Golden Geese
To ensure that your climb up the proverbial ladder of success will not end in a tragic, crash-and-burn fall, you might want to study what hubris is, what great thinkers have written about it, and how to inoculate yourself against falling victim to it. You can’t get more golden eggs out of a dead goose, as the hapless farmer in the classic Aesop fable learned too late.

Victims of Success
In coaching executives, I find that while most who earn their success are wealthy, many are not satisfied or at ease; in fact, some become victims of their own success. Since few have disorders, imbalances, or attributes that predispose them to self-destruct, I wonder why so many fail to thrive. Once attained, success may be neither lasting nor personally fulfilling.

Blame Game
Children believe in superheroes; adults know that heroic men and women have feet of clay. Yet for some reason, only a handful of leaders remember this when confronted by the need to work their way out of trouble. Most often they regress to primitive (childish) modes of thinking aimed at convincing others and themselves that they can still do it all.

Superstar Talent
Since both Talent and Prima Donnas are quick starters, deliver stellar results early in their careers, and are indefatigable in their pursuit of success, it is hard to differentiate the folks guaranteed to give you headaches from those who will be a rising tide, lifting all ships. Moreover, by the time Prima Donnas show their true colors, the damage they cause can be considerable. Hence, learn to distinguish between these two types of achievers.

Anger Mismanagement
Even leaders who are safely tenured can suddenly find their careers derailed by an inability to deal with anger. Our culture is obsessed with being politically correct and suppressing aggressive words or deeds—yet if leaders always swallow their anger, failing to give voice to negative feelings or inhibiting actions with the potential to hurt others—they do so at their peril.

About the Author
Read about the fascinating executive coach who authored these five enlightening articles.
Golden Geese

Keep the eggs coming.

by Steven Berglas

SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE crash and burn after achieving stellar success far more often than they find ways to sustain, replicate, or improve on their achievements. To ensure that your climb up the ladder of success will not end in a tragic fall, you might want to study what hubris is, what great thinkers have written about it, and learn how to inoculate yourself against falling victim to it.

In ancient Rome victorious generals were honored for their heroics with a parade. The honoree rode in the lead chariot followed closely by a slave who walked behind him holding a wreath over his head while whispering to the hero, “Remember... thou art only a man.” The ancient Romans, and Greeks, understood hubris, the arrogance born of success.

Worry about Hubris

Unfortunately, self-medication is tricky at best, and usually disastrous. This is one reason why those who employ super-achievers should worry about hubris: It is far simpler and infinitely more effective for someone managing a star to treat them, than leaving a star to his own devices. The wisest CEOs I know accept this contention because they have embraced what quality guru Joseph Juran dubbed “Pareto Principle” in honor of the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto who observed that 80 percent of the land in Italy was owned by 20 percent of the population. According to Juran, 20 percent of your talent will account for 80 percent of your success. In bottom-line terms, your top talent are worth every cent you pay them—and more.

Some CEOs sense this. During the past year’s economic implosion I have received twice as many calls to conduct “hubris prevention interventions” for top-talent than I did in 2008. Why? Top talent is extraordinarily rare, and virtually impossible to grow—these folks are born not made. Even if an A Player is acting-out in the most arrogant and egregious manner, it’s more cost effective to coach him than to replace him.

Three Recommendations

You can save top talent from destroying themselves in three ways:

1. Pamper your pets in public, not private. I read the Bible primarily for management advice. Consider this brilliant Proverb: Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall. I never miss a chance to warn CEOs, “Give talent almost anything they want, but never behind closed doors.” Two idiosyncrasies of geese capable of laying golden eggs make this intervention crucial to ensuring their productivity:
   • First, in a functional sense, hubris is flaunting your prowess in front of others. No one cares if a superstar whoops-it-up in the privacy of his home, but when in the presence of colleagues he must be decorous. It’s one thing to know you are exempt from the rules; quite another to rub that fact in the face of a rule-follower. CEOs should laud their A Players to the sky at a group meeting, and then ask the star’s colleagues to shout “amen.” Sanity, let alone innate modesty, will demand that the A Player say something like, “Gosh, guys... I couldn’t have done it without you.”
   • Second, top talent will be bossy toward others whether you like it or not. In most instances, this is a blessing since they demand a no-holds-barred commitment to success from those around them. It is also easy for anyone working with top talent to accept their being bossy if it is understood that their power is contextual: When involved in a project, they have the right to call the shots. What concerns co-workers of Golden Geese is not knowing if their boss has ceded authority to an arrogant A Player, or if that person is just being arrogant because he can get away with it. If you are seen “conferencing” with an A Player in private, the ambiguity of “what went on” can engender out-of-control fear within the rank-and-file that something is amiss. So spoil your talent, but only when everyone can hear how much special treatment they are receiving.

