The cost of exceptional talent in the C suite

Boards and Chairpersons must be more alert to the unintended consequences of having an exceptional individual on the Exec team. Why? Because too often this superman or superwoman rescues, protects or otherwise overcompensates for the wider group. When this happens, a costly and complicated dynamic can emerge. The cost for the executive team is high: other colleagues step back; diversity of thought and debate are lost and team spirit along with team development can flounder. But what about the "star talent"? They can end up feeling overburdened, unsupported and are often unsuccessful despite their Herculean efforts.

Over the years I have had the opportunity to work with several organisations who have an exceptional leader at their helm or on their Executive Team. You would expect a halo effect that would benefit everyone from having such a star in their midst. Surely, they enhance and uplift the entire organisation? Sadly, this is not always the case.

When one leader steps forward, others step back. In my experience, rather than raising the game of the entire executive team, the average (or immature) team can be happy to retreat. Far from raising the team game, this superstar can end up carrying their companions and team performance actually deteriorates. This happens most frequently around the charismatic leader who brings eloquence, clarity and courage to the business dynamic and not the technical superstar whose fairy dust has a narrower reach.

Slowly but surely, you see this same individual being plugged in to every tricky client situation, strategic question, people issue or tough conversation. Fellow leaders come to rely on their ability to inspire the organisation or sponsor anything that requires unpopular change. Consciously or unconsciously, the executive team allows the star player to shoulder more and more of the discretionary leadership load that should be part and parcel of every executive's role; articulating the future, making the tough calls required to survive in it, being clear sighted about what is getting in the way and setting the emotional tone and pace of the business.

Consider the following, I recently watched the newest member of an executive team (let's call her Sally) bravely call her colleagues on their unwillingness to tackle persistent performance issues and make the required decisions. This team demonstrated several forms of avoidant behaviour when faced with their performance reality. They would 'kick the can down the road' by calling for more analysis, argue about the different ways of calculating their non-performance or fail to hold themselves or each other to account for not taking action. Convinced of the urgency of the situation, Sally would use her analysis of the issues, experience from other turnaround situations and long standing relationships to corral her fellow leaders into taking action. Unfortunately, the decisions taken collectively at the Executive team meetings would then be quietly unpicked behind the scenes. Sally repeatedly played the bad cop role to both force decisions and call out colleagues when they tried to slide out of them. She became the effective but well-worn iron fist in a velvet glove. It was a thankless role, compounded by the lack of consequences for these executives who failed to make or own decisions.

So, what about the cost? In the short-term, Sally helped the business stick to its guns, implement its strategic review and announce some decisions. Longer term, executive decision making capabilities remained weak because they had effectively outsourced this capability to one exhausted person: Sally.

Victims of their own vision. One of the most effective multi-national transformations I have witnessed was led by a CEO who joined the business with a pre-determined and unfaltering view on how that business would return to growth. Over the course of 5 years, "Robert" systematically reshaped every part of the business and team until it supported his vision. The global executive team and management were whittled down to those who complied and agreed. He brought in past colleagues into the key financial and people roles. He was directive in setting the new strategic priorities, issuing new values and setting out an ambitious future roadmap. After years of underwhelming performance, most of the organisation were pleased to defer to this dominant visionary, especially when the share price started to head back upwards.

However, at a recent internal leadership meeting, this same CEO and his team expressed genuine fury and disbelief when the Top 100 leaders in the business failed to speak up and give their views about a controversial restructuring of one division. The atmosphere became distinctly pained and awkward as everyone sought to avoid the microphone and stay off the record.

The 'overperformance' of this CEO in setting the direction of the company meant the ability of leaders to debate and determine strategic questions had withered. Everyone in that conference hall knew what happened to individuals who held a different view to the CEO. Over 100 leaders chose to avoid that risk rather than air a counter view although these views certainly existed. The business had lost the ability to debate and resolve critical issues in a safe way that used their collective experience and considerable expertise.

Dazzled by the lights. It can be very hard to see the negative cost of this dynamic until the bright light is gone. Most analysts will never pick up on the undesirable impact of strong leaders because they are amazing drivers, smoothers and visionaries for their businesses. Executive teams may also collude because there are upsides for individuals too. On the surface, everyone wins. Often, it is only when the superstars step down from the business that the subtle erosion of the top team's collective strength becomes visible. Far from being able to continue with the winning formula, colleagues are now on the back foot from having sat back for so long. Dependence on a superstar leader puts a business's sustainability in jeopardy and makes succession a potentially poisoned chalice. We should celebrate and measure the lack of a vacuum or destabilisation when a leader steps down. This is a hallmark of distributed leadership rather than dependence on one exceptional talent.

Heavy is the head that wears the halo. The final and rarely acknowledged cost is the impact of this superstar dynamic on the individual themselves. While they may enjoy the limelight and often be complicit in their excessive involvement and indispensability, there can be a weighty price tag. The increasing incidents of executive burnout, mental health issues and even suicide, are often underpinned by this same story; an exceptional individual, stretched too thinly by their organisation until a straw comes that breaks the executive's back.

Boards need to be alert to this dynamic. I have watched one clear sighted Chair effectively call out the 'hero' behaviour of the CEO superstar and the gradual abdication of the team. This subtle duel party coaching helps an executive team see the dynamic they may unwittingly be caught up in and ultimately play a stronger collective game.

Kate Lye is a Partner with KLI Consulting; working with businesses and their leaders to deliver change.