



Taming the Alpha Exec

Ambition, self-confidence, even a little bloodlust--all can be part of a great biz leader. They can also wreak havoc on an organization. Now, for the executive from hell, help is on the way.

From: [Issue 105](#) | May 2006 | Page 86 | **By:** Andrew Park

His name is George. He's a vice president at Cleveland's Eaton Corp. And he's a recovering alpha exec. It took him three years at Eaton to admit that he had a problem. It took another year for him to commit to doing something about it.

Months of professional probing and coaching later, George T. Nguyen is learning how big a jerk he has been--autocratically dispensing orders through his administrative assistant, for example--and how little loyalty he has inspired. That psychic hurdle cleared, he's starting down the path to becoming a guy you'd actually want to hang out with--and a more effective executive. Says Nguyen now: "I have to work at this every day, every week, every month, because it's not a natural tendency for me. I'm 45 years old. If I don't make the change now, I won't have the incentive to change."

Going to the Dark Side

You may be wondering when being an alpha exec became enough to warrant an intervention. For generations, after all, alpha characteristics have pretty much been prerequisites for success in American business--and most other endeavors. Are ambition, self-confidence, and competitiveness really so bad, especially when there are billions of dollars and thousands of careers at stake?

The trouble is, there's a dark side to those traits we revere in bosses, a side that many just can't resist. For every bold visionary, there's a Michael Eisner--the alpha boss whose dysfunctional behavior causes disastrous results. Convinced of their greatness, these alphas lapse into arrogance, defensiveness, manipulation, and malevolence, leaving a tangle of confusion and unhappiness.

Enter Worth Ethic, a consulting firm in Austin, which for about \$30,000 will put an alpha executive through a rigorous program designed to rein in those unhealthy impulses. The first step is getting the executive to cop to the crime, usually after founder and CEO Kate Ludeman or her husband, Eddie Erlandson, the firm's two coaches, has produced a thick stack of feedback from miserable coworkers. Then they dare the alpha male--or female--to do better. "They just don't understand that they can be as powerful and as influential with a different approach," says Ludeman. "It's almost like Samson's fear of cutting his hair, a fear that their power and influence is tied to these behaviors."

More Dr. Phil than Deming or Drucker, Worth Ethic's tough love has an uncanny way of getting even the toughest executive's attention. It has also gotten the firm invited into some of the most intimidating executive suites in the world, including those at Dell, eBay, Microsoft, the Pentagon, and, most recently, the front office of the Boston Red Sox.

Maybe that's because Ludeman and Erlandson are all too familiar with what it's like to be intensely

driven high achievers. She went from Cotulla, Texas (population 3,000), where her father owned a western-clothing store, to degrees in engineering and psychology and a career as a Silicon Valley HR exec. Says Dell chairman Michael Dell, a Ludeman client since 1995, "Kate's in tune with our culture. She's very, very frank with us." Erlandson is a Midwestern minister's son who became a vascular surgeon and hospital chief of staff in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and ran 100-mile ultramarathons in his spare time. "He's not shy about... having long productive days," says Red Sox president and CEO Larry Lucchino, whose management team worked with Erlandson following the departure (and eventual return) of star general manager Theo Epstein. They're both energetic, gregarious, and like many alphas, tall--she's 5'10", he's over 6'.

Yet the couple also understands the dangers alphas face. They blame their own impatience, entitlement, and, at times, overweening ambition for the failure of previous marriages. While they haven't slowed down--Worth Ethic will rake in \$3 million in fees this year--they work hard to keep their relationship in tune, meditating together on days when they are coaching.

While the "alpha" label is applied liberally these days as a synonym for macho aggression, its actual meaning is much more nuanced. Among chimpanzees, alphas are as likely to use cunning and intellect to get to the top as they are their superior size, and they can be male or female. In humans, alphas' power is assumed to reside in an innate tendency to lead, whether out of intellect, desire, charisma, or brawn. Alphas are revered for their self-confidence, and wannabes who appear to lack it are mocked. (Just ask Al Gore.)

Ludeman and Erlandson actually share that deference to alphas. They believe that three out of four top executives and half of all middle managers are alphas, and they say non-alphas who aspire to upper management won't get there without adopting at least a few of their traits. Last year, though, the couple embarked on a survey of 1,507 businesspeople to better understand the species, ultimately grouping alphas into four categories, each with distinct strengths: Commanders excel at making decisions and winning battles, while Visionaries inspire and motivate toward outsized goals. Strategists are supremely methodical, and Executors are disciplined and relentless. (Their book, based on this research, is due out in October.)

That's the good news. The bad is that each category suffers corresponding weaknesses--and the greater the strength, the bigger the risk that those alter egos will appear. Think of it as a Darth Vader syndrome: Fail to keep the alpha style in check, and Commanders become domineering; Visionaries grow overconfident; Strategists turn smug; and Executors get impatient. According to Erlandson, alphas get addicted to the adrenaline surges that accompany those excesses, even though they can cloud reality and excuse abuse or manipulation. University of Dayton management professor Dean McFarlin likens alphas to narcissistic bosses he has studied. "Race cars win races only if you drive them under control," says McFarlin. "After you cross a certain threshold, you crash the car, you kill yourself, you kill your company."

