

Heroics, Process, and Program Management

Superheroes In The Organization

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In Terry Gilliam's hilarious but underrated 1989 film *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, an army officer is brought before his commanding general, in the middle of a pitched battle, for what appears to be a promotion or reward. The general's assistant tells a tale of the officer's battlefield heroics, of his courage under fire, and his willingness to accept personal risk to secure his unit's objectives. When the story has been told, the general instructs his assistant to take the heroic officer out back and shoot him because such extraordinary behavior "damages the morale of ordinary soldiers."

The scene came to mind at a recent meeting. A dozen people were discussing a process improvement activity, and one of the group's explicit assumptions was that due to a lack of well-documented processes, most of the things that get done are the result of "heroic efforts." This was considered unfortunate and undesirable. In fact, a Power-Point chart was displayed that included the line "Getting things done by heroic efforts without sufficient resources is Level 1 behavior." Our objective was to get to Level 2, where things apparently get done by people who always have sufficient resources and never resort to heroism. This disparaging of heroics and preference for procedural homogeneity is metaphorically and morally equivalent to shooting the hero.

Few would argue that repeatable, well-documented, robust processes have

value. It is important to learn from experiences and avoid reinventing the wheel. But as Robert Townsend observed in *Further Up The Organization*, it is better to have champions working for (and with) you than zombies. If most of the accomplishments within an organization are the result of heroic effort, could it be there are simply a lot of heroes in that organization? Similarly, if every activity is the result of following an established procedure, is that not the definition of a mindless, inhuman, zombie-filled bureaucracy? Where's the innovation? Where's the life?

The truth is, getting things done through heroic efforts without sufficient resources is admirable, and we mere mortals need to be heroes and heroines for the sake of our organizations as well as for ourselves.

The Case for Heroes

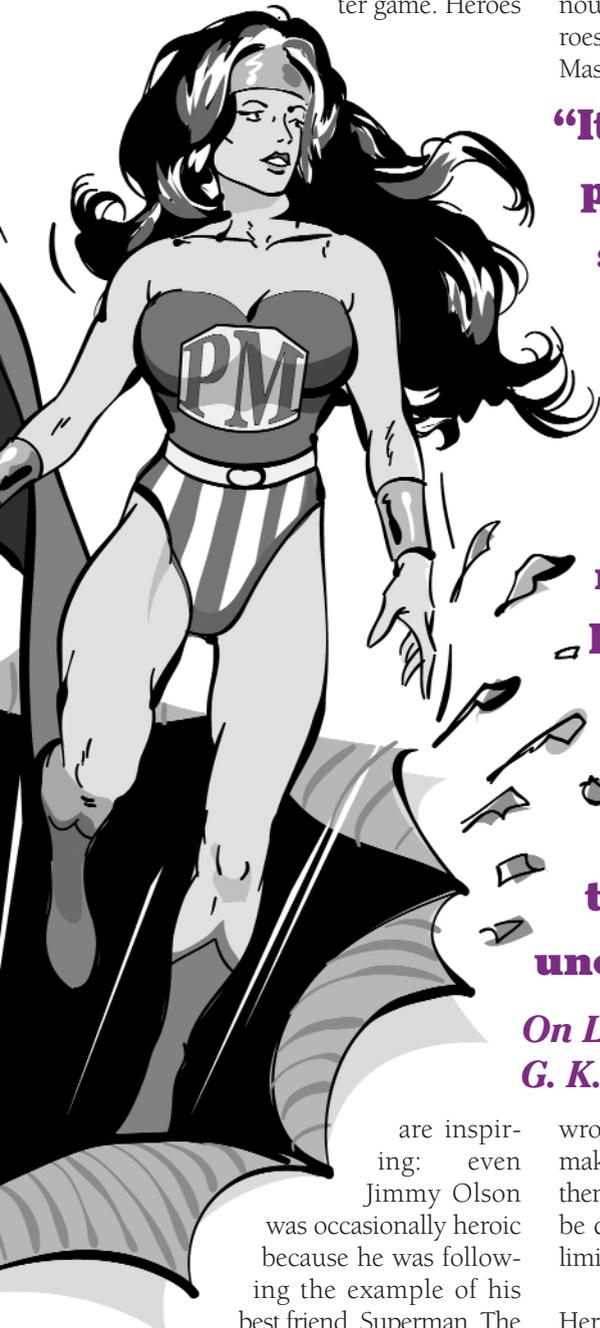
Why are heroes—and from here on, we use the word to embrace heroes and heroines—necessary? To point back to



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the meeting that sparked this idea, heroes are necessary precisely *because* sometimes there are not sufficient resources (for whatever reason), and the only way anything will get done is if a hero comes along. Heroes can save the day. Would we really be better off without them?

Acts of heroic behavior are infectious. They inspire groups, raise the benchmark on performance, and drive individuals to be better people or play a better game. Heroes



are inspiring: even Jimmy Olson was occasionally heroic because he was following the example of his best friend, Superman. The same thing happens in the real world, even when the inspirational hero isn't

wearing a red cape. In the trenches in World War I, a Marine famously asked, "Do you want to live forever?" The catchphrase inspired the American Forces to sweep rapidly through the fields of battle, pushing the front back toward Germany and driving the war to its conclusion.

In addition to their value in times of crisis, we also need heroes when everything is going well, when all activities and results are predictable, homogeneous, and dull. In such situations, heroes often uncover villains in disguise. Mason Cooley summed it up when he

"It is the great peril of our society that all its mechanisms may grow more fixed while its spirit grows more fickle. ... Let us pay a little more attention to ... [the] possibilities of the heroic and unexpected."

