

# BIG EGOS

## DEALING WITH LEGENDS IN THEIR OWN MINDS

By **Kathy F. Bernhard**

**R**ainmakers. Superstars. Alpha males. Alpha females. Organizations are proud to have them on board and boast about their business results. Competitors would kill to lure them away. But for those who actually have to work with them, or worse, have to work for them, pride isn't usually first on the list of emotions they evoke. In many cases, those blessed with signature strengths also have some major flat spots. Often, it's a super-sized ego that can be tough for others to deal with.

We've all come across them or heard the office folklore about their most outrageous antics. I once witnessed a very senior executive running down the hall, pounding his chest and literally screaming "We are gods! We are gods!" upon hearing that a competitor was closing. A god? I think not. A legend in his own mind? More likely.

Folklore aside, at their best these folks do a lot of heavy lifting and contribute disproportionately to organizational success. Wouldn't it be terrific to be able to reap the rewards without putting up with the bluster? The good news is that it's entirely possible, although it may require you to move outside of your comfort zone. The bad news is that too many people suffer in silence and allow the egomaniacs to continue to bully and abuse them.

So that's the challenge: Figuring out how to harness the superb results these folks generate without having to put up with their "acting out." Below are some tips for getting started. (Note: For the purposes of this article, the discussion will be limited to those

egomaniacs who are great contributors; other egomaniacs should probably just be exited from the organization without a lot of fanfare.)

### **Take Them off That Pedestal**

When people truly excel at something, it's easy to be so dazzled by that strength or set of accomplishments that we are blind to their weaknesses. Even superstars are human and—news flash!—most of us humans are flawed. Some hide flaws better than others, some find ways to compensate, and the very best acknowledge their weaknesses and do everything they can to improve them. The ones I worry about are those who act as though they are flawless or that their flaws don't matter, behaving as though the world ought to let them get away with outrageous behavior. They expect the rest of us to cut them more slack, and all too often that's just what we do. Of course we should continue to acknowledge their strengths, but it's easier to see the flaws when we knock down those pedestals. We need to broaden our definitions of people. He's the firm's rainmaker *and* he's got the interpersonal skills of a flea. She's a dazzling litigator who lines up clients to pay her astronomical fee *and* she has a portfolio of strengths and weaknesses just like the rest of us. Such profiles are less typical and maybe more skewed than most, but we must try to see them honestly.

### **Insist on Being Treated Right**

I hate to invoke pop psychology, but sometimes Dr. Phil knows what he's talking about. He's fond of saying that we teach people how to treat us, and in my experience, he's absolutely right. Although it may seem a little counterintuitive, people with enormous egos actually respect people who "call them on their stuff." It may not seem that way in the moment, and you may have to muster some courage before saying something like, "I can tell you're really worked up

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about this. Why don't you take some time to think about it and let me know when would be a better time to talk about this calmly?" Your strategy may even provoke a nasty initial response, but there's no sense feeding the beast. The truth is that most dominant people respect dominance in others, even when they don't agree with the content of the message. In the best case you will have garnered some respect, and at the very least you will have removed yourself from a non-productive exchange. Bottom line: Don't let someone else's flaws bring out your inner wimp.

Kate Ludeman is a well-known executive coach and co-author, along with her husband Eddie Erlandson, of *Alpha Male Syndrome* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006). Here's her take on ego-driven tirades: "No one has ever screamed at me or raised their voice at me in my whole career. I would leave so immediately. I would not tolerate being treated like that" (quoted in Andrew Park's "Taming the Alpha Exec," *Fast Company Magazine*, May 2006).

Not a bad rule to live by.

### **Hold Up a Mirror**

It may seem incomprehensible that people whose abusive behavior and outrageous tirades are the stuff of office legends can still be pretty clueless about the wake they leave behind. After all, they didn't really mean anything by it, and everyone knows that's just the way they are. Besides, they bring so much (prestige, new business, gravitas, revenue—you fill in the blank) to the firm that they're entitled to let off a little steam and let the working stiffs know what's expected. It can't really be that bad or someone would've done something serious about it. Yada, yada,—you've heard all of the same rationalizations I have. And on it goes. The problem gets exacerbated the more senior a position that the egomaniac holds. Once we introduce power into the equation and the ego offender is the boss or very senior in the organization, there is frequently a real feedback vacuum. It can be a double whammy in that it's tough enough to criticize the boss, but, worse, a lot of these folks start to believe their own press: "So what if I ruffle a few feathers? You can't argue with this success. Look what I've accomplished and look at the level I've achieved in this organization." That's the kind of self-talk that's going on with precious few contradictory messages. And that's where the mirror comes in.

