Alpha Male Syndrome
The Good, the Bad, the Ugly

Excerpted from
Alpha Male Syndrome

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Harvard Business Press
Boston, Massachusetts
Human history is the story of alphas, those indispensable powerhouses who take charge, conquer new worlds, and move heaven and earth to make things happen. Whether heading a band of warriors, bringing a vital new product to market, guiding a team to glory, or steering a giant conglomerate, alphas are hardwired for achievement and eager to tackle challenges that others find intimidating. Along the way, they inspire awe and admiration—and sometimes fear and trembling. Wherever they are and whatever they do, they stand out from the crowd, usually leaving an indelible impression on those whose lives they touch.

The business world swarms with alpha males. Although there are no hard numbers to support this approximation, 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 to 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 coworkers, 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, earthshaking breakthroughs, and skyrocketing profits—and abusing power, bankrupting companies, and wearing handcuffs.

Like many natural resources, alphas are both indispensable to progress and potentially hazardous. The purpose of this book is to help individuals and organizations harness the immense power of alpha males while minimizing their potential downside. If you’re an alpha yourself, you know how to transform the world around you; this book will help you transform yourself so you can work your magic even more effectively. You will learn how to leverage your innate assets and at the same time get the upper hand on your alpha liabilities before they create problems. If you run a team or an organization inhabited by alpha males, you will learn how to optimize their enormous productive capacity while keeping a lid on their tendency to turn teamwork into guerrilla warfare. If you work for alphas, you will learn how to take full advantage of their leadership gifts while protecting your health, integrity, and career from their potential abuses.

What Is an Alpha?

*Alpha* is the first letter of the Greek alphabet. In English, it has come to denote “the first of anything.” In astronomy, for instance, alpha is the brightest star in a constellation. Animal researchers use the word to signify dominance, applying it to the leader of the pack, who is first in power and importance. That usage has been extended to human be-
ings. An alpha is defined as “a person tending to assume a dominant role in social or professional situations, or thought to possess the qualities and confidence for leadership.”

As we use the term in our work, alpha signifies a powerful, authoritative personality type with a specific set of traits. Alphas are aggressive, results-driven achievers who insist on top performance from themselves and others. Courageous and self-confident, they are turned on by bold, innovative ideas and ambitious goals, and they pursue their objectives with tenacity and an urgent sense of mission. Their intense competitive drive keeps them focused on the gold—silver or bronze simply won’t do—and they’re always keeping score. Often charismatic figures who command attention, they exert influence even when they’re low-key and inconspicuous.

Alphas are found at every level of the organizational chart. Whether they’re at the forefront of a global corporation or stacking shelves in a retail store, they look for ways to increase their power and influence, dominating meetings, taking the lead on projects, and otherwise making their presence felt. Indeed, many a corporate bigwig started out as an alpha nobody who somehow stood out from the crowd. This does not mean that all good leaders are alphas, or that only alphas have what it takes to lead a group to victory. On the contrary, depending on the nature of the business and the organization, many leadership positions are better filled by men and women who are not alphas, and who achieve their goals with styles that better suit their personalities and circumstances. However, even those executives possess some alpha qualities, or else they simply could not lead, and they certainly could not lead alphas.

Those positive leadership qualities constitute one-half of the alpha syndrome. The other half consists of a package of not-so-positive symptoms that leads to everything from minor business problems to full-fledged organizational catastrophes and personal disasters. We’ll get to those in a moment. But first, a question that has probably been on your mind since you picked up this book: why alpha males? In this age of powerful women in every field of human endeavor, what about alpha females?
Why Alpha Males?

Because of the popular image of the alpha male, with his powerful physical presence and tough-guy demeanor, we seldom hear the term *alpha female*. But a great many women in leadership positions do possess the fundamental traits that define alphas. One of them, in fact, is one of the authors of this book. We decided to focus on alpha *males* for two primary reasons.

First, there are more of them. In general, men are more likely than women to have alpha characteristics, and the business world contains many more alpha males than alpha females, especially in the top executive ranks. As consultants, we’ve noted this disparity in every company we’ve worked with, and, as you’ll see later in this chapter, our observations were confirmed by research data. Studies on the infamous glass ceiling offer further evidence of the male-female ratio at the highest corporate levels. A survey by the Catalyst organization, for instance, found that while women hold 50.3 percent of all management and professional positions, only 7.9 percent of the top earners are in the *Fortune* 500, and only 1.4 percent of the CEOs are women.²

The second reason for focusing on alpha males is that a great deal of wreckage is caused by boys behaving badly. In our research, men scored much higher than women on measures of the alpha risk factors we’re about to describe. What does this mean? In short, alpha females get angry, but they’re seldom as belligerent as alpha males. They like to win, and they set aggressive goals for themselves and their teams, but they’re not as intimidating or as authoritarian as their male counterparts. And while they can be fiercely competitive, they’re less likely than alpha males to use ruthless tactics or to see peers and colleagues as rivals who have to be destroyed. Which is why you don’t see *New Yorker* cartoons about domineering alpha females.

Throughout the book, we will call upon our personal observations and scientific studies to highlight the differences between male and female alphas. But our primary focus is on the male of the species, because it is there, in the testosterone zone, that the alpha syndrome appears in its most troublesome form.
How We Learned About Alpha Males

Our interest in the subject actually began with the work we had to do on ourselves. You see, we too are alphas. Our positive alpha traits had made both of us highly successful in our careers. But our alpha liabilities had kept us from living completely successful lives.

Even as a child, Kate exhibited the ambition and drive of an alpha female. She was also fascinated by the alpha males she encountered growing up in South Texas. In the first grade, she figured out how to beat the strongest boys at the game of red rover, using direct eye contact and a smile to break through their supercharged strength as she approached the line. Later, she found a way to entice alpha boys to attend a summer school she organized in her small town, and in the fourth grade she bit the wrist of a bully to get him to quit bothering her friends. In college, she was one of only eight girls among 4,000 engineering students, and she was the one to organize lab teams that consistently came in first.

When she turned to organizational development work in her 30s, Kate focused on coaching alpha males, often joking that she was an expert in transforming jerks into nice guys. Many of her clients were hard-hitting, super-driven executives who accomplished extraordinary results, but at a cost. Because they harassed and abused people, thinking it was the only way to drive success, they caused morale problems within their business units and sometimes embarrassed their companies.

