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Macho Management: What HR Professionals Should Watch For

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American management has never faced greater challenges than it faces today. Up against the current invasion of foreign products, U.S. firms must also cope with problems caused by our increasing national debt; the loss of jobs for American workers; our eroding technological edge in comparison to that of other countries; an increasing list of changes in markets, regulation, and tax laws; and the growing wave of mergers. Without doubt, our current and future competitors aren't inside our firm, down the street, or in another state; they are in countries that we hardly thought about just a few years ago. The nationally directed economies of many foreign countries are decimating both basic and sophisticated industries in America. The trade deficit is just the most visible sign of the ability of almost any nonwestern country to make almost anything we make—and to make it more cheaply and often with better quality.

Why doesn't American management do something about this? The answer, in large part, is the complex and well-entrenched myth of the "macho manager." Macho managers work hard to demonstrate to others in the organization that they are the ones who guide the organization's fate. Of course, not all managers are macho managers, but it takes only a handful in key places to put a company out of touch with reality and focus its energy on spreading the macho manager myth.

Macho managers are much more interested in polishing their reputation than they are in saving American industry. In fact, warding off threats from other departments or blemishing a competing colleague's macho image is a far higher priority than taking creative risks to ensure the life of the company. Macho managers practice image shaping: If it helps build a macho image, do it! Specifically, macho managers behave in three distinct ways: (1) they nurture their particular image, (2) they practice many debilitating strategies, and (3) they blurt out the "right" slogans—slogans designed to stymie any objective arguments.

The authors take a close look at the motives and behavior of the "macho manager"—the manager more interested in individual power than in organizational strategies and goals.



To become more competitive in the face of foreign competition, U.S. firms must ensure that their managers' top priority is the success of the organization. Human resources managers, then, will want to develop a good understanding of what the macho manager's goals are and how the achievement of those goals may work against the firm's best interests.

The Macho Manager Image

Five elements make up the macho manager image. First, macho managers appear to be in charge: in charge of the world, in charge of the organization, in charge of the job, and in charge of themselves. They seem to make the world, the business, and the department run. Macho managers run when they could walk, stand when they could sit, and work when they could relax. They



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tilt forward when they run, they scowl when they listen, and they wave their arms when they talk. They never let another person finish a sentence because they anticipate the comment and the answer, finish the sentence in their mind, and dive headlong into their prepared rebuttal. Lesson number one for the macho manager is always to run when you can walk and never to listen when you can talk.

The second element in the macho manager image is a masochistic appearance. Macho managers are dead serious about life. To them, life is duty and hard work; life is never being satisfied, especially with oneself; life is sacrifice and achievement and never letting up; life is one constant war made up of battles with the competition, the government, unions, and so on. Macho managers must always be on the alert with sword

ready. Like Jesse James, they never sit with their backs to the window; like gunslingers, they always maneuver so that the sun is in their opponent's eyes. They suspect that everyone is out to get them, and they protect themselves at all times. They sleep with a gun under their pillow—or, in this case, an undated set of denial memos stashed in the top desk drawer. The macho manager's second lesson: No pain, no gain!

For the macho manager, "Be a man" is lesson number three. The very few women who become macho managers do so after rigorous training in speaking football-ese, telling dirty jokes, and swearing. Even these achievements never fully convince the macho manager that the macho woman is truly committed to the cause. It is, of course, the intrusion of women into the ranks of management that has caused some erosion of the image and effectiveness of the macho manager.

Macho managers draw their role models from super-masculine types. In times of crisis they quote liberally from Vince Lombardy, General George S. Patton, and John Wayne. Their models come from western films, war, and sports. They "shoot" from the hip, direct a marketing "campaign," and "maneuver" the company. For them, life is a battle, and to the victor goes the corner office. Coronaries are simple, acceptable casualties. Lesson four, then, is draw, fire, and score.

Finally, macho managers are stimulus junkies. They race through life high on a charge of electric sizzle. Sleep is for sissies; idle time is a wasted resource. When macho managers run out of real management work, they hustle home to get to the project in the basement, the Little League team, or the marathon bridge tournament. Time is to be spent, controlled, and manipulated; relaxation is impossible. Performance is the name of the game, and macho managers are only as good as their last performance. The macho manager learns early that targets don't have to be fully explained—they don't even have to make sense. Targets *do*, however, have to be hit hard and

without questioning. The final image lesson: Never call a time out!

Macho-Manager Strategies

The macho manager is a heat-seeking missile. He or she can feel the heat, sense pressure, and spot displeasure growing in superiors months in advance. This distant, early-warning system knows what's hot, what's not, and what to do about it. When any crisis occurs, the macho manager applies any of the following strategies.

1. *Convert all issues into black and white.* Gray doesn't exist; something is either good or bad, right or wrong, an expense item or an income item. The macho manager's illusion of strength depends on this simple expedient. Compartmentalizing circumstances into black and white means the macho manager doesn't have to spend time thinking about what is in between. Inappropriate absolutes are a key to appearing strong. For example, if I can dismiss all union actions as bad, then I don't have to think about the actions that are constructive.

2. *Act decisively.* Macho managers are never wishy-washy or at a loss for words—not even when they lack meaningful information. They always make a declaration, take a position, and leave no room for doubt. They use the “implicit favorite” decision model—choose, then analyze to find support for your choice.

3. *Take the heat.* Macho managers brush off the concern of others and allow themselves no indulgences. When in the most pain, they say something witty like “It only hurts when I laugh” or “Lord, don't lighten my load, broaden my shoulders!”

4. *Never err.* Macho managers appear never to make mistakes. For them, the only mistake is to admit a mistake. The macho manager creatively converts mistakes into enlightened policy.

