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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

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## EPISODE 83: DAVE HEENAN – HIDDEN HEROES

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### Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, two weeks ago on the podcast, we featured a conversation with Dave Heenan, a successful leader, executive educator, and author. We discussed his book *Leaving on Top: Graceful Exits for Leaders*. We asked him to join us again, this time to talk about another book he wrote, *Hidden Heroes: Finding Success in the Shadows*. In the book, Heenan writes about the way society tends to focus on celebrities. The high-profile CEOs, entertainers, or athletes in the spotlight. But when examining how the real work gets accomplished, Heenan found one group of professionals, the exceptional subordinates who fly under the radar. He calls them hidden heroes. They're the selfless individuals who find success in the shadows. Without them, a leader and an organization can't succeed. Dave Heenan joined us on the podcast to discuss *Hidden Heroes: Finding Success in the Shadows*.

### Ken White

Dave, thank you for joining us. It's a pleasure to have you back for the second time.

### Dave Heenan

Terrific.

### Ken White

Yeah, and you've written ten books, as we discussed on the last podcast, and one of the ones we'll talk about today is titled *Hidden Heroes: Finding Success in the Shadows*. And why don't you define this group that you're talking about?

### Dave Heenan

Yeah. Well, this, Ken, is really a take-off of a book that Warren Bennis and I did earlier called *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships* about a really important and classic second bananas in organizational life but high potassium second banana.

Ken White

Yeah okay.

Dave Heenan

Number twos who are as gifted, if not more gifted, than the number ones. And when we did that, that book had a quite a reception. A number of people said you ought to take it down in organizational life and get some people two or three levels below. So this book really tries to acknowledge these people who fly under the radar, who are invisible in many cases but absolutely invaluable.

Ken White

And every organization has them.

Dave Heenan

Every organization has them, and they're just remarkably important to me. They're the bone marrow in many cases of institutional success. They really they do the heavy lifting.

Ken White

Can you give us an example?

Dave Heenan

Well, heavy lifting, think the Sherpas.

Ken White

Sure.

Dave Heenan

Who are a chapter in the book? I mean, the Sherpas are working and have been identified as being employed in the most perilous occupation ever, and they're doing it in large part to the service of very expensive foreign climbers trying to keep them successful and healthy and up the mountain and back down without killing themselves. In their lives are devoted in large part for this effort, for which they get anywhere from five hundred five thousand bucks a season. I mean, it's ridiculous.

Ken White

Wow.

Dave Heenan

They literally are sacrificing their bodies and souls to provide these services.

Ken White

And what motivates the hidden heroes.

Dave Heenan

Well, in the case of the Sherpas economics. Sherpas are not natural, believe it or not, mountain climbers. They just had, you know, GNP per capita in Nepal is like 900 bucks. So they gravitated towards the profession in large part to put bread on the table, but most of these other people, just the commonality they have is a selfless and egoless trait that really allows them, in many cases inspires them to take their careers their lives half a step backward to propel someone or something a giant step forward. It's really a servant leadership notion.

Ken White

Yeah really. Other centric type of people.

Dave Heenan

Absolutely.

Ken White

One of my favorite chapters. Everyone, I assume, has seen the Harlem Globetrotters at some point, and you talk about the Washington Generals, the team they always played against.

Dave Heenan

Yeah, I mean it's sports are all about winning, as Vince Lombardi said many times. And you know, here's a team, the Washington Generals, who compiled over 63 years the longest losing streak in Sports Illustrated. All to the same team, the Harlem Globetrotters. I mean, these guys lost in front of Barack Obama and Nikita Khrushchev. They lost on aircraft carriers and leper colonies. They lost in prisons. They lost, you know, you name it, they lost. The last time the Washington Generals tasted victory was on January 4th, 1971.

Ken White

And I didn't know they had ever won until I read your book.

Dave Heenan

Yeah. Since that time, they never won another game. So over the years, they lost 16,000 games.

Ken White

Yeah, 1 in 16,000. Yeah, right.

Dave Heenan

But you know the guy who founded them who just died a couple of years ago up in New Jersey guy named Red Klotz was always circumspect about losing, and he said you know there's nothing wrong with losing as long as you you know you've given your best and you put up a show, and you happen to come out on the back end to the score. But in assembling his team, the origin of the theme was that the Globetrotters before the generals were pounding on a mishmash of very inferior talent, and people were getting fed up with paying fancy prices to watch this. So Saperstein, the guy that founded the Trotters, realized he needed a competitive counterweight truly competitive. So he went to Klotz, lend him some dough, and the generals were formed. Run, by the way, totally independently of the Globetrotters.