Kate’s business succeeded because she found a way to get through to these tough guys and help them become better leaders. There were two keys. First, her training as an engineer gave her a knack for turning soft information about human relationships into the metrics-oriented language that alpha males understand best. Using hard data, she spelled out the risks of their current behavior and the bottom-line benefits of changing, then gave them a way to measure their progress. The other key was that she used her skills as a psychologist and her alpha female tenacity to stand up to alpha bullies—not an easy thing for women to do. The combination of straight talk and data earned the respect of hard-headed alpha males, and has since helped more than a thousand executives accelerate the progress of their careers and their companies.
At age 29, Eddie was a surgical resident at the University of Michigan, holding down two outside jobs and trying to live a normal family life with his two young children. But that wasn’t enough for an achievement-obsessed alpha. He decided to become a marathon runner. After 50 marathons, the 26-mile run wasn’t enough of a challenge, so he took on ultra marathons, becoming so obsessed with each 100-mile race that he ignored medical advice and ended up with stress fractures and a broken leg. Later, he realized that the excessive zeal that blew out his knees has blown up many an alpha’s business career.

As a vascular surgeon, he was building a growing medical group, taking on leadership positions at the hospital, coaching his son’s Special Olympics basketball team to the state championship, and still running lengthy races. In seizing every opportunity to accomplish something new, he diverted needed attention from his family, children, and friends. When he became chief of staff, he learned how to use his own alpha strengths to corral the energy and egos of other alphas, who were waging turf wars at the hospital. He also learned valuable lessons from his patients: of the approximately 10,000 surgeries he performed, about 75 percent were on alpha males.

Watching these driven individuals defy medical advice to achieve their career goals only to end up in surgery, Eddie decided to change his approach to medicine. He developed the Life Lessons wellness program and later gave up his medical practice entirely, turning to leadership coaching to help hard-charging executives succeed without jeopardizing their health or their family lives.

Throughout our separate journeys, we were both forced to come to grips with our alpha tendencies. While Eddie’s challenges as an alpha male were different from Kate’s as an alpha female, in both cases the alpha upside led to great success and exciting lives, and the downside was revealed in career snags, high stress, and failed marriages. When we met, in 1999, we began to learn from each other’s insights and to help each other smooth out the rougher edges of our alpha natures. Eventually, we got married and moved to California to live a quiet life by the ocean. But, like true alphas, we went too far. After a year of drastically reduced work levels, we lacked appropriate outlets for our healthy alpha
achievement drives. So we built a consulting firm that specializes in helping alphas and their companies thrive.

Individually and together we have coached hundreds of alpha executives, including Michael Dell and Kevin Rollins, Dell’s chairman and CEO, respectively; eBay CEO Meg Whitman; Boston Red Sox CEO Larry Lucchino; Vice Admiral Keith Lippert, director of the Defense Logistics Agency; and over 1,000 vice presidents and senior executives at companies like Abbott Labs, Adecco, AMD, Amgen, Bristol-Myers, Coca-Cola, Eaton, the Gap, General Electric, IBM, Intel, KLA-Tencor, Microsoft, and Motorola. Throughout this book you will find examples from our experiences at these companies, especially at Dell, where we’ve worked with Michael Dell and his executive team since 1995. Early in the remarkable rise of the computer giant, the company’s leaders created a culture that reinforced the best of alpha traits and minimized unhealthy alpha behavior.

In May 2004, we presented some of the lessons we derived from those experiences in a *Harvard Business Review* article titled “Coaching the Alpha Male.” Readers responded so enthusiastically that we decided to expand our research and write this book. The main thrust of both the book and our ongoing consulting work is to help individuals and organizations leverage alpha strengths to maximize productivity, teamwork, and overall effectiveness. As you’ll see, doing that requires more than simply building on those formidable alpha assets. It also means taking an unflinching look at how those very qualities can mutate into liabilities with the potential to destroy careers and spread like viruses to teams, divisions, and entire companies. The tools in this book will help you identify those deadly alpha risks and stop them in their tracks, just as they’ve helped the hundreds of leaders with whom we’ve worked.

### The Alpha Male Syndrome

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 coworkers, 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 on their strengths. In other words, the alpha upside is limitless, but the downside can be devastating. We call this complex set of characteristics the alpha male syndrome because it fits both the basic definition of the word—“a distinctive or characteristic pattern of behavior”—and its usual connotation of disease or dysfunction: “a complex of symptoms indicating the existence of an undesirable condition or quality.”

As portrayed in figure 1-1, the range of alpha male traits can be viewed as a continuum ranging from devastating dysfunction on one extreme to gloriously noble leadership on the other. In between are degrees of healthy and unhealthy behavior. On the exceptional end of the spectrum is history’s pantheon of extraordinary alpha males, with distinguished statesmen, titans of industry and philanthropy, creative geniuses, courageous generals, and stalwart heads of families. Here you will find George Washington, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King Jr. At the opposite extreme is the Alpha Hall of Shame, with its rogues’ gallery of tyrants, despot, white-collar criminals, notorious gangsters, and redneck brawlers. This is the home of Genghis Khan, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, and other brutes.

In the business world, of course, most alpha males inhabit the middle range. To one degree or another, they fluctuate between healthy and unhealthy alpha tendencies: their magnetic leadership commands respect, but their aggressive tactics create resistance, resentment, and
revenge; they are celebrated for their achievements but loathed for the carnage they leave in their wake; people stand in awe of their competence and can-do energy, but they often hate reporting to them or teaming with them. As Thomas A. Stewart, editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, said after meeting powerhouse CEOs Jack Welch and Andy Grove, “Geez, are they impressive and stimulating! I love to be around them—but am I glad I don’t work for them!”

At the dysfunctional end of the continuum, alpha anger is explosive, alpha competitiveness is ruthless, and alpha aggressiveness and urgency is in the red zone. As you move to the right, negative alpha behavior becomes less destructive, less volatile, and less frequent. Crossing into the healthy part of the spectrum, you start to see alpha strengths with fewer downside risks, and alpha males who are trusted and respected instead of feared and loathed. As you approach the exceptional leadership end, alpha strengths become awe-inspiring, and the alphas are revered as inspirational leaders.

