

Alpha Male Syndrome: Curb the Belligerence, Channel the Brilliance

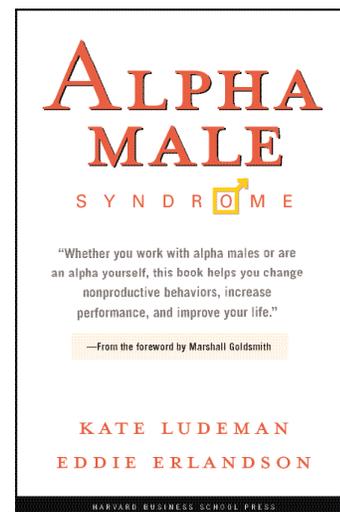
Are you or your boss an alpha? A new book from the Harvard Business School Press explores what makes alphas tick and how to better manage their behavior.

BY KATE LUDEMAN AND EDDIE ERLANDSON

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As business has evolved, the alpha male drive for dominance that once assured the survival of the toughest has become increasingly maladaptive. In an environment where brains count a whole lot more than brawn, a physical pip-squeak can be a giant. In organizations that favor ensembles over solos, emotional intelligence does more to inspire loyalty than a loud roar or a puffed-up chest. Today's employees—well educated, increasingly female, and concerned about job satisfaction and work-life balance—would sooner quit than put up with abusive managers. In addition, the widely dispersed and culturally diverse teams created by globalization need managers who can communicate, teach, and consistently motivate. And, in the wake of Enron and other corporate scandals, unenlightened alpha males who scrap the rules or indulge in lavish displays of perks and privilege are no longer welcome.

Unfortunately, a great many upper-level executives still behave like classic enablers. By the time they wake up to the damage being caused by dysfunctional alpha males, it's too late for the leopards to change their spots. Like athletic coaches who coddle prickly all-stars without realizing how toxic they are for the team, some managers let abusive alpha males slide for years, even decades. "It comes with the territory," they say. They are seriously miscalculating the risks and rewards of unhealthy alpha behavior. For example, a study by business school professors Tiziana Casciaro and Miguel Sousa Lobo, of Harvard and Duke, respectively, found that personal feelings were more impor-



tant than competence in forming effective work relationships. "We found that if someone is strongly disliked, it's almost irrelevant whether or not she is competent," said the researchers. On the other hand, if a person is liked, "colleagues will seek out every little bit of competence he has to offer."

Creating an atmosphere in which trust, respect, and congenial relationships flourish is vital for success in today's environment. In a *Wall Street Journal* article titled "Malevolent Bosses Take a Huge Toll on Business," Kevin Voigt cited a Columbia University study of 1,000 workers in nine countries including the United States, Japan, Singapore, and Australia. Ninety percent say they'd suffered abuse from bosses at some point in their careers, and on any given day, 20 percent have to put up with a bad boss. The cost in

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reduced productivity, low morale, and high turnover—not to mention health care expenditures due to stress disorders—is enormous. Plus, people who feel abused have no interest in being loyal. Many simply quit, contributing to what economists see as an alarming trend: worker shortages in key industries.

A study at San Francisco State University, for example, found that the main reasons people cite for leaving jobs is not money but the desire “to be respected, to be challenged, and to grow.” If companies want to retain their most valuable employees—which is, of course, more cost effective than hiring and training replacements—they have to realize that “no pain, no gain” is not a sound management style. It is, in fact, maladaptive: today’s well-educated, highly skilled workers haven’t got time for the pain.

Make no mistake, the magnificent strengths of alphas make them the most likely—and the most appropriate—people to assume positions of leadership. Yet, for many alpha males, the skills that today’s leaders require—motivating, inspiring, teaching, communicating, modeling integrity and personal growth—do not come naturally, and those who fail to develop those skills will become increasingly out of place. In *Developing Global Executives: The Lessons of International Experience*, management professor Morgan W. McCall Jr. and organizational psychologist George P. Hollenbeck identified what they call “universal fatal flaws” of executives in the global environment. They include bungled relationships with key people, lack of people skills, failure to ask for help, and failure to learn or to adapt to change. Those flaws are similar to the risk factors of alpha males. For all these reasons, the skillful management of alpha males is one of the most crucial tasks facing today’s organizations.