Ken White

I hadn't realized that. I think people thought it might've been staged, as a matter of fact.

Dave Heenan

But you know it, I mean, Klotz was a realist. He knew that people were going to come to the game to watch globetrotters, not his beloved generals. And the place, so he had to recruit a special breed of player, you know, who could, who could play the underdog role because when the game started, they were going to get the ball stuck behind the back of their jerseys. Jerseys, by the way, with no names on them.

Ken White

Right.

Dave Heenan

When they made a score, their name was never announced. There was no program that indicated who the hell they were. And they went through all of this rigamarole and had to do it night after night around the world on three or four different continents and pull it off.

Ken White

Yeah.

Dave Heenan

And these guys did. Thanks in large part to Klotz's leadership.

Ken White

And another example you use is the shipping industry, the travel industry, luxury liners, and the in the hidden heroes there.

Dave Heenan

Yeah, now I mean, who do you think is the most important player on a luxury we're talking here, six-star cruise ships?

Ken White

You tend to think the captain.

Dave Heenan

It ain't the captain. It's not the cruise director. It's not the head chef. The real hidden heroes are the male dancers who are devoted to single women traveling alone.

Ken White

A big piece of their business.

Dave Heenan

Yeah. They know the up mark, and we're here. We're talking the upmarket segment.

Ken White

Right.

Dave Heenan

Their number one client base by far are elder single women who outnumber the men 4 or 5 to 1. And they have found over the years that these ladies now don't want to watch fashion shows around the swimming pool or play a bunch of bridge games. They want to kick up their heels, literally. So these lines bring on a crew of single male dancers, and these guys, to qualify they have to go through an intensive background check, as you might expect. They have to be proficient, Ken, in six steps six different dance steps.

Ken White

Wow.

Dave Heenan

Yeah, so let me see some of your moves, by the way.

Ken White

Yeah, wow.

Dave Heenan

And you know they are not all, or they aren't paid. They get to share a first-class cabin with another host, and they enjoy all of the amenities. The travel, of course, share outstanding cuisine.

Ken White

Right.

Dave Heenan

Access to the fitness center and on-shore excursions. In return, they have to high-foot it with the ladies, and of course, they have to be appropriately attired. Jeans aren't allowed. And above all, there is no hanky panky which is.

Ken White

Right, right.

Dave Heenan

These from day one, when they come on board and when they're hired, they're told you don't form any close relationships. In fact, they are prohibited from dancing with the same woman twice in a row.

Ken White

Wow.

Dave Heenan

Yeah.

Ken White

But take them out of the picture, and the industry has some issues.

Dave Heenan

The industry would definitely have them. I mean, there are just many people that I talk to of the dowager category whose selection decision of a line is based on their experience with these guys, and over the years, by the way, I have run in, I've been impressed with these men who typically are between 50 and 70. I've run into two former astronauts, a number of retired doctors and dentists, and also a number of former partners of leading accounting firms.

Ken White

Amazing.

Dave Heenan

But they, nonetheless. They get a mixed bag in terms of sort of reputational aspects. You know their critics look at these guys as gigolos, see predators preying on these wealthy old ladies.

Ken White

Yes.

Dave Heenan

Far away from home, unprotected but to their heroes, and there are many of them, most of them. These guys are white knights in dinner jackets who are providing much-needed companionship but a bit of exercise.

Ken White

Yeah.

Dave Heenan

For the genteel set, so it's an important group, and looking ahead, by the way, when I talk to industry executives, they said, you know, with the aging population, more boomers coming on the market, they're going to be more not less of these guys. And the last thing these very expensive cruises can afford is to have anybody bored onboard. So as long as lovely ladies want to dance under the stars, they're going to staff their ships up with these perfect gentlemen.

Ken White

How about it?

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Dave Hennen in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary. The Center for Corporate Education can help you and your organization reach your goals with a leadership development program specifically designed for your organization and delivered by our world-class business school faculty. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education, visit our website at [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Now back to our conversation with Dave Heenan.

Ken White

And you give it a number of examples. Ghostwriters, blimp aviators.

Dave Heenan  
Adjunct professors.

Ken White  
Adjunct professors.

Dave Heenan  
Community College folks.

Ken White  
Supporting acts and entertainment.