One of Kate’s mentors, Richard Farson, wrote in *Management of the Absurd* that “strengths can become weaknesses when we rely too much on them, carry them to exaggerated lengths, or apply them where they don’t belong.” People with the virtue of persistence sometimes turn stubborn, for example, and brilliant analysts can think themselves into a corner. Buddhists call these weaknesses the “near enemies” of their corresponding virtues. The stronger the positive qualities, the more likely they are to erupt as negatives. That’s what happens to a great many alpha males, and because they have inordinate influence, their pendulum swings can be ruinous.

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. Fast 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’s loss of his chairmanship and resignation as CEO.

The arcs of these larger-than-life characters capture both the extraordinary 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, unflagging 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.”

How Dysfunctional Alphas Damage Organizations

When we’re invited into a company as consultants, it is usually at the request of a strong alpha leader who wants to make the organization better—and most of the complaints we hear are about alpha males who drive people crazy. Employees complain that autocratic alpha man-
agers are abusive, and that micromanaging alphas waste their time and create logjams. Coworkers complain about alphas who are demanding, impatient, and unwilling to listen. Peers resent alphas who solo rather than collaborate, and who fight to get their way even when they're demonstrably wrong. Managers complain about alpha subordinates who are not team players. Senior executives complain that abrasive alpha managers demoralize their troops. And everyone complains that alphas think they're smarter than everyone else.

The gripes we hear have usually been part of the corporate milieu for some time, consuming employee time and energy. According to a survey by badbossology.com, sponsored by Development Dimensions International, “The majority of employees spend 10 hours or more a month complaining about or listening to others complain about bad bosses, while nearly one-third spend 20 or more hours.” In many cases, bringing us in is like calling 911—an emergency. Companies want sustainable results, and quite often alpha males make a powerful impact initially only to run into dead ends, creating expensive overhead in the form of turnover, declining motivation, emotional turmoil, and other productivity killers.

Of course, alpha males have complaints of their own: employees don’t understand their directives, or don’t move quickly enough, or need to be constantly monitored. Because they’re naturally confident and self-directed, alphas have trouble relating to people who are hard to motivate or have a strong need to be appreciated. Some are more comfortable working with objects, systems, and ideas than with human beings; their attitude is captured in this droll remark by an alpha male manager: “My job would be a lot more fun if I didn’t have to work with people.”

When told that subordinates gripe about their intimidating ways, some alpha executives reply, “They should thank me!” In their minds, they’re only doing what’s necessary to make everyone more effective. If only people were accountable; if only they were willing to go the extra mile; if only they didn’t drop the ball—then the alpha could lighten up. The laments sound reasonable, but in most cases their frustration is caused by their own leadership shortcomings, not the ineptitude of others. Ken DiPietro, a former senior vice president at a major high-tech company, spoke for most alpha males when he said, “No one who is
sane intends to come off as mean-spirited or inflexible in communicating with staff, but you can get so caught up in your desired outcome that you forget the impact you’re having on the team.”

The rewards and risks of alpha traits are enumerated in table 1-1, which summarizes the alpha male syndrome: the very strengths that

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<tr>
<th>Alpha attribute</th>
<th>Value to organization</th>
<th>Risk to organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant, confident, takes charge</td>
<td>Decisive, courageous leader; gets people to take action and move forward</td>
<td>Doesn’t develop strong leaders; intimidating; creates fear; stifles disagreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charismatic, magnetic leader who leads the way</td>
<td>Brings out the best in others; gets people to do more than they thought was possible</td>
<td>Manipulates to get his way; uses charm to lure people down his path</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive, competitive</td>
<td>Determined to win; turns others into winners</td>
<td>Competes with peers; alienates colleagues; reluctant to give others credit</td>
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<tr>
<td>High achiever with a strong sense of mission</td>
<td>Action-oriented; produces results; energizes teams to reach impossible goals</td>
<td>Takes strong performance for granted; expects the impossible and fails to acknowledge what’s required to achieve it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bold, creative, innovative thinker</td>
<td>Dreams up ingenious ideas; solves intractable problems; sees further than others</td>
<td>Arrogant, stubborn, overly opinionated; imposes own views; closed to others’ thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent, tenacious, determined, steadfast</td>
<td>Has courage of convictions; always moves forward; willing to take unpopular stand to get results</td>
<td>Drives self and others to exhaustion; urgent, impatient; thinks rules don’t apply to him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong appetite for newness and change</td>
<td>Values speed; drives people and organizations toward needed change and rapid growth</td>
<td>Overzealous; undervalues organizational alignment; launches into action before gathering support from others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farsighted, sees what’s possible</td>
<td>Recognizes gap between today’s reality and tomorrow’s potential</td>
<td>So focused on future that present and near term are neglected; loses sight of business viability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees what’s missing</td>
<td>Proactively spots problems; adjusts, corrects, prevents things from getting worse</td>
<td>Can be critical and demeaning; fails to appreciate others’ contributions; people feel demoralized</td>
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make alphas so effective become their downfall when they’re overused, excessive, or misplaced.

With egregiously dysfunctional alphas, the cost can be even greater than stress disorders, ruined careers, and reduced productivity. If you hear about a scandal in the executive ranks, it’s a good bet you’ll find alpha males with runaway egos who think the rules don’t apply to them. Like other alpha risks, this one stems from a strength: creative, passionate alpha males often shatter the constraints of conventional thinking and generate brilliant innovations; but the same disdain for limits can lead them over the edge of legality or propriety. The more grandiose the self-image, the bigger the overreach. “Looking back on it, I wasn’t always right,” said a high-tech entrepreneur who lost investors more than $20 million. “But I was never in doubt.” That’s classic alpha male hubris: supremely confident, they find a way to get what they want even if it means turning an audacious idea into an actionable offense.

If it’s not money, it’s sex. We’ve observed that many leaders who fit the dysfunctional alpha male typology fall prey to sexual predation, becoming womanizers who use conquest and control to assert their dominance. Their magnetic charisma and take-charge personalities can make them exceptionally attractive, creating temptations that challenge even the most loyal of spouses, and—as we’ve seen repeatedly—cause everyone from religious leaders to heads of state to throw caution to the wind.

Add to that the tendency for alphas to think they should have whatever they want, and you have a perfect setup for dramas that can ruin careers and families, weaken mighty leaders, and throw organizations into turmoil. The following comments are from 360º interviews with the colleagues of an alpha male just before the company was hit with a very public sexual harassment suit: “If you’re not attractive, you don’t feel valued. He couldn’t care less about super-bright women unless they’re pretty.” “He tells sexual jokes, he’s flirty, and he obsesses about breasts. Occasionally he’s funny, but mostly he’s inappropriate and unprofessional. Everyone is sure he’s having affairs.”

