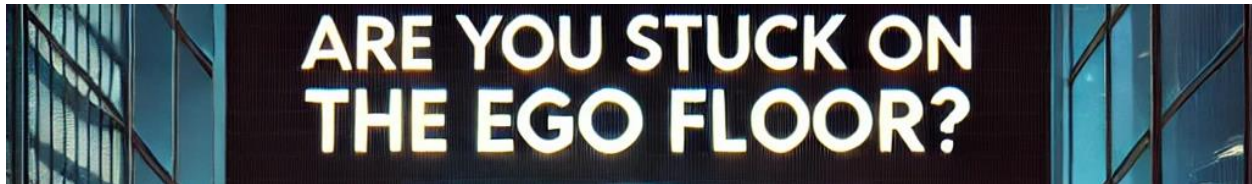


# Are You Stuck on the Ego Floor?

by: Howard M. Guttman

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There are some people who are pathologically egocentric. No matter what you do, they will always have an excessive need to be in control, to assert themselves at the expense of others, and to be the center of attention. For example, I recently worked with the president of a financial services company who always had to be center stage. The members of his team were highly competent and experienced, but he refused to accept their advice or listen to their points of view. Worse yet, he often took credit for their accomplishments or berated them in front of clients when they dared to disagree with him. Not surprisingly, his narcissistic behavior began to rankle clients, who one by one began moving to other companies.

Ego—the term itself evokes both condemnation and praise. The dictionary defines it as both an “exaggerated sense of self importance, conceit” and “appropriate pride in oneself, self- esteem.” It’s helpful to think of the sense of self, or ego, on a continuum: on one extreme are individuals whose low self-esteem keeps them from asserting themselves, expressing their point of view, and making decisions. With little or no confidence in their ability to do the right thing, they avoid doing anything. On the other extreme are those who think so highly of themselves and their judgment that they see no need to ever involve others in their decision making or planning. They act—and direct others to act—without ever asking for additional input.

High-performance leaders fall directly in the center of the ego continuum: They have confidence in their own ability, but they recognize the fact that others can also make valuable contributions. They have no problem sharing authority and empowering others to make decisions. They know that they can choose to relinquish control and, if necessary, get it back.

They come from a place of strength and conviction. Egocentric leaders, on the other hand, come from a place of fear: the fear of losing control and never getting it back.

Conscious, evolved leaders recognize that working horizontally is the best way to increase the probability of their being successful. They have the Emotional Intelligence to understand the importance of enrolling rather directing those they lead.

Unfortunately, some leaders who score high on I.Q. tests would fail miserably if you measured their Emotional Intelligence. They are so self-involved and so concerned with their own image that they fail to see how their egocentric behavior limits the results they are able to achieve through others. In my coaching and alignment work with senior executives, one of my roles is to raise the consciousness of leaders whose “elevator is stuck at the ego floor,” preventing them and their team from ascending to a higher level of performance. I am not a psychologist, however; my job is to help my clients become aware of how their ego is getting in the way, not why.



Interestingly, I have never coached an executive who said, “I have an ego problem.”

Most executives who fall into this category are aware that they don't feel good about where they are, that they have a hard time letting go of control and delegating, that it is hard for them to acknowledge others' contributions. But they haven't made the connection between their unhealthy ego and their unsatisfactory performance. Getting them to see it starts with identifying the behaviors that are impeding performance, then probing why they are engaging in these behaviors. Are they conscious that they are choosing them? What is the price they are paying? It isn't until they become fully aware of the "balance sheet"—the benefits versus the costs of indulging their ego—that they can begin to make changes.

The ultimate goal: a leader who wants his or her team to be made up not of followers, but of other leaders. The difference between a true high-performance leader and one who is ego driven was quite apparent to me recently, when I heard about the way several teams in one of our client organizations made presentations to its Board. One team leader, who had not embraced the high-performing-team model, presented his group's plan for the upcoming year. He put on a one-man show: taking the floor, presenting the plan, and fielding questions. It was a dazzling performance, but it left the board wondering how any team could withstand the onslaughts of such a supercharged ego.

Another leader, whose team had gone through an alignment and was operating horizontally, shared the stage. Each player presented the portion of the plan that related to his or her function and, as the subject-matter expert, provided in-depth responses to questions that the leader wasn't nearly as well prepared to answer. And they got rave reviews from the Board.

One leader was stuck on the ego floor. The other rode right past it. Think about your own leadership: What would your ride be like?