Dave Heenan  
Yeah, supporting folks in the entertainment world are people that basically sacrifice themselves, in many cases, their reputations to prop up the careers of their more distinguished headliners. One of the most interesting guys that I ran into was on a cruise ship. By the way, a guy named Harry Marra, who's a comic magician and he, got on board a lovely ship in Brunei and had a four-gig, eleven-day segment to Bangkok, and his job was basically to set the stage for the primary featured group, which was a quite a great cast dealing with Broadway musicals and acrobatic acts and so forth. But Harry Marra, over the years, has done this for thirty-three three and a half decades. He's introduced the likes of Joey Bishop to Rosie O'Donnell to others, and although he and his own rights as a magician and comedian is absolutely first-rate. But his real love, his real forte, is propping up others of introducing others. So I asked him, Ken, I said, you know what's the danger of the second banana outperforming the top banana? And he said, you know that's a lot of hooey he said that really does not happen he said. Every headliner, even the most difficult prima donna, want to walk on stage, and they want to have that audience electrified on the edge of their seats. The last thing you want to have to deal with is to try to put some hot air back in the balloon.

Ken White  
Sure.

Dave Heenan  
You have these guys, and this is hidden heroes generally have this characteristic. They recognize that most of the credit is gonna go to the star, and they can deal with they have enough sense of self to be able to handle that. They also tend ironically to be very confident in their own abilities, and the people, the good ones that I ran into, feel that they are every bit as talented if not more talented than their more highly acclaimed boss or featured star.



Ken White

Boy, they got to be pretty secure.

Dave Heenan

They are very secure.

Ken White

Yeah.

Dave Heenan

They're comfortable in their own skin.

Ken White

Right.

Dave Heenan

Yeah.

Ken White

What are the positives and the minuses, and the negatives of being a hidden hero?

Dave Heenan

Well, I mean the negatives. I mean, this is not a role for everyone. Donald Trump, Rupert Murdoch, and the Kardashians are not going to gravitate

Ken White

No.

Dave Heenan

to being a hidden hero or subordination in any form. It's just not in their DNA. In addition playing this role, as you all know, there are acrimonious bosses. There are poisonous work situations places that C.S. Lewis called Shadowlands. I mean some real crap. And as a subordinate, you know you've got to soldier through some of this, although importantly, in the process, don't sell your soul or ruin your body important, and you also the folks that I've run into recognize. I mean, they're realists. They know they aren't going to be the next Oprah Winfrey, LeBron James, but they realize that even if they haven't reached the greatest heights, they can still live a very, very good life. And importantly, they realize that they don't have to be the captain of the team to find happiness on the team.

Ken White

Yeah.

Dave Heenan

Yeah.

Ken White

What about from the leaders perspective? How do you work with folks like this, so they are, in fact, engaged and happy?

Dave Heenan

They're a bunch of things again in the last part of the book. For starters, there are bosses that view these guys as competitors for some strange reasons and don't give them sort of the shine and kudos and support that they really ought to have. And that's a major limitation. These guys are colleagues, but they ain't competitors, and your ego as a boss has to be able to acknowledge that and sort of as a corollary. Even though these people are self-effacing by and large, everybody likes a bit of recognition. And so don't clap with one hand about their accomplishments. Make sure that they get their due attention. And then, on the career side, advancement-wise, you know, don't just bury them in the organization. Find out, you know, what are the switches, what's important to them that's going to keep them motivated whether it's, you know, self-development, management development, whether it's more time off, or whatever. Find out what the right switches are and engage these people because they, again, are the lifeblood of organizational life.

Ken White

Any takeaways or lessons for someone who's about to read the book that you like to use to tee it up?

Dave Heenan

Yeah, well, I think the theme of the book is that in sort of this new view of the organizational galaxy, what I'm arguing is that we should no longer let the great man or the great woman define us. We should view the world as the Pope suggests from the bottom up, not the top down. And what we need are more givers, fewer takers, more Davids, fewer Goliaths, and I've always liked sort of a closing line the comment of Woodrow Wilson who said the history of a nation, any nation is a history of its servants written large. Today I would argue those servants, those hidden heroes, may just be best equipped unlocking America's great potential.

## Ken White

That's our conversation with Dave Heenan, author of *Hidden Heroes: Finding Success in the Shadows*, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization meet and exceed your goals with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs and get results. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Finally, if you have a suggestion or comment pertaining to our podcast, we'd love to hear from you. Please connect with us via email. Our address is [podcast@wm.edu](mailto:podcast@wm.edu). Thanks to our guest this week, Dave Heenan, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.