In sum, when properly channeled and controlled, the alpha male drive to reach the top is a boon to progress, but when the ethic of “Do
what it takes to get results” is taken to extremes, it becomes a menace to both personal careers and corporate health.

**The Hard Data on Alphas**

Based on our long experience working with alphas in their natural environments, we designed an in-depth questionnaire that measures the extent to which an individual has alpha characteristics. As a comprehensive, scientific instrument, the assessment will not only tell you if you’re an alpha, but it will also enumerate your particular alpha risk factors and indicate whether you would benefit from enhancing particular alpha traits. It also takes into account gender differences, providing somewhat different text for alpha males and alpha females. Taking the assessment before going on to chapter 2 can make a significant difference in your ability to get the most out of this book. See the box “The Alpha Assessment” for instructions. (For a quick snapshot of your alpha strengths and risks, use the brief checklist, “Are You an Alpha?” at the end of this chapter.)

The Alpha Assessment was developed over a series of three validation phases on a population of 1,507. The subjects all worked full time in the business world, many in high-ranking leadership positions: 1,484 were drawn from the readership of *Harvard Business Review*, and 123 more came from personal business contacts; 63.8 percent were male; the average age was 41.2 years. Ethnically and racially diverse (65.2 percent white, 3.2 percent African American, 20.8 percent Asian, 4.5 percent Latino, and 6.3 percent other), they hailed from an astonishing 106 nations and spanned hundreds of different industries, among them agriculture, telecommunications, high technology, real estate, education, oil, automotive, and finance and banking. More than three-quarters (77.5 percent) said they supervise other people.

In addition to helping us refine the assessment tool itself, the validation phase yielded some fascinating data about alphas. Here are the most salient results. (See appendix B for additional details; a comprehensive description and extensive data can be found at www.AlphaMaleSyndrome.com.)

Overall, alpha traits correlate with being male, with increasing levels of education, with low anxiety, with supervisory positions, and with type
A personality traits—all of which are in line with expectations and are reflected in the content of this book. The propensity for having alpha risks relates to being male, to higher levels of stress and tension, and to a lack of self-reflection. In other words, according to our data, the prototypical alpha is a well-educated man with managerial experience and the hard-driving, urgent intensity of a type A. The more troublesome members of the alpha fraternity are men who are under a high degree of stress and are not inclined to introspection.

The scores for both men and women followed a normal distribution for all the factors analyzed, but the mean scores of men were markedly higher than those of women. Significantly, men scored higher on both alpha strengths and alpha risks (see table B-2 in appendix B). In practical terms, these findings mean that the overall patterns were the same.
for both sexes, but male scores were higher in general, reflecting overall differences in leadership style. The results are consistent with our personal observations: more men than women are alphas, and male alphas are much more extreme in their expression of alpha qualities. These findings were instrumental in convincing us to focus the book on alpha males.

The data also revealed other intriguing patterns. While there were no significant differences between subjects born in America and those born elsewhere, minorities scored slightly higher in alpha strengths than did whites. However, no significant race or ethnic differences were found in alpha risk scores. Since “minority” encompassed a range of ethnicities, the findings might reflect what many minorities have reported: they have to perform better than whites to reach the same level of advancement. We also found that younger respondents scored somewhat higher than older ones on both alpha strengths and alpha risks; that level of education was not related to either strengths or risks (but did correlate with general alpha traits); and that holding a supervisory position correlated with alpha strengths but not with alpha risks. Taken together, these data suggest that as people mature and settle into leadership roles, they develop positive alpha traits and learn to modulate the extremes of alpha behavior.

One of the most significant findings corroborates a key principle in this book: alpha risks are closely related to alpha strengths. The data show a strong correlation between high scores in both categories. Although some subjects scored high on one scale and not on the other, in general, the greater the strengths, the greater the risks. (See table B-1 in appendix B.) This breakdown corroborates what we said earlier: your greatest assets can be your worst liabilities if you do not take control of them. Your goal should be to join the 3 percent at the top of the heap in alpha strengths and at the bottom in alpha risks. Those are the kind of leaders the world needs more of.

**Dysfunctional Traits of the Alpha Male**

In the animal kingdom, rivals compete for positions in the social hierarchy because ranking high assures access to necessities like food and to
privileges such as mating opportunities. It’s not much different in the human jungle, where alpha males strive to achieve positions of prominence. That drive can lead to healthy competition and achievements that benefit all of us. When it’s excessive, however, it wreaks havoc, turning otherwise worthy alphas into bullies who intimidate, browbeat, and humiliate people to get what they want, often rationalizing their behavior as necessary to get others to shape up. Combative and pathologically competitive, unhealthy alpha males need to dominate; as a result, they are constantly on guard and always looking for an advantage.

Those statements are borne out in our study. When factor analyses were applied to the data on alpha risks, three distinct themes stood out: hard-driving competitiveness, interpersonal impatience, and difficulty controlling anger. (See table B-3 in appendix B.) The trio represents a compelling summary of alphas who create trouble: they see everyone as a rival and every situation as a contest for supremacy, they’re demanding and impatient for results, and they’re veritable powder kegs. Although people in supervisory positions have fewer alpha risks overall, they are somewhat more inclined to display anger, impatience, and competitiveness. It is unclear whether people with those traits are drawn to supervising others or if becoming a manager brings out these tendencies.

Alpha males want excellence, they want it now, and they’re sure they know how to get it. When others fail to measure up, alphas let them know about it. Alpha males who operate with a sense of fairness, who give feedback appropriately and limit their outbursts to genuine crises and major screw-ups, become respected leaders. But those who can’t control their anger can cripple a team or an entire organization.

One way alpha combativeness plays out is in a propensity for defensive behavior. Alpha males’ intimidating style makes other people defensive, and alphas respond to that defensiveness with disdain. But, paradoxically, when someone disagrees with them, or gives them critical feedback, they get defensive—only to justify their behavior as honest truth-telling. They think they’re delivering a wake-up call when in fact they’re hurling verbal grenades. In part, their defensiveness stems from thinking they have all the answers, and from having to prove it to others. They have a powerful need to explain, justify, and convince. If the other
person doesn’t get it, they say it again another way, louder and more forcefully. If that doesn’t work, they pour on more data, more logic, and more evidence, pumping up the volume at every step. Discussion becomes debate, debate becomes argument, argument becomes war.

