

## Taming the Alpha Female (Jul 09)

Kate Lanz looks at the common pitfalls of Alpha females in the workplace, and how to tackle them.



*Perfectionist women can fall into several Alpha traps that could potentially de-rail an organisation. Kate Lanz explains how to tackle bullish women in the workplace, and harness their perfectionist power.*

The Female FTSE Index has been tracking the number of women executive directors on the boards of FTSE 100 companies since 1999. In 2008 it published its [Decade of Delay report](#) that showed that there were now only 12% of female board directors compared to six per cent when the report first started

Although there has been lots of publicity about increasing female representation on boards, in the corporate world change has been disappointingly slow. There are all sorts of reasons about why the glass ceiling remains intact. Sadly, a recent news story blamed women for actively blocking progression of other women, targeting and seeking them out for bullying. The [New York Times article](#), based on research conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute, recently claimed that 40% of bullies in the workplace were women, and that they preferred to target other women 70% of the time.

### The perfectionist problem

As an executive coach working with senior women leaders this is contrary to my experience. Often I find that women leaders actively support and mentor other women. However, occasionally senior Alpha women can suffer from a lack of confidence which, when combined with total perfectionism, presents itself as derailing and dominating behaviour and - in the worst case - bullying. When you take a closer look at what lies behind this, there is almost always a positive desire to deliver a great job and a genuine ignorance of the disruptive impact.



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One woman I worked with was recommended to coaching as she'd upset and lost many of her support staff. She was nearly fired and people experienced her as a total nightmare to work with. Yet, no one in the organisation had addressed her behaviour.

Through coaching we dissected her actions and I used evidence gathered from within the organisation to present back to her. She was horrified by what she heard and totally unaware of the internal damage she had caused.

During our sessions we found that what she wanted to achieve was her absolute best and was striving for perfection. She is a classic Alpha personality who wants to win, never let anyone down and is strongly driven by her own internal critical voice. She is a lovely person but in the heat of the moment came across as impatient and belittling. We worked on some strategies to help her cope and understand the impact of her behaviour. She went back into the organisation and apologised to her colleagues.

She is absolutely the type of woman who would support the progression of other women. I do agree though that some of the characteristics of the Alpha, who make up about 70% of our senior managers, can be extremely disruptive in the workplace – especially in today's economic climate.

## The common Alpha pitfalls

I have researched three common 'Alpha Traps' that leaders can often fall into.

The first is the **Confidence trap**. Part of the Alpha make-up is supreme confidence, or at least the appearance of it. Alphas often struggle to admit their fears and vulnerabilities. As a result they find it difficult to reach out, ask for help or build mutually supportive relationships. Under severe stress, they want more than ever to look like they confidently have everything under control.

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The second pitfall is the **Competition trap**. Alphas are programmed to compete. When the external wins are not forthcoming, this competitive energy can get directed internally into the organisation. Subtle but insidious rivalries build up as the 'high' from winning comes by scoring points off peers. This is dangerous territory and is happening a lot right now with Board or senior partners relationships particularly vulnerable.

**My way or the highway**, the final trap, is also increasingly visible. Alphas love control. Pushed too far, this tendency seriously limits their capacity to get the best from their people.

Although this type of behaviour is easily recognisable it is often left unaddressed. Confronting or 'calling out' inappropriate behaviour takes courage as people tend to avoid confrontation. Yet addressing it in the moment is one of the most effective ways. If this is difficult, perhaps other people are around, it needs to be followed up as soon as possible.

To do this effectively, the individual must be assertive and make it clear how they have experienced the behaviour and what the impact has been. They should use 'I' language and avoid blame.

Alpha or dominant females are usually very open to addressing their own issues and accepting that their behaviour is out of order. Of course confronting this behaviour might cause an initial flare-up that can be difficult. But in the main, people are usually relieved that someone has spoken up to them.

Alpha leaders, both male and female, have exactly what is needed psychologically and emotionally to bring organisations through the downturn:

- Firstly, **swift but carefully judged action**. Operating at pace is easy for the Alpha and being decisive comes naturally.
- Secondly, **straight talking** – being honest about the difficulties and telling it like it is.
- Thirdly, staying **emotionally connected** to their people. Alphas can find it hard to show how much they care but those who have built their emotional intelligence can stay in tune with how others are feeling.
- Finally, providing **inspiration** – the Alpha's energy and self-belief is contagious. This galvanises others and builds confidence in the face of difficult circumstances.

This is why it's even more imperative for organisations to confront inappropriate behaviour as quickly as possible. Without this, Alpha personalities will continue to fall into the traps potentially derailing an organisation at a critical time.

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