One of the most effective ways I know to "hold up that mirror" is through a rigorous process of 360-degree feedback, debriefed by a qualified professional. Three-hundred-sixty-degree feedback is a well-respected method for collecting feedback about a person's strengths, development needs, skills, etc. Typically, if we get this feedback at all, it comes from a single source, the boss. The power of 360-degree feedback is that it creates a more accurate and complete picture by adding the perspectives of peers, direct reports, and sometimes even customers and clients. In addition, the person rates him/herself, enabling comparisons with those of the other raters. Formats for such debriefings vary, but the most effective tools are those that include narrative comments so that raters can give some context and examples along with the numbers. These debriefings are not about "absolute truth" and are only "true" to the ex-

tent that they represent the perceptions of one's raters. The patterns that emerge when raters are candid, honest, and balanced in their feedback can be powerful. If you have the privilege of being someone's 360-degree feedback rater, the privilege of giving the gift of feedback, I hope you will take that responsibility seriously and be thoughtful with your ratings and comments. Although messages shouldn't be sugarcoated, the purpose is not to slam someone. The goal is for the person being rated to walk away with newfound clarity about what to start, stop, and continue doing for maximum effectiveness. In the case of egomania, very often the cold splash of water comes not from the description of their behavior but from the description of the impact it has on others. Nobody likes to be described as Attila the Hun, but sometimes understanding the *impact* of their behavior is the breakthrough that finally gets their attention. For example, it can come as a surprise that people actually choose not to share important information rather than risk the egomaniac's wrath.

Although I am a strong advocate for formal 360-degree feedback tools and use them extensively in my coaching practice, they are not the only effective method. A series of interviews with key stakeholders or even a quick-and-dirty appraisal where anonymous raters are asked a handful of questions about what contributes most and least to the person's effectiveness can also do the trick.

### **Talk in Terms of Their Currency**

Behavioral change is uncomfortable, and people are unlikely to do the work required to change unless and until continuing the current state actually becomes *more* uncomfortable than doing the work to change. That's Change Management 101, and it applies equally to large organizations and single individuals. The implication for anyone trying to influence egomaniacs is to talk in terms of things that truly matter to them. Take a step back and think about what might be some key drivers for this person. Frequently, they're things such as recognition, power, and control. It's foolhardy to think that your garden-variety egomaniac will respond positively to an argument such as, "people find it upsetting when you tell them their ideas are idiotic." An executive I once worked with had much more success playing to the boss's ego by starting out with, "I know you're the boss and that makes you the ultimate decision maker. Would you be open to an alternative point of view so you can see the full array of options?" While not a slam dunk, incorporating what matters to the other person, rather than what would matter to you, can make a world of difference. Keep in mind that people with the strongest powers of persuasion are people who clearly understand it's all about the other guy, not them.

### **Banish the Jerks**

"Yeah, right," you're thinking. "Maybe in some parallel universe of lawyers and corporate executives." You might be surprised to know some brave organizations—law firms among them—make a point of striving to be "jerk-free zones." Robert Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University, wrote about this phenomenon as one of the 20 "Breakthrough Ideas for 2004" in *Harvard Business Review* (February 2004). Some or-

ganizations have simply made the explicit decision that they expect a certain minimum level of respect for others and reject those who don't want to play by these rules. Period. Commentator Eric Press should be applauded for the following observation about Sutton's notion: "Why do we put up with this behavior? If the answer is 2,500 value-billed hours, at least you will have identified your priorities without incurring the cost of a consultant" (*The American Lawyer*, April 2004, [www.americanlawyer.com/newinhouse0404.html](http://www.americanlawyer.com/newinhouse0404.html)).

No kidding. Sutton built on his ideas in the best seller *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't* (New York: Warner Books, 2007). He makes a compelling case that "bad behavior" can translate into financial liability when one examines the companion employee and client churn and the damaged reputations, as well as the potential negative impact on investor confidence and even on innovation and creativity. He even includes a framework for calculating a firm's "TCA" (total cost of a\*\*\*\*\*s—feel free to substitute "jerks" if you find it more palatable), citing a company that calculated the extra costs generated by one of its superstars (overtime costs, legal costs, anger management training, assistants he burned through, etc.) to be \$160,000 for one year.

Perhaps the most frightening concept Sutton describes is something called "emotional contagion," attributed to researcher Elaine Hatfield. Here's how it works:

The most important single principle for building a work-

place free of jerks, or to avoid acting like one yourself, is to view being a jerk as a kind of contagious disease. Once disdain, anger and contempt are ignited, they spread like wildfire. . . . A swarm of jerks creates a civility vacuum, sucking the warmth and kindness out of everyone who enters and replacing them with coldness and contempt. (Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard L. Rapson, *Emotional Contagion*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994; quoted in Sutton, 2007)

An ugly picture along with a pretty compelling argument for taking one's business to the firm down the street.

### **Lose the Unmentionables**

So maybe your organization isn't quite ready to conduct a "jerk audit," something Sutton heartily recommends. Maybe at least there is an appetite for calling out the elephants in the room and giving voice to the unmentionable topics that everyone thinks about yet never discusses on the record. I hope I've convinced you of the value of holding up mirrors to the egomaniacs. While you're in the market for mirrors, how about requisitioning one big enough to hold up to the whole organization? If you don't like the reflection of the culture staring back, a no-holds-barred discussion about rules of engagement and standards for behavior might be just the remedy. It might get you started down the road of transformation from "legends in their own minds" to "legends we're proud to be associated with." You gotta start someplace. **GPSOLO**