2. Work golden geese like rented mules. After his first season of playing pro basketball (for the Chicago Bulls), Michael Jordan, arguably the best hoopster of all time, returned home to North Carolina, played in schoolyard games with his buddies, and promptly broke his ankle. Bulls’ management reacted by trying to limit if and when their franchise player could play extracurricular hoops. Jordan retaliated by demanding that a right to play clause be inserted in his contract. Because of who he was and what he could do on the hardwood, Jordan prevailed.

Why do all top talent take busman’s holidays during “down time”? They love the challenge of competing, literally get adrenaline highs from doing so, and feel deprived of \textit{joie de vivre} when sitting idle.

If you have no challenging tasks for them, create some, ship them (on loan) to other departments, or lose them. Achieving is in the DNA of superstars, and if you do not provide opportunities for them to shine, over and over, they’ll implode—just as dramatically and irrevocably as Supernovas.

3. Affording challenging opportunities is not the same as demanding more. Challenges contain elements of novelty within them. After winning three championships in a row, Michael Jordan briefly tried his hand at Major League Baseball. He dominated the NBA, and it was briefly the “same old; same old.” Every star wants the thrill of conquering what is unknown, so build chances from happening, be as congratulatory as you want toward top talent, provided you preempt them from demanding authority to make personnel decisions.

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Victims of Success

Avoid self-destructive action.

by Steven Berglas

FEW EXECUTIVES HAVE the skill and acumen to achieve authentic success—rising to the top on the basis of talent and hard work. Those who earn their success, according to cultural iconology, should enjoy material wealth and personal satisfaction.

In coaching executives, however, I find that while most who earn their success are wealthy, many are not satisfied or at ease; in fact, 25 percent become victims of their own success. Since few have disorders, imbalances, or attributes that predispose them to self-destruct, I must wonder why so many fail to thrive.

Once attained, success may be neither lasting nor personally fulfilling.

Success can go to your head, strengths can become weaknesses, and weaknesses that may not have mattered in the past can prove to be your undoing when circumstances change. The nature of success changes the way successful people view themselves. This change in self-perception is the key to understanding how success can sow the seeds of discontent and foreshadow eventual failure.

Is Hubris the Culprit?

Executives are often portrayed as narcissistic, fist-pounding, materialists who lead by “my way or the highway” and put their needs first. While such an approach accounts for why some people rise to the top, you’d be wrong to assume that the aspects of a narcissistic personality that interfere with effective management—extreme grandiosity, hubris, and sense of entitlement—are always the cause of undoing.

What explains why success often breeds failure? People become risk-avoidant once money starts rolling in, either owing to complacency or their failure to reexamine their business plan; hence, they miss the opportunities that rapidly growing competitors see in changing or expanding environments. Regardless of what causes successful leaders to grow complacent, two things are true. First, rewards are not what they are cracked up to be, and results are never good enough. Second, businesses need to “stay hungry,” not “stay happy.” Although the lessons of impositions following success are relevant to executives who fall victim to their own success, factors involving diffusion of responsibility, mistrust of others, and “group-think” make personal failings attributable to success a separate phenomenon.

A common form of C-suite self-sabotage is what I call perseveration—an insistence to cling to “tried-and-true” problem-solving strategies. This behavior emerges from three causes: 1) awed by success, we project a “halo” around the head of those who achieve it, signifying they can do no wrong; 2) the “halo” influences how we view and describe them and biases how they view and describe themselves; and 3) they seek to protect themselves against having to admit failure or weakness and suffer shame.

With this self-defeating behavior, the puzzling question is; “Why do super-smart and capable people fail to adapt and instead resist new information when it is obvious that the old way is working against them?”

Professor Chris Argyris reveals why “smart, old dogs” are so opposed to dropping old solutions and learning new tricks: We want our behavior to meet four needs: enable us to feel that we are in control, maximize “winning” and minimize “losing,” suppress negative feelings, and appear to behave rationally in accord with clear goals. Thus, those old dogs are loath to try new tricks for fear of looking stupid or inept. And don’t encourage them by saying, “Come on, Fido; given all the tricks you know, this one will be easy.” Since their sense of self is tied-up in the notion that they are achievers, they see this as a very intimidating demand.

