

Addendum Three — Alpha, Beta, and Theta Instincts Impact

Peace

Our Alpha and Beta instincts have a significant impact on our behaviors. Those instincts were not on my radar screen when I started the research and learning process that resulted in the intergroup instinct books. But I now understand that they affect what we do and how we think in a wide range of hierarchical settings.

We have very clear instincts to form hierarchies everywhere. We also have clear instincts to place ourselves in relative positions in the hierarchies we form, and to protect the relative position we each have. I did not know that those instincts existed and I now see them everywhere.

Each set of hierarchical instincts triggers its own thought processes, behaviors, and priorities.

The people at the top of each hierarchy tend to each have their own package of “Alpha” instincts activated. I learned about those alpha instincts and their impact on our intergroup interactions fairly early in the instinct delineation process.

What I didn’t discover until much later is that we also have what I now call Beta and Theta instincts — instincts that cause us to each protect

and defend our relative status in each hierarchy we form. Those instincts can also have a major impact on people's lives and can impact how groups of people interact with one another.

I have long found those sets of hierarchical level instincts to be both fascinating and useful to me at multiple levels. Serving for more than three decades as a CEO and working for a very long time in a number of settings where CEOs gather and interact — as well as working in a number of settings where various levels of governmental and community leaders function and interact — I have had relatively extensive interactions with people whose personal Alpha instincts have been activated and are fully functioning.

I have found that particular set of instincts to have a major impact on intergroup interactions in a number of situations and settings, because the people who have their Alpha instincts activated tend to believe in predictable and consistent ways.

This book — and its sister books — each have sections that discuss the Alpha instinct packages that are triggered when someone achieves alpha status in any given setting. Alpha instincts tend to be tied tightly to our turf instincts and to our win/lose packages of them-linked instincts.

It became obvious to me in the early 1990s that many of the instincts and behaviors that are activated by Alpha status tend to be directly relevant in most settings to any attempts to create intergroup interactions, intergroup collaboration, and intergroup Peace in that setting.

What I have observed in all of those settings was that people who are in Alpha roles tend to act in Alpha ways. It also became clear fairly early that many people who are not in Alpha roles aspire to Alpha status. Ambition to rise to higher levels is a widespread phenomenon. Many people aspire to be the leader of their relevant groups, organizations, or communities, and will work to achieve that status when the opportunities present themselves.

People compete in many settings for Alpha status, and for better or worse, many people measure their own success in life relative to their personal achievement of relative hierarchical status in their own settings.

Quite a few people, I have seen, are highly motivated to climb hierarchies — and many people to aspire to the top job in each hierarchy. I actually knew about the drive to be Alpha before I began studying instinctive behavior. Aspiring to hierarchical status as the lead person in a setting is an obvious role and goal for many people.

What I did not understand, however, before I began to study those heavily linked behaviors more carefully was that we not only have very powerful and relevant Alpha instincts — we also have very powerful and highly relevant Beta instincts and Theta instincts. We aspire both to top status and to relative status.

Betas expect to be number two in a setting. Betas, I have found, play a special role in any hierarchical settings. They tend to be the Chief Operating Officers in corporate settings, and the first mate in ship related settings.

Beta leaders tend to be personally loyal to their Alpha leaders. They often see themselves and function as an extension of the Alpha leaders' power and will.

People in Beta jobs tend to have a direct and linear chain of command relative to their Alpha leader.

People below the Beta level on a chain of command are not as defined by being an extension and direct supporter of their relevant Alpha, but people below that Beta level tend to place a very high priority on their own personal hierarchical status — their own relative Theta status.

I learned from both study and observation that relative status is actually extremely important to a very significant number of people, and it

often affects both personal and intergroup behaviors. Almost all people, I discovered, are directly highly motivated at a very instinctive level to guard and protect their own relative position on any hierarchy.

What I had missed entirely in my earlier understanding of instinctive hierarchical aspirations was the fact that it was not just Alpha and Beta status that triggered instinctive reactions, values, and behaviors. People tend to have a very powerful sense of whether their relative position on a hierarchy happens to be.

Even The Perception Of A Demotion Can Trigger Stress

People in settings know who to salute and people in settings know who they expect to salute them — and people will often fight hard — sometimes to the death — against any level of demotion from their current status.

Even the perception of a demotion can sometimes trigger high levels of stress. It can generate serious anger in people at a very visceral level.

That knowledge about the emotional impact of status changes on people can be useful to people who are managing and guiding people in any hierarchical setting.