Put two dysfunctional alpha males together and, even if they start out with common objectives, they’re likely to end up in a power struggle. When an alpha male pounces on someone who’s not an alpha, the dynamic is different. As the other party tries to explain his or her thoughts, the impatient alpha either tunes out conspicuously or cuts in with a barrage of heavy artillery. The opponent slinks away in self-defense, pretending to get the alpha’s point. Also disappearing are useful facts and important views, along with respect, trust, and support. People comply with alpha males and mindlessly implement their strategies, even if they don’t agree with them. Effort diminishes, learning ceases, and collaborative dialogue is silenced.

As troublesome as it is, defensiveness pales in comparison to the most abusive alpha male trait: volatility. “We never know which Mike is going to show up in the morning, the effervescent guy with the big smile who can’t wait to take on the world, or the maniac who’s going to explode the first time someone rubs him the wrong way.” That’s from a series of 360° interviews we conducted at the request of the CEO of a major consumer products company. Like other volatile alpha males, Mike’s sunny side was dazzling and infectious, but his dark side made Darth Vader look like Mr. Rogers. When “the happy warrior” showed up, everyone was ready to follow him to the barricades. When “the ogre” emerged from its cave, they wanted to hide under their desks.

In general, employees are willing to cope with an occasional outburst, especially if it’s predictable. But arbitrary, frequent, and abusive tantrums cross the line into intimidation. And the flare-ups don’t have to be volcanic to be debilitating.

This 360° excerpt about a senior executive named Candace captures a less explosive version: “She’s like the big sister of your dreams: supportive, patient, understanding, and kind. She’ll do anything to help you be the best you can be. An hour later, she’s the wicked witch. She snipes at everything and everyone, cutting people down with nasty criticism.”
In part, the difference between Mike’s and Candace’s anger is a matter of personality and style, but it also reflects a common gender distinction. In our study, male alphas scored markedly higher than female alphas on impatience and difficulty controlling anger (there was no significant difference in competitiveness). (See table B-4 in appendix B.) This jibes with our workplace observations. Male anger tends to be transparent, whether it’s expressed in biting sarcasm or a blow-up. Angry women are usually less overt: their tone takes on a sharp edge, or they carp and criticize, pointing out what’s wrong at every turn and ignoring what’s working well. Women also imply you’re in trouble and hint that there might be consequences, whereas a dysfunctional alpha male will get in your face and lay it on the line, paying no mind to packaging.

Whether it comes out in upheavals that shatter the Richter scale, or glares that melt icebergs, or callous slurs that cut to the bone, alpha volatility makes for an edgy, unpredictable workplace. Because of the sheer power of their inner furnaces, alpha males set the temperature of the group. Shift their thermostat from upbeat to surly, and watch the mood of the organization plummet. Raise it into the red zone, and you have a paranoid workforce. When an anger-prone alpha male leader is about to arrive on the scene, you’ll see anxious people searching for clues about which personality will walk through the door. The price of that pervasive fear includes wasted energy, elevated stress levels, and employees who cover their behinds instead of getting their jobs done.

Many alpha males operate under the mistaken belief that fear moves people to productive action. They think the laws of the jungle apply to business, but it turns out that the chest-thumping leadership style not only doesn’t cut it in today’s office, it doesn’t work all that well in the jungle either, as the research in the box “Lessons from the Jungle” indicates.

To be sure, the old-fashioned, hard-nosed alpha male style can be a legitimate management tool, not just in war or on a football field but in the corporate world as well. In turnaround situations, in severe crises, or at times of exceptional fear and uncertainty, tough command-and-control tactics can provide needed order and discipline. In ordinary circumstances, however, alpha male excesses are much riskier now than they used to be. More and more leaders realize that success in the corporate
Lessons from the Jungle

It used to be assumed that brute force determined which animals led the good life and passed along their genes. But new research on our close relatives, the baboons, paints a more complicated picture. In an interview with Fortune magazine, Stanford primatologist Robert Sapolsky notes that brutish baboons that fight for the top slots are the most stressed-out of the bunch.a Plus, they’re not all that good at keeping the status they win through force.

Who gets to the top and stays there? Animals that are “great at forming coalitions.” In the long run, cleverness, affiliations, and “suggestions of violence” work better than overt aggression. What’s more, the tough guys don’t do nearly as well in the sex wars as was previously assumed. Frequently, the kinder, gentler males quietly get it on with new mates while the macho dudes are beating each other up. In short, nice guys don’t always finish last. In fact, they are quite well compensated, and their benefit packages are even better than the top alpha males’.

Sapolsky conjectures that primates with well-developed impulse control build strong coalitions, while those who lack impulse control and rely on force “can’t prevent themselves from leaping out and doing some dumb-ass thing that blows their whole plan.” For the human equivalent, compare a hot-tempered boss who intimidates people with a firm leader who treats people with respect. Bottom line: the animal drive to dominate will take you a long way, but you won’t go all the way if you lack what it takes to inspire, affiliate, and truly lead.

Alpha Females

Our coaching experience, our own research data, and a large body of scientific research all suggest that women in general display their leadership traits somewhat differently than men.\(^\text{15}\) Those stylistic differences are just as pronounced among male and female alphas. Like their male counterparts, female alphas are ambitious and drawn to positions of authority, but as a rule, they are less inclined to dominate. Better attuned to the emotional climate, they are more likely than alpha males to look for ways to collaborate and to find win-win solutions to conflicts. They can be just as opinionated and strong-minded, but they’ll search for consensus and buy-in rather than impose their will.

In other words, alpha women want to lead, but they don’t necessarily need to rule. A growing body of research supports those general observations. Studies indicate, for instance, that men are drawn to situations involving competition and risk taking, while women place higher value on cooperative relationships and working with people they like. In a study for the National Bureau of Economic Research, economists Muriel Niederle and Lise Vesterlund, of Stanford University and the University of Pittsburgh, respectively, decided to test the common observation that women are reluctant to compete, while men can be overly eager to compete. In groups of two women and two men, the subjects were given simple math problems to solve, under two different testing conditions. In the first, each participant received 50 cents for each correct answer, regardless of how the others did. The second round was done tournament style; the person with the best score won two dollars while the others received nothing. Each person was told how many questions he or she answered correctly, but not how the others compared. For the third round, they were allowed to choose between getting paid for each correct answer and competing in a winner-take-all scenario. Men were twice as likely to choose the tournament option, even though the maximum reward was the same and the potential for winning nothing was higher.