According to Argyris, a successful person’s success at education helps explain the problems they have with learning. “Before they enter the world of work, their lives are full of successes; they have rarely experienced the embarrassment and sense of threat that comes with failure. Their defensive reasoning has rarely been activated. People who rarely experience failure, however, end up not knowing how to deal with it effectively.”

Once people who have never envi-

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ACTION: Don’t kill your golden geese.
sioned a “worse-case scenario” finally do so, their avoidant behaviors often melt away. But as long as boogey men are allowed to lurk, behind closet doors, their powers to intimidate grow stronger and stronger.

By avoiding exposure to anything that may force them to admit a mistake or imperfection, people whose history is devoid of failure refuse to modify their behavioral strategies. They ignore or suppress contradictory information, distort feedback that casts their judgment in a critical light, and behave in a defensive manner. As Argyris notes, defensive reasoning encourages them to keep private the premises, inferences, and conclusions that shape their behavior and to avoid testing them in an objective fashion.

Can Victims of Success Be Helped?

You become a victim of your success when success makes you “too smart” to learn you are about to fail. People who fall victim to their own success are saddled by two major problems. First, since they bring “hang-ups” that hamper all remedial relationships they enter, you can’t just say, “Hey, smart old dog, I know you’re made anxious when asked to learn new tricks, but this situation is different.” Second, despite indisputable evidence of achievement, their self-concept has been so corrupted that they live with a self-image that needs ongoing reinforcement.

**Problem 1: Resisting help.** Many executives resist learning because they are “too smart” and trying to do so may be embarrassing. How can you help a “smart old dog” to recognize resistance to learning new tricks; muster the courage to risk embarrassment; and, approach the learning in a healthy manner? I approach these cases by first removing resistances, and then by providing a safe context.

- **Remove resistance.** I often break down resistance by using paradoxical interventions. These “pull” the executive in the direction of the resistance. I describe the symptom, encourage them to not change their behavior, or even increase symptoms to expose them to the absurdity of their resistance and to recognize its adverse consequences. When they ultimately do, they often either abandon their resistances or seek remediation for their symptoms.

- **A safe learning opportunity.** Many coaches of C-level executives fail to prepare for the emergence of a paradoxical response: vulnerability. Certain coaches are cowed by the power of CEOs, and intimidated by a CFO’s or CIO’s smarts. When these successes make themselves open to evaluation and vulnerable to change, a “smart old dog” becomes a “scared old dog” in ways they’ve never known. Bibliotherapy (providing them with proof that they are not unique in this regard) helps. Getting a first-hand report from a confidant who thrived after leaving his comfort zone, works better. Regardless, you (the change-agent) need to add supportive work to the process of change (you ignore it at your peril).

  I always suggest that coaches engage their executive clients in role-playing in two phases: 1) have the executive assume the role of mentor or coach to a colleague, played by the coach, who is grappling with his or her own “too-smart-to-learn” dilemma—and during this exercise, mirror adaptive responses; and 2) interrupt the executive (while in role) and pose a problem for him to solve that he did not anticipate. This causes the executive to experience anxiety in a safe environment. If a coach can be critical yet supportive, the old dog can learn to approach any context demanding he learn new tricks with equanimity.

**Problem 2: Self-conception.** What causes an unstable sense of self? Narcissistic instabilities are often linked to: patterns of parenting that make people feel objectified or believe they are loved for what they produce, not for who they are; parental overindulgence; emotional neglect; unpredictable and inconsistent caregiving; parenting marked by excessive admiration but not balanced with realistic feedback—receiving laudatory feedback and not knowing why.

Being confused by excessive positive feedback creates a vulnerability in those on the path to becoming a victim of their success. They tend to have difficulty enjoying their success and can’t dissociate from their personal success or foster the success of others.

Being unable to either enjoy success or dissociate from it and nurture the development of others impacts a coach’s ability to plan interventions. First, when a person is focused on meeting internalized expectations for success not yet attained, it means that his experience of his achievements is “incomplete.” These people feel like valuable Ming vases with holes in the bottom—and they constantly seek to redress the damage. If a halo is projected on them, they wear it, not questioning why, since it may help in damage control. On the other hand, if a novel learning opportunity is presented to them, they reject it. They never realize that they’re worth millions empty. It’s a classic case of focusing on the hole, not the donut.

  - **Redirect the need to achieve.** When an executive is locked in a pattern of perseveration, the coach must help him find value and reward apart from accomplishment—of status and tangible manifestations of self-esteem—for change to occur. I like to exploit the fact that virtually all executives who perseverate have either been entrepreneurs or “originators” of the business model that they refuse to abandon. I tap into their entrepreneurial spirit by finding an issue, cause, or activity that provokes a perseverating executive’s interest—and then provoking the executive to get angry, constructively, with regard to the issue.