That particular set of instinctive behaviors makes perfect sense, when we look at it. People get both security and power from their relative status. People will work hard to achieve relative status in any setting. People will trigger strong instinctive reactions against any real or perceived threats to that relative status.

It makes perfect logical sense to have defined hierarchical levels in many settings because almost all people in a hierarchy must, by definition, have a level lower than Alpha. Those are clear advantages in most hierarchical settings to be as far up the hierarchy as one can get.

Power and perquisites tend to flow from relative status as well as from having Alpha status — so having instincts to value and protect relative status makes functional sense.

Those Beta and Theta instincts both affect intergroup interactions in several ways.

Those Beta instincts can impact any attempts to create intergroup alliances, because we need to make sure that we both deal with the Alpha issues of the relevant senior leaders, and we need to be sure that the Beta-activated people in that setting do not fear or perceive a potential relative status loss from any intergroup alignment efforts.

The primary and most relevant instincts that we need to understand to create successful intergroup interactions are, however, the ones that are triggered by Alpha status. People in Alpha positions tend to have a particular and very predictable mind-set about the organization, community, or group that they lead.

I have met with many Alpha leaders. I have talked to mayors, presidents, and even kings. I met once with a deposed, in exile, Shah. That was a fascinating conversation.

I have talked to ministers of government from two-dozen countries and I have talked to the leaders of major trade unions and Fortune Fifty companies from several countries.

What I have seen is that clear Alpha behaviors, expectations, and values happen with great consistency everywhere.

Alpha Leaders Often Feel Accountable For The Groups They

Lead

What I have seen as a predictable pattern for basic Alpha status is that it generally triggers a strong sense in that person of being accountable for the group that the Alpha person leads.

It isn't always true, but my experience has been that most Alphas tend to be protective of their group and most Alphas also tend to be very protective of the turf that is claimed by their group.

That turf can be physical, political, or economic.

Alpha leaders protect their domain. If you want to get the attention of any Alpha person, simply threaten their turf. I have seen the potential loss of even market share can sometimes push a CEO into serious, and sometimes irrational, reaction processes. Alpha instincts and turf instincts often very strongly reinforce one another and people with Alpha status have a major focus on issues of relevant turf.

People with Alpha status expect to be obeyed in the context of their Alpha setting and role. Alpha leaders tend to be accorded deference and respect from their group. It can be very good for the personal morale and for the personal esteem levels of the Alpha person when deference and respect happen in the settings they lead.

Group Alpha instincts are generally triggered fairly easily when a person takes on that role in a group setting.

A very similar set of behaviors can be triggered by relative Alpha status in our family settings. In most cultures, there is a clear sense of who is

head of each family. Heads of families in traditional cultures are almost exclusively males.

In our own country, decades ago, legal forms used for the names of husbands and wives often had one line for head of family and another line for wife.

Families Need Protection To Survive

Cultures tended to designate men as head of families at least in part because cultures all needed their children to survive. Children need families in order for children to survive.

To keep men functioning in families, one of the rewards and benefits of staying with a family has traditionally been the designation and function of the man in the family to be the head of the family.

Men who functioned as Alpha for their families, received many of the same benefits and situational status rewards as the men who are Alpha for their clan, tribe, or nation.

Alpha Status Can Be Addictive

Alpha status can be pleasant. It can be so pleasant that it can even be addictive. That is an important fact of emotional life that we need to

understand and appreciate in order to understand some of the most dysfunctional Alpha behavior.

It can actually be extremely hard for a person to give up Alpha status in any group setting. People tend to feel pain, anger, and stress when Alpha transitions happen and people often suffer at several levels when that status goes away. Losing status at any level can be a painful and challenging experience and losing Alpha status can create its own level of misery and pain.

That was one of the things I actually learned directly, myself, at a very personal level in a couple of group settings. I felt a serious adjustment in deference levels personally for the first time when I went from being a very senior exec at a very large health insurer to being the first employee of a very tiny health plan back in my early 30s.

I had been a very senior Beta in the local community deference hierarchy, and that relative status went away when I left that job and began to run a very small company. That particular small plan ultimately became a large plan — but the shock of not being accorded my own prior level of community Senior Beta status in those initial days of the new small plan job was completely unexpected and more than a bit disconcerting.

That change of status makes great sense in retrospect. But at the time it was definitely unpleasant for me in the early days and months of that role transition process to be treated by a wide range of people very differently than I had been treated when I was in my prior position.