Making the Call

Worth Ethic is typically called in when a CEO recognizes such tendencies in an otherwise promising executive. Nguyen arrived at Eaton in 2001 to head its heavy-duty-truck transmission business after landing three promotions in four years at Honeywell International, known for its rough-and-tumble culture. But at Eaton, a more collegial, more consensus-driven place, Nguyen was running roughshod over coworkers. Subordinates complained that when they questioned him or made suggestions, he shut them down or went dark. Peers saw his lack of interest in discussing anything but business as a sign of arrogance.

The feedback made little impression on Nguyen, but it was obvious enough to his boss, who urged him for months to call Worth Ethic. Eventually, it became evident to Erlandson that the obliviousness was a by-product of his client's alpha-male doggedness and independence. At the age of 14, Nguyen and his family were forced to flee Vietnam, eventually landing with other refugees at Camp Pendleton in California, and he has had a survivor's bias toward self-reliance ever since.

Erlandson got Nguyen to open up about his past, then set out to make him a better and more receptive listener. Soon, the coach was accompanying his client to meetings, quizzing him afterward on what had transpired. He persuaded Nguyen to start explaining decisions to subordinates and submit to some awkward situations, such as emotional "clearing the air" sessions that allowed long-festering gripes to emerge. "It gives people the license to tell me when I do something wrong and correct me," Nguyen says. In his spare time, Nguyen was coached to practice deep breathing as a means of centering himself, and to reach out and forge some personal relationships at the office. "It's a relief that I can be myself rather than be somebody that I thought I had to be," he says.

Erlandson acknowledges that the techniques he used with Nguyen are "pedestrian"; many would be familiar to anyone who has worked in the corporate world. Take 360-degree reviews: Most executives participate in surveys of management and corporate climate on a regular basis. But Worth Ethic takes the 360 to a whole new level. Feedback typically fills 35 to 40 pages, much of it organized into charts and graphs designed to appeal to analytical and quant-hungry alphas. Reviewing it can take four hours.

Afterwards, executives are expected to commit to making changes that Worth Ethic tracks closely. When Ludeman began working with Michael Dell in the mid-1990s, she heard from some of his subordinates that he didn't seem to appreciate their hard work. So she created an entirely new category on his 360 labeled "appreciation" and then watched to make sure he improved. Later, Ludeman suggested Dell start sharing his 360 feedback with his entire management team and expect subordinates to do the same. The exercise, painful for Dell and his colleagues at first, has made it impossible for troublesome personality conflicts to fester. "We can talk about things that normally wouldn't get said," Dell says.

Of course, there are also plenty of alpha females who need coaching. They're just different. The survey identified far fewer women than men in the Spock-like Strategist category, and while there were plenty of female Commanders, they were less likely than males to lapse into anger, bullheadedness, or aloofness. In general, alpha women are also less competitive and more collaborative than their male counterparts, Ludeman says. In fact, many recognize that abrasiveness isn't tolerated in women as it is in men and need coaching before they're comfortable challenging that double standard and showing a harder edge.

For most people, though, the question isn't how not to be an alpha-run-amok, but how to deal with one. Too often, underlings tolerate a bad boss if they believe it will benefit their careers in the long run. "A lot of people like to work for these great intimidators," says Stanford Business School professor Roderick Kramer, who cites Eisner, Miramax founder Harvey Weinstein, and former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina as examples. "They know so much, they can teach you so much. They may be really unpleasant, but they have really great insights."

Forget for a second that all three wound up on their butts, or that there's a difference between a tough boss and a belligerent jerk. Good leaders should be tough but nice, Ludeman says, and there's no reason to let yourself be bullied. Just walk away, she counsels--and once tempers have cooled, register your unwillingness to be treated that way. Otherwise, you'll quickly become a regular target. Often, Worth Ethic will coach coworkers it believes are enabling an alpha's destructive side. "No one has ever screamed at me or raised their voice at me in my whole career," Ludeman says. "I would leave so

immediately. I would not tolerate being treated like that." Spoken like a true alpha.

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Alpha Phyla

Alpha males and females come in four high-achieving flavors, each with dangerous weaknesses that can overpower its strengths.

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Type	Commander	Visionary	Strategist	Executor
Archetype	Jack Welch	Richard Branson	Michael Eisner	Sam Walton
Good Side	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energetic • Decisive • Motivating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambitious • Creative • Inspirational 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligent • Objective • Analytical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tireless • Disciplined • Demanding
Dark Side	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domineering • Intimidating • Uncontrollable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overconfident • Unrealistic • Defensive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smug • Pretentious • Unemotional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impatient • Unreasonable • Unappreciative

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- [Is Your Boss a Psychopath?](#)
Odds are you've met one of these characters in your career. They're glib, charming, manipulative, deceitful, ruthless -- and very destructive. And there may be lots of them in America's corner offices.

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