

1 **Vincent Gauthier, MA and Pierre Gauthier, Ph.D.**

2 **THE HIGHLY AGGRESSIVE LEADER**

3 Note: hereafter, the masculine designates both genders.

4 In our work as leadership consultant and psychotherapist we often come across leaders that are
5 highly aggressive with the people under their authority and other persons they encounter in their
6 work. While sometimes viewed as an asset for their organization, they often constitute a potent
7 source of stress for everyone around them. To gain some insights about their behavior and propose
8 strategies towards more functional relationships this article comprises three parts:

- 9 - Typical behavior of the highly aggressive leaders
10 - The making of a highly aggressive leader (HAL)
11 - Strategies of personal change for the HAL

12

13 **Typical Behavior of the Highly Aggressive Leaders**

14 HAL's are characterized by a style that seeks to control, compete, criticize and achieve impossible
15 performance standards. We are not referring here to leaders who have aggressive plans for their
16 units and their companies but leaders whose style involves almost constant aggression towards
17 others. The typically observable behaviors of the style are frequent demonstrations of anger and
18 irritability such as interrupting conversations, being abrupt and defensive, arguing, and engaging in
19 often physical demonstrations such as shouting and slamming one's fist on the table. In
20 conversations, highly aggressive leaders are focused on themselves, their arguments and winning the
21 day. They tend to be very poor listeners and are frequently not interested in others' opinions. These
22 leaders are almost always critical of people behind their backs and use competitive language when
23 talking about others within their own company. For example they will frequently say of others

- 24 • "They do not know what they are doing."
25 • "They are idiots and incompetents."
26 • "So and so is not to be trusted."
27 • "We must win, we are here to deliver results, and work is only about
28 delivering results."

29 Aggressive leaders will expect people to execute their orders and will be surprised and irritated when
30 people do not or when outputs are not to their exacting standards. Such leaders are often boastful
31 and have difficulty giving credit to the team. They very often lead from the front and have the
32 impression that they must pull the team to achieve results. In fact, they almost always complain
33 about the skills, competence, and ability of their own team.

34 Highly aggressive leaders will often describe themselves as high performers and will use a language
35 that they believe reflects top performance:

- 36 • “I always tell my team they need to perform.”
- 37 • “If people are not pushed, they do not perform.”
- 38 • “I have no tolerance for low performance.”
- 39 • “I have no time to listen to the problems of the team; we are here to get
- 40 things done.”

41
42 Also, such leaders often have “favorites” in their teams, and identify people as “winners” and
43 “losers”. They tend to micromanage the team and bark out orders. As such they usually do not ask
44 for suggestions, listen to, or show empathy for their team members.

45 Superiors to such highly aggressive leaders often consider them very favorably as hard workers
46 capable of getting the work done. Consequently, during the period when they are up and coming, the
47 aggressive leaders usually do well in corporate environment and enjoy rapid career progression. In
48 fact they very often enjoy spells of success determined in pure business results. Units or
49 departments may perform very well in terms of sales, profitability, market share gain and so on. The
50 issue really lies with what the aggressive leaders leave in their wake and what happens when they
51 quit the organization or move to another position.

52 They are almost always perceived very poorly by their teams and peers. Their relationships are
53 usually problematic and often end up making them feel isolated. Typically, very aggressive leaders
54 will have put in place loyal (and passive) followers who support their ascent on the organizational
55 ladder. From a unit performance perspective, the highly aggressive leaders create a number of
56 problems for themselves, their teams and ultimately the organization they work for.

57
58 The diagram in figure 1 illustrates the cycle that aggressive leaders create for their units and for
59 themselves.

60
61 Because they want to impress and often over estimate their capabilities, they will often take on too
62 much work. As a consequence of being in a hurry and being eager to get many things done, they will
63 tend to give orders without clearly outlining why a task or project is important, what needs to be
64 done, and how to do it (in case of a first time assignment). In a nutshell, expectations are very
65 typically unclear. Furthermore, tasks are often delegated with a great deal of pressure in terms of
66 timelines, quality of outputs, and the very frequent: “Don’t screw this up.”

