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The Alpha Leader In Turbulent Times

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Forceful 'alpha' types are good at overcoming obstacles to get things done: perfect in a recession, you would have thought. But tough times can also bring out the ugly side of their dominant personalities, writes Kate Lanz, executive director of leadership coaching specialist Sandler Lanz.

In particular, alphas face three traps in the current economic crisis.

The first is the confidence trap. Part of the alpha make up is supreme confidence, or at least the ability to project the appearance of it. The flip side is that alpha leaders often struggle to admit to their fears and vulnerabilities. As a result they can find it difficult to reach out and ask for help or make connections and build relationships. Under deep stress the tendency is to want to look like they have everything under control.

The second big pitfall is the competition trap. Alpha leaders are programmed to compete. When the external wins are not

forthcoming this competitive energy can be targeted within the organisation. Subtle rivalries can build up as the emotional high of winning is achieved internally rather than externally. This is dangerous territory, with board relationships being particularly vulnerable.

The final trap is alpha's need to control others. Pushed too far, this tendency to insist on 'my way or the highway' can seriously limit the ability to get the best out of people.

Take the managing partner of a small venture capital firm who fell into all three traps during the last few months. He did not build relationships with key players in the investment businesses. Initially confident that he could add value alone he did not reach out. He jostled with colleagues and told people how things should be done. When it came to driving through changes in the investment companies he found he did not have a real voice. Frustrated, he started to throw his weight about, creating even more resistance. Finally, he was asked to step down from the partner group, his position untenable.

Alpha leaders at their best can provide exactly what is needed psychologically and emotionally to lead through a crisis: straight talking, fast but considered action, and real inspiration (the alpha's self-belief is contagious). However, they often fall down when it comes to empathy. The emotionally intelligent Alpha can stay in touch with the emotional temperature at the same time as being brutally honest about the reality.

In growing companies the alpha's role is even more important than in a larger corporate: in fact, it can make the crucial difference between failure and survival.