This stimulating activity is an antidote to burnout—it is challenging, reinforcing, and capable of eliciting endorphins.

- **Detachment.** When I examine the causes of burnout in executives, I find that not being able to detach from demands for ever-increasing achievement is a major cause. When an executive can’t extricate from acting in ways intended to dominate market sectors or conquer new heights, his action orientation becomes a hindrance. If he is obsessed with success at all costs, can’t experience his intrinsic self-worth, and has no time for caring for or nurturing others—he needs help.

**Since most executives eschew developing the self-reflective capacity needed to stop self-destructive behaviors and to develop others, I employ a special “adjunctive” coach—a Rabbi, meaning a trusted advisor.** A Rabbi brings a perspective I can never have: an intimate familiarity with the nuts-and-bolts of a person’s work. Only a Rabbi can say, “This too will pass” with authority, and free me to help leaders initiate change.

When you question your faith in pursuing success at all costs, you can enjoy what you have achieved, know it is real, ask, “Was it worth it?” and move on with equanimity, being inoculated against becoming a victim of your own success.

Dr. Steven Berglas is an executive coach who spent 25 years on the faculty of Harvard Medical School’s Department of Psychiatry. He is the author (or co-author) of four books on dealing with the stress of success. Visit www.berglas.com.

**ACTION:** Avoid being a victim of your success.
**Blame Game**

**Confess: “I blew it.”**

by Steven Berglas

**While few career tracks, with the possible exception of wilderness guide, afford more highs than C-level executive, the thrills come at steep costs—performance pressure from boards, stakeholders, and customers, not to mention personally imposed standards of excellence. It takes broad shoulders to withstand the burdens of sitting at the desk where the buck stops. This is why I counsel senior executives—men who almost always suffer from excessive performance pressure—to behave in an “unmanly” manner and, in the event that they err, beg for forgiveness.**

In *Reclaiming the Fire*, my book on understanding and preventing success-induced burnout, I devote a chapter to why women are better equipped to handle the pressure in the executive suite than men, and how they do so. To boil it down to a word, it’s *vulnerability*. For myriad reasons (linked to identifying with care-giving mothers), women—with no loss of stature in the eyes of well-adjusted people—readily reveal a soft-underbelly when wounded.

Male executives, on the other hand, still adhere to a *Mad Men* era mode of handling job pressure: I am not referring to being sexist but, rather, falling-back on a psychically out-of-date *machismo* if and when they blunder. In my experience, a male executive tends to believe that manifesting strength under fire, along with signs of intestinal fortitude and a never-say-die attitude, are better ways of weathering criticism than by throwing himself at the mercy of the public. I’m here to tell you: Nothing could be further from the truth. If you’ve messed up, offering an immediate “mea culpa” is the best option you have for making things right and saving your job.

For example, in April 1985, Roberto C. Goizueta, the late CEO of Coca Cola, launched an initiative that nearly trashed his otherwise stellar career: He changed the formula of industry-leader Coca-Cola and replaced it with “New Coke.” The reaction was swift and uniform. The only variability was the level of the contempt directed at him: extreme to unprintable.

Most men in Goizueta’s position would have fought the feedback by doubling-down: Increased marketing budgets and an escalation of commitment to the new recipe and failed business plan. Not this brilliant executive. Instead of acting like a *macho Latino* Goizueta immediately issued an apology for acting as he did, reversed his plan, and returned the company’s original formula, dubbed *Classic Coke*, to store shelves. While “New Coke” wasn’t called from stores, Goizueta let it die without a single life-saving gesture. In the months that followed this fiasco, Coke’s market share not only recovered, it grew beyond what it was when New Coke was released.

**Five Benefits in Admitting Weakness**

Children believe in superheroes; adults know that heroic men and women have feet of clay. Yet for some reason, only a handful of leaders remember this when confronted by the need to work their way out of trouble.

Most often they regress to primitive (childish) modes of thinking aimed at convincing others and themselves that they can still do it all.

Those who evince vulnerability benefit from several psychological truths:

1. **People hate to have their intelligence insulted.** The old saw, “Cheat me once; shame on you. Cheat me twice; shame on me,” has stood the test of time. People can accept being conned, but not stupid. Because there was no way anyone could put a favorable spin on the reaction *New Coke* elicited, trying to do so would have only added insult to injury. You gain public support by a show of respect. As an executive, you also gain the buy-in of the folks you need to move your business forward when you ask them, implicitly, “Can we restrict the implications of this disaster and move forward?”