I had personally believed that the deference that people had been according me for several years was based on some inherent personal validity, and I had believed that there was some obvious and visible value in me as a person that created that level of deference from all of those people.

The Deference Was Linked To My Job

It turned out that the deference was actually just linked to my job. My very direct experience when I changed jobs was that a number of people who had accorded me Senior Beta status when I was in my prior lead job were clearly treating me with less direct respect and with less personal interest only months later when I no longer had that job.

I was in my early thirties. I was shocked, offended, and a bit hurt. When I asked people directly about their change in approach, a couple of honest people told me gently but explicitly that I no longer had the personal linkage to a position that still triggered their prior deferential behavior.

I regained a level of that status in a couple of years when my new job became a community leading organization — but I have never forgotten the shock, displeasure, and direct unhappiness of discovering the deference I was being paid earlier was actually directed to my hat and not to my head.

That seems like a relatively petty personal story to tell in this book, but the important point that I learned in that process is that when people have been at a senior hierarchical level, and when people have been treated accordingly — when that senior role ends and that deferential treatment changes — we can expect the former Alphas or former Senior Betas in any setting to be unhappy about the change, and to act in various ways to respond to that loss of status.

The Gavel Felt Like It Had Been Amputated

In a somewhat similar personal learning vein, when I finished my first term as the chair of our national health insurance trade association and when I handed the gavel over to the new chair of the Association at the transition meeting, it felt like that gavel had been amputated from me.

It was almost physically painful to hand him the gavel. It was painful to sit in the room next to the new chair; to watch the new chair run the meeting that I had been running for the past couple of years.

That feeling of pain was also entirely unexpected. It was a total surprise. It was not at all pleasant. I did not want to go to the next meeting of that board, even though I was still a senior officer of that board. That loss of Alpha status for that group hurt too much to be amusing for several weeks.

I recovered fully from that reaction once I came to grips with what my reaction actually was — and I was ultimately actually very much amused by my reaction — but I have had great respect ever since for how hard it is for many people to give up public office or to retire from their jobs as heads of organizations.

Leaving a high relative status in any setting can trigger withdrawal symptoms and some personal discomfort and even pain.

I later served again as chair of that same group and I turned over that same office two other times. I personally felt significantly less pain the next two times I turned over that same gavel to a new chair — but that was only because I knew after that surprising initial painful experience what the Alpha transition issues would be. My own personal expectations about my own reaction to each subsequent transition were then aligned with that reality.

So those future transitions were much easier. They still, however, were not easy. But they were much easier.

Turning over a CEO job in any setting can actually trigger the same set of instinctive issues. I also know that from personal experience. I have served more than three decades as a CEO, and I have now turned over the CEO job for companies I have led half-a-dozen times to a new CEO.

Even With Practice, CEO Change Can Be Hard

Even with practice and a clear expectation on my part about what that transfer of power process will feel like, turning over the CEO role can be a tough and at least slightly painful process to get through.

I have had the good fortune to make each of my own six CEO job transitions voluntarily. No one has fired me. I have also been able to make most of my CEO transitions to specific people I had helped prepare for the job.

So both of those facts definitely make the transition process easier. But even when it is easier, it is painful at an instinct-linked level to have a place and a team that I used to lead very directly being led by a new person and not by me.

It is much easier for me personally to do those kinds of transitions at this point in my life, because I know now what to expect. But even easier is still hard.

So I know from my own personal reaction to those changes why so many people in Alpha jobs resist any changes in their personal Alpha status so strongly.

I have been an observer of those kinds of transitions for many people — elected officials, union leaders, community leaders, and corporate leaders. I have seen a lot of Alpha transitions in a number of settings. I have seen many people go through real pain as those transitions happened.

Many of my friends have been in Alpha jobs in their organizations and have moved on from those jobs. I have had a fairly good sense at a personal level of their current feelings in several cases on those same issues when they have turned over their Alpha jobs to someone else who was the new Alpha for their old setting.

It clearly can be much harder to turn over the Alpha role when the loss of Alpha status is forced or involuntary or when the person who moves into year old Alpha job in is not aligned with what you have done as CEO in that setting. But I can tell you for a fact that even when the process is voluntary, and even when the transfer is a transfer to a worthy successor, I know from personal experience that there tend to be painful elements to those kinds of transition processes.

Many People In Ceo/Alpha Jobs Strongly Resist Change Of

Status

That experience in my own life of turning over those roles has helped me understand at a very basic level why some leaders in many settings will fight so hard to stay in power and why some leaders will sometimes do unfortunate, very negative, and basically dysfunctional things to keep from losing their own Alpha status.

