

# Leadership Run Amok: The Destructive Potential of Overachievers

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*"If you believe too many executives think, 'It's all about me,' you're right: Research shows that an ethos celebrating individual achievement has been shoving aside other motivations, such as the drive to empower people, that are essential for successful leadership."*

## Achievement Motivation

Businesses have benefited from a steady increase in achievement motivation exhibited by managers: Productivity has risen, and innovation, as measured by the number of patents issued per year, has soared. Achievement motivation is characterized by relentlessly focusing on task and goals—at the expense of relationship and employee engagement. Although achievement-oriented behavior can reap short-term benefits, there is a dark side that undercuts long-term employee morale, trust and confidence in management. Eventually, productivity and profits are eroded. Indicators of high achievement include economic growth, innovation, cheating, and cutting corners.

*"Overachievers tend to command and coerce rather than coach and collaborate, thus stifling [direct reports]. They take frequent shortcuts and forget to communicate crucial information, and they may be oblivious to the concerns of others. Their teams' performance begins to suffer, and they risk missing the very goals that initially triggered the achievement-oriented behavior."*

## Social Motivation

David McClelland, the late Harvard psychologist, studied motivation and identified three different social motives: achievement, affiliation, and power.

- ⦿ Achievement—meeting and exceeding a standard of excellence or improving personal performance
- ⦿ Affiliation—maintaining close personal relationships
- ⦿ Power—being strong and influencing others; comes in two forms
  - Personalized Power—leader draws strength from controlling others and making them weak
  - Socialized Power—leader's strength comes from empowering others

*"Studies show that great charismatic leaders are highly motivated by socialized power; personalized power is often associated with the exploitation of [direct reports]."*

All three motives are present to some extent in everyone. Effective leaders operate over a range of motivations and use a variety of leadership styles of coach and empower employees.

## Six Styles of Leadership

- ⦿ Directive—using strong, coercive behavior to get work done through others
- ⦿ Visionary—using communication and clarity to set clear goals and expectations
- ⦿ Affiliative—emphasizes harmony and relationships
- ⦿ Participative—emphasizes collaboration and democratic decision making
- ⦿ Pacesetter—characterized by personal heroics
- ⦿ Coaching—focuses on long-term development and mentoring of others

*“The most effective leaders are adept at all six leadership styles and use each when appropriate. Typically, however, a manager defaults to the styles he or she is most comfortable using, a preference that reflects the persona’ dominant motive combined with the level of pressure in the workplace. People motivated mainly by achievement tend to favor pacesetting in low-pressure situations but to become directive when the pressure is on.”*

*“People high in socialized power, by contrast, naturally gravitate to coaching in low-stress situations and become visionary under pressure.”*

## Workplace Climate

The authors looked at how motives and leadership style affect a group’s climate and performance by studying 21 managers at IBM. Eleven managers created climates that were perceived by their direct reports as strong and energizing. The balance created climates that were reported as neutral or demotivating. In just one year, the teams with energizing climates generated \$70 million more in revenue than the balance.

*“The leaders who created ...energizing climates got more lasting results by using a broad range of styles, choosing different styles for different circumstances. They were strong in visionary, affiliative, participative, and coaching styles, relying least on the directive and pacesetting approaches.”*

## Six Factors Affecting Workplace Climate

- ⊙ Flexibility—reflects employees’ perceptions about whether rules are procedures are really needed, or just red tape
- ⊙ Responsibility—degree to which people feel free to work without asking for permission or guidance
- ⊙ Standards—degree to which people perceive that their company emphasizes excellence—bar set at a high, but attainable mark
- ⊙ Rewards—reflection of whether people feel they receive regular, objective feedback
- ⊙ Clarity—whether people know what is expected of them and understand how their efforts relate to organizational goals
- ⊙ Team Commitment—amount of pride people feel to belong to a team or organization and believe that everyone is working toward the same objectives

## Changing the Culture

*“Some companies unabashedly create cultures that foster and reward the achievement-at-all-costs mentality. Most organizations are less calculating; they simply select and promote high achievers for their obvious assets, let nature take its course, and then look the other way as long as the numbers are good.”*

Companies can redirect the behavior of leaders and build energizing climates. IBM did this by incorporating the desired behaviors into a competency model that was used to select, develop, and promote leaders over a span of eight years. Although high achievement drive is a source of strength for most companies, they must learn when to draw on it and when to rein it in. The challenge is to seek an approach to leadership that uses socialized power to keep achievement in check.

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