2. **People give sacrifices to deities but have dinner with effective leaders.** Of all the forms of “management by walking-around” I know of, the most effective occurs outside the office. Southwest airlines CEO Herb Kelleher patented this form of gaining employee allegiance and improving morale: He would play with his people, not have them pray to him. You cannot do this, however, unless you show your employees that you are human. What better way to do so than to embody the principle, “To err is human?”

3. **Asserting you are bulletproof smacks of hubris.** When Lou Gerstner, Jr. left RJR Nabisco to save IBM by becoming its CEO, his first remarks to senior executives included the admission that he was more technophobe than technophile. No matter, he went on to add, since he claimed to know how to run a business.

By saying, “I can’t do it all” and, “I need your help,” Gerstner got the buy-in he desperately needed to completely turn around the fortunes of a once-proud company that, when he joined it, was on life support.

4. **The “blame game” is despicable and doomed to failure.** If you ask people when JFK was most popular, the overwhelming majority will say that it was after he was assassinated. Not so: It was after the botched Bay of Pigs invasion. Why? Kennedy showed true strength of character by blaming none of his advisors or strategists for the fiasco (as he legitimately could have), but, instead, shouldered all of the responsibility for this shameful invasion.

People who externalize blame are always revealed to be weak—like bad carpenters blaming their tools—and not worthy of respect. The leader that prevails is the one who says, “I struck-out but will have other ‘at bats’ to show you my ability.”

5. **If you assume 100 percent of the blame for an errant act, you take the wind out of potential critics’ sails.** This is the big benefit of confessing to messing up. It is a subtle maneuver known only to experts in the art of strategic self-presentation: Having already stated the worst case—“I blew it”—what can a detractor say? “Oh, um, Steve’s correct (and very insightful); he blew it?” That don’t cut it, since no one looking to shoot you down will admit to anything positive about you.

**Bottom line:** Even if your goal is to merely neuter potential critics, man-up and act like women do: Be vulnerable and don’t externalize blame, no matter how much it pains you to do so.

Dr. Steven Berglas is a Leadership Coach and author of *Reclaiming the Fire* and The Success Syndrome. Email drb@berglas.com or visit www.berglas.com.

**ACTION: Don’t externalize blame.**
Superstar Talent
Can’t live with or without them.

by Steven Berglas

My career has been devoted to studying the effects that success has on those who achieve it, and serving now as a leadership coach, to those who can’t handle its problematic consequences. In the 30 years I’ve devoted to these endeavors, I never met a person who was universally acknowledged to be Talent (with a capital T)—for example, Derek Jeter (sports); Wynton Marsalis (music); and Richard Branson (business)—who wasn’t worth his (or her) weight in gold to whatever organization he or she was affiliated with. Make that platinum.

While my perspective is shared by many CEOs who move mountains to acquire great Talent, some question its validity: “Give me folks with good character rather than talent any day,” they say. This knock on Talent is often undeserved, because no authentic Talent, A Player, or Superstar, morphs, over time, into the character-disordered megalomaniacs that give Talent a bad name. Those folks—Prima Donnas—are not Talent. Once you learn the difference, the problematic aspects of working with Superstars are diminished.

Talent is born, not bred. Prima Donnas, on the other hand are “bred” by being damaged at such an early age that it appears as if they are born to achieve and aggravate simultaneously. They are not. As far as the field of psychiatry can tell, Prima Donnas are kids possessed of one or more rare attributes that as a result of a major trauma or traumas become the basis of compulsive achievement-seeking strategies.

Often a Prima Donna is born when a dad berates his young son for what he deems to be substandard performances. Vowing to never again suffer the verbal excoriations his forebear meted-out, Junior works night and day to excel. The good news is that he often attains his goal (Those reared by hypercritical fathers who can’t excel often end-up in jail.) However, the psychic toll Junior pays to prevent getting verbally eviscerated never goes away. These kids overcompensate so drastically to ward-off their father’s punishment that they become a psychological Humpty Dumpty: Demanding, self-centered, narcissistic, pains-in-the-butt (achievers you can’t live with), “Talent is God given. Be humble. Fame is man-given. Be grateful. Conceit is self-given. Be careful,” said John Wooden.

Talent. In my lexicon, Talent are people who possess exceptional attributes. They are Franchise Players that sports teams pay tens-of-millions-of-dollars a year to employ. Operationally, Talent are the elite members of the group single-out by the Pareto Principle—the 80/20 Rule—as getting results. They are the top echelon of the 20 percent, seen as responsible for 80 percent of a company’s favorable results.