I have been looking at those behavior patterns in many settings. Those patterns of painful Alpha transitions tend to be very similar in all of the settings.

One place where I have seen that pattern of resisting loss of Alpha status have an impact on settings repeatedly has been in national leaders in other countries who have gained power through overthrowing the local national leader in either coups or revolutions.

It is common for clearly reform-minded leaders, who deposed dictatorial governments in any setting and who replace evil tyrants in their countries, to fully intend on the day they took office to stay in power only through a time of needed revolutionary adjustment to a new civilian government. Those leaders believe that commitment to be true at the time

they make it — and then they discover once they have been in the job for a period of time, and once their own Alpha instincts are in full gear in that job, that they love the job and that the next set of national elections they promised the people really does not need to happen.

I have seen that behavior pattern for revolutionary leaders in several settings. Cuba gives us a nearby example. The pattern of revolutionary national leaders staying in power long past their initially declared terms of office is very clear and it is extremely consistent.

It is also clearly very instinctive.

I have seen a somewhat similar situations a number of times in corporate settings when there is an unexpected change in the top job in an organization, and a fill-in person is named to take the lead job on an acting basis as an interim leader while a new permanent leader is chosen.

The interim leaders who go into those “acting” jobs in corporate settings very consistently tend to say very honestly on the day they are appointed, that they don’t want the permanent job. Then after they do the lead job for a while, they discover that it can be very painful to give it up.

I have seen that pattern happen many times. It can be very painful for people to give up those “acting” positions. Alpha jobs can be addictive.

We are very blessed as a country by the fact that George Washington — our first President — was so grounded in his own personal self-worth that he gave up his office as President of our nation voluntarily after two terms, and did not set the precedent that he could easily have set of being President for life.

Very few national leaders in any country impose term limits on themselves. Pain at the loss of Alpha status is clearly an instinctive pain, and it tends to be triggered by having an Alpha position and then losing it. We seem to have a strong instinct to resist surrendering Alpha status whenever we get it.

Alpha Status For People Has Often Ended With Death

It is easy to see why our instincts trigger that package of responses. Look at historical realities and at Alpha roles for other species. At a primal functional level, losing Alpha status often turns out not a good thing for whoever loses it.

If we look at other settings where Alpha status exists and where Alpha changes happen — like lion prides or chimpanzee clans — the outgoing Alpha leader is often killed as well as deposed from the Alpha role.

Death is clearly a significant and relevant adverse outcome for a change in status from Alpha to non-Alpha. Our personal survival instincts are among our very highest-powered and most influential sets of feelings and behaviors.

Linking a sense of personal survival to our Alpha status and linking a sense of threat about death as well as a sense of loss about status change adds entire and powerful levels of energy to that process.

Lions are not unique in having death linked to the end of their Alpha status. For humans, the transition of power for Alpha leaders in many traditional cultures at the most senior level has actually also often been death.

Kings Also Tend To Be King Until They Die

Kings are almost always kings until they die. Kings can die naturally or they can be killed, but the Alpha status for kings usually ends only with death.

Likewise, chiefs are often hereditary positions with the chief, serving to death.

Even gang leaders who clearly hold Alpha status for their gangs tend to lead their gangs until they die.

So our Alpha instincts might very basically have a small fear of actual death built into the package and into the emotional tool kit as well.

My own level of appreciation and understanding for the lengths that people will go to maintain their personal Alpha status has been enhanced a bit by personally having held Alpha status, and having lost it in several settings and by looking at the history of Alpha leaders in multiple settings.

Overall, our hierarchical instincts affect the issues of intergroup Peace because Peace needs to be negotiated by our Alpha leaders or Peace will generally not be accepted as a legitimate agreement by the people it affects.

Alpha leaders tend to protect their people and protect turf — intergroup conflicts can have roots in both of those sets of behaviors.

Some Alpha leaders gain power and have an increase in support from their followers in terms of conflict. So leaders who seek more power sometimes trigger conflict in their settings to achieve that additional power.

People in Alpha jobs need to interact with other Alphas to create Peace. People in groups sometimes worry that their leader is being a traitor at some level, simply by creating the kinds of interpersonal relationships that can facilitate Peace.

Turf and power both create barriers to Peace. People at Theta levels feel better about Peace if their own relative status is either protected or enhanced by the Peace process.

So our hierarchical instincts are relevant to Peace at multiple levels — intergroup Peace that is created in any setting needs to take those instincts into account.