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Me Alpha, you fired

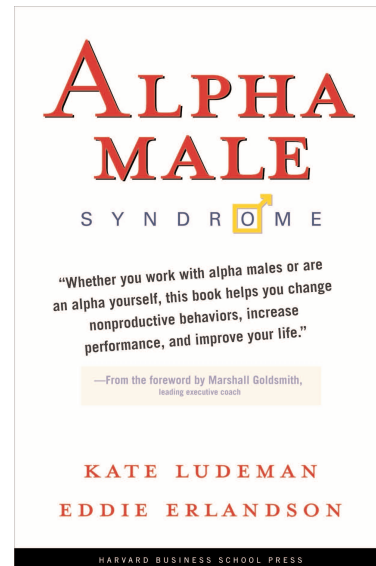
Alpha males have all the power, but misusing it can be their fatal weakness, according to the Harvard Business School. Our correspondent explains the problems, and how to fix them.

BY RICHARD MORRISON

You will certainly know one. And if you have the key to the executive washroom, you probably are one. Quick checklist? You achieve great things. You're quick-witted, assertive, opinionated, volatile, a born leader. You love to win. You glow with self-confidence, but also smoulder with irritation if those around you fail to jump when you snap your fingers, or are too stolid to follow your brilliant train of thought. Working with you can be exhilarating or bruising. You're the sort of guy who rewrites the history books — if not always for the better.

If this cap fits, even partially, congratulations and commiserations. You are an alpha male. And don't feel left out, ladies. According to Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson, the American husband-and-wife authors of *Alpha Male Syndrome*, women can have alpha traits too — only not so many, and nothing like as dangerous. Their saving grace? A tendency to empathise rather than confront or intimidate. "Women are far less likely than men to demonstrate inappropriate anger or an impatience that comes across as harsh and brusque," Ludeman says.

So basically we are talking about talented and charismatic men behaving badly. Such macho beasts have always existed, of course. From Alexander the Great to Chairman Mao, these are the tough cookies who shaped our world by force of personality, for better or worse. But *Alpha Male Syndrome* is the most comprehensive analysis yet of this bullish breed, which — according to the authors — accounts for 75 percent of the corporate world's top managers.



Ludeman and Erlandson, both self-confessed alphas, maintain that we need to understand alpha male syndrome not only to harness fully the shining qualities of the alphas around us but also to tame their potentially destructive traits. "Like many natural resources," they write, "alpha males are both indispensable to progress and potentially hazardous." And when alpha males self-destruct, "we all suffer."

But the authors also address their book to alphas themselves, especially the thrusting young go-getters among us. Their problem, it seems, is that their careers progress very fast, with heaps of praise at every stage. So their sense of infallibility starts to overwhelm the other qualities they will need as they advance up the ladder — particularly the patient art of listening to

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others. As the authors put it, in their all-American way: “They don’t realise that the skills that got them to the play-offs are not enough to take them all the way to the championship.”

Ludeman and Erlandson argue that, as they move from middle to top management, alphas are less and less likely to be experts in all the areas they have to control. So to make good decisions they have to be open and honest about the limits of their knowledge. The trouble is that this transparency is an utterly un-alpha characteristic. “Alphas don’t like appearing vulnerable,” Ludeman says. “It pains them to be wrong about anything. If they are shown not to know everything about everything they often take it intensely personally.”

And what sort of damage can a dysfunctional alpha cause? The authors come up with something called the “alpha triangle” to explain the probable disruption and destruction to colleagues and organisations. The three sides of the triangle comprise “villain”, “victim” and “hero”. Typically, the alpha will become the office villain, a power-freak putting brutal pressure on those around him, bawling them out if they mess up, making lives miserable. That creates victims. Then there are the heroes, who pick up the pieces left by the alpha’s trail of destruction, and act as peacemakers. The result of all this triangular tension is “alpha sludge”: organisational inertia. It occurs because everyone’s emotional energy is expended dealing with the alpha’s moods, rather than working creatively and efficiently.

What the authors also assert, however, is that the triangle couldn’t exist if any of the three sides pulled out. In other words, sludge isn’t only the alpha’s fault. Some people, paradoxically, like being victims because they get lots of attention and sympathy. Others like playing the hero because they get appreciation. But both types are only reinforcing the alpha’s bad tendencies.

With me so far? Good, because it now gets more complicated. Ludeman and Erlandson identify not just one type of alpha male, but four. There are commanders: magnetic leaders who get everyone

enthused by their passionate rhetoric, without necessarily bothering their heads with the details. Then there are visionaries, Bill Gates types, capable of seeing opportunities far into the future. Different again are strategists, who excel at pulling together facts and figures, grasping the big picture and macro-planning. Finally there are executors. Dogged, indefatigable, disciplined and painstaking, they can be relied upon to push a project conscientiously to completion.