In business parlance (thanks to Jack Welch’s recognition of their worth), Talent are often called A Players. Welch says of them: “The A’s are the people who energize not only themselves, but everyone who comes into contact with them. They make business productive and fun at the same time.” Simply put, A Players have a synergistic effect—one reason why you can’t live without them.

Prima Donnas. The reason why most people believe that Talent often imposes intolerable burdens on team efforts is because they can easily be mistaken for Prima Donnas. Early in their careers, both Talent and Prima Donnas deliver the goods with no ill effects on those around them. Before too long, however, Prima Donnas reveal their true colors. These folks are insecure over-achievers who see life as one zero-sum game after another, with everyone in their environment posing a threat and representing a potential obstacle to their coveted achievement.

Before their insecurities dominate their life, Prima Donna can put points on the board. But, since a pathological need to achieve is the engine driving their train—not the joy that comes with doing well that motivates Talent—the moment Prima Donnas cross one goal line, they start searching for a new one. Often, the goals they choose are at variance with those their teammates (and bosses) have set, but they could care less. They are compelled to look good, and damn anyone who gets in their way.

The compulsion that drives Prima Donnas to look good is the fear that if they don’t succeed constantly, aspects of their self-image that should remain hidden—a negativity, born of their history—will be seen by the world, which will then reject them. This compulsion to prevail makes Prima Donnas look like Talent striving for achievement, but this is not the case. Prima Donnas often get results similar to those obtained by Talent but at a price: When they succeed they are driven to cause others pain, while demanding to be extolled for their achievements and value.

Three Discriminative Tests

Since both Talent and Prima Donnas are quick starters, deliver stellar results early in their careers, and are indefatigable in their pursuit of success, it is hard to differentiate the folks guaranteed to give you headaches from those who will be a rising tide lifting all ships. Moreover, by the time Prima Donnas show their true colors, the damage they cause can be considerable. For this reason—and to amass the resources that you need to keep Talent satisfied (they are not inexpensive), you must learn to discriminate between these two sets of high scorers:

Test 1: Know them by what they want.
The easiest way to differentiate Talent from Prima Donnas is by what it takes to satisfy them. Talent, although often quirky, strives to succeed for the joy of succeeding. Prima Donnas seek both tangible rewards for doing well and public acclaim. Talent is often shy, eschewing spotlights for quiet time after a job well done. Prima Donnas can’t just know they did well; they must have an audience! Since their maladaptive drive was born to keep critics at bay, the compensation they develop is not complete unless potential critics (everyone) is told that they are Stars. Warren Buffet—The Oracle of Omaha—appears in public infrequently. Donald Trump, a man drawn to interpersonal conflicts, has his own Reality TV show.

Test 2: Know them by their influence on others. Apart from humility and a passion to actually be the best—not merely be perceived as the best—Talent will demand the best from those around

[Image 44x614 to 102x686]
ANGER

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Stay in touch, and don’t isolate.”

Once you get to your highest level, you have to be unselfish: Stay reachable, and seek social support to improve a win/win situation. Without these support systems, you risk becoming a Prima Donna yourself, or have him axed. It is quite another to have a scapegoat-in-waiting should a scenario not go as expected. Leadership Excellence February 2011

Test 3: Know them by how they demand to be spoiled. Aristotle observed, “No great genius has existed without some touch of madness.” All Talent is quirky, at best, and obtuse, at worst. However, Prima Donnas are downright upsetting, refusing to make their wishes known in benign ways. Recall Cal Ripken, Jr., formerly of the Baltimore Orioles, who surpassed Lou Gehrig’s record for consecutive games played. In private, Cal was anything but accessible and humble. To keep in peak condition, he received special accommodations: He traveled apart from the team; he slept in a private room; he had personal trainers. While these were costly and not in keeping with There is no “I” in team, Ripken created a win/win: He provided record attendance, and he achieved greatness with out stepping on anyone to do so.

Years ago, I worked for a legal consulting firm and was hired to coach “problem partners,” all Prima Donnas with a propensity to berate, belittle, and abuse their associates. Why? To have a scapegoat-in-waiting should a case of theirs not go as expected.

Talent eschews the blame-game: Yes, they refuse to perform unless all knives around them are sharp, because they want to achieve cutting-edge outcomes that enable them to show that they are the sharpest blade in the bunch.

Once you can differentiate Talent from Prima Donnas, you need to reward Talent in ways that inoculate them against attempts to poach them while massaging their egos. The only way to do this is with heart-to-heart conversation, a prospect that is intimidating to managers.