What explains this discrepancy? The researchers found that the men were far more confident in their ability to win. While none of the players actually knew whether they’d won the earlier tournament, 75 percent of the men thought they had, as compared with only 43 percent of
the women. This bolsters our observation that alpha males are more likely than their female counterparts to see themselves as exceptionally competent—so much so, in fact, that they relish visible, high-risk competitions in which they expect to stand out. Depending on their actual competence, this drive either pays off big-time or leads to conspicuous disasters. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to shy away from competition even when they stand a good chance of winning.16

Other data suggest that female managers tend to be perceived as more consultative and inclusive, whereas men are more directive and task oriented.17 There are also indications that men are biologically more dependent on the adrenalin of rapid-fire, high-risk situations, whereas women thrive on the calming influence of endorphin-producing activities, such as conversation and relationship building.18

In “The Art of the Decision,” Fortune magazine reporter Janet Guyon wrote, “After 25 years of interviewing CEOs, I can say definitively: Men love to lecture, women like to listen.”19 It is a matter of ongoing debate whether such generalities reflect actual differences between men and women or whether people merely perceive those differences because of cultural stereotypes that no one can completely escape. According to Guyon, “a growing body of work” says there is an actual difference in male and female decision-making styles. “Women collaborate, listen, and try to build teams. Men are more apt to direct, blame others, and use the vertical pronoun.” The article also reports that men are inclined to exercise decision-making power unilaterally while women with the same level of authority prefer to work through other people. Even at the higher rungs of the ladder, it seems, women get their self-improvement tips from Oprah and men get them from ESPN.

The jury is still out, but it’s likely that scientists will eventually trace the differences between men and women to a complex mix of nature and nurture. Because these gender proclivities are accentuated when individuals are placed in strong leadership positions, it’s safe to assume that alpha men and alpha women—on average—tend to evaluate novel situations in different ways. Because of her natural attraction to novelty, an alpha female might drive her organization toward something that hasn’t been completely checked out, whereas an alpha male might cling too
long to the known and be more conservative about exploring risks. Once on a novel path, women will likely fit the new situation into what’s already established, whereas men might adapt by creating new systems.

It must be emphasized that neither style is better than the other. What’s important is for individuals to become adept at using both under the appropriate circumstances, and to draw upon the natural strengths in the brains of the other sex.

Gender leadership differences show up fairly early in life. For example, in a study of teenagers at a summer camp, anthropologist Ritch Savin-Williams placed campers in cabins with strangers of the same age and sex. The boys started competing for leadership privileges right off the bat; girls waited at least a week. Boys used ridicule and bullying to gain advantage; girls were conspicuously nice as they established strategic friendships. To assert their dominance, boys hurled insults, fists, or hard objects, and they didn’t much care who got hurt. Girls employed subtle strategies such as gossip, backstabbing, or ignoring, and their empathy for losers was evident.

As described in the box “Systemizing and Empathizing,” some scientists believe that such studies point to inherent differences: men tend to be systemizers while women excel at empathizing. Whatever its origin, the style we think of as “feminine” certainly seems to soften the edges of female alpha tendencies.

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.
Systemizing and Empathizing

In his book *The Essential Difference*, Simon Baron-Cohen, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Cambridge University, defines empathy as the ability to put yourself in the shoes of others and respond in a concerned way that resonates with their thoughts and feelings. It’s an essential skill for comprehending and communicating with human beings. Systemizing involves discerning the rules that govern how things work, a vital tool for predicting external events and manipulating objects. Because empathizers care about the feelings of others, they prefer to get what they want through collaboration and reciprocity rather than fighting. The systemizers’ ability to manipulate systems is useful in combat, competitive strategizing, and political maneuvering. Quantitative analysis is systemizer territory; intimate communication is the terrain of empathizers.

Obviously, any population will have highly empathetic men who are lousy systemizers, and women who are outstanding systemizers with the empathy of a stone. On average, however, women score higher on measures of empathy and men do better at systemizing. These tendencies are evident early in life. Show infants one day old a mechanical mobile and a human face, and boys lock into the former while girls fixate on the latter. One-year-old boys are drawn to videos of cars; girls favor talking heads even with the sound turned off. Young boys push and shove to get what they want; girls bargain and persuade. On questionnaires, more girls check “I like to learn by working with other students” while most boys choose “I like to do better work than my friends.” Girls make requests; boys issue commands. Girls allow for multiple viewpoints; boys draw hard lines of right versus wrong.

By all indications, differences in the crib and on the playground get reinforced by society and later show up in the workplace. The ideal, displayed by healthy alphas of both sexes, is to be skilled at both empathizing and systemizing, and to use whichever is most appropriate to the situation.

b. Ibid., 29–33, 47–56, 83.
Running a company with over 9,000 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 that 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 outstanding 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 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. If, for example, you’re overly concerned about people’s feelings, your communication might be so indirect that no one can figure out what you want and what you think. Politely worded instructions get construed as mere suggestions, and critical feedback is mistaken for gently offered advice. Plus, leaders with an aversion to conflict can stifle healthy competition and productive debate, depriving their organizations of a useful management tool.

Another reason sensitivity can turn from asset to liability is that women are often seen as too emotional. As many experts have observed, an enraged man is considered tough and strong, but an irate woman is hysterical and irrational. And if they lean in the opposite direction, female alphas run the risk of being considered too soft. 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, CEO of Adecco Group North America, 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.

Overall, the attributes we associate with masculinity, such as rationality, toughness, and physical strength, have historically made alpha males the natural leaders of human groups. But today’s job description is different, and the slow emergence of women at higher levels of management is both a result of that change and a leading cause of it. It remains to be seen whether alpha women will transform the face of management entirely or become more like alpha males. What’s required of both sexes is balance: balance within the organization as a whole; balance in individual departments; and above all, balance within each alpha leader. The tools you’ll discover in this book will help you achieve that vital balance.

**What’s in It for You**

We’re often asked by CEOs to coach up-and-coming alpha males who have the talent, drive, and energy to run a company, but who are diamonds in the rough in dire need of polishing. In most cases, the clients themselves are surprised that anyone thinks they need help.

