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Are You an Alpha Male (or Female)? If so, What Can You Do About It?

We all know them, and they are frequent (if not prevalent) participants in our leadership development programs. These are the folks, male and female, that run our client companies, or parts of them, and who are motivated to do the best they can to improve on their skills to do so.

There is lots of evidence in the literature that suggests that the traits and behaviors of our Alphas are positive for their organizations. Studies indicate that they tend to be ambitious, assertive, self-confident, and competitive. However, they may also be blunt, abrasive, impatient and demanding of self and others. Alpha behavior is also linked to production of high levels of testosterone and cortisol, a stress hormone. Unfortunately, these are not so good for one's health, and Alpha-people tend to suffer from increased cardiovascular risk and other forms of physical decay over their lifetimes.

These risks may also be evident in business and personal life. Alphas may be so hard-driving that they are insensitive to the pressure they put on themselves and others. They may place high emphasis on their work and less on their families and friends. Worst of all, they may derail themselves even at work, where their development as successful executives requires that they be more sensitive to the needs of others, including their own support systems. The #1 "Derailment factor" in the research of the Center for Creative Leadership is, you guessed it, problems with interpersonal relationships.

Here's a short little test for you, taken from the work of Luderman and Erlandson (See website www.worthethic.com.) and quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*:

1. No matter what, I don't give up until I reach my end goal.
2. I have no problem challenging people.
3. I make the decision I believe is correct, even when I know other people don't agree.
4. I don't care if my actions hurt people's feelings if that's what's required to produce results.
5. When people disagree with me, I often treat it as a challenge or an affront.
6. People say I become curt, brusque, or frustrated when I have to repeat myself.

Scoring: Yes to statements 1 – 3 may suggest you have positive Alpha qualities, with strengths that make dynamic and influential leaders. Yes to statements 4 – 6 may suggest you have some negative Alpha traits that deserve attention.

So what's a leader to do if he/she nails #1 - 3, and sometimes worries about others' responses to 4 – 6.?

Here are some answers arising out of our leadership development seminars/experiences:

- Get some feedback from others, as 360° as possible, so you know your impact around you. Most 360° instruments are not designed for family members and friends, and this is important to know as well.
- Know *why?* that impact is taking place...What is there in my styles, preferences and behaviors that cause, or are correlated with this impact?
- How can I reduce stress on myself (and others) through an effective program of physical and mental exercises? (Daily aerobic exercise is known to reduce cortisol and raise well-being, as well as to contribute to cardiovascular health. Meditation and other stress-reduction techniques such as yoga, are important for stress modulation.)
- Developing and maintaining connective relationships is nurturing in itself. We know that people who are involved in mutually supportive relationships are happier and healthier, and, by the way, more productive.

So there are practices, habits and behaviors that can help keep Alpha people healthy and live longer, and make life more pleasant for the people around them that share their lives. Here are some of these, with some literature back-up for the more detail and source-oriented of our Alpha guys and gals:

1. Establish reliable channels of feedback among people who are not intimidated by our Alpha-ness and will tell us the truth about how our behaviors are affecting others, and maybe about ourselves when we are looking and feeling strung out on cortisol.
2. Listen, listen, listen to feedback from trusted others and don't fend it off or minimize it. If we do, we only close off the channels and erect levees around ourselves that people will easily sense -- and may just as easily shut themselves down from delivering the feedback we need most.
3. About the listening – listen first, talk only afterward. Never intervene in a conversation until we have heard others' views expressed.
4. Read (or at least look up on the internet) *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, by Robert Sapolsky. Some really good evidence here on the negative effects of stress: "Stress kills slowly, suppressing the immune system..."
5. Read, really read *Younger Next Year*, by Chris Crowley and Henry Lodge, MD. It's a full explanation of handling aging successfully, of the effects of diet and exercise, and of how to connect to that limbic part of our brains that provides the connections that sustain health.
6. Meditate or use some form of yoga or mind focus and relaxation. My favorite, recently discovered, is the Holosync system of Centerpointe Research Institute. (See their website.) More than just a commercial product, this group offers a humanistic focus and personal attention that goes beyond their meditation exercise discs.

Sometimes I think we forget that we are human beings in the pursuit of enjoying life, not human doings in the chase for dominance and recognition. You may have guessed that I'm one of them, these Alpha-people, but I'm trying to incorporate Beta behaviors...and have more fun!

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