



**Sandler Lanz**

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## Are you an Alpha female?

As a leading executive coach, **Kate Lanz** brings to her practice more than 12 years of international corporate experience as well as 11 years experience as an executive coach. She talks to Law and More about the role of Alpha women in the workplace and their impact on fellow female colleagues...

Women are responsible for a surprising **80%** of bullying in the workplace says a study by Manchester Institute of Science and Technology. Women are also being accused of reinforcing the glass ceiling. There is a view that the few that do make it to the top are actively preventing the promotion of their female colleagues. So are women really to blame for the lack of female leaders and for bullying?

My experience is to the contrary. As an executive coach to senior leaders, in 20 years I have rarely come across a woman who has knowingly blocked the progression of other women. However, occasionally senior Alpha women can suffer from a lack of confidence which, when combined with total perfectionism, presents itself as derailing and dominating behaviour and in the worst case bullying. When you take a closer look at what lies behind this, there is almost always a positive desire to deliver a great job and a genuine ignorance of the disruptive impact.

One woman I worked with had a terrible track record for upsetting her staff and many had resigned. She was seen in the organisation as a total nightmare to work with and was nearly fired. No one internally had addressed her behaviour so she came in to coaching to try and dissect her actions. When confronted by solid evidence she was horrified as she was oblivious to the internal damage she had caused.

During our sessions, we found that what she wanted to achieve was her absolute best and was striving for perfection. She is a classic Alpha personality who wants to win, never let anyone down and is strongly driven by her own internal critical voice. She is a lovely

person but in the heat of the moment she could come across as impatient and belittling. We worked on some strategies to help her cope and understand the impact of her behaviour. She went back into the organisation and apologised to her colleagues.

Is she someone who would support the progression of other women? You bet. She is actively supportive and is very keen to be a positive role model for other women coming through the organisation.

Does this mean that Alpha personalities, both male and female, are not 'at cause' in disruptive behaviour in the workplace? Not at all. In fact, the current economic climate is actually causing some specific negative dynamics to emerge. There are three common, what I term, 'Alpha Traps'<sup>TM</sup>.

The first is the Confidence Trap. Part of the Alpha make-up is supreme confidence, or at least the appearance of it. Alphas often struggle to admit their fears and vulnerabilities. As a result they find it difficult to reach out, ask for help or build mutually supportive relationships. Under severe stress, they want more than ever to look like they confidently have everything under control.

The second pitfall is the Competition Trap. Alphas are programmed to compete. When the external wins are not forthcoming, this competitive energy can get directed internally into the organisation. Subtle but insidious rivalries build up as the high from winning comes by scoring points off peers. This is dangerous territory and is happening a lot right now with Board or senior partners relationships particularly vulnerable.

My Way or the Highway, the final trap, is also increasingly visible. Alphas love control. Pushed too far, this tendency seriously limits their capacity to get the best from their people.

It is easy to criticise and condemn behaviour of senior leaders, both male and female. Spotting the Alpha traps and managing their behaviour takes enormous self-awareness and honesty, which is sometimes not forthcoming.

If their behaviour is unacceptable it does need to be addressed by the person on the receiving end in the moment. Be assertive and make it clear how their behaviour has been interpreted and what the impact has been. If it is difficult to address there and then, perhaps the incident occurred in front of other people, follow up with the individual as soon as possible afterwards.

The clue is to be firmly assertive but not aggressive. Use 'I' language and avoid blame. Whilst there might be an initial flare-up, in the main people are usually relieved that someone has spoken up to them. You can then work with them on what is acceptable behaviour. Alpha or dominant females are usually very open to addressing their own issues and accepting that their behaviour is

out of order.

Alphas at their best can provide exactly what is needed psychologically and emotionally to lead through a crisis.

- Firstly, swift but carefully judged action. Operating at pace is easy for the Alpha and being decisive comes naturally.
- Secondly, straight talking - being honest about the difficulties and telling it like it is.
- Thirdly, staying emotionally connected to their people. Alphas can find it hard to show how much they care but those who have built their emotional intelligence can stay in tune with how others are feeling.
- Finally, providing inspiration. The Alpha's energy and self-belief is contagious. This galvanises others and builds confidence in the face of difficult circumstances.

### **About Kate Lanz**



As a leading executive coach, Kate Lanz brings to her practice more than 12 years of international corporate experience as well as 11 years experience as an executive coach. Kate has an impressive track record in working with business leaders to achieve high impact behavioural change.

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