately, it is a *why-to*. MacKenzie explains that in many process-oriented organizations, "intricate patterns of effective behavior have grown around lessons of success and failure, creating a Gordian Knot of Corporate Normalcy." He goes on to point out that the problem is, "Corporate Normalcy derives from and is dedicated to past realities and past successes. There is no room ... for original thinking or primary creativity."

If all we have is process, how can we ever do anything new? Please don't think process can produce truly creative results because you simply can't get there from here.

MacKenzie advocates seeking a balance between Corporate Normalcy (process) and dynamic creativity (heroism), where a person is able to occasionally operate "beyond accepted models, patterns or standards—all while remaining connected to the spirit of the corporate mission." The individual needs to respect and be part of the corporate organization because it contains the mission and purpose for the work, but individuals also need to be free to be "appropriately inappropriate" when the situation warrants it. This type of courageous creativity is an important component of heroism.

### What's Wrong With Process?

It would be silly to say processes are always bad. Indeed, our original article pointed out that "repeatable, well-documented, robust processes have value." However, an undue focus on process may 1) create a false sense of security, since no process is perfect; 2) decrease an organization's ability to respond to unexpected developments; and 3) shift the focus away from results. Heroes address all three issues. This is not to say every focus on process



is undue or extreme, but relying *solely* on process and ignoring (or disparaging) heroics is just as much a symptom of bad management as relying on heroes completely. Our first article explained that heroics are sometimes an indication of dysfunctional management, a point worth repeating here. However, we believe procedural homogeneity leads to a false, illusory comfort that in turn leads to stagnation and apathy, while heroics keep things honest, lively, and effective.

Process is all about repeatability and adherence to standards. Those are important components of organizational behavior and achievement, but they aren't the whole story. Process is singularly ill-suited to doing something new, creative, or unanticipated. Process is designed to propagate yesterday's success rather than craft tomorrow's breakthrough. Process also tends to be failure-averse, which is not always a good thing. In an attempt to prevent mistakes, a strict focus on process may inadvertently prevent learning, growth, and opportunity. As former CEO Rondalyn Varney Whitney observed, failure is the only way to measure maximum performance, so our organizations need to allow room for failure with an understanding that the opportunity gained will far exceed the damage that could occur. This is something most processes don't address.

One other problem with a myopic focus on process is that it removes individual responsibility. If a person follows a process and things go badly (which even the most rabid process advocates must admit happens occasionally), the process is clearly to blame. Similarly, if things go well, the individual earns relatively little credit—after all, the process saved the day. Thus there is not much personal accountability and little sense of personal commitment if everything is based on following a process, and that is a problem. It leads to apathy, boredom, frustration, and a number of other atmospheric poisons.

Because heroes, in contrast, are mindfully engaged in determining their path, they are directly accountable for

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their results. They take responsibility for their actions and outcomes. This buy-in and involvement has a positive effect on quality that far outweighs any potential redundancy of effort. As we pointed out in the first "Heroes" article, process helps avoid re-inventing the wheel—but it doesn't do to forget that sometimes the old wheels do need re-invention.

A final comment on process was inspired by *Re-Imagine!* Tom Peters' latest book, which devotes much of a chapter to the importance of heroes. It is true, we must have processes. And equally true, we must hate them. That is, we must not love our processes unduly; and when compared with our feelings about results, customers, and so on, our attitude toward process should look an awful lot like hate. In practical terms, that translates to a willingness to challenge our processes, refining or replacing them as necessary—"re-imagining" them, to use Peters' term. And heroes? Gotta love 'em.

### **Heroics and Process—Call a Truce**

It is tempting to ask who makes the greatest contribution to organizational performance, the solid citizen who keeps his head down and unquestioningly follows the process, or the heroine who challenges, changes, improves, or replaces that process? That's the wrong question. Surely *both* contribute, and neither should look down on the other. Process and heroics are part of the same team, and ultimately it's about people. People can demolish a great process or salvage a lousy one.

Heroes are often unpredictable, but that shouldn't be confused with being unreliable. You may not know what the hero is going to do next, but there is great certainty about how things are going to turn out in the end. Reliability is important. Predictability is less so.

If we've said too few good things about process, that's only because so much has already been said by others far more experienced than we are. Program management literature is full of articles proclaiming the virtues of various processes, maturity models, and so forth. There is much to be said about those articles and ideas. We've aimed to provide not a counterpoint, but a complementary point, addressing a dimension of programmatic excellence that hasn't received much press—and of that, some undeserved bad press.

We only hope that J. Jonah Jameson will someday come to see the good things Spiderman contributes to his city.

**Editor's note:** The authors welcome comments and questions. Quaid can be contacted at [quaidc@nga.mil](mailto:quaidc@nga.mil) and Ward at [wardd@nga.mil](mailto:wardd@nga.mil).