A few weeks ago, I witnessed the Barcelona football team stage an improbable comeback from four goals down to edge Paris SC 6-5 in the Champions League. Great teamwork, though, saw the capability to go beyond and deliver much more than the sum of their parts. Yet, in business, we hardly see sustained focus on building high-performance teams. A lot of time, individuals get the limelight and little is done to highlight team performance.

THE FOCUS OF BUSINESS

When it comes to business, phrases such as “competitive demands,” “personal branding,” and “growth and development” frequently pop up to remind us that we need to “up our game” and “stand out from the crowd” if we wish to be successful. This dog-eat-dog narrative has been doing the rounds for decades as the de facto strategy for getting ahead of the competition. In a world of scarcity, we’re told, it’s every man and woman for themselves; no-one remembers who came in second place.

I remember clearly when I first started working at General Electric (GE) and was advised by a senior leader during my orientation session on the importance of standing out from the pack. According to him, the only way to do so was to work hard, communicate and execute relentlessly. He pumped me up to push, stand out from the crowd. According to him, the leader during my orientation session put themselves first, even to the peril of their own teammates and colleagues.

However, when people continually put themselves first, it soon becomes obvious to anyone who is able to observe them for a time. And the reason why such people weaken a company’s culture is because they set people on edge, create divisions, and upset a lot of people in the process. They might even convince a few others to follow their lead, which only serves to spread and reinforce the toxicity.

Self-servers rarely succeed in the end, and even if they do, their success either comes at a hefty price or it doesn’t last long. In his book Give and Take, Adam Grant builds on this point, writing: “If we create networks with the sole intention of getting something, we won’t succeed. We can’t pursue the benefits of networks; the benefits ensue from investments in meaningful activities and relationships.”

Martin Luther King Jr. once described a similar point through one of his many poetic and profound insights: “Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.”

As the quote from Simon Sinek suggests, cultures that are weak tend to become so because people within an organisation stop working for each other and instead look out for themselves. That’s not to say it’s wrong to look out for our own interests, development and growth. But it is problematic when we begin to focus solely on our own progression, goals and achievements.

Even at Leaderonomics, I often am amazed by some employees who appear on the surface to be excellent team players and show genuine care for our vision to transform the nation. Yet, when hardship and trial start to rear its head (who said achieving our mission would be easy!), it becomes obvious to everyone that they put themselves first, even to the peril of their own teammates and colleagues.

If the opposite of self-serving is to serve others, doesn’t that mean that our own returns are diminished? Not necessarily. In fact, the reverse is often true. Think about those you have interacted with in business, or indeed in any area of life. The people who consistently seek favours without giving much back; those who try to negatively influence or push their ideas onto you, the colleagues who come across as being insincere and superficial when offering their help… how do these people make you feel?

Conversely, we all know people who can’t help others enough. They are always happy to give their time, knowledge and resources in offering their support, and they expect very little, if anything, in return. They are sincere, trustworthy and reliable. These are the people we want to help in any way we can. In fact, they are the people around whom they want to help.

As Adam Grant puts it: “This is what I find most magnetic about successful givers: they get to the top without cutting others down, finding ways of expanding the pie that benefit themselves and the people around them. Whereas success is zero-sum in a group of takers, in groups of givers, it may be true that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.”

By working together, we achieve more. It’s true that being a self-server, or a taker, can yield some returns over the short-term, but in the long run it’s not an effective strategy.

Sooner or later, we all need help and support to get to wherever we want to go. As the research suggests, it’s those who give freely, without expectation, who are much more likely to enjoy success, strong relationships, and a life of happiness and fulfillment.

Lead team. Be the droplet that makes the difference. By working together, success is about who can get closest to our vision and goals. As the quote from Simon Sinek suggests, success is about who can get closest to the boss, who can get the most over on their colleagues – who can be the most Machiavellian in the pursuit to gain whatever they can for themselves.

If you are a CEO who is looking for a programme to help you grow in your leadership journey and enable your business to scale to the next level, do register your interest for the 2017 intake by scanning the QR code or directing your browser to bit.ly/LEDojointerest.