When told that their intimidating style can deplete morale and impair teamwork, these bright, savvy human beings are often dumbstruck. “I’ve been successful just the way I am,” they say. “You’re not going to neuter me now.” No one wants to neuter them, of course; just fine-tune their strengths and scrape away their rough edges. They don’t realize that the skills that got them to the playoffs are not enough to take them all the way to the championship. To truly realize their leadership potential, they need to build alliances and coalitions, earn the support of peers, demonstrate maturity and wisdom as well as talent, and show they can put the good of the organization ahead of personal glory. Un-
Fortunately, many fail to realize the need for those skills until they’re passed up for a major promotion.

If you’re a typical alpha male, you might be thinking, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” You may be tempted to give this book to someone who really needs it. Snap out of it! You may be hugely successful, but you’re not yet where you want to be, and some of your traits may keep you from getting there. Even worse, some alpha male attributes can land you in a hospital.

We estimate that more than half of all middle managers are alphas. Thanks to their assertiveness, drive, and take-charge confidence, they rise to that level quickly, and they thrive there because they skillfully manage processes and day-to-day functions. Alphas also stand a better chance of rising higher than those who are not alphas. Indeed, middle managers who do not possess alpha traits—or don’t make a concerted effort to add them to their functional competences—are likely to plateau at that level. But so are alpha males who don’t overcome their inherent risk factors. Why? Because fewer and fewer companies are willing to tolerate alpha abuses, like denigrating people and driving one’s agenda like a bulldozer. Bullies who lead through intimidation are likely to be kept under wraps by wise CEOs, self-destruct, or get brought down by insubordination, sabotage, and other forms of jungle retribution.

Like the hundreds of alpha males we’ve worked with, you can adopt new, more effective strategies. Doing so is a bottom-line issue: when you liberate your alpha gifts and reduce your alpha liabilities, you will stand a much better chance of rising to the heights your talent deserves—and everyone will be happy to have you there. Here are some of the benefits you can look forward to:

- Dramatic improvement in your leadership ability
- More productive and enjoyable working relationships
- Enhanced cooperation from peers and employees
- Increased respect and trust from colleagues
- Creative and harmonious teamwork
• Smoother flow of projects from conception to fruition
• More authentic self-expression and self-confidence
• Less stress, better health, and a happier home life

The Intention-Impact Gap

The starting point for obtaining these rewards is to expand your awareness. Only through honest self-reflection and self-monitoring can you effectively apply the tools you’ll find in these pages.

In our coaching work with alpha males, we use the impact trajectory (figure 1-2) to demonstrate the central role of awareness in success. We begin by having clients enumerate their intentions in several categories, such as business outcomes, leadership results, and key relationships. We then compare their intentions to their actual impact, to make them more aware of the gap between their expectations and their results. We
all know that factors such as knowledge, skill, and experience are vital for effective leadership, and high-ranking alpha males have all of those in spades. The wild card is their self-awareness (vertical axis) and their awareness of how they influence others, including peers, their teams, customers, and other key players (horizontal axis). As each type of awareness increases, so does the level of impact.

By becoming more aware of the impact of their behavior, alpha males can enhance their ability to communicate, collaborate, and create, leading directly to greater influence and sustainable business results. In turn, this improvement enables them to refine their intentions, bringing more authentic motivation to the surface. By asking questions such as, “What are my core beliefs?” and “What are my deepest values?” our alpha clients often realize the need to align their behavior with their truest intentions.

For example, in 2001, Kevin Rollins, then COO and president of Dell (now CEO), wanted to add explicit values of caring, integrity, and human connection to the performance-oriented corporate culture. From Kevin’s examination of his own deepest intentions, and his commitment to move beyond his analytic alpha style to become a more inspiring leader, grew an initiative called the Soul of Dell, which greatly enriched the leadership training of executives and added new criteria to the metrics used to determine bonuses. Under this initiative, managers were evaluated not by the usual business performance standards alone but also by whether or not employees felt supported and coached.

Each increment of awareness narrows the gap between noble intentions and powerful impact—and, incidentally, brings welcome health benefits by reducing stress and strain. The more honestly you can reflect on the information in the book as it pertains to you, the more you stand to benefit.

How Alpha Are You?

If you have not already done so, we encourage you to begin the process of raising your self-awareness by taking the online Alpha Assessment (described earlier in this chapter in the box “The Alpha Assessment”).
Meanwhile, the following checklist ("Are You an Alpha?") will give a quick sense of the extent to which you are an alpha, and the degree to which your alpha traits are assets or liabilities. Respond to each statement with “yes” or “no”; if neither choice fits perfectly, choose the one that seems most correct. Please reflect carefully and respond honestly; the awareness you gain will guide you to the most appropriate information and tools in the subsequent chapters.

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**Are You an Alpha?**

### Alpha Strengths

- ☐ No matter what, I don’t give up until I reach my end goal.
- ☐ I always say exactly what I think.
- ☐ When I play a game, I always like to win.
- ☐ I have no problem challenging people.
- ☐ I expect the best from the people I supervise, and I help them deliver.
- ☐ I make the decision I believe is correct, even when I know other people don’t agree.
- ☐ I have strong opinions on issues I know about.
- ☐ I seldom have any doubts about my ability to deliver.
- ☐ When leading others, I set high performance standards.
- ☐ Even when I am successful, I always think about things that could have been done better.

### Alpha Risks

- ☐ I constantly compare myself to others.
I don't care if my style hurts people's feelings, if that's what's required to produce results.

When people disagree with me, I often treat it as a challenge or an affront.

I tend to believe that others need to change more than I do.

If I have a good idea and I'm asked to hold off and listen to inferior ideas, I can quickly become visibly annoyed.

People say I become curt, brusque, or frustrated when I have to repeat myself.

Sometimes I lose control of my temper and visibly express my anger.

I have strong opinions about most things, even if I don't know much about them.

Many of my work relationships have a competitive undertone.

I don't invest much time in building collaborative relationships with peers.

I've been told that I don't listen as well as I should.

While this is not a precise instrument like the online assessment, it does give you a rough idea of your alpha tendencies. If most of your responses to statements in the Strengths section were "yes," you are probably an alpha with many of the strengths that make alphas such dynamic and influential leaders.

If half or more of your responses to the items under Risks were "yes," you mostly likely have some alpha risks that deserve your attention. If you have seven or eight yeses in that group, it's very likely that your alpha liabilities are already limiting your success. With nine or ten yeses, you might well be on the brink of trouble.