67 The subordinates or the team will naturally feel the pressure coming from the boss and will work as
68 hard as they can to meet his expectations. In our experience, few subordinates purposely try to
69 deliver outputs of low standards, particularly when they know that the boss’s expectations are high.
70 However, since the expectations were not originally clarified, subordinates often struggle to deliver
71 exactly what the boss wants. Furthermore, the team led by an aggressive boss often works under
72 the double pressure of time and high expectations. Under such stress, people are prone to make
73 mistakes. When an outcome with mistakes is delivered to the highly aggressive leader, he very often
74 gets into a fit of rage as the work is now done without time to fix it. In those circumstances
75 subordinates get a double dose of negative feelings; first because they get no recognition for making
76 an effort to please the boss, and second because he is displeased with the results of their action.
77 This cycle of high expectations and high pressure, unclear expectations around assignments and,

78 ultimately, reprimand for not doing something correctly quickly leads to the establishment of an
79 atmosphere of fear in the workplace.

80 In turn an atmosphere of fear pushes teams towards covering up mistakes or blaming them on
81 others. Leaders then start spending more time on trying to find who committed an error, why it was
82 committed and so on. However, since fear pushes people to dissimulate, much time is needed to
83 find the cause of the problem, hence valuable time and energy gets wasted. Such finger pointing
84 also leads to recrimination and very soon cooperation and collaboration in the organization come to
85 suffer enormously. We once worked with a leader who proudly said that people did not hide
86 anything from her because they knew she would throw them out the window if they did (her office
87 was on the 22nd floor!). She did confess a bit later that she had to “interrogate” the team when
88 mistakes did occur as no one would dare volunteer the information.

89

90 An atmosphere of fear in the workplace also tends to make subordinates conspire together to lower
91 the group standard. Why would anyone do more than is necessary if the outcome of a task or
92 project will almost surely end up with the boss being angry or critical? Fear kills any kind of initiative
93 and creativity in the workplace. In such circumstances people tend to wait for orders. This drift
94 towards group mediocrity ensures no one looks especially bad, and spreads the wrath around so
95 each team member gets a bit. This in turn appeals to the group’s sense of belonging – they belong to
96 a group whose members look after each other. The problem is that the group does not include the
97 leader. Usually someone else, who can shield the team to some extent, becomes the informal
98 leader.

