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Leadership Run Amok

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Scott W. Spreier, Mary H. Fontaine, Ruth L. Malloy

The Idea in Brief

A leader's hunger to achieve--to continually be the best--is a major source of strength for any organization. It fuels innovation, productivity, and growth: companies would be lost without it.

But taken to an extreme, the drive to achieve can damage an enterprise. To meet ambitious goals--a revenue aim, a sales target--overachievers command and coerce employees rather than coach and collaborate with them. Many also cut corners, neglect to communicate crucial information, and ignore others' concerns.

Result? Overachievers stifle others' drive and development--ultimately eroding organizational performance, demolishing trust, and undermining morale.

How to guard against achievement overdrive? As Spreier, Fontaine, and Malloy suggest, recognize that the *best* leaders strive to help *others* succeed. Discern whether your achievement drive is undermining your leadership style. For instance, are you always providing answers rather than inviting others' input? Do others see you as arrogant and impatient? If so, channel your achievement drive into **altruistic achievement**: replace coercion with collaboration, balance direction with influence, and focus less on results and more on people.

Though difficult to master, altruistic achievement pays big dividends. After one pharmaceutical executive at AstraZeneca tamed his overbearing achievement drive, his previously frustrated team won recognition for being the first to attain market leadership with three top-selling drugs.

The Idea in Practice

Recognize If You're an Overachiever

High achievers, the authors explain, relish challenging projects that enable them to accomplish something new. They like to outperform others who embody high standards of excellence. And they're utilitarian in their communication--often short and to the point.

If you fit this description, watch for signs of an *overactive* achievement drive. Feedback from others can help.

Dean McAlister, a senior pharmaceutical sales director with AstraZeneca, was talented, sincere, and hard-working. But he drove his team crazy--flooding employees with early-morning emails and

solving problems before his staff could discuss them. Result? He stifled his team's input and creativity and came across as manipulative, impatient, and arrogant. After his manager alerted him to the problem, McAlister asked his team, peers, and boss for honest feedback on his behavior. Resulting insights--including "I'm always talking"--were painful but valuable.

Consciously Change Your Behavior

Identify and practice new behaviors. One executive who tended to criticize others during meetings began writing reminders to himself to take up issues outside a meeting instead. Another consciously limited her comments on an idea to no more than a couple of minutes.

McAlister knew he still needed to set sales targets. But instead of continuing to issue directives to his team, he practiced engaging them in discussions about *how* to achieve the targets. He also strengthened his coaching skills: When a sales rep emailed him about closing an important new contract, an excited McAlister fired back with a list of actions she should immediately take. Catching himself, he immediately sent a second message congratulating the rep and inviting her to develop her own plan.

Create a Culture of Altruistic Achievement

Too many organizations select high achievers for their obvious assets, then ignore the damage they're causing as long as the numbers are good. To avoid the resulting dangers, balance the emphasis on achievement with attention to helping others succeed.

In the early 1990s, IBM's leadership culture emphasized personal heroics. Executives focused on their own departments and divisions--even as that focus hurt other parts of the organization and eroded IBM's market dominance. But a small group of leaders behaved differently: while still high achievers, they worked through others, provided coaching, and strove to enhance the entire company's capabilities. IBM incorporated these behaviors into a competency model used to select, develop, and promote leaders. Public praise and stock options rewarded leaders who adopted the new style. By 2004, IBM's combative, turf-protecting culture had given way to one of collaboration.

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Further Reading

Articles

[Narcissistic Leaders: The Incredible Pros, the Inevitable Cons](#)

Harvard Business Review

January 2001

by Michael Maccoby

Maccoby introduces a type of leader--"narcissistic"--who demonstrates a particularly high need for achievement and who wreaks extensive damage on his or her organization. Charismatic and visionary, narcissistic leaders can also be emotionally isolated and highly distrustful--prone to hair-trigger rages and grandiose airs. To manage themselves, *productive* narcissistic leaders find a trusted sidekick who keeps them rooted in reality, points out the operational requirements of their visions, and gets them to accept new ideas. They also self-reflect to hone their awareness of their irrational need to achieve at all costs. Those who must work with narcissistic leaders can also help them become more productive--for example, by showing them how new ideas will benefit them, and thus persuading them to embrace valuable new approaches they might otherwise have rejected.

Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?

Harvard Business Review

January 2001

by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones

The authors provide additional ideas for managing the need for achievement so as to inspire higher performance in others. Practices include: 1) *Reveal your weaknesses*. By showing you're human, you build collaboration and solidarity between you and your employees as well as underscore your approachability. 2) *Become a sensor*. Collect and interpret subtle interpersonal cues, detecting currents of opinion, unexpressed feelings, and the quality of important relationships in your organization. 3) *Practice tough empathy*. Care intensely about your people's work, giving them what they need--not necessarily what they want--to achieve their best. 4) *Dare to be different*. Distinguish yourself through qualities such as imagination, expertise, and adventurousness--you'll motivate others to perform better.

About the Authors

Scott W. Spreier is a senior consultant in Hay Group's McClelland Center for Research and Innovation in Boston.

Mary H. Fontaine is a vice president and the managing director of Global Talent and Leadership Services for Hay Group in Boston.

Ruth L. Malloy is the director of research and technology at the McClelland Center.

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