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Taming an Oversize Drive to Be Top Dog

Confident, driven leaders are an asset to their organizations. But these strengths can also be negatives when not tempered.

Stefan Stern

If it is tough at the top, then it is hardly surprising that the top jobs are invariably filled by determined, dominating people — the alpha males who are the subject of this new book.

Its authors, Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson, are a husband-and-wife executive coaching team that has worked with more than 1,500 chief executives and senior executives, including Dell Inc. founder Michael Dell and CEO Kevin Rollins, and EBay Inc. CEO Meg Whitman.

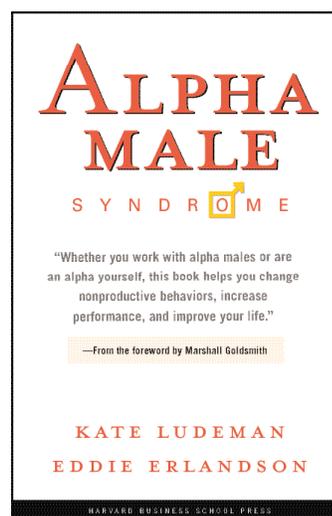
As good coaches, the authors avoid being unfairly judgmental about their subject. They recognize the alpha male's strengths as well as his weaknesses, and argue that the world needs its alpha leaders.

But when those strengths turn into liabilities, "alpha male syndrome" has struck: "The stronger the positive qualities, the more likely they are to erupt as negatives."

Alpha males display extreme confidence. They "want excellence, they want it now, and they're sure they know how to get it," the authors explain. But, they add, this self-assurance can go too far.

"A great deal of wreckage is caused by boys behaving badly. The healthy ones — well-balanced human beings in full command of their alpha strengths — are natural leaders who are trusted by colleagues, respected by competitors, revered by employees and loved by Wall Street. But other alpha males are risks to their organizations — and sometimes to themselves."

The authors should know; they are self-declared alphas. Ludeman is a coach with a doctorate in psychology; Erlandson is a surgeon turned health guru.



One high-tech entrepreneur told them, after he had lost his investors' \$20 million: "Looking back on it, I wasn't always right, but I was never in doubt."

That is an alpha male talking. But what about alpha females? Do they not get to the top as well?

"Alpha women want to lead, but they don't necessarily need to rule," the authors say. They are not as belligerent or as aggressive as their male equivalents. For this reason the authors have chosen to focus on the real problem cases: the men.

How can you tell when alpha male syndrome is afflicting your business? Consider how meetings are run, they suggest.

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Are meetings like a particularly unpleasant episode of the competitive television program "The Apprentice"? If so, they can become "theaters for the Alpha Male Show." Often there is a discrepancy between how an alpha male leader thinks the meeting has gone and the reality.

To complicate the matter further, there are four types of alpha male leaders, the authors say: the commander, the visionary, the strategist and the executor.

Commanders are dominant high achievers, demanding the best from themselves and others. But they also may create fear, suppress disagreements and stifle open communication.

Visionaries are passionate enthusiasts, resilient and indefatigable. However, they can lose sight of the needs of today, dazzled by their own vision of tomorrow.

Strategists are strong decision makers. They are innovators, finding opportunities buried in piles of data. But they can seem remote and dispassionate, unable to engage with arguments that are not based on hard facts.

Executors are brilliant deliverers of results. They are strong on detail and superb problem solvers. But they may prove to be excessively demanding micromanagers, often disappointed with others' efforts.

Alpha males may end up playing several roles, or personas (from the Latin word for mask). But with help, harmful personas can be abandoned in favor of the authentic self. "If you and you alone change, other people will also change," the authors say.

Alpha males are bad for everyone's health. The old tycoon's joke, "I don't get ulcers — I give them," is just wrong. In fact, alpha males are often adrenalin addicts.

"Those adrenalized bodies in business suits are all dressed up with nowhere to go," Ludeman and Erlandson say. "Alpha adrenalin junkies not only make themselves sick, they create a toxic environment for everyone else."



Kate Ludeman, PhD, is CEO and founder of Worth Ethic Corporation and author of *The Corporate Mystic* and four other books. She has been a featured speaker at the Fortune Magazine Summit of the Best and Most Admired Companies and has coached more than 1,000 CEOs and senior executives on every continent.



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