Michael Jordan describes what Talent must do to function as A Players, not Prima Donnas: “To be successful you have to be selfish, or else you never achieve. Once you get to your highest level, you have to be unselfish: Stay reachable, stay in touch, and don’t isolate.”


ACTION: Learn to live with top talent.

MANAGEMENT ANGER

Anger Mismanagement

Avoid excessive political correctness.

by Steven Berglas

Even leaders who are safely tenured can suddenly find their careers derailed by an inability to deal with anger. All leaders must recognize those situations and contexts when being politically correct (PC) is self-destructive. This seems counter-intuitive in a nation like ours—obsessed with PC and the suppression of hostile, aggressive, words or deeds—yet if leaders always swallow their anger, failing to give voice to negative feelings or inhibiting actions with the potential to hurt others, they do so at their peril.

Michael S. Dukakis, twice governor of Massachusetts and once favorite in the 1988 campaign for president, may be best known for why he lost that race to Bush. Known to be soft regarding the punishment of criminals—despite seeing his brother killed in a hit-and-run car accident and his father beaten in a robbery—Dukakis allowed a convicted murderer to participate in a weekend parole program. On his first weekend of freedom following a sentence of life without parole, one murderer Dukakis allowed to go free, the infamous Willie Horton, committed assault, armed robbery, and rape.

In a debate, moderator Bernard Shaw asked Dukakis, “Governor, if Kitty (your wife) were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?” Dukakis’ answer, the one seen as costing him the election, was, “No, I would not; I’ve opposed the death penalty all my life.”

Most Americans are opposed to the death penalty but are more vehemently opposed to the failing manifest by Dukakis—the inability to express appropriate anger such as, “I would not make the state execute my wife’s murder—instead, I would kill him.”

Recently, many politicians, including Barak Obama, have been caught making hostile remarks when unaware they were speaking to open microphones. Yet surprisingly, few, if any, of those exposed as harboring hostile feelings suffered. Why? Because being PC is like observing the speed limit: We comply with the law only when we fear getting caught. When cops are absent, we flout the rule.

In a private tête-à-tête, people often say, “This is totally un-PC” before being critical of some person or group who has violated our standards of conduct or ethics. This is common for one reason: Feeling contempt for those who violate our standards and laws is not only a natural reaction—it’s a healthy one.

In October 2010, while discussing his reactions to 9/11 with Bill O’Reilly, Juan Williams said that when he is in an airport and sees people in “Muslim garb” boarding a plane, it makes him uncomfortable. As a result, Williams was fired by NPR. But most people share Williams’ view. This is not Islamophobia, but, rather, a learned association to the trauma of 9/11.

Benefits of Being Unabashed

When a CEO is conducting a performance review with his COO, this is a time when unabashed candor, PC-compliant or not, is absolutely appropriate. People need unvarnished, direct, no-holds-barred feedback from CEOs; if they don’t get it, they resent, or possibly develop contempt for the CEO. Everyone loathes ambiguity.

Ambiguity, although it may seem like a benign annoyance, is an intolerable emotional state to endure when the consequences of Windex-clear feedback really matters. Absent the whole truth, people reflexively fill informational voids with “worst case scenarios” in order to be prepared to cope with the situation.

If your physician performs several blood tests, and you hear nothing back for weeks, assuming all is well may buoy your mood, but soon you’ll be plagued by fantasies of every illness that may account for the fatigue. This is a hard-wired reaction: Our minds force us to be on the ready-to-fight illn

Deadly PC Sins

Well-entrenched, well-respected CEOs are often loath to give negative feedback to direct reports owing, among other reasons, to a sense of loyalty and
noblesse oblige: They feel blessed to be where they are, and empathize with how they assume those who receive negative feedback will react. This attitude is beneficial if “tempering bad news” is the result. It is destructive if suppressing bad news is the tactic CEOs take. This latter, ill-considered response, occurs most often when:

• The leader wants the protégé he is grooming to be his successor to thrive, and fears that a rebuke will derail him. Unfortunately, boilerplate encouragement is dissonant to any heir to a corner office worth occupying it—that person values critical feedback from his boss the same way a golfer with an 18 handicap welcomes advice from a golf pro.

• The leader operates from the perspective that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. This may be true for flies, but not future leaders. Any junior executive (JE) who knows he’s on shaky ground—as all JEs who merit negative performance reviews do—wants feedback about just how shaky that ground is. When his boss doesn’t tell him the truth, the JE will assume that the feedback being withheld is so bad his boss is avoiding a discussion of it until the time comes for him to be axed.