An organisation clearly benefits if it has a combination of alpha types at the highest level. A visionary like Gates, for instance needs a commander type such as Steve Ballmer, his chief executive at Microsoft, to fire up employees with his ideas. The problem is that all these types have their downsides. Commanders tend to view every situation as a competition — one that must be won by comprehensively routing the other party, even if he or she happens to be a colleague. They live by the law of the jungle. But as the authors wryly point out, we now know that the law of the jungle doesn’t even work well in the jungle. Recent research into baboons reveals that while the “commander” apes are jostling for supremacy, a non-alpha will quietly nip in and seduce the best female with a bit of tender, loving care.

So, too, in the human jungle. Alpha commanders will often fail to notice, or deliberately ignore, evidence that their approach is failing. Is George Bush, for instance, a classic commander? “I think we’d need more data before making a firm assessment,” says Erlandson. “But yes, he has the charisma, and also the tendency to isolate himself from useful critical feedback.” Such figures, the authors suggest, need “an infusion of self-disclosing candour”. Which, in plain English, presumably means that they should admit when they are wrong.

But the other alpha types also have potential problems. Visionaries can make big mental leaps, but are prone to extreme attention-deficit disorder when confronted by minions who insist on nattering about nuts and bolts. And they sometimes bend the facts to get their bold ideas accepted.

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Strategists tend to be better at handling data than people. Like Mr Spock in *Star Trek* they have souls like calculators, and zero tolerance for people who are slower thinkers than they are. And executors can become, according to the authors, “their own and everyone else’s worst enemy”. Constantly micromanaging, looking for faults, slow to praise and quick to blame, they cause burnout by imposing huge workloads on themselves and those around them.

So much for the problems. What are the remedies? Ludeman and Erlandson, a psychologist and former cardiovascular surgeon, run a Texas-based “executive coaching” firm offering “re-set strategies” to dysfunctional males in their client companies (which include the Dell Corporation and US government agencies). Seeing the value of teamwork, listening to other people’s opinions, learning to trust what the authors poetically describe as “the alchemy of human connection”: all this comes into it. But the most important (and difficult) step is probably the first: getting the alphas to acknowledge their own negative qualities, and then convincing them that renouncing these traits will not sap their macho strength, like Samson shorn of his hair, but make them more effective and respected.

The authors maintain that the scandals that have hit corporate America in recent years make tackling alpha male syndrome not just advisable but essential. “Enron is a good example of how one of the biggest risks inherent in the alpha male — the feeling of entitlement — can take a company down a slippery slope,” says Erlandson. “Unhealthy alphas think they are entitled, by virtue of their position or intellect, to believe that the rules don’t apply to them.”

And as the authors also point out, the alpha’s misplaced feeling of entitlement can extend into the sexual area as well, especially if they can dazzle office juniors. “Power is the great aphrodisiac,” Henry Kissinger gloated. Bill Clinton’s behaviour with Monica Lewinsky was the classic example.

However, Ludeman and Erlandson detect that the corporate climate is changing fast. “Some alpha executives I coached back in the early 1990s were, well, very challenging human beings,” Ludeman says. “People like that don’t often make it to the top today.”

The reason? Paradoxically, in the male-dominated world of alphas, it’s the influence of women. “In the old days women who wanted to get to the top thought they had to behave like alpha males,” Ludeman says. “But from the mid-1980s we got a critical mass of women into middle management, and their presence changed expectations about the workplace. There’s much more collaboration now, less confrontation. Yelling at people is considered a no-no in most corporate cultures. All that can be attributed to the impact of females.”

So with the tide running firmly against macho alpha-male brutishness, there should be nothing to stop more and more women flourishing at the highest corporate levels — always provided, of course, that they have those essential alpha skills of assertiveness and granite willpower. But what of the majority of our species, male and female, who aren’t alphas? Must they meekly accept their lot as minions and makeweights, while the Masters and Mistresses of the Universe strut their stuff on the big stage?

Not so, according to Ludeman. “Sometimes people with non-alpha characteristics — consensus-orientated, soft-spoken, with little psychological need to dominate a room — can be very useful in giving stability to a management,” Ludeman says. “In a very alpha environment the introduction of a non-alpha leader can open up the culture.”

“And sometimes,” Erlandson adds, “talented people want to work for someone precisely because he or she isn’t an aggressive alpha. That’s an important factor if you believe, as many people do, that the main function of corporate leaders is to attract, retain and develop talent in their companies.”

So there’s still hope, then, for those of us stuck in the beta, gamma and delta streams of office life. On the other hand, don’t stop taking the testosterone tablets yet, girls.

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FOUR CLASSIC ALPHAS

Henry Kissinger

Type: Strategist

Assets: Objective, analytic, data-driven, sees underlying patterns, concocts grand schemes

Liabilities: Opinionated, smug, pretentious, know-it-all

Gordon Brown

Type: Executor

Assets: Disciplined, immense appetite for work, eagle-eyed

Liabilities: Micro-manages obsessively, impatient, fussy, prone to burn-out

George Bush

Type: Commander

Assets: Charismatic, strong, decisive, appetite for winning

Liabilities: Intimidates, stifles disagreement, doesn't listen to advice

Tony Blair

Type: Visionary

Assets: Big goals, strong convictions, far-sighted

Liabilities: Loses sight of reality; over- confident about own judgment; unpragmatic



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