8-2007

Are you too smart for your own good?

M. THULASIDAS
Singapore Management University, manojt@smu.edu.sg

ARE YOU TOO SMART FOR YOUR OWN GOOD?

Knowledge can be a bad thing, if others are taking credit for it

DR MANOJ THULASIDAS

TECHNICAL knowledge is not always a good thing for you in the modern workplace.

Unless you are careful, others will take advantage of your expertise and dump their responsibilities on you. You may not mind it as long as they respect your expertise. But, they often hog the credit for your work and present their ability to evade work as people management skills.

People management is better rewarded than technical expertise. This differentiation between experts and middle-level managers in terms of rewards is an Asian phenomenon. Here, those who present the work seem to get the credit for it, regardless of who actually performs it. We live in a place and time where articulation is often mistaken for accomplishments.

In the West, technical knowledge is more readily recognised than smooth presentations. You don't have to look beyond Bill Gates to appreciate the heights to which technical expertise can take you in the West. Of course, Gates is more than an expert; he is a leader of great vision as well.

Leaders are different from people managers. Leaders provide inspiration and direction. They are sorely needed in all organisations, big and small. They are not to be confused with middle-level folks who keep

WHO DID IT?
HERE IN ASIA, THOSE WHO PRESENT THE WORK SEEM TO GET THE CREDIT FOR IT, REGARDLESS OF WHO ACTUALLY PERFORMS IT.
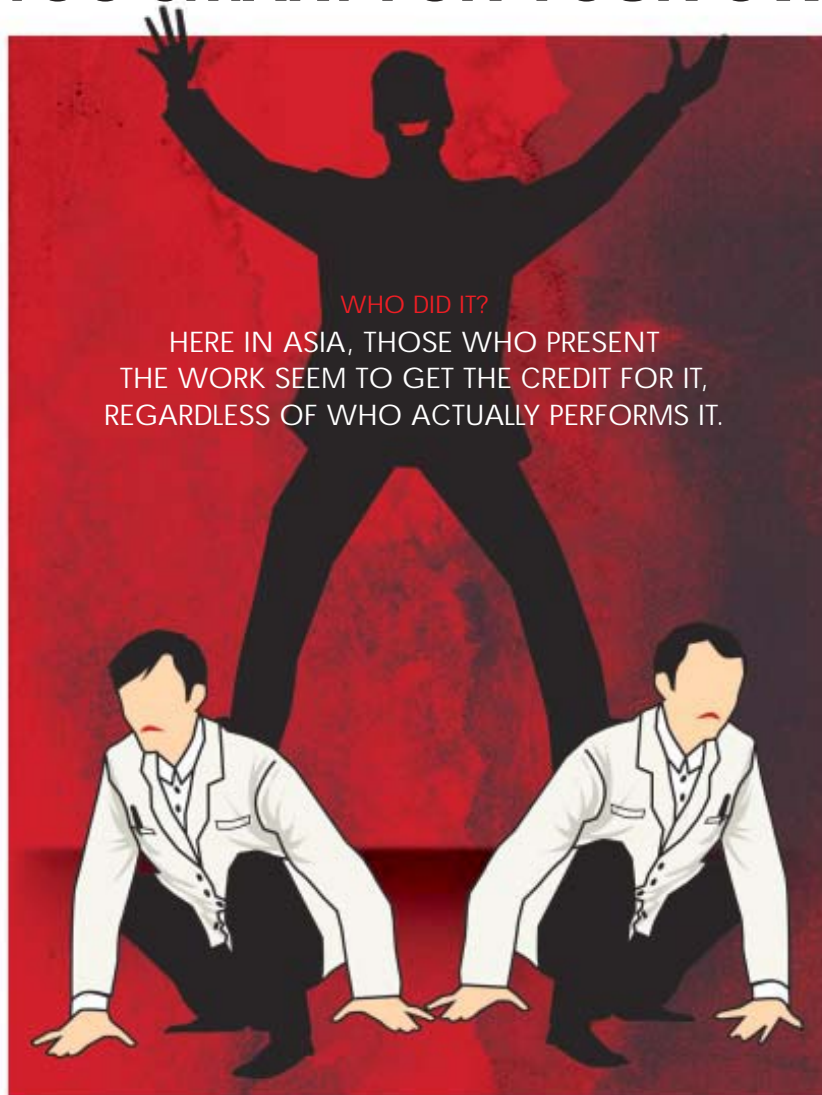
YEN YOK

harping on the "big picture", the "value-chain" and such, and spend all their working hours in meetings.

Why should they get such hefty salaries when they know

and do so little?

Technical experts are smart cookies. They can easily see that if they want to be people managers, they can get started with a tie and a good haircut.

If the pickings are rich, why wouldn't they?

Going the other way is a lot harder, though. For a pure people manager to become a technical expert, it takes a lot

more than losing the tie. But why would anybody want to be an expert in the current corporate climate here? Slim pickings, really.

Is it time to hide your knowledge, get that haircut, knot that tie, and become a people manager? It comes down to your personal choice. Knowledge gives you technical authority and a sense of indispensability. But it also sets you up for a stunted career progression. So, the choice is between fulfilment and satisfaction on the one hand, and convenience and promotions on the other.

I wonder whether we have already made our choices, even in our personal lives. We find fathers who cannot get the hang of changing diapers or of household chores. Is it likely that men cannot figure out washing machines although they can operate complicated machinery at work?

We also find women who cannot balance their accounts or estimate their spending. Is it really a mathematical impairment, or a matter of convenience?

At times, the lack of knowledge is as potent a weapon as its abundance. Yes, knowledge is a double-edged sword. Use it wisely.

The writer is a scientist from the European Organization for Nuclear Research (Cern), who currently heads OCBC's Quantitative Analytics team. His internationally-acclaimed book, The Unreal Universe, is available in local bookstores and at www.TheUnrealUniverse.com