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Dear Reader,

I recently read an article in the May 2004 Harvard Business Review about coaching Alpha Males, and was amazed to recall the number of people I have encountered who corresponded to this profile, and who made the life of their subordinates and colleagues extremely difficult. To discover they fell easily into this "alpha male" category helped me understand them better. I thought how similar this was to learn about someone's MBTI profile: to realize that ascribing an 'antisocial' behavior to a person who is actually merely an "introvert" is to increase one's tolerance, and establishes more constructive relationships with others. So I decided to explore the "alpha male" subject further, and to try to unveil what is behind those threatening leaders.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

Quote of the Month

***"Our similarities bring us together.  
Our differences allow us to make it useful"***

*Jorge Bucay*

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# LIM NEWS



*We develop your leaders while they develop your business*

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## Threatening Leaders

by Isabel Rimanoczy

**W**ould you be surprised to hear that 70% of all senior executives respond to a similar profile: highly confident, intelligent, successful and matching the "alpha" pattern? This is what Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson indicate in their study about successful top leaders and their needs for personal coaching (1). According to the authors, the very success of

these leaders pushes them to higher levels of responsibility, and with this comes the need to be more inspirational, which is often an aspect that these results-oriented personalities don't excel at.

### **What is the Alpha Male?**

The term was coined in the 1930s by anthropologists, to describe the leader of a wolf pack. The position of 'Alpha Male' means the male predominating over all the other males in his social group.

The position of Alpha Male is seen as one of the most socially desirable (in wolves as well as humans) as having it enables a male to make decisions about how his social group/pack is run, to exact submission and obedience from subordinates, and generally to control things and people at will.

To organize around a leader seems to be a very natural tendency. "Scientists view social hierarchy as a necessary evil allowing any group to function more effectively. It's why committees have chair persons. Sorting out rank in the first place can be perilous for everyone. So it pays to settle on a hierarchy and then avoid further bloodshed by acknowledging rank with gestures of dominance or submission. Every time two people meet, some scientists say, the question of dominance or submission gets answered in the way one person holds eye contact and the other glances away, or in the way one unconsciously shifts vocal tone to match the other. Trying to figure out who's in charge is almost as natural for us as breathing. Dominant individuals generally make direct eye contact when they're speaking, but tend to look away when subordinates are speaking to them."(2)

This practice starts very early. "Hierarchy appears almost automatically in groups of children all over the world, usually before the age of three. It isn't simply a matter of males competing for females. It's part of the underlying fabric of our minds, a product of tens of millions of years in which primates have been evolving as social species, and none are more social than ourselves. Disputes among children in these studies were generally of the "my toy" variety, and, unlike adults, the dominant individuals routinely used aggression to take control. As in the animal world, the aggression became less overt once dominance was established". (2) An interesting example of this is stated by Ludeman & Erlandson (op cit) as they were coaching an insightful and inspiring CEO on his temper problem. "He was usually warm and easy to connect with, but in tense meetings he would invariably become angry and flushed and speak in a sharp, staccato tone that intimidated people, even though he never raised his voice. To help him become aware of his destructive behavior pattern, we looked for its roots. We asked him to recall the first time he ever reacted in this way, and he remembered being four years old and hitting his six-year-old brother over the head after his brother stole one of his toys for the hundredth time. And his brother never did it again. He roared with laughter when he realized he'd basically been using the same pattern ever since. He acknowledged that this approach was unlikely to motivate his senior executives". (1)

### **What are characteristics of the Alpha Leader?**

Alpha leaders are very intelligent people who discover early in life that they are smarter than others. So they start feeling superior to peers, later to their teachers, and this self confidence inspires them to do more and try new challenges. They are disciplined and have visions and dreams, and will not shy from the effort that is required to get something done. The combination of persistence, discipline, vision and intelligence brings success, which in turn makes them more confident about their capabilities.

By growing up trusting themselves so much, they develop a lack of trust in the capabilities of others, and prefer to do things by themselves to get what they see as a "better result". A consequence of this is that

they will rarely ask for help, asking themselves who could possibly be qualified better than themselves to solve their own problems?

As Alpha types become team leaders, this evolves into high expectations about the performance of others, and the high standards of the Alpha make him strive constantly for better results. This unwillingness to be satisfied with past success usually leads him to demand more of himself and of others. Nothing you can do will be ever 'enough' for an alpha leader, and even when he may think something was done well, he gives few compliments. When someone meets the performance standards, it's just "what was expected", as one Alpha leader once told me.

They work fast, and this makes them impatient with those who take time making a presentation of a report or understanding a challenge. A common behavior is to interrupt others, in order to push them to come to the point more quickly. As we all do, they also take themselves as the standard, and have difficulty understanding why others don't think or act as fast as they do. As a consequence, they constantly challenge others to do more or do it differently, which is a very unsettling feeling for peers and subordinates.

