

# Business Week

## When Top Dogs Need Leashes

### ALPHA MALE SYNDROME

BY KATE LUDEMAN AND EDDIE ERLANDSON

**The Good** Persuasively argues that high achievers and their teams may need some group therapy.

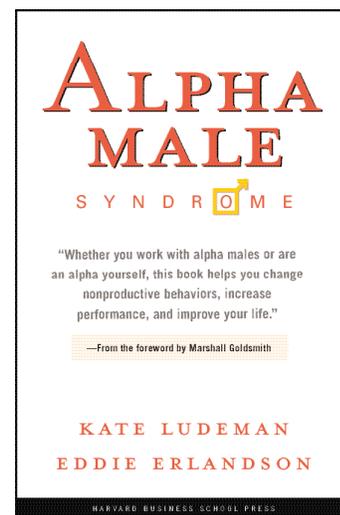
**The Bad** The analysis worked better in short form, as a Harvard Business Review article.

**The Bottom Line** Useful if hardly startling advice for alpha males and their co-workers.

In May, 2004, Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson made a splash with their *Harvard Business Review* essay "Coaching the Alpha Male." The authors' thesis: The top ranks of business are filled with highly intelligent, confident, and successful men who demand to be in control--but whose impatience and drive can also hurt their companies. As a result, they asserted, these men and their beleaguered teams often need a little group therapy. The Texas executive coaches omitted women from their analysis, noting that even the most ambitious females rarely come on so strong as typical alpha males.

Now, Ludeman and Erlandson have expanded their idea into a book, *Alpha Male Syndrome*. Unfortunately, the argument that worked well in an article wears thin when stretched over 276 pages. Still, the volume, targeted at both alphas and their sometimes apprehensive co-workers, offers some useful if commonsensical tips.

A key problem is the authors' revised definition of an alpha male. The *HBR* article clearly focused on domineering top dogs. Here alphas take on many forms--the charismatic commander, the lofty visionary, the data-driven strategist, and even the disciplined executor. While the authors note that alphas are always marked by "an overlay of aggressive intensity, energetic persistence, and competitive drive," their broad categories could include almost everyone in business. Moreover, they now muddy the waters further by



making room for alpha females: Among others, former Hewlett-Packard (HPQ) CEO Carly Fiorina makes a brief appearance.

Like the *HBR* piece, the book emphasizes the importance of coaching, particularly so-called 360-degree assessments, where executives get feedback from peers and underlings on the impact of their behavior. But leaders who have shot up the career ladder are often all too conscious of their many assets and resist exposure to blunt, unflattering comments. The authors add that "a great many alpha males see coaching as a soft, touchy-feely fad with little substance, like aromatherapy." Luckily for the authors, once converted, alphas apparently become a coach's dream. "They commit to the process fully and follow through with such discipline and tenacity that the impact on them and their organizations is profound."

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The book's many examples give it needed grounding. Ludeman and Erlandson, both of whom consider themselves alphas, clearly empathize with their ambitious subjects. In particular, they have a soft spot for Michael Dell, a client of theirs who, along with his senior staff, comes up repeatedly. A "visionary alpha with a strong strategist arm," Dell once had difficulty connecting emotionally with others, the authors say. But at Ludeman's prompting, he decided to discuss co-workers' negative feedback concerning him at a 2001 annual executive meeting. His candor, say the authors, boosted executive cohesion and revitalized the company's top ranks.

In essence, the authors build a case for the importance of listening, sharing, and generally being nice. They devote a chapter to teams that include alpha males, because all that testosterone can work at cross purposes. Even smart, innovative alpha thinkers can be a problem, generating more ideas than a team can act on. True teamwork, to the coaching duo, is embodied in a women's basketball team (why just the women's version isn't explained), while cutthroat alpha-driven teams are typified by what's seen on Donald Trump's TV show *The Apprentice*. So what does a good alpha do? "Respect the opinions of others even if they don't agree with them," say the authors, while "self-serving alphas use their verbal skills to distort and disparage."

Like any good coach, the authors also look at alphas' time away from the office. Among their suggestions: a regular fitness program (although they warn against competitive sports such as marathon squash or full-court basketball, which only feed adrenaline levels). And alphas need to take special care not to bring their more demanding traits home with them. The authors' tips: Learn to share responsibility (can alpha males do dishes?), stop blaming, listen, and don't make marriage a power struggle.

It's perfectly sound advice. Most readers already know boorish behavior in the corner suite doesn't cut it. But they also understand that if you want to get ahead, many alpha traits are an advantage. Sure, get a coach and loosen up. But even Ludeman and Erlandson acknowledge that, despite some drawbacks, an alpha male is what you want to be.



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