

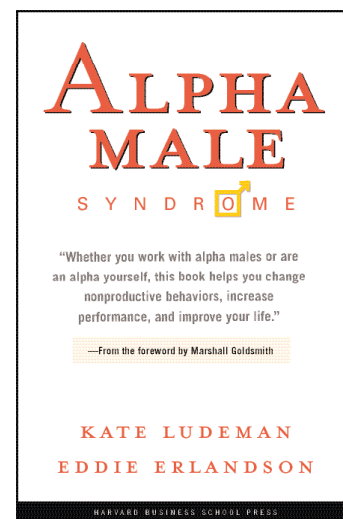
## CORPORATE PSYCHOLOGY

### The Power Trip

BY KATE LUDEMAN AND EDDIE ERLANDSON

The business world swarms with alpha males. Although there are no hard numbers on this, we estimate that alphas comprise about 75 percent of top executives. Some are larger-than-life legends who run giant companies; others lead in relative obscurity at the top of little-known firms or small departments. 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 adored by Wall Street. But other alpha males are risks to their organizations, and sometimes themselves. They get depicted in Dilbert cartoons, not management textbooks. Inspiring resentment instead of respect, and fear instead of trust, they create corporate soap operas that make life miserable for co-workers, create expensive problems for their companies and derail fast-track careers — including their own. Why? Because their greatest strengths have turned into tragic flaws. Evidence of this alpha ambiguity can be seen on the covers of *Fortune* and *Forbes*, on the front pages of newspapers, on CNN and ESPN: alpha males leading the way to amazing accomplishments, earth-shaking breakthroughs and skyrocketing profits — and abusing power, bankrupting companies and wearing handcuffs. Like many natural resources, alphas are both indispensable to progress and a potential hazard.

Make no mistake: the world needs alpha males. We could not do without their courageous leadership, their goal-driven focus, their unwavering sense of responsibility and all the other qualities they bring to bear when they roll up their sleeves and take charge. At their best, alphas are world beaters. When they are not at their best — when they are unaware, out of balance or out of control — they create problems that diminish the value of their productive energy. And when they are at their worst, they go down in flames and drag their co-workers, their families and their organizations with them. In fact, when alpha males self-destruct, we



all suffer, because economic progress and social well-being depend upon their strengths. In other words, the alpha upside is limitless, but the downside can be devastating.

The difference between alphas who soar and alphas who sink is most evident in the area of interpersonal relations. Take Michael Dell and Michael Eisner, two classic alpha males. Brilliant, driven and aggressive, both aimed high at an early age, boldly followed their dreams and achieved extraordinary success in businesses marked by innovation. In 1984, Dell, then a nineteen-year-old college student, started the company that bears his name, telling his mother he would one day surpass IBM. That same year, Eisner capped a meteoric Hollywood career by being named chairman and CEO of the Walt Disney Company. He quickly propelled Disney from the doldrums of the entertainment industry to the mother of brand names and the darling of Wall Street. Meanwhile, Dell became the youngest CEO ever to crack the *Fortune* 500. Flash forward to 2005. Dell is



named America's Most Admired Company by Fortune magazine, while the vanquished IBM bows out of the PC business. In the meantime, the sordid details of Eisner's hiring and firing of Michael Ovitz are dragged into public view, and a board revolt culminates in Eisner losing his chairmanship and resigning as CEO.

The arcs of these larger-than-life characters capture both the extra-ordinary strengths and the dangerous risks of the alpha male personality. Both men had all it takes to excel in business and leave a lasting mark on society: competence, creativity, astute judgment, abundant energy, daring vision, unflinching self-confidence and more. But Dell leveraged his alpha assets to become a leader who makes everyone around him better, while alpha blind spots got the better of Eisner's prodigious ability. In the last years of Eisner's reign, the atmosphere at Disney was reportedly marked by paranoia, backbiting and civil war; the culture at Dell remains the most collaborative and collegial we've ever observed in a large corporation. By all accounts, the iron-fisted Eisner needed to subordinate the other alphas in his orbit; Dell recruited seasoned executives and eagerly learned from them. Eisner consolidated his power and hogged the credit; Dell, at the height of his success, handed the CEO position to Kevin Rollins and created an unusual power-sharing arrangement. Most of Dell's talented, enormously wealthy senior executives choose to stay with the company rather than retire or accept one of the many choice job offers that

come their way. By contrast, a joke that made the rounds in Hollywood during the Eisner years had homeless people carrying signs reading, "Will work for Disney".

## THE ALPHA ASSESSMENT

You can access the questionnaire online at [www.AlphaAssessment.com](http://www.AlphaAssessment.com). It takes only 15 minutes to complete. The results are automatically and instantaneously tabulated, and an in-depth personalised report is generated. You will not only learn whether or not you are an alpha, but also the degree to which your alpha tendencies show up as assets or liabilities — and specific advice for enhancing the former and reducing the latter. If you are not an alpha, the assessment will give you personalised tips for acquiring alpha strengths that can significantly boost your career.

Meg Whitman, the CEO of eBay, is an excellent example of the differences between the alpha male and the alpha female. She has a robust drive to succeed, she likes being in command and she's as metrics-oriented as most male executives we've worked with. Without those qualities, Fortune magazine would not have named her the most powerful woman in American business two years in a row, in 2004 and 2005. But, like only the healthiest of alpha males, she balances her systemizing skills with solid empathizing skills. By all indications, her collaborative style has enabled her to assemble effective, highly motivated teams that serve as glue within a vast organization that has grown sevenfold since she took over in 1998.

"Her most striking attribute is to enable other people and other groups to get things done," says Tom Tierney, an eBay board member and the former CEO of Bain & Co.

Running a company with over nine thousand employees and more than 150 million customers, Whitman "leads by not leading, bosses by not bossing, and manages by not managing", writes William Meyers in *USNews.com*. Elsewhere, venture capitalist Bob Kagle says Whitman "represents both the emotional and rational side of the brand. She is an active and fair listener, and tough-minded and competitive." That is not the combination of traits we associate with alpha males, except for exceptional leaders who are as venerated as they are valued. Many experts consider Whitman's balanced style the future of management, just as hybrid cars are the future of transportation.

Are female alphas the perfect antidote to the alpha male downside? In many ways they are. But they have challenges

# CORPORATE PSYCHOLOGY

---

of their own. Emotional intelligence is a huge asset, but it can also create problems, and seeking consensus can either pay off big time or backfire in costly ways.

Joyce Russell is the Chief Operating Officer at Adecco USA, the world's largest staffing firm. Naturally warm and effusive, she is a talented and passionate executive who easily establishes rapport and builds good working relationships. Joyce feels that her "softer edges" are exactly what make her an effective leader. But many men perceive her as "fluffy".

Ray Roe, Adecco's U.S. CEO, fought hard to place Joyce in her current position, and wants to groom her as his successor. "She's as fine an executive as I've ever worked with," he told us. "But her warm, open approach fuels people's gender biases. She doesn't get the credit she deserves because her more feminine style makes it easy to discount her." In truth, there is nothing fluffy about Joyce.

Underneath, she's as tough as nails and smart as a whip. But she has to work harder than men to prove it. "My challenge is to stay tough-minded about results and still keep my affinity for people," she says. She's learning to do things like begin presentations with hard facts rather than a more personal approach, and to confront issues directly while still showing concern for people's feelings.

# CORPORATE PSYCHOLOGY

---



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.



**Worth Ethic**  
CORPORATION

23 Hull Circle  
Austin, TX 78746  
(512) 330-9979 • [info@worthethic.com](mailto:info@worthethic.com)  
[www.worthethic.com](http://www.worthethic.com)