5. *Push yourself to the limit.* Macho managers exasperate others with their tolerance for self-punishment. Stoic, selfless, and pain-seeking, macho managers work extremely long hours,

travel on their own time as a matter of personal choice, and plan routes through the lion's den whenever possible. They never do things the easy way. The macho manager collects thorns and displays scars proudly.

6. *Be aggressive.* It is never enough for macho managers to work on a problem; they must devastate it. In the organizational equivalent of a "scorched earth" policy, they must assault the area, stir great plumes of smoke and dust, and move the mountain into the valley. Real solutions are secondary to establishing the real issue, namely who is in charge.

7. *Demonstrate unshakable loyalty.* The price of admission to the macho manager's ranks includes unquestioning loyalty: If the boss wants it, the boss gets it. During a corporate crisis, the loyal macho manager is frequently called in and told to ax a dozen or so loyal and long-service people, only to be called in once again and axed himself (or herself). The macho manager is not shaken by this; it goes with both the job and the macho manager role.

8. *Never say "no" or "can't" to "power people."* Since even a macho manager can't do the impossible, he or she sorts out work by finding innumerable ways *not* to do something without actually saying he or she can't do it. For example, if an executive should ask about the status of a long overdue request, the seasoned macho manager will adroitly shift the blame to someone else or use this as documentation for an earlier proposal for a larger staff.

9. *Be in perpetual motion.* The macho manager knows that if you keep moving fast enough, you can stay ahead of anyone. By the time that unfortunate individual finds out you don't know what you're doing, it's too late—you've moved on, out, or up!

10. *Don't emote.* No pain, personal or organizational, is so great as to force a whimper of emotion from the truly strong macho manager. Tears are for the weak; displays of affection and caring are for the afflicted. There is one critical excep-

tion: Explosions of anger are permitted periodically as part of the long-term plan to instill fear in employees and staff departments.

11. *Exude superiority.* Simple emotional control is not enough. In the face of organizational chaos, the macho manager wears a smirk or a smile and is able to convert all tragedy into an "I told you so." A macho manager encourages others to think that only he or she has God-given insight.

12. *Intimidate others happily.* Macho managers have, use, and enjoy power. They see "power" as a zero-sum situation: There is just so much to go around, and if they use theirs, others are left without it. Macho managers believe that others need and want to be led, governed, and shown how to act correctly; to those who think otherwise, swift and sure punishment will be meted out. The macho manager's personal development plan involves ridiculing employees with a long list of "gotchas" at review time.

The Macho Manager's Cliche Catalog

The macho manager's life clearly consists of an endless stream of events requiring intimate involvement. Since macho managers seek mostly to contain and control, not to create or constructively solve, they have a tradition-bound, spring-loaded, ready-made response system. To every crisis, to every call for inspired leadership, to every irrational demand from on high, the experienced macho manager applies one of the macho strategies explained above and lashes colleagues and workers with a trusted, time-honored slogan or cliché.

The macho manager "corollary" is that for every event, a truly fitting slogan should be pronounced. We have already used several classic macho manager clichés, but there are many other trite, blinding, side-tracking slogans in the macho manager's collection, including the following "dirty dozen":

1. *Profit is the name of the game.* Designed to chill the opposition, it carries as much weight as the Ten Commandments.

2. *If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.* Followed to its logical conclusion, this must mean "Let's all hang around and get burned together."

3. *It's the (short-run) bottom line that counts.* This is a *carte blanche* ticket to reward the "short-run ends justify the means" mentality. If the bottom line is all that counts, why has the company spent the last two months filling in all those other lines?

4. *I told you so!* If so, then where was the macho manager when the group discussed the problem? Why didn't he or she stand firm during deliberations? The truth is, the macho manager wasn't sure then, yet he or she wants the credit now. Macho managers have marvelous hindsight.

5. *No one said it would be easy.* Has such a mindless blip ever been preceded by someone saying, "Hey, this is easy"?

6. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* What the macho manager is really saying is, "You stick your neck out; mine's covered."

7. *We're all going to have to roll up our sleeves.* Rather unfitting for people in three-piece suits, short-sleeved shirts, or summer dresses.

8. *We're all going to have to try a little harder.* A not-so-subtle put-down of what everyone did yesterday or last week. Also, a glimpse at an ever-tightening future.

9. *When the going gets tough, the tough get going.* Ho-hum.

10. *We've got to bite the bullet.* Or the cannon ball, for important issues. The macho manager is saying, "This is really going to hurt, but no pain, no gain!"

11. *It goes with the territory.* An excellent squelch for an employee who is whining about having missed Christmas dinner because he was snowed-in in Akron.

12. *This is just a chip shot for your department.* Yeah, 180 yards onto an eight-inch green.

13. *Remember the Alamo.* This can have great surprise value, especially as a *coup de grace* to a previously rattled-off string of cliches.

Macho Managers: The Real Costs

Creating and sustaining a macho manager image requires a reliable intelligence network, intense concentration, and a full application of energies. It is a heavy, consuming, full-time lifestyle. It is reassuring for the macho manager when he or she sees so many successful executives thinking, acting, and talking the same way.

In light of the widespread presence of macho managers, it is no wonder that foreign competition, sagging quality, and slow reaction to shifts in technology receive only short-run responses and quick-fix treatment. Macho managers do try; they do care, but they care only about themselves. After years of image-polishing, macho managers really believe they are the indispensable instruments of any profit crusade. Their misdirection and diffusion of effort and attention unfortunately leave little concentrated power to tackle worldwide competitors.

As long as managers continue to confuse what is significant and primary for the company and themselves with what is less important, they will continue to respond to foreign competition by manufacturing quick, weak, and inappropriate counter-strategies. Human resources managers will want to ensure that such performance is no longer encouraged and rewarded. □

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