• The leader believes that in a PC culture, being known as hostile or aggressive has negative long-term consequences, such as not being invited to sit on boards. Hence, the leader adopts a he’ll grow out of it or wait-and-see attitude toward reprimanding direct reports. However, these postures only serve to arouse ambiguity and, ultimately, contempt for the leader.

• The leader fears an open and candid discussion of performance. This fear is unfounded, since most JEs know what their performance reviews should be before they receive them. Rather than being devastated by negative reviews, most are relieved to discuss them openly with their boss. Once Junior hears that he must shape up and start achieving desired results—and will not be fired but has another six months to show what he can do—he is relieved and can start making amends.

Absent an un-PC feedback session, the state of ambiguity he’d be forced to endure makes Dante’s inferno seem like a Caribbean resort.

My views on the expression of anger are neither new nor unique. Aristotle noted, “Anyone can become angry—that is easy; but to be angry with the right person at the right time, and for the right purpose and in the right way—that is not within everyone’s power, and that’s not easy.”

Follow Three Guidelines

I suggest three guidelines:

• Before being angry with an employee, map out the issue you wish to discuss to rule-out extraneous influences. It is said that success has many fathers while failure is an orphan. Before you critique the father of a failure, make certain you can intelligently discuss if or how other parties or agencies may contribute to the problem. This precludes the that’s not fair defense, and makes criticism seem constructive.

By showing empathy and sharing a subordinate’s view, you seem aligned with him. Absent this full appraisal, you are seen as a pompous ass breaking his chops.

• When possible, condemn behaviors—not the person. Duffers don’t want to hear, “You suck at golf,” but welcome, “you’ll drop your handicap by five strokes when you stop chomping your club.” If you know that it is correct to feel angry with a subordinate whose execution skills are A+ but who is an interpersonal 800-pound gorilla on LSD, take care to get angry about the fact that a phenomenal talent may be destroyed by his out-of-control temper (or anger mismanagement).

If you segregate a problem, or restrict your anger at poor performance to a manageable issue versus a global deficiency, most people are relieved, and can then focus on what they must do now to remedy it.

• Honesty is the best policy. Confiding in a person or taking him into your confidences builds his self-esteem and trust in you. One CEO I coached had me shadow a performance review he gave to his chosen successor—a young man he loved like a son. This heir was brilliant but abrasive, and the CEO told him so. He excoriated his protégé for at least six aspects of his demeanor that alienated people. After he was done and asked his protégé for comments, the JE said nothing—he just hugged his boss.

En route to mastering the ability to express anger appropriately, remember the words of Winston Churchill: “Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the body—it calls attention to an unhealthy state.”


ACTION: Observe these three guidelines.

About the Author

Dr. Steven Berglas is an executive coach and management consultant who spent over 30 years on the faculty of Harvard Medical School’s Department of Psychiatry. Dr. Berglas’ seminal views on executive coaching—drawn from his research and practice—appear in June 2002 edition of Harvard Business Review. In his executive coaching, Dr. Berglas draws upon his expertise in behavioral- and psycho-dynamic psychiatry to design interventions that are uniquely suited to foster the success of C-suite executives at risk for career burnout, malaise, or self-defeating behaviors.

His New Book

Dr. Berglas’ newest book, Icarus In The Executive Suite: Why Leaders Fail; What You Can Do About It, brings together the findings and insights he has amassed from over 30 years spent studying the causes and cures of self-destructive behavior, and his work as a therapist and coach for scores of senior executives and CEOs.

Dr. Berglas’ work is unique, and readily differentiated from trait-based theories of why leaders fail (such as “his greed drove him over the cliff . . .”). As Berglas demonstrates in Icarus In The Executive Suite, attributing the self-immolation of leaders to a unitary trait is often wrongheaded and almost always as useless as name-calling. Dr. Berglas’ approach to understanding, preventing, and treating executive failure is 180 degrees removed from this approach.

Rather than blaming bad character, Berglas examines the role that the untoward, unforeseen consequences of success—status-generated hubris, paradoxical loss of personal control, social isolation, and unremitting performance pressure—play in driving leaders to cope with these demands heaped upon them in maladaptive ways.

Proof of the efficacy of Dr. Berglas’ stressed-based model of why leaders self-destruct abounds, but the most interesting example is his “letter” to President Clinton (actually, an Op Ed piece) two years before Monica Lewinsky became a household word.

Berglas warned Clinton that serving as a lame duck would be inordinately stressful for him, and doubtless prompt him to act-out in self-defeating ways. The rest, as they say, is history.

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