Direct in their communication, they don't hesitate to express their opinions. "Not always right but never in doubt", said a colleague referring to their assertiveness. They are results-oriented people who go after success. When someone confronts them, they fight back: ask for hard data or good logical arguments before accepting the opposing view. When the rationale is not strong enough from their perspective, they can reply in a dismissive or demeaning way. This creates an environment where people refrain from confronting them, to avoid losing face or being exposed to their questioning.

After a while, organizations develop a type of 'halo effect' around these people, and even when they demonstrate "non-Alpha" behaviors, their reputation for direct, impatient attitudes is so strongly ingrained that they don't get credit for attempting to change.

I have seen Alpha leaders making decisions that their subordinates or colleagues knew were bad, but no one was willing to step up and give information to challenge the leader's opinion. They are just perceived as too strong to confront, and self-preservation recommends silence and observation. Naturally the Alpha leader is not aware of this! Indeed, when I spoke to them about it, their reaction was one of great surprise. Again, taking themselves as the standard, they expect that anyone can speak up, without fear. Organizations suffer the impact of Alpha leader behaviors because of their failure to develop their colleagues. Their style fosters more silent compliance and passive resistance than debate, brainstorming and creative ideas from others. Interestingly, while they strive for success and results, they lack the people skills that help find the right process to get things done.

Another characteristic of the alpha leaders is a marked interest in learning about technology, about business or "things", and little interest in people issues or feelings.(1) To deal with feelings is seen by them as a sign of weakness, although they have no problem expressing their own anger or passion. The weakness is *to talk* about feelings. It's perfectly acceptable to act them out. This is a severe handicap to their leadership, as they miss a key element of their environment: how others feel. As they don't know how to go about handling feelings, they tend to avoid perceiving or acknowledging emotional signs in others.

Winning drives their behaviors, and they are ambitious and hungry for power. As Ludeman and Erlandson put it (1), "they are not happy unless they're the top dogs, the ones calling the shots". They cast a large shadow at work, and the atmosphere around can be tense and not much fun. Because of the

responsibilities and ambitious goals they accept, they transmit pressure to perform on their colleagues, which can make them intimidating, less participative, even abusive or autocratic.

### How to deal with Alpha Leaders?

To begin with, as with anyone else, you cannot change an Alpha leader. What you can do, is influence his reactions with your own behaviors.

Alpha Male behaviors	Suggested counter behaviors
Shows lack of trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make it explicit: "I know you don't trust me but let me show you my data"</li> </ul>
Doesn't ask for help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Say "You didn't ask me for help, but I thought that xxxx could be useful for you..."</li> </ul>
Fails to acknowledge achievements of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask, "Was this what you expected? Was this useful? I would like to know if you think we have met this target".</li> </ul>
Is impatient, tends to interrupt comments of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contract how much time you have for the meeting and what the outcomes are.</li> <li>• Be organized, clear and succinct.</li> </ul>
Inspires fear, is difficult to confront	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect rational, solid data. Be extremely logical and base positions on valid information</li> </ul>
Has extremely high expectations; presses for results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try to be on the same side. If you share the goals, prepare the help/support you will need. If you think the goals are not realistic, provide data and see if they can be negotiated. If he has his own pressure from above, tackle it as a joint challenge: "What can we do?"</li> </ul>

As author Suzanne Brockmann puts it, "Each of these men were shaped by those beliefs they learned as a child, but like all living humans, they continue to be shaped and reshaped by the things they learn as adults."

### Final Remarks

Alpha leaders make an important contribution with their discipline, intelligence and vision. They are results-oriented people, who respond readily to challenges and are able to pull groups along in their slipstream. The problem is that they easily are perceived as threatening to peers and subordinates, and people don't give their best under those circumstances. Besides that, they are a popular profile. A cursory Google search for 'Alpha Males' elicited the information that there are 650,000 references for

the topic! And consider the archetypal images presented by Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas, John Wayne, Harrison Ford in the USA; by Jean Gabin and Jean Paul Belmondo in France; by Vittorio Gassman and Vittorio de Sica in Italy...

*Want to add your own?*



**Sources:**

- (1) HBR, Coaching the Alpha Male, Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson, May 2004
- (2) Discover, Richard Conniff, May 2000
- (3) Evolutionary Snippets, The Alpha Male Profile, William A. Spriggs, 1999  
<http://www.evoyage.com/index.htm>

***Do you struggle with an Alpha leader or peer?***

Email to [Isabel.rimanoczy@LIMglobal.net](mailto:Isabel.rimanoczy@LIMglobal.net) to get some tips and questions to help you address your challenge.



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Fax: (305) 692-1931

E-mail: [Newsletter@LIMglobal.net](mailto:Newsletter@LIMglobal.net) - [www.LIMglobal.net](http://www.LIMglobal.net)