***On Lying In Bed*
G. K. Chesterton**

wrote "heroes are born to be troublemakers." They shake things up and set them right, showing the world what can be done if we are willing to push the limits and explore possibilities.

Heroes bring truth to an organization, and in the words of a well-known hero, "the truth will set you free."

It comes down to this: heroes are necessary for the life, vitality, and continued success of any organization. If heroism is routinely disparaged, or—worse yet—if heroes are routinely taken out back and shot by their supervisors, there is little reason to believe the organization will survive.

Believe It Or Not—The Opposition

In the "tragic but true" category, there are people who reject the idea of heroics as admirable. What are their objections?

NUMBER ONE:

HEROES ARE UNPREDICTABLE.

Since they don't follow a formally established process, it's difficult to know for sure if a hero will indeed save the day. Such uncertainty can be unnerving to the unimaginative or those without faith, and so they seek refuge and comfort in the so-called certainties provided by processes.

The response to this objection couldn't be simpler: baloney! What is more consistent than (insert hero name here) saving the day? Heroes may not come with a guarantee—but neither does a process. Even occasional heroics are frequently a sign of more to come. It's important to recognize that while heroes may not be around every time we want them, they do tend to show up—in the spirit of just-in-time logistics—right when we *really* need one.

NUMBER TWO:

HEROES ARE ONE-DEEP.

They take vacations, occasionally get sick, get transferred, get dead, or are otherwise unavailable at critical times. How can an organization count on heroes if they aren't around all the time? This objection is based on the self-fulfilling belief that heroes are rare. Indeed, if Baron Munchausen's stories are true (and they all are, I'm told), then the shortage of heroes may be caused more by the way we treat them than by the inherent nature of heroics. We need organizations that foster not discourage heroes. There are plenty of models to follow: the X-Men, The Justice League

of America, and the United States Marine Corps, to name just a few. What these organizations, fictional and real, do well is create environments where heroic efforts are expected as a matter of course from all their members.

NUMBER THREE:

HEROES HAVE FEET OF CLAY.

This objection, unlike the others, has some truth, and there's no getting around it. Even in the comics, superheroes have limitations: Superman has to avoid kryptonite; Wonder Woman is nothing without her golden belt; Green Lantern can't deal with the color yellow; Ironman worries about rust.

Similarly, real life heroes have real life limitations, and our heroes will inevitably let us down at some point. This doesn't negate the good they have done, nor does it necessarily prevent their future feats of strength. But whether on the comics page or in the conference room, we ought to take a clear-eyed look at our heroes and understand that underneath the mask they are human too. A similarly clear-eyed look at ourselves just might uncover a caped crusader lurking beneath our ordinary selves, waiting to don a mask and be revealed.

Heroism and the Program Manager

Program managers (like other human beings) have a responsibility to recognize, reward, encourage, and nurture the heroic tendencies in themselves and the people around them. Tom Peters argues this point loudly and often as he describes the War for Talent (and its corollary, the War For Attitude). It turns out people really *are* the most important component of any organization, heroic people in particular.

Much of the PM's responsibility involves forecasting cost, schedule, and performance metrics. Such fortune telling is an inexact science at best, and wise PMs learn to prepare for the unexpected. An excellent way for PMs to get ready to respond to negative surprises—be they cost overruns, super-villains, or test failures—is to make sure there's a hero or two on the team. At the very least, a PM

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needs a Bat Signal or some other mechanism to call in heroic support when it's needed.

PMs ought to regard heroes as their weapons of choice in a chaotic world. The unpredictable variables, problems, and challenges that plague the cost, schedule, and performance of programs are exactly what the hero is on alert for. This type of chaos is candy for heroes, who are often themselves "unknown variables" in a positive sense and can deftly match external chaos with their own internal flexibility and unpredictability. A PM is more easily able to counteract unforeseen, unpredictable problem variables with an unforeseen, unpredictable hero on hand.

PMs with a Machiavellian streak will appreciate the fact that heroes tend to catch bullets. They can act as a human shield and help PMs identify both pitfalls and goldmines. A hero's services allow for

"PM preservation," as the hero navigates a minefield or engages in a velocity contest with a speeding bullet. What our Machiavellian PM may not appreciate is that heroes don't always survive these interactions. A kinder, gentler, wiser PM would do well to protect the heroes, to keep in mind that they aren't all bullet-proof, and to resist the urge to shoot them down even if their extraordinary deeds do make "ordinary soldiers" feel bad.

Chinese Proverb: Heroes Create Circumstances; Circumstances Create Heroes

From an organizational standpoint, heroics can be a sign of a robust organization or a sign of a disorganized mess. In either case, heroes are vital and heroics are good. Repeatable processes are important and useful, but heroes are essential and irreplaceable, if for no other reason than that things occasionally go wrong in unanticipated ways. A person with the ability to respond quickly and fix these unexpected problems richly deserves the title "hero."

Heroes do amazing things. They are carriers of truth and paragons of excellence. But as Baron Munchausen showed, they are also vulnerable to the vagaries of human jealousy and small-mindedness. Successful PMs will recognize the value of heroism and nurture such tendencies in the people around them. If we are to be good stewards of the blood and treasure entrusted to us by this country's taxpayers and warfighters, we need to recognize, protect, and encourage the heroes in our midst.

Editor's Note: The authors welcome comments and questions. Quaid can be reached at QuaidC@nima.mil and Ward at WardD@nima.mil.

Readers who are interested in learning more about Baron Munchausen's exploits can access the full text of Rudolph Erich Raspe's The Travels and Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen at <<http://www.rickwalton.com/authtale/munch.htm>>.