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VIEW FROM THE CUBE

Workaday heroes reflect the heart of success

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Whose photo should I tack to my cubicle wall?

Back in college, I idolized the motivational business gurus of the day. I lived by the preachings of Stephen Covey (the "Seven Habits" author) and Zig Ziglar ("See You at the Top"). Tom Peters encouraged me to "Search for Excellence." As my buddies laughed derisively, I taped to my refrigerator a poster of Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart.

"This," the poster seemed to shout, "is the richest man in the world." And I really felt like that was the ultimate goal. Money and success were synonymous. What else mattered?

Now, like so many Americans, my belief in the executive ideal has been irreparably scarred. I no longer have a business idol.

Corporate honchos have gone from heroes to scoundrels. Enron's Ken Lay, WorldCom's Bernard Ebbers, and Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski have all been revealed as rogues. Even Martha Stewart, the doyenne of household perfection, is said to have allegedly swept a few dust bunnies under the rug.

I'm wondering then: Should I regret that I have no business hero to look up to? Or should I congratulate myself?

In a Bertolt Brecht play, the character Galileo chides a disillusioned student by stating, "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero." What Galileo is saying is that we don't need a larger-than-life exemplar in order to experience good, successful lives.

Still, I feel kind of lost without someone to look up to.

There are some good folks out there. Consider Darwin Smith, chief executive of Kimberly-Clark, renowned for his personal modesty, or Kristine McDivitt of Patagonia, who used her fortune to save thousands of acres from exploitive development in Chile.

Never heard of them? They're great business leaders with scant mention in the media. Of course, Aaron Feuerstein has achieved folk-hero status for paying his workers after a disastrous fire at his Malden Mills plant. Yet he ended up losing control of his company.

Whether they're naughty or nice, CEOs in general just might make bad heroes for the majority of us. What we see of them is typically defined by how much they make, how much power they have, and whether they've been on the cover of business magazines. We rarely get a glimpse of their personal values



ILLUSTRATION/OLIVIER LATKY

or of actions we could use as guideposts for our own lives.

Perhaps I should be looking lower down the ladder for my hero. True heroism, in my opinion, entails peril, pain, and a bit of sacrifice. And it's hard to imagine that too much suffering was felt by the average CEO, who made 531 times the average hourly worker's pay in the year 2000, according to Business Week. Sacrificing for others doesn't normally come with corporate jets, tax-sheltered island retreats, and

seven-figure bonuses.

I'm not alone in my cynicism. According to a survey by the Wall Street Journal, 55 percent of people professed to have a "great deal of confidence" in business leaders back in 1966. The number had plummeted to 13 percent by 2002.

I spend the bulk of my waking life in the office. So shouldn't my hero be a paragon of the working world? After some reflection, my heart tells me no.

I don't see myself when I read about the typical

Fortune 500 CEO. My days don't usually include multimillion dollar commitments and decisions that affect thousands of people. Nope. I grapple with whether to make a chart in MSWord or Excel. I wonder, "Will I look like a slacker if I leave early to see my son's Christmas pageant?"

I don't know if the Donald Trumps and Michael Eisners of the world struggle with similar issues, but I'm sure that the average Joes and Janes packed onto my commuter train every day probably do.

If I need one at all, the hero I'm searching for is an Everyman; someone who shows up for work every day, does a decent job, and treats people kindly. Not a workaholic who looks toward success above all else but an honest worker, a champion of the eight-hour day, one who works hard, always takes a lunch, and goes home on time to have dinner with the family.

Even with values so basic, I sometimes struggle to follow this example. The vice president of our company recently asked me to accompany him on a trip to Washington, D.C., for an important meeting, on the same day my son was to begin kindergarten. It took me a while but I mustered my courage, explained the situation, and said no to the vice president. Happily, he understood and made other arrangements. Meetings can be rescheduled, notes can be taken, but my oldest child will have only one first day of kindergarten.

The person whose face I want hanging on my cubicle wall would've done the same thing.

I don't believe that the majority of business leaders are bad apples — they're not. But the media focus on those who are has caused me to rethink my values and how they relate to a career. The unexpected effect of this epiphany is that I have a renewed interest in things closer to my heart, like spending time with my loved ones.

It's going to be especially important for me to remember these feelings this holiday season when they come into conflict with the huge project I have due to a client in January. I just need to keep reminding myself that my hero of the cube isn't a guy who works late on Christmas Eve for a bigger bonus.

Instead, he's the guy who took the day off to build a gingerbread house with his kids.

It's not sad if we're a people who need heroes. We all need heroes. But perhaps they need to be more authentic reflections of who we really want to be.

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