

THE CONFERENCE BOARD REVIEW

Are You an Alpha Leader?

BY THEODORE KINNI

Alpha males lead wolf packs, chimpanzee communities, and, according to Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson, most businesses. The authors don't have any hard proof of this assertion, but based on their experience as executive coaches with an impressive list of clients including Michael Dell and Meg Whitman, they "estimate that alphas comprise about 75 percent of top executives."

If you associate alphas with "Chainsaw Al" Dunlap and Wall Street's Big Swinging Dicks, this might sound like the opening of an indictment of corporate leadership. But in *Alpha Male Syndrome*, the first-time authors take a more balanced view of the breed.

On one hand, Ludeman and Erlandson, who identify themselves as alphas, portray their brethren much like the Prime Movers of Objectivist philosopher and *Atlas Shrugged* author Ayn Rand. "Make no mistake: the world needs alpha males," they write. Alphas are "world beaters," whose courageous leadership, goal-driven focus, and unwavering sense of responsibility are essential ingredients of progress.

Unlike Rand, however, these authors fully acknowledge the dark side of alphas. It turns out that world-beaters are often also power abusers. When they are "not at their best," alphas can be "unaware, out of balance, or out of control." At their worst, the authors explain, "alpha anger is explosive, alpha competitiveness is ruthless, and alpha aggressiveness and urgency is in the red zone."

Ludeman and Erlandson map this balance as the "alpha syndrome continuum" (though it sounds more like a bell curve). Picture George Washington, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King Jr. on one end and Genghis Khan, Joseph Stalin, and villain du jour Saddam Hussein on the other. Then, according to the authors: "Most alpha males inhabit the middle range. To one degree or another, they fluctuate between healthy and unhealthy alpha tendencies:

their magnetic leadership commands respect, but their aggressive tactics create resistance, resentment, and revenge; they are celebrated for their achievements but loathed for the carnage they leave in their wake; people stand in awe of their competence and can-do energy, but they often hate reporting to them or teaming with them."

Hence, the "alpha male syndrome" in which the qualities of the hero and rogue are present in the same boss. This, suggest the authors, also explains the spectacles to which we are so often treated by high-profile execs and entrepreneurs, such as Michael Eisner and Martha Stewart, who accomplish prodigious feats of business and then, just as brilliantly, implode.

Unlike their estimate of the number of alpha males swinging through the corporate jungle, Ludeman and Erlandson offer up some hard evidence for existence of their syndrome. They have created an "Alpha Assessment" and administered it to just over 1,500 people, all of whom "worked full time in the business world, many in high-ranking business positions" and 77.5 percent of whom supervised others.

Being a mathematical cretin, I can't vouch for their study's statistical validity. But I did take the online assessment, which is offered gratis to all of the book's readers, and found it a fairly accurate reflection of my personality. I scored in the 4.1 percentile of overall alphadom—that's out of 100 percent. (The thirteen page "Alpha Assessment Interpretive Report" received via e-mail just after completion of the test tactfully stated that I was in the "bottom quartile," but the well-designed graphics made it quite clear that even almost all of the other non-alphas are looking down at me.) Further, while I have virtually none of the "alpha strengths," I do have the deep reserves of "alpha risks" that I'll be able to draw upon whenever someone is needed to make matters worse. This jibes with my career path: I dropped out of the corporate

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world twenty-five years ago and ended up a freelance business writer with no one to boss around and almost no one to be bossed around by because I was well aware that I had little aptitude for either end of the authority continuum.

Self-awareness is also the authors' main message. The first and the biggest step in flicking that inner Stalin off your shoulder is knowing that he is perched there, urging you to purge your imagined enemies. Next, you want to maximize your alpha strengths and minimize your alpha risks.

To help you identify your inner alpha, the authors define the four alpha types that they see most often in their practice: commanders, visionaries, strategists, and executors.

- Commanders are charismatic leaders - decisive, strong, and confident. They are also domineering, intimidating, and prone to jealousy and argument.
- Visionaries are inspiring, creative leaders who see the best paths forward. They can also be overconfident, ignoring reality and spinning the truth when it doesn't fit their version of the future.
- Strategists are objective and highly analytical, able to synthesize complex data sets in a single bound. They are also know-it-alls, smug and arrogant.
- Executors are relentless in the pursuit of organizational goals. They are also overly critical and prone to setting a killing pace.

The core of the book is four chapter length descriptions, one for each type, that include type strengths and problems, male/female type differences, self-improvement tools for the alpha type, and advice for working with the type. Oddly, these chapters are often reminiscent of astrological readings. If your moon is in alpha commander, you will read, for instance, that you have to shine while allowing others to shine, compete by collaborating effectively, and blow minds with your competence and strength while also winning hearts with fairness and empathy. You need to stand tall without making others seem small, take charge and also share control, and earn acclaim and also give credit.

Because all alphas share the same basic characteristics, this prose gets a little repetitive and tiresome. But just like a good astrological profile, if you home in on your type or your boss's type, you'll probably find yourself nodding along in recognition. And even if generic profiles stretch your patience, remind yourself that one sound insight is all you need to earn a handsome return

on a book's cover price.

Alpha Male Syndrome does leave some questions unanswered. An alpha leader is all well and good in a wolf pack, but do you want one running your company? How many leaders are actually alphas, and how do they stack up against the ones who aren't? Do alpha males actually make the world go round, or does their outsized ambition simply drive them to glom onto the best offices in the organizations that make the world go round? And if you eliminate all those dysfunctional alpha traits, are you still an alpha male or do you evolve into something else—an alpha female, perhaps?

Philosophical questions aside, if you lead or aspire to lead, *Alpha Male Syndrome* offers an interesting take on leadership as well as practical behavior-modification techniques. If you work for a dysfunctional alpha, you can read the book for hints on how to work together more effectively. Unless, like me, you have more than your fair share of alpha risks, which might make it far more satisfying to tell the boss to shove it and heave the book at him.



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