

EGO CAN UNDERMINE LEADERSHIP ASPIRATIONS AND COMPANY SUCCESS

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When asked to name the three biggest problems standing in the way of outstanding leadership, one president of a successful global organization answered: "Ego, ego and ego." Ego, popularly conceived as an over-inflated sense of self-importance, is a major stumbling block to effective leadership. It is rare to find an organization without at least one person so completely ego-driven, blindly confident and lacking in realistic self-awareness, that he causes a vortex of negativity from which few people escape unscathed.

Take the case of a person we'll call George. He was brought in from a sister company to fill a director's role in a mid-sized sales and marketing organization, a position that provides significant decision-making power in all areas of the business. George has some strong ideas and asks vital questions about measurement, accountability and processes that come from his perspective and experience. However, his emphasis on getting results, no matter what the cost, runs counter to the existing culture where people and relationships weigh in equally. George is a bully acting in tyrannical ways toward everyone, including the president. He's right and everyone else is wrong (and incompetent). The white knight, he believes, has arrived to save the day.

George's ego wreaks havoc throughout an organization that is committed to leadership learning as one of the means to achieve key business results. His unrelenting need to impose his ideas creates animosity, divisiveness and increased turnover. He doesn't understand leadership and it shows. Few people trust him or his motives, nor does he listen or engage others in making decisions. The other tragedy is that people dismiss George's valid and important ideas along with him.

All it takes is one giant ego, one director who thinks he's "the chosen one," to put an organization in turmoil, struggling to maintain its culture and live its values.

George is not alone. The higher up in organizations you go, the bigger the egos grow. The drop in critical feedback makes it tougher to foster realistic self-awareness. The top dog gets insulated. One author refers to this as "CEO disease." Society also maintains significant pressure for leaders to be gods: perfect, charismatic and sweeping us all up in the dream of a certain and stable future.

In fact, the Georges of the world are not the only culprits when it comes to a false sense of self-importance. Everyone could stand to look in the mirror.

A recent *Psychology Today* issue states that "perhaps the biggest bias in people's perceptions of themselves involves their penchant for overestimating their own positive qualities." Researchers found that people tend to judge themselves above average on virtually every dimension tested, including maturity, job performance, intelligence and ethical behaviour.



So, while George is a blatant example, ego wears various disguises. The less obvious example is of the individual who appears overly humble, perhaps even insecure. Such a person constantly asks for advice and input before making decisions or taking any significant action.

"Do you think I can do this? What should I say? I'm just not sure ... what would you do?" Everything is still all about *me*. The under-inflated ego not only cripples the ability to take a stand and move independently in a chosen direction, but also insists on all attention focusing on itself.

Both over-inflated and under-inflated egos get in the way of leadership. A leader needs a healthy sense of self-confidence that enables independence and interdependence. In today's complex and rapidly changing world, no one person can have all the answers and everyone must be willing to step up and speak the truth, contributing something to create new possibilities.

Tips for organizations:

- ❑ Get a handle on the egomaniacs before they do too much damage.
- ❑ Look at what behaviours are rewarded, both formally and informally. Does the organization promote those who best promote themselves? Evaluate succession planning processes to ensure they create conditions for the best leaders to advance, not just those who tell you what you want to hear.
- ❑ Every organization needs maverick ideas - regardless of your position, get over yourself, speak up and then let it go.
- ❑ Watch for the leadership shadow - how in check is your own ego? Create ways to continue getting the feedback you need for an accurate sense of yourself.

This column is written by Kris Laroche for the "Leadership Lessons by Dr Rosie Steeves" column in BIV. Kris and Rosie can be reached at info@refineryleadership.com.