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Dealing With Those Alpha Types (and Winning)

BY CLAUDIA H. DEUTSCH

Do you compulsively change lanes when driving? Do you clock yourself when you jog? Do you always have to be right? When colleagues, friends or even your children say someone else's mistake made them miss a goal, do you accuse them of whining — even if you are the “someone else”?

If you are nodding in self-recognition, chances are that you suffer from alpha male syndrome — or, more accurately, that everyone around you suffers from your alpha male syndrome. If you are reminded of your boss or spouse or child, you are probably suffering from someone else's intensely competitive streak.

And don't let the narrow label fool you — women can be as “alpha” as men. Just ask Kate Ludeman, an executive coach and self-described alpha whose book, “Alpha Male Syndrome,” written with Eddie Erlandson, her alpha male husband, and published by Harvard Business School Press, will arrive in bookstores next month.

“Female alphas may be disarming and use charm as a tool to get ahead,” she said, “but they have that same need to be in charge.”

They are also particularly likely to bare their teeth when protecting others. When Ms. Ludeman was 9 years old she bit the neighborhood bully so hard that she drew blood — then warned him to leave her friends alone.

All of which leads into the subsets of alpha behavior. Ms. Ludeman, it seems, is an alpha visionary, someone who brooks little disagreement with his or her goals. Then there are alpha commanders, charismatic types who insist on unflinching loyalty and obe-

dience; alpha strategists, intellectuals who can pull together disparate concepts into a game plan that all around them must follow; and alpha executors, tactical martinetts who shine at putting in place the ideas of the strategist or visionary.

As Ms. Ludeman sees it, Donald Trump and Carleton S. Fiorina, Hewlett-Packard's former chief executive, are classic alpha commanders, while Larry



Lucchino, president of the Boston Red Sox, is a typical alpha strategist. Ms. Ludeman regards Michael S. Dell, the computer company's chairman, as an exemplar of an alpha visionary, and Kevin B. Rollins, Dell's chief executive, as the consummate alpha executor.

All different types of alphas, with their competitive charge and generally brilliant minds, can do wonders for companies' bottom lines. But while “working or living with an alpha can be exhilarating,” Ms. Ludeman said, it “is certainly a challenge.”

As a young girl, she seemed more likely to channel her alpha energy into solving equations than working

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with people. She grew up in Cotulla, Tex., the oldest of three children. She always loved math and science and remembers turning potato starch into doll clothes and burning broken toys to compare the colors of the flames from the different plastics.

Still, she never gave much thought to a career. “When you were a girl in rural Texas, your goal was to marry a guy with a career,” she said. “To me, being smart felt like a handicap.”

Her parents had college degrees, though, and encouraged her to get one. So she studied engineering at what is now Texas Tech University. She took a basic psychology course in her senior year and fell in love with the field.

By 1971, she had a master’s degree in psychology and earned a doctorate in psychology in 1979.

She embarked on a series of human resources jobs. Each time, she found that her favorite task was helping executives tame impatience and anger — or, as she put it, “humanizing the jerks.” In 1988, she founded Worth Ethic, an executive coaching firm. Eleven years later, at a psychology conference, she met Eddie Erlandson, a vascular surgeon. They married on Feb. 2, 2002.

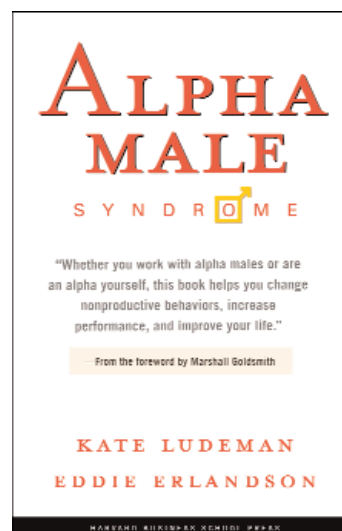
“That’s 02/02/02,” Ms. Ludeman said. “I never did lose my fascination with numbers.”

She never lost her fascination with taming alphas, either. And over lunch at HeartBeat, a restaurant in the W Hotel at Lexington Avenue and 50th Street in Manhattan, she offered some advice on how to stay sane if you are stuck in alpha territory.