Don't be confused if you scored high in both categories. Because alpha liabilities are mainly alpha assets taken too far or applied inappropriately, that is to be expected. (The exceptions to the rule are healthy alphas who have worked hard to reduce their negative tendencies.) Again, don't treat this as a definitive personality profile. As you proceed through the book, pay particular attention to information that resonates with your own self-perception and with the feedback you've received from others.
The Times They Are a-Changin'

As business has evolved, the alpha male drive for dominance that once assured the survival of the toughest has become increasingly maladaptive. In an environment where brains count a whole lot more than brawn, a physical pipsqueak can be a giant. In organizations that favor ensembles over solos, emotional intelligence does more to inspire loyalty than a loud roar or a puffed-up chest. Today’s employees—well educated, increasingly female, and concerned about job satisfaction and work-life balance—would sooner quit than put up with abusive managers. In addition, the widely dispersed and culturally diverse teams created by globalization need managers who can communicate, teach, and consistently motivate. And, in the wake of Enron and other corporate scandals, unenlightened alpha males who scrap the rules or indulge in lavish displays of perks and privilege are no longer welcome.

Unfortunately, a great many upper-level executives still behave like classic enablers. By the time they wake up to the damage being caused by dysfunctional alpha males, it’s too late for the leopards to change their spots. Like athletic coaches who coddle prickly all-stars without realizing how toxic they are for the team, some managers let abusive alpha males slide for years, even decades. “It comes with the territory,” they say. They are seriously miscalculating the risks and rewards of unhealthy alpha behavior. For example, a study by business school professors Tiziana Casciaro and Miguel Sousa Lobo, of Harvard and Duke universities, respectively, found that personal feelings were more important than competence in forming effective work relationships. “We found that if someone is strongly disliked, it’s almost irrelevant whether or not she is competent,” said the researchers. On the other hand, if a person is liked, “colleagues will seek out every little bit of competence he has to offer.”

Creating an atmosphere in which trust, respect, and congenial relationships flourish is vital for success in today’s environment. In a Wall Street Journal article titled “Malevolent Bosses Take a Huge Toll on Business,” Kevin Voigt cited a Columbia University study of 1,000 workers in nine countries including the United States, Japan, Singapore, and Australia. Ninety percent say they’d suffered abuse from bosses at
some point in their careers, and on any given day, 20 percent have to put up with a bad boss. The cost in reduced productivity, low morale, and high turnover—not to mention health care expenditures due to stress disorders—is enormous. Plus, people who feel abused have no interest in being loyal. Many simply quit, contributing to what economists see as an alarming trend: worker shortages in key industries.

A study at San Francisco State University, for example, found that the main reasons people cite for leaving jobs is not money but the desire “to be respected, to be challenged, and to grow.” If companies want to retain their most valuable employees—which is, of course, more cost effective than hiring and training replacements—they have to realize that “no pain, no gain” is not a sound management style. It is, in fact, maladaptive: today’s well-educated, highly skilled workers haven’t got time for the pain.

Make no mistake, the magnificent strengths of alphas make them the most likely—and the most appropriate—people to assume positions of leadership. Yet, for many alpha males, the skills that today’s leaders require—motivating, inspiring, teaching, communicating, modeling integrity and personal growth—do not come naturally, and those who fail to develop those skills will become increasingly out of place. In Developing Global Executives: The Lessons of International Experience, management professor Morgan W. McCall Jr. and organizational psychologist George P. Hollenbeck identified what they call “universal fatal flaws” of executives in the global environment. They include bungled relationships with key people, lack of people skills, failure to ask for help, and failure to learn or to adapt to change. Those flaws are similar to the risk factors of alpha males. For all these reasons, the skillful management of alpha males is one of the most crucial tasks facing today’s organizations.

Our primary purpose in writing this book is to help alpha males leverage their strengths and subdue the flip-side weaknesses that stifle their effectiveness. Our other aim is to help the peers, teams, and managers of alphas work more effectively with them. By understanding alpha males, adjusting your attitude toward them, and taking command of how you behave toward them, you can make your workplace more productive, more agreeable, and more personally rewarding.
A Quick Look Ahead

In the next chapter you will learn about the four basic alpha types: the commander, the visionary, the strategist, and the executor. You will also discover the debilitating trap we call the “alpha triangle” and acquire a powerful tool for putting an end to it.

Chapters 3 through 6 describe each of the four alpha types in depth; you’ll become familiar with the style each type brings to work every day and gain practical tools to maximize the strengths and subdue the risks.

Chapter 7 contains a crucial examination of the impact of alpha males on teams. It will give you powerful ways to deal with alpha-related problems and turn nightmare teams into dream teams.

In chapter 8 we address the care and feeding of alpha males. It will help you achieve a higher level of personal well-being. Don’t think this is a throwaway topic: as you’ll see, it’s a vital bottom-line concern.

The final chapter contains a brief description of how to get the most follow-through from everything you’ve learned in the book. It focuses on the importance of coaching, something every alpha male—and everyone who works for or with alpha males—should take advantage of.

ACTION STEPS

- Become familiar with the full range of alpha male strengths and their flip-side weaknesses.
- Recognize that what separates healthy, well-functioning alpha males from dysfunctional alphas is primarily the area of interpersonal relations.
- Examine how alpha male strengths—yours and/or your colleagues’—contribute to the success of your organization, and how alpha male risks damage productivity, morale, and efficiency.
- Identify the leading alphas in your organization and observe the differences between the men and women.
• Take the online Alpha Assessment and contemplate the implications of your scores.

• Make a firm commitment to reflect honestly on the information in this book and to apply the tools that you find the most relevant.
Notes

Chapter 1

3. All of the stories in the book are real. In some cases, the identities of the actual individuals and companies are left out or disguised because they requested anonymity.
10. Uncited quotations in this chapter are from client interviews during 2005 and 2006, conducted by the authors, unless otherwise specified.
11. The type A personality is discussed in chapter 8.
12. Tension was assessed using the IPAT 16 personality factors.
13. These gender differences remained statistically significant even when stepwise regression analyses controlled for age, education, and whether or not respondents held supervisory positions.
14. For more on defensiveness and tools for overcoming it, see chapter 6.
15. Research findings on sex differences reflect generalities based on statistical averages. Among actual men and women there is huge variation; any individual’s traits might be closer to the average of the opposite sex.
17. Prime, “Women ‘Take Care,’ Men ‘Take Charge.’”
25. Dillon, “Peerless Leader.”