



# Wolf of 'Brick-Wall' Street

## *How Egos are Hounding the Workplace*

By Rebecca Thair – April 2014

I imagine that by now, the majority of the corporate world will have seen Leo's latest flick – that is if you could fight your way through the crowds of eager bankers – and will have seen this charismatic leader, telling the classic tale of the underdog who came from nothing to riches and fortune, with a few prostitutes and tossing dwarves along the way of course. On seeing this egotistical, arrogant businessman, I started to draw comparisons to the real-world managers and executives (obviously not to such extreme and exaggerated levels) and considered how egos affect a business and its successes.

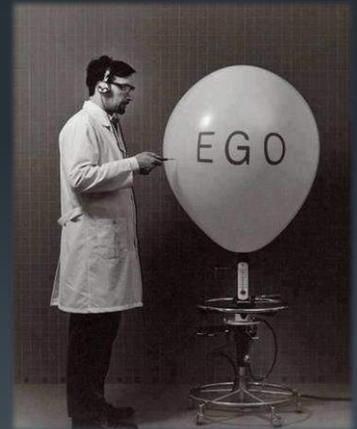
Who doesn't know of the stereotypical, narcissistic exec in real life? The ruthless nature, enigmatic personality, ability to improvise on the spot (also known by some as 'bullshitting') and extreme drive for success have meant he has risen above those who have sunk with dampened spirits, who chose flight over fight. People are drawn to the energy exuding from him, dazzling clients and managing to manipulate conversations and situations to his favour.

A business needs unrelenting leaders who have such strong self-belief that they will devote everything to their work. Their positive energy flows through the company, inspiring others at all levels and encouraging the workforce to have a clear drive, vision and determination of what they want to achieve. Their confidence permeates through fellow employees, to clients. Regardless of whether they do occasionally 'bullshit', this authority and power created, leads the company towards success. Confidence in yourself breeds faith and trust in you from others. However, without the work delivered with quality to back his attitude up, this trust can easily be chipped away, with nothing behind the façade to support it.

He got into that position for a reason, but how long can he be supported by hot air? Whilst Leo's character in the film cared about his employees, or at least cared about keeping them happy and performing, plenty of businesses are letting their people constantly run into ever-growing brick-walls, built by egos, a lack of humility and a culture of avoiding the blame. The attitude of the 'lone-wolf' may get you to rise through the ranks, but a successful

business can be destroyed if its employees separate themselves from each other through self-imposed barriers. For a machine to work, all parts and cogs must function together; if you sectioned one off, the entire thing would cease to

work. In the same vein, people in business must consider the whole in the way they behave and communicate. The same self-belief which can lead a team to success can also tear it apart if it becomes a protective casing, preventing anyone from penetrating to the real person beneath the bravado.



Recent client work has led me to see firsthand just how difficult senior leaders find it to let down the curtain and be vulnerable, open and honest, even with their peers. The egos seemed to get in the way and prevent a group of extremely talented and passionate people from working efficiently to go beyond hitting targets, to truly delivering impressive results and over-performing. People were in the habit of 'passing the buck' and turning around criticism to reflect the negative spotlight onto someone else, with no one taking responsibility and acknowledging failures. The poor communication which was created by playing the blame game meant nothing could get resolved, dealt with, and moved on from. All that was bred was deepened resentment, mistrust and frustration.



Owning up to a fault can take a lot of courage, and be very difficult whilst in an intimidating group, to be the first one to take a step forward into the

spotlight. It can feel like being under attack, resulting in the retreat to defensiveness and hostility. In order to try and permeate through the defensive barriers they had imposed, it became apparent that creating an environment in which there was humbleness and vulnerability, shared equally by all, was perhaps the most effective option to begin. As an exercise, participants were encouraged to each admit a personal flaw or error made. The new atmosphere allowed for deeper trust, and started to break down the taboo of admitting to weaknesses. By putting everyone on an equal footing, the burden of the spotlight was shared and less menacing. This brought more honest communication, with the mindset that though they may be super-talented, no one is infallible – as even Jordan Belfort demonstrated.

Businesses thrive when a variety of people, opinions and skills come together, with effective communication between all parts to allow for innovation and the enhancement of each other's skills through collaboration. No business is supported by one man, but one man can put a spanner in the works and disrupt the entire company. Regardless of individual input, we all must consider the whole and the effect we have on it. A workplace where people can feel comfortable with acknowledging mistakes, in order for them to be resolved and learnt from, is the only way for a business to develop and chase after the elusive full potential.

Don't get me wrong, there is value in the charismatic, cocky, extrovert leader, but the important thing is to maintain balance. Showing some vulnerability doesn't equate to an outpouring of every small mistake or wrong decision; it is about understanding the right moments when putting your hands up and admitting an error is a positive and necessary step in resolving a lingering issue. When the balance of honesty and confidence is achieved, a team finds themselves empowered by a trustworthy and respected leader, who is both inspirational and human.

Having confidence, even arrogance in some cases, in business can be a positive thing, enabling people to be inspired and feel like they can achieve anything with a really strong drive. However it must be kept in check so as not to isolate team-members, or create a lack of communication and thus productivity when the ego prevents acknowledgement of basic errors. You will find that too many egos in a room, unflinching in their stance, will cause the business to hit a brick wall and the working results become limited. Leaders may argue that they are functioning just fine as they are; of course, why wouldn't they be with such a strong and



impenetrable ego in check? How would they know the difference? A team, even one that seems to be doing well, can never become fully aware of its potential until it drops the barriers and takes a good look in the mirror. It might not be pretty, it may have cracks and all, but it is much more real; when we are real with ourselves we can become more authentic in our work and admit that we are not invincible after all, and that's perfectly human. Having that slice of humble pie every now and again may be bitter on the tongue, but it will settle the stomach.