- **Decide which type of alpha you are dealing with.** Then tailor your proposals to his or her predilections. Say you want to hold an event in an expensive hotel. If you need an O.K. from a visionary, describe how the event would look and the results it would bring. Woo a strategist with data about costs and the easy logistics of getting people there. An executor needs to know everything about setting up the event. A commander will respond best to a passionate plea. “But if he digs

in his heels, you’ll probably have to go over his head or give up,” Ms. Ludeman said.

- **Never ask alphas to defend their positions.** Instead, ask them to explain them. “Show curiosity,” Ms. Ludeman said. “Ask how he arrived at a certain solution or idea.” While explaining, he may spot flaws in his logic himself. Even if he doesn’t, “the explanation will give you insight into how he thinks,” she said. A corollary: Stress whatever meager things you do agree with in your alpha boss’s orders. “When alphas think you understand their goals, they may entertain alternate ways of reaching them,” she said.



- **Sprinkle superfluous, even erroneous, nuggets into your own presentations, and thank the alpha when he or she spots the mistakes.** That way, the alpha won’t have to scuttle your project in order to feel in control.

- **Err on the side of too much detail.** Non-alpha bosses might like employees who say, “Trust me, I’ll take care of it.” Alpha bosses, particularly alpha executors, want to know how. “They want details,” Ms. Ludeman said. “Otherwise, they’ll watch you and worry.”

- **Don’t confuse an alpha’s arrogance with total self-confidence.** Alphas may think they are smarter than everyone else, but they have an inner critic that keeps

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telling them that they can do still better. They are too smart to be gulled by flagrant flattery, but they respond well to specific praise. “Whenever you can, point out when they did something smart, or kept you from doing something stupid,” Ms. Ludeman said.

- *Don’t ever complain to alphas.* They see it as weakness. Instead, ask for help. “Tell them you need advice on how to deal with a difficult colleague, or on how to meet an impossible deadline,” she said.

- *Go over an alpha’s head if you must, but be prepared to grovel soon after.* If you are sure you are right about something but cannot get your alpha boss to budge, take it up to the next level. Then apologize profusely to your boss for having challenged his or her authority. “Your alpha boss will never see you as an equal, and that can work in your favor,” Ms. Ludeman said. “A non-alpha boss would never forgive you, but the alpha will just be pleased you’ve seen the error of your ways.”

- *Don’t assume that your battles with alphas are confined to work.* If you are living with an alpha, be prepared to fight a lot — particularly if you are an alpha, too. “Best to take frequent time-outs for anger to subside,” Ms. Ludeman said. If you are raising alpha children, orders won’t work as well as letting them learn from their mistakes. If they refuse to clean up their rooms, let them live in squalor until they cannot stand it any longer.

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Kate, a widely recognized executive coach, speaker and author, founded Worth Ethic Corporation in 1988. Her BS in engineering and PhD in psychology give her a unique approach when working with analytical, data-oriented executives, who want to expand their emotional intelligence and create company cultures where people perform at their peak. Kate has worked with over 1,000 senior executives in a wide range of industries. She has coached executives globally on all major continents.

Previously, she was vice president of human resources for a high-tech Silicon Valley company. Her books include *The Worth Ethic*, *Earn What You're Worth*, and *The Corporate Mystic* (now in its 11th printing).



Eddie Erlandson coaches executives to transform entrenched leadership habits, especially leaders who need to make their style more inspiring or more trustworthy. As an accomplished physician, Eddie draws on his knowledge of the physiological aspects of change. He's also developed strategies from competing in endurance sports that he applies to leadership. He's worked with executive teams across a number of industries, including consumer products, education, government, high tech, heavy industrial, medical care, pharmaceutical, and the military.

Previously, Eddie served as Chief of Staff at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he also practiced as a vascular surgeon for over 20 years and co-directed a wellness program.

Eddie Erlandson and Kate Ludeman consult both individually and together, and have co-authored *Alpha Male Syndrome* (2006) and *Radical Change, Radical Results* (2003). They live and work in Austin, Texas.



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