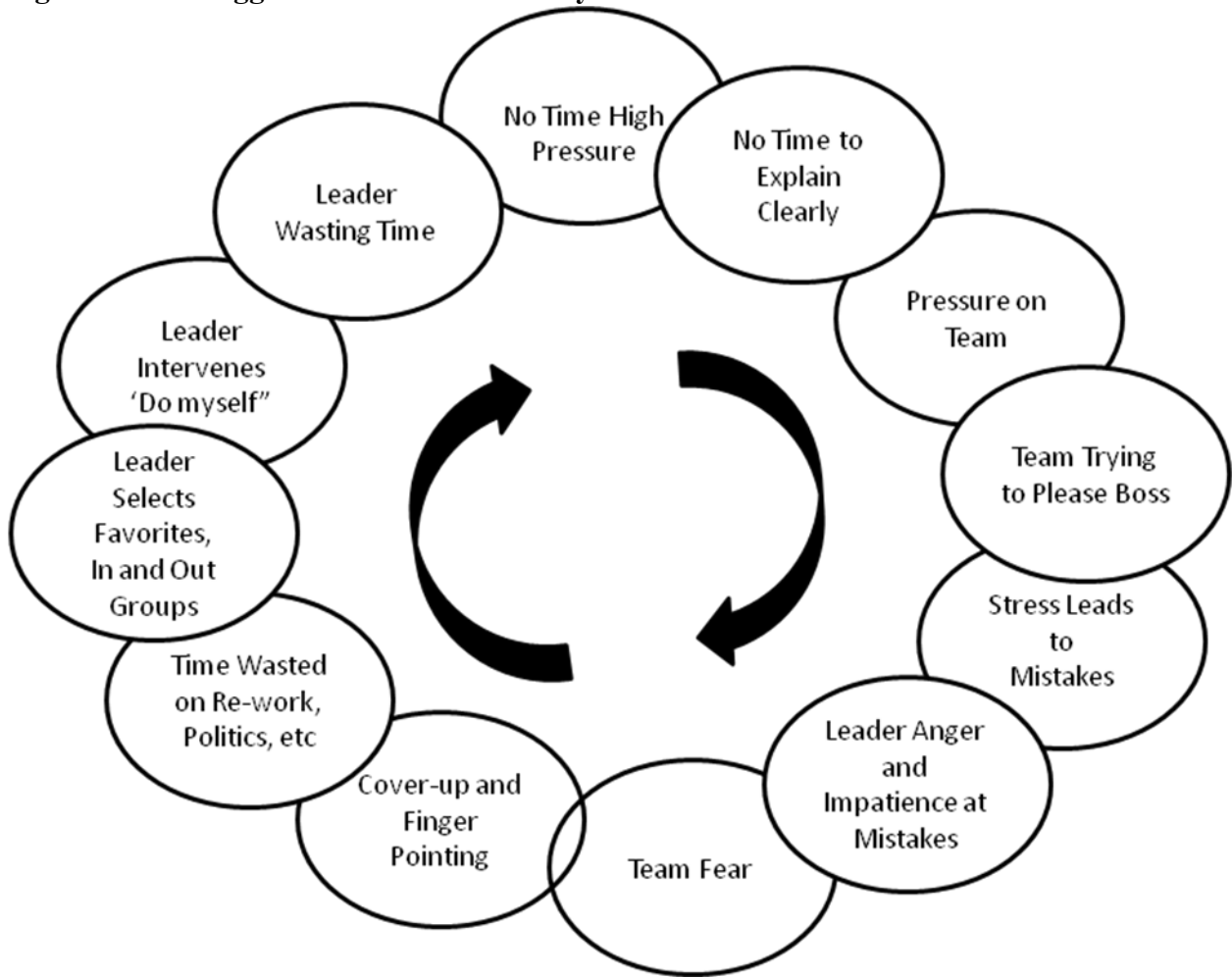
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100 The aggressive boss soon begins to believe that his team is indeed incompetent and starts taking on
101 more of the work himself or else it “does not get done.” Very often the boss also starts over-relying
102 on a few “loyal” people who can tolerate his attitude. These people become favorites, “the stars” at
103 the expense of the rest of the team. “The stars” take their cues from the boss’s leadership style and
104 reproduce it with their own subordinates thus further contributing to the creation of a culture of
105 fear. The creation of “in” and “out” groups also complicates team dynamics and collaboration suffers
106 further.

107

108 Finally the boss, unable to give all his work to a few trusted subordinates, ends up taking on more
109 and more tasks. This reduces his time to accomplish other more important undertakings, and he
110 starts multiplying the pressure. The aggressive leader is now under even more pressure himself,
111 takes even less time clarifying expectations and becomes more exasperated. Such a process gradually
112 becomes a negative cycle that may eventually destroy careers, departments and companies. Many
113 aggressive leaders have seen their career unexpectedly come to an end because they have
114 completely lost the trust, good will, and cooperation of their teams. In many cases, we have seen
115 subordinates actively campaign to see their leader fail.

116 **Figure 1 – The Aggressive Leader Work Cycle**



117

118 **The Making of a Highly Aggressive Leader**

119 It is important to understand the underpinnings of the very aggressive leader's attitude and behavior
120 here described. As we have previously mentioned, this type of leader creates problems for himself,
121 his subordinates, his clients, and his whole organization. To fully comprehend a behavior that does
122 not correspond to rational, functional considerations, one must go back to the very development of a
123 personality. To do so it is worthwhile to examine early phases of human development that exert
124 lasting influence on behavior.

