

Bosses must be heroes too

The recession has tarnished risk takers, but businesses still need leaders who can inspire and be bold

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Robert Fry says a hero is someone with the moral courage to take risks

A way from the cinema and the pages of comic books, this is not a time for heroes. Almost everybody — politicians, sports people, celebrities — is tainted by the perception that they are out to get whatever they can for themselves.

And we certainly don't like the idea of being ordered about at work. "To me a heroic leader is someone who believes that he knows all the answers and expects people to follow his directions or get the hell out of the way," said John Turner, chief executive of Core Filing, a software company.

"It's the kind of leadership that created some performance stars in the 1980s, but the world has moved on since then."

It might not be fashionable to think of business leaders as heroes but we still need them, said Sir Robert Fry, a former Commandant General Royal Marines who is now chairman of McKinney Rogers, a management consultancy.

"We live in non-heroic times," he said. "Do people believe in their politicians? No, not after the expenses scandal. Do they believe in business leaders? No, not after 2008."

Really the only people recognised for heroism now are soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the risk to society that results from this attitude is that people will no longer play to win.

“A hero is someone who has the moral courage to take risks. That might mean being willing to risk resources and reputation to take on an entirely new market when to a certain extent he is working on a hunch. If he wins he looks great and if he does not he looks extremely foolish. There really are only so many chief executives who go out to win. There are many who are happy getting by, just playing a dead bat.”

Clearly not all businesses will want a leader who is willing to take risks, particularly with memories of the financial crisis still fresh. “There will be a certain sort of shareholder who is happy with a steady return and a certain type of board that is happy with a life of no surprises,” Fry said. “But we do need business leaders with bravery and moral courage.”

This is particularly the case at smaller, more entrepreneurial businesses, said Derrick Watson, a director at Watson Moore, the recruiter. “In a fast-growth environment the character of the leader is often much more at the fore,” he said. “A heroic leader’s charisma, tenacity, intensity and appetite for risk are often the energy that propels the business forward and enables it to outperform its competitors.”

Richard Brown, a managing partner at Cognosis, a business strategy consultancy, encourages the executives he works with to think of developing strategy as akin to the journey taken by a Hollywood hero: not one who takes a command-and-control approach to leadership, but one who has to inspire his colleagues to take the right path.

“We are making strategy an adventure and making leaders heroes,” he said. “There is risk involved in any significant change, and strategy is about change and choices.”

No business leader is comfortable thinking of himself as some sort of comic-book superhero, but they do recognise that courage, determination, grit and an element of self-sacrifice all come in to play when leading change, just as they do when battling the forces of darkness. “If you define heroism as knowing what it takes to lead, then it’s a good thing. It’s inspiring,” Brown said.

This approach adds an emotional charge to what can be a rather dry activity, which in turn means that people are more connected with the process, he said. “Done well, all the component parts of an adventure are there — new terrain, uncertainty of outcome, the need to make allies and confront foes. There are so many leaders who think of strategy making as a dull, dry process that becomes almost ritualised but to make powerful change you need to connect the rational and emotional sides.”