

## Egocentric Leaders

*Are you stuck on the ego floor?*



by Howard M. Guttman

SOME PEOPLE ARE PATHOLOGICALLY egocentric. No matter what you do, they'll have an excessive need to *be in control, assert themselves at the expense of others, and be the center of attention.*

For example, I recently worked with the president of a financial services company who always had to be center stage. His team members were highly competent and experienced, but he refused to accept their advice or listen to their points of view. Worse, he often took credit for their accomplishments or berated them in front of clients when they dared to disagree with him. Not surprisingly, his narcissistic behavior began to rankle clients, who one by one began moving to other companies.

The term *ego* evokes both condemnation and praise. It's defined both as an "exaggerated sense of self importance, conceit" and "appropriate pride in oneself, self-esteem." It's helpful to think of the sense of self, or ego, on a continuum: on one extreme are people whose low self-esteem keeps them from asserting themselves, expressing their point of view, and making decisions.

With little or no confidence in their ability to do the right thing, they avoid doing anything. On the other extreme are those who think so highly of themselves and their judgment that they see no need to ever involve others in their decision making or planning. They act—and direct others to act—without ever asking for additional input.

**High-performance leaders fall in the center of the ego continuum:** They have confidence in their ability, but recognize that others also make valuable contributions. They easily *share authority* and *empower others* to make decisions. They know that they can *choose* to relinquish control and, if necessary, get it back. They come from a place of *strength and conviction*. Ego-centric leaders come from a place of fear: the fear of losing control and never getting it back.

Conscious leaders recognize that working horizontally is the best way to increase their probability of success.

They have the *emotional intelligence (EQ)* to *enroll rather direct* those they lead. Sadly, some leaders who score high on IQ tests fail miserably on EQ measures. They're so self-involved, so concerned with their own image that they fail to see how their egocentric behavior limits the results they achieve through others. I try to raise the consciousness of leaders whose *elevator is stuck at the ego floor*, preventing them and their team from ascending to higher performance. They need to see *how* their ego is getting in the way, not *why*.

***I've never coached an executive who said, "I have an ego problem."*** Most ego-centric leaders are aware that they don't feel good about where they are, that they have a hard time letting go of control and delegating, that it is hard for them to acknowledge others' contributions. But they haven't made the connection between their *unhealthy ego* and their *unsatisfactory performance*.

Getting them to see it starts with identifying the behaviors that impede performance, then probing why they engage in these behaviors. Are they aware that they are choosing them? What is the price they are paying? It

isn't until they become fully aware of the *balance sheet*—the benefits vs. the costs of indulging their ego—that they can make changes.

***The ultimate goal: a leader who wants his or her team to be made up not of followers, but of other leaders.*** The difference between a high-performance leader and one who is ego driven

was clear to me when I heard about the way several teams in one client organization made presentations to its Board. In presenting his group's plan for the year, one team leader put on a one-man show. It was a dazzling performance, but it left the board wondering how any team could withstand the onslaught of such a *supercharged ego*.

Another leader shared the stage. Each player presented the portion of the plan that related to his or her function and, as the subject-matter expert, provided in-depth responses to questions that the leader wasn't nearly as well prepared to answer. And they got rave reviews from the Board.

One leader was *stuck on the ego floor*; the other rode past it. In your leadership, what would your ride be like? **LE**

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**ACTION:** *Tame the ego to create other leaders.*