125 **1. The beginnings of life, from conception to about 18 months after birth.**

126 During the period of pregnancy, the physical and psychological welfare of the mother is
127 important for her own development and the growth of her baby; the birth process and the
128 post natal period also exert a determining influence. All of this contributes to imprint within
129 the infant's central nervous system a basic pattern of trust or mistrust in his human
130 environment.¹

131 **2. From about 18 months to 3 years of age.**

132 As the infant matures, he or she ceases to be relatively docile. The age of "no" sets in,
133 whereby the child tries to affirm his own will. Any proposition is likely, at first, to obtain no

134 for an answer. And, as the child's muscle system becomes much stronger and better
135 coordinated, the age of exploration sets in. He wants to climb up and down stairs, reaches for
136 everything that attracts his attention, even that precious vase on the table. To cap all of that,
137 the 18 to 36 months period is the time where sons or daughters learn to control their
138 sphincters, to be "clean". No small feat for a toddler.

139 Here the parents' behavior may take diverse directions. The understanding, empathic
140 parents will recognize the child's efforts toward autonomous decisions and patiently
141 negotiate with him. His attempts to overcome physical challenges such as standing, walking,
142 running, climbing, rolling, doing somersaults will be encouraged, recognized, appreciated.
143 The difficult learning "to be clean" will meet with careful support based on recognition of
144 success and acceptance of failure. Thus the child will feel that his parents and the other
145 adults he regularly deals with are cooperative, "on his side". As a result, a conviction, the
146 foundation of self-confidence, will gradually imprint itself in his brain: "I am capable to
147 accomplish, I have the power to make decisions and carry them through."

148 At the other end of the spectrum, the parents may hold the belief that the child's role is to
149 obey rather than learn by doing. So any resistance, such as a resounding "no", will be met
150 with punishment, verbal or physical. Hence the child registers that his own will is practically
151 non-existent. Worse, he internalizes the conviction that his tendencies to decide for himself,
152 explore, try to do whatever is suggested to him by his immediate environment, that all of
153 this is bad. Since he does not have the mental capacity to establish nuances, he will
154 generalize his conviction to his whole being: "I am bad". In other words, inhabited by
155 unaccepted tendencies, I have basic defects, I am a bad person.²

156 This generates, deep down, a terrific protest in the form of anger that, at that age, cannot be
157 expressed in words. In adult life, this may manifest itself by relentless efforts to prove oneself
158 as superior to others in constantly responding to ever greater challenges, at great cost to self
159 and others. This compulsive need of superiority over others should not be confounded with
160 the innate need for achievement.

161 **3. 3 to 5 years of age**

162 Around the age of 3 a child discovers that he is a sexual being, as are all others around him.
163 At the same time he develops interest in the affective components of his relationships with
164 mom, dad and others of the household, and a keen curiosity for the emotional aspects of
165 links between all these people.

166 He expresses his loving feelings for those who are significant for him. Very often the little boy
167 shows great love for his mother or mother substitute, acting as a little lover. Similarly, the
168 little girl is "in love" with her father or father substitute, planning to marry him when she gets
169 older.

170 This signals that the child is becoming conscious of his own and others' feelings; he is
171 evolving towards the capacity to establish a relationship based on openness and reciprocity.
172 Both boy and girl want to behave in ways that will please their loved ones. Previously they
173 were very much self-centered, now they begin to understand how the others around them

174 feel internally. They are developing empathy (the ability to feel the emotional state of
175 someone else while remaining conscious of one's own affective climate).

176 **4. Early School Years (6 to 12)**

177 During that period the child gradually takes interest in learning in a systematic way. He or
178 she learns the procedures of reading, writing, calculating, doing "scientific" experiments and
179 so on. They also begin to learn how to act in a group situation, how to play games with
180 winners and losers, they start using defensive, offensive and mediation tactics of conflict
181 resolution. Expressive activities also allow them to explore their talents and present the fruits
182 of their creativity to others.