The Four Types of Alphas

All alpha males are aggressive, competitive, and driven to achieve. They think big, aim high, and attack their goals with courage, confidence, and tenacity. But each of the four types expresses these common qualities in different ways. Think of them as spices that add flavor to the basic alpha male recipe. Understanding their nuances will give you deeper insight into yourself and the alpha males around you, enabling you to pinpoint strengths you can build upon and risks you need to address. With this more granular view, you can home in on a specific course of action, just as a doctor can devise a better treatment plan if she knows the exact type of infection a patient has rather than only the broad category.

Here is a brief summary of each type’s primary behavior traits:

- *Commanders*: Intense, magnetic leaders who set the tone, mobilize the troops, and energize action with authoritative strength and passionate motivation, without necessarily digging into the details.
- *Visionaries*: Curious, expansive, intuitive, proactive, and future-oriented, they see possibilities and opportunities that others sometimes dismiss as impractical or unlikely and inspire others with their vision.
- *Strategists*: Methodical, systematic, often brilliant thinkers who are oriented toward data and facts, they have excellent analytic judgment and a sharp eye for patterns and problems.
- *Executors*: Tireless, goal-oriented doers who push plans forward with an eye for detail, relentless discipline, and keen oversight, surmounting all obstacles and holding everyone accountable for their commitments.

You might say that all human beings can fit into those four categories, not just alpha males. To some extent that is true, but our concern is with alphas, and alphas bring to the four types an overlay of aggressive intensity, energetic persistence, and competitive drive that sets them apart from the rest of humanity. It is that distinctive collection of traits that led us to use the term alpha male syndrome.

It’s important to note that the types are not mutually exclusive. While virtually every alpha has one dominant type, he or she will typically have one or two secondary patterns as well. So, for example, a visionary alpha might also have strong strategist tendencies, while another visionary might have commander traits as a secondary characteristic. The data from our Alpha Assessment study support the observation that alphas display the qualities of one primary type, but also possess traits of the other three in varying degrees. Although each type is statistically unique, there is an approximate 20 percent correlation between them.

To cite ourselves as examples, we are both visionary alphas, but Eddie has strong secondary arms as both a commander and a strategist, while Kate has a lot of executor traits. We both have big, expansive ideas, but Kate will offer practical comments about implementation challenges to justify her point of view, and she will persist until she can bring closure to the discussion. When Eddie wants to get his way, he first uses charm and humor to inspire support. Before bringing out the data, he appeals to the emotions by describing the

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impact his idea will have on other people.

In our experience, the most effective alpha leaders are those who blend the functional elements of more than one type—or are smart enough to surround themselves with associates who add the strengths of other types to the mix. For example, here's how the four types might look at a particular task:

- *Commander*: This job needs someone to take charge and lead the way.
- *Visionary*: I see a great possibility waiting to be unveiled and seized.
- *Strategist*: The potential opportunities and risks need to be analyzed and resolved.
- *Executor*: Getting this done requires structure and control.

You can see where all four styles have value, and that, depending on the circumstances, different combinations and proportions would be ideal. Michael Dell, for example, is a visionary alpha with a strong strategist arm, and Kevin Rollins is very strong in both strategist and executor alpha traits. The strengths of their dominant styles complement each other, and also neutralize their shortcomings

Kate Ludeman, PhD, and Eddie Erlandson, MD, are the principals of Worth Ethic, an Austin-Texas-based executive coaching firm. They have coached thousands of leaders, including Michael Dell and Kevin Rollins of Dell, Meg Whitman of eBay, and Larry Lucchino of the Boston Red Sox.

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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*, *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 a 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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