The Myth of the Solitary Leader

I always thought I was the smartest person in the room.

OK, so I still struggle with that major fault, but when I first became a leader seven years ago, my ego was uncontainable. To make matters worse, I based my vision of leadership on what I call **"the myth of the solitary leader."**

To me, leadership was personified not by the coach getting hands-on with his team but by icons such as Bill Gates secluding himself in a cabin for a week to think big things. That was my vision...*the solitary leader who single-handedly uses his genius to solve every problem, launch every new initiative, and change the world.* I would, in my dreams at least, become a superhero, a caped crusader for my causes, and surely everyone would buy in to everything that I wanted to do.

The only problem was that I was wrong. Very wrong.

That minor detail aside, my vision of me as a solitary leader still burned brightly in my mind. I wanted so bad to be the smartest person in the room. *To be the one with all the ideas, to be the one people relied on and saved the day. I wanted to be the one the teacher called on...wait, what happened there?*

Read those last two sentences again. Does all of this really go back to childhood?

I think so. I wanted to be the **one** the teacher called on. I wanted all the glory for myself and I wanted to individually be able to answer every question and impress the teacher (and fellow students) with my academic prowess.

Somehow years after my 16-year stint in academia ended, I found myself still wanting to impress the teacher (my boss) and my fellow students (other team members). I was a solitary leader.

The only problem with being a solitary leader is that, by definition, a leader cannot be solitary. **A leader needs people.**

I recently read a 2002 study done by behavioral scientist Patrick Laughlin and his colleagues that scientifically proved that groups working together to find a solution outperform the best problem solver working alone. What they found was that many leaders (often the "smartest person" in the group) know that they are the smartest and most-experienced group member and fail to seek help or input from other team members.

The research proved that the best (smartest, most experienced) leader working individually will *almost always be slower to make a decision than a cooperative group.* They will also be incorrect more often. But why?

There are three main reasons solitary leaders fail at decision making compared to a group:

1. Varying perspectives.

Solitary leaders cannot match the varying perspectives, life experiences, and wisdom of a cooperative group, particularly if they are a part of the group. Other people's input and questioning activates thinking processes that we are simply incapable of activating when working alone.

2. Speed

Solitary leaders are slower. There is a simple scientific reason for this. Groups possess a powerful advantage known as parallel processing, meaning they can process different parts of a task at the same time, while a solitary thinker must perform each task sequentially.

3. Failure to get buy-in

Solitary leaders struggle to get buy-in, which leads to doubt. Even when solitary leaders do quickly arrive at the correct decision (and believe me, I did on occasion), I was so hampered by doubts of getting buy-in, that my once firm, definitive decision was soon muddied by "what ifs" and worries about how to convince so-and-so that this was the right thing. Groups that achieve a decision together rarely have to deal with this.

Getting input from your team is not decision making by committee. The ultimate responsibility for all decisions rests on the leader. But the process of getting input is critical to getting varying insights, speeding up the process, and achieving buy-in.

Who is your vision of a leader? Is he/she a solitary leader or more of a group leader?