183 The flip side of this development is experienced by the child, male or female, who finds he is
184 repeatedly unsuccessful in learning activities. Or he may be adept at physical feats but get
185 poor results in academics. Then he will concentrate on his area of success, investing very
186 little in acquiring more attention demanding pursuits of knowledge. If he is unsuccessful in
187 practically all school related activities, he will develop hatred of anything connected with
188 systematic learning, including teachers, other youngsters who succeed and knowledge or
189 performance.

190 **5. Adolescence**

191 All this development greatly increases during adolescence, both cognitively and affectively.
192 From the emotional development point of view love for parental figures becomes more
193 realistic in the sense that "marriage plans" with a parent or sibling are renounced in favor of
194 romantic links with partners outside the family circle. It serves as a basis for taking initiative
195 in numerous domains, such as acquiring knowledge and a variety of skills used in the
196 occupational world.

197 When such evolution does not take place a sense of guilt about sexual tendencies and
198 inferiority in social relations is strongly felt, confirmed by failures in attempts to establish
199 intimate relationships with friends or potential love partners. In turn this provokes a retreat
200 into oneself accompanied by grandiose dreams of power, both in the socioeconomic and
201 romantic fields. In daily life, authentic rapport with others is replaced by formal politeness
202 and mock interest.

203 **The personality and behavior of the highly aggressive leader**

204 What is the relationship between the areas of personality development just described and the
205 behavior of a highly aggressive leader? Let us try to construct a schematic view of the personality
206 development of the highly aggressive leader during his formative years. In early infancy, he has
207 received enough care and attention to be protected from severe emotional defects but has not
208 experienced warm emotional bonding with at least one parental figure. Consequently he has not
209 internalized an experience of intimacy. When he reached the "age of no" (18 months to 3 years) his
210 attempts at opposing, affirming himself and "being the absolute boss" have been met either by very
211 aggressive reactions where he was totally dominated, or by a *laissez faire* attitude where he gained a
212 conviction that indeed he could impose himself on everyone. The result is an enduring dominant-

213 dominated pattern in his relationships to others: every encounter is lived as a test of who will
214 supersede whom.

215 At the age of 3 to 5, the dominant-dominated pattern was not replaced by rising consciousness of
216 others' feelings, the base of empathy. On the contrary, in this period of his life he may have learned
217 to dominate by manipulating others' feelings rather than be emotionally open. During school years
218 academic and sport activities were occasions for tough competition with others, with as little
219 cooperation as possible. The result was success in those activities, reinforcing the conviction that life
220 is a basically a contest to be won, with a tendency to despise "losers".

221 Adolescence brings the rush of hormonal waves and the resulting discovery of sexual desire, plus
222 some access to adult prerogatives, where revenue producing and romantic endeavors confirm the
223 dominant-dominated attitude. Again, at that age, our highly aggressive leader probably engaged in
224 great efforts to be part of the dominant club, to fight for grades, money and romantic partners as
225 trophies. So everything was in place for him or her to enter the workplace with great ambitions to
226 reach top positions. Hard work produced its rewards and top positions became a reality. He or she
227 has become a member of top management.

228 To further understand the inner dynamics of the highly aggressive leader, let us keep in mind that
229 personality development unfolds like biological growth in a spiral fashion, phase 1 serving as the
230 basis for phase 2. The second phase integrates new development arising from the one already
231 existing; it thus creates a basis for phase 3, where new elements will be acquired, synthesized with
232 the components of phases 1 and 2, and so on.

233 So let us imagine that, from conception to adulthood, an individual has gone through phases of
234 development that were mostly positive. The probability is great that such a person will become quite
235 adept in human relations and the other skills required to be a good leader. If he is given a post where
236 he exerts authority, he will tend to take at heart the objectives of his organization and work towