

# 1

---

## The Fall of the Heroic CEO and the Rise of the Leadership Team

**D**iego Bevilacqua is an experienced executive, a respected leader, and a veteran of the usual corporate team-building exploits, including trekking through the steamy rain forests of Costa Rica. But nothing, including grinning crocodiles and howling monkeys, prepared him for the challenge he was handed at the end of 2000: to put together a leadership team that could, with few new resources or technology, rapidly build a successful business.

Bevilacqua talks about the food service business he took over after the merger of Bestfoods and Unilever as “a child with no family.”<sup>1</sup> His challenge: to integrate Bestfoods’ highly successful food service business with Unilever’s much less effective counterpart. Although Bestfoods was the smaller entity, it had the stronger business. Bringing these two organizations together would be a politically charged process and an uphill battle against skeptics on both sides who believed that the merger would destroy rather than expand the food services business.

Bevilacqua inherited a set of leaders on both sides who knew the industry deeply and who had their own ideas about how the business

romantic idea that great things are usually accomplished by a larger-than-life individual working alone. Despite evidence to the contrary—including the fact that Michelangelo worked with a group of 16 to paint the Sistine Chapel—we still tend to think of achievement in terms of the Great Man or the Great Woman, instead of the Great Group.”<sup>4</sup>

### The Heroic CEO Versus the Two-Heads-Are-Better-Than-One Approach

Going it alone is not just a romantic notion. It's human nature, at least in individualistic cultures. Despite all the talk of the importance of “the team” or “the organization” we still, in some parts of the world, celebrate the achievement of the individual leader in successfully maneuvering to the top of the organization. Just look at a cover of any popular business periodical. As often as not, the photo is of a single person, arms folded across the chest: the Lone Ranger, the Heroic CEO standing proudly atop the organization.

But this one-leader approach is starting to give way to the Great Group idea. In some countries, a division of leadership is legally mandated. In the United Kingdom, for example, regulatory bodies strongly recommend that the chairman and CEO roles be held by different individuals, and most publicly traded companies comply. In other places, including the United States, a few organizations have simply begun dividing the work of the CEO role among two or more coleaders, and others have taken a team approach in which senior executives work together to guide their organization.<sup>5</sup>

In many organizations the co-CEO option has met with limited success for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the inability of most leaders to share the top role no matter how good their intentions or persistent their efforts. Citicorp tried it following its merger with Travelers but quickly found that the structure did not work. Co-CEOs John Reed and Sandy Weill, who had cordially agreed to share the position after the merger, soon found themselves embroiled in a messy power struggle. In the end, Weill stayed, Reed left, and another board learned that as big as the CEO's role is, it's almost always too small for two strong leaders. Other high-profile attempts at corporate crown sharing, including Daimler-Chrysler, Kraft, and Time Warner, have met similar fates.