Channeling Alpha Male Leaders
BY KATE LUDEMAN AND EDDIE ERLANDSON

The business world is a natural habitat of alpha males. Whether they’re larger-than-life legends who run giant companies or relative unknowns heading up obscure firms and small departments, these aggressive powerhouses are hardwired for achievement and eager to tackle challenges that others find intimidating. Alpha males who are well-balanced human beings in full command of their strengths, are esteemed by colleagues, revered by employees, and adored by Wall Street. But other alpha males are organizational risks, not assets. They inspire fear and resentment rather than trust and respect, often causing expensive problems for their companies. Indeed, the very term alpha male has become a pejorative in America, thanks to the many instances when their abuses have created corporate soap operas and dramatic news stories.

Make no mistake: the world needs alpha males. When used appropriately, their courage, confidence, tireless energy, and fighting spirit make them natural leaders in competitive situations. The trouble comes when they use their exceptional strengths inappropriately or carry them to such extremes that they turn into tragic flaws: their confidence becomes arrogance, their toughness becomes belligerence, and their competitiveness becomes a fight to the death in which even teammates are seen as rivals to be vanquished. As many alpha males find out the hard way, what works in a jungle or on a battlefield—or during a genuine business crisis—is not always appropriate in today’s corporate environment, where leaders are called upon to motivate, inspire, teach, communicate, and model integrity and personal growth. Alpha males who rely exclusively on authoritarian command-and-control tactics need to develop what they often disdain as "soft skills," or else find themselves increasingly out of place.

We have coached hundreds of prominent alpha males. We have written about them extensively and have conducted a rigorous study of their assets and liabilities. The main thrust of our work is to help alpha males harness their formidable strengths while minimizing their potential downside—for the sake of their organizations and their own careers. That is the purpose of this article as well.

Are You an Alpha Male?

If you’re a woman, the answer to that question is obviously no. But you’re surely asking, "Aren’t there alpha females?" Yes, there are, and women with positive alpha traits are taking on major leadership roles in ever-increasing numbers. However, while those women possess the same fundamental traits as alpha males, the men have received the bulk of attention for two primary reasons: there are many more of
them in high positions, and a great deal of wreckage is caused by boys behaving badly. While alphas of both sexes are aggressive, competitive, and prone to anger, the men are far more likely to become ruthless and intimidating. These observations were borne out in our research: men scored much higher than women on virtually all measures of alpha risk factors.

Overall, our data shows that alpha traits correlate with being male, with increasing levels of education, with low anxiety, with supervisory positions, and with type A personality traits. The propensity for having alpha risks relates to being male, to higher levels of stress and tension, and to a lack of self-reflection. In other words, the prototypical alpha is a well-educated man with managerial experience and the hard-driving, urgent intensity of a type A. The most troublesome alphas are men who are under a high degree of stress and are not inclined to introspection. High alpha scores correlate strongly with anger, impatience, and competitiveness, and the scores for anger and impatience are significantly higher in men than in women.

One of the most significant findings corroborates something we observed repeatedly in our work in organizations: alpha risks are closely related to alpha strengths. Although some subjects scored high on one scale and not on the other, in general the greater the strengths, the greater the risks. That downside is why we have focused our work on

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**TABLE 1. THE ALPHA SYNDROME: WHEN STRENGTHS BECOME LIABILITIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alpha Attribute</th>
<th>Value to Organization</th>
<th>Risk to Organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant, confident, takes charge</td>
<td>Decisive, courageous leader; gets people to take action and move forward</td>
<td>Doesn’t develop strong leaders; intimidating; creates fear; stifles disagreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charismatic, magnetic leader who leads the way</td>
<td>Brings out the best in others; gets people to do more than they thought possible</td>
<td>Manipulates to get his way, uses charm to lure people down his path</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive, competitive</td>
<td>Determined to win; turns others into winners</td>
<td>Competes with peers; alienates colleagues; reluctant to give others credit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High achiever with a strong sense of mission</td>
<td>Action-oriented, produces results, energizes teams to reach impossible goals</td>
<td>Takes strong performance for granted; expects the impossible and doesn’t acknowledge what’s required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bold, creative, innovative thinker</td>
<td>Dreams up ingenious ideas; solves intractable problems; sees further than others</td>
<td>Arrogant, stubborn, overly opinionated; imposes own views; closed to others’ thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent, tenacious, determined, steadfast</td>
<td>Shows courage of convictions; always moves forward; takes unpopular stand to get results</td>
<td>Drives self and others to exhaustion; urgent; impatient; thinks rules don’t apply to him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong appetite for newness and change</td>
<td>Values speed, drives people and organizations toward needed change and rapid growth</td>
<td>Undervalues organizational alignment; launches into action before gathering support from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farsighted; sees what’s possible</td>
<td>Recognizes gap between today’s reality and tomorrow’s potential</td>
<td>So focused on future that present and near term are neglected; loses sight of business viability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees what’s missing</td>
<td>Proactively spots problems, adjusts, corrects, prevents things from getting worse</td>
<td>Can be critical, demeaning; fails to appreciate others’ contributions; people feel demoralized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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alpha males—and why women (and men who are not alphas) need to understand the species and learn to deal with them more effectively.

Dysfunctional alphas sabotage their productive gifts by creating resistance, resentment, and revenge. People admire their competence, but they hate reporting to them or teaming with them. When we’re invited into a company as consultants, most of the complaints we hear are about alpha males who are driving people crazy. We’re told about alpha managers who demoralize their staff with autocratic, abusive, or micromanaging tactics; about alpha coworkers who are demanding, impatient, and unwilling to listen; about alpha peers who fight to get their way even when they’re demonstrably wrong; about alpha subordinates who solo rather than collaborate. By the time we hear about them, this syndrome has usually exacted a huge cost in absenteeism, turnover, stress-related health problems, and diminished motivation, not to mention the time and energy of management.

In sum, when properly channeled and controlled, the alpha male drive to reach the top is a boon to progress, but when the ethic of "do what it takes to get results" is taken to extremes, it becomes a menace to both personal careers and corporate health. This can be seen in Table 1, which lists common alpha traits and the value and risk associated with each one.

The Four Types of Alphas

Alpha male strengths and risks are expressed in different ways by different alphas. In our research we identified four distinct types—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 assets to build upon and liabilities that can diminish your effectiveness. Here is a brief summary of each type’s primary behavior traits:

The Commanders: Intense, magnetic leaders who set the tone, mobilize troops, and energize action with decisive passion, without necessarily digging into the details. Commanders take charge and lead the way, pushing people hard to accomplish their goals—but they can drive so hard they run over others like bulldozers.

The Visionaries: Curious, expansive, intuitive, inspiring, and future-oriented, they see possibilities and opportunities that others often dismiss as impractical or unlikely. Fueled by a fertile imagination, visionaries lead with passion and enthusiasm—but they sometimes ignore reality, biting off more than they can chew and leading their teams over a cliff.

The Strategists: Methodical, systematic thinkers who favor data and facts, they have excellent judgment and a sharp eye for patterns and problems. Strategists approach tasks armed with data and exceptional powers of reason and analysis—but they can become know-it-alls who fall in love with their own brilliance and fail to listen to others.

The Executors: Tireless and goal-oriented, they push forward with an eye for detail, relentless discipline, and keen oversight, holding everyone accountable, including themselves. Executors are masters of structure and project management—but they can be control freaks whose micromanagement creates roadblocks and paralysis.

Which type of alpha best describes you? Knowing your type can help you maximize your strengths and keep your destructive alpha traits in check. It can also help you formulate more effective teams. In our experience, the most effective alpha leaders are those who blend the functional
It’s more important to learn than to win.

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elements of more than one type—or are smart enough to associate with colleagues whose strengths complement their own.

Stop Defending and Start Learning

How to treat the alpha male syndrome? If you're an alpha male, your primary challenge is to optimize your enormous productive capacity while getting the upper hand on your alpha risk factors before they create problems. You need to capitalize on your powerful competitive drive without turning teamwork into guerrilla warfare and treating colleagues like stagehands in your one-man show. You need to take full advantage of your leadership gifts without abusing those who work for you and alienating your peers. In other words, if you imagine a continuum with magnificent leadership gifts at one extreme and destructive belligerence and egotism at the other, your task is to move further toward the positive end of the spectrum—and if you manage alpha males or work with them, your job is to help them move in that direction.

One of the keys to shifting your behavior toward the positive side of the alpha continuum is to recognize when you become defensive and get yourself to shift gears into learning mode. Alpha males always feel a need to project an image of strength and competence, which can make them notoriously allergic to disagreement and critical feedback. While they can be highly critical themselves, offering feedback in a pugnacious manner, they don't like hearing it, and when they do, they often counterpunch or shift the blame to someone else. The same thing happens with disagreements. Because they think they have all the answers, alpha males have a strong need to explain, justify, and convince. If the other person doesn't get it, they state their case another way, louder and more forcefully, sometimes to the point of bullying. Discussion becomes debate, debate becomes argument, and argument becomes hostility. If the opponent is also an alpha, the result is war, even at the expense of mutual interests.

If this description hits close to home, you might be paying a heavy cost. The people you intimidate either fight back or slink away in self-defense. Either way, you alienate them and lose the opportunity to gather useful facts, garner support, and bolster incentive. Where defensiveness prevails, no one receives constructive feedback, and therefore no one can improve. It's critical to stop the defensiveness in its tracks and remind yourself that it's more important to learn from the encounter than to win.

Table 2 is a powerful tool for monitoring defensiveness. It presents increasing levels of learning behavior on the positive scale and escalating defensive behavior on the negative scale. The higher you move on the (+) scale, the lower the defensiveness and the greater the openness to learning. The lower you go on the (-) scale indicates the opposite: a lot of defensiveness and a mind closed to learning.

You can use the scale to understand your own escalation pattern, as well as that of other alpha males. During an encounter, the basic task is to shift your behavior from a high score on the minus side to a high score on the plus side. Once you make that shift, you'll quickly see others move in the same direction.
**Let Yourself Be Vulnerable**

As superheroes in their own minds, alpha males always want to appear invincible. They fear that if they don't come across as titans their credibility will be undermined and opponents will pounce like sharks that smell blood. But, paradoxical as it may seem, when strong, successful leaders allow themselves to be candid about their human frailties, they're actually seen as self-confident and courageous. They end up commanding more respect than those who strut around with their chests puffed up, afraid to show a chink in their armor. That's why we strongly encourage alpha male clients to be fully transparent and to publicly affirm their commitment to personal growth. (For tips on how to get the most out of the alpha males you work with, see the sidebar, "Coaching Alpha Males.")

The truth is, everyone already knows you're imperfect. Trying to maintain an image of perfection just keeps you at a distance from your colleagues and feeds into your image as arrogant and self-important. On the other hand, if you openly expose your personal foibles, you display another side of yourself— one that is self-aware, humble, and eager to improve. That candor builds trust, respect, and loyalty, making your working relationships far more productive and raising your leadership capacity to new levels.

To see how open or self-protective you are, respond yes or no to the following questions:

- When people ask me something, I have trouble saying, "I don't know."
- I always find ways to let people know I'm smarter than they are.
- I often exaggerate the extent of my knowledge and experience.
- I try to cover up my problems until I find a way to solve them.
- I deflect attention from anything that makes me look bad.
- I sometimes pretend to understand things when I'm actually confused.
• I try to project an image of decisiveness even when I’m sure what to do.

If you answer yes to more than four or five statements, you would benefit from adjusting your style. In today’s workplace, projecting a Superman image actually works like kryptonite, weakening your ability to lead effectively. Bottom line: let down your guard and be real. This is not psychobabble; it’s a nuts-and-bolts, bottomline concern. In our experience, companies that place a premium on openness, authenticity, and self-awareness are more creative, more energetic, and more profitable. If you doubt that, try this mental experiment: imagine a scenario in which your boss has problems with how you’ve executed certain directives, which you considered too vague to follow. Now imagine your boss storming into your office, slamming the door,

COACHING ALPHA MALES

Whether you supervise alpha males, struggle to work with alpha male peers, or suffer under the iron-fisted rule of an alpha male boss, you can make your workplace more pleasant and productive by following these strategies:

Provide data that can’t be argued with. Alpha males are moved by facts, not feelings. We have found they respond very well to interview-based 360-degree feedback with verbatim comments.

Make the coaching concrete and practical. Alpha males respond to bottom-line concerns: they don’t care if they hurt someone’s feelings; they’re all about results. Therefore, help them understand the consequences of their behavior and tie everything to business performance.

Overcome defensiveness. Alpha males are proud and argumentative; use the information in the section "Stop Defending and Start Learning" to prevent or neutralize defensive behavior.

Get a commitment to change. Alpha males value accountability and personal responsibility. Harness that admirable trait by getting them to commit to specific actions. Ask:

• Are you willing to make the needed changes?

• Are you willing to do whatever it takes to do so?

• Are you willing to allow us to assist you?

Follow up to get follow-through. Because they’re results-driven, alpha males respond well to follow-up and positive reinforcement. If they see good results from their attempts to change, they’ll stay on the program.
and letting loose a barrage of demeaning remarks. Then imagine your boss calmly walking in and saying, "I'm aware that I'm not doing a very good job communicating what I'm looking for. I have a sense of how it should be done, and I really want you to execute it, but you obviously can't read my mind. So let's try to tease it out together." Which approach would make you bust your butt to get the job done? Which manager would earn your loyalty and trust?

That's the kind of reflective, self-aware leader we encourage alpha males to be. If you make that shift, you'll be positioned to overcome the domineering, combative impulses that sabotage the noble intentions of many alpha males. You'll then be able to harness your alpha power, energy, and competitive drive for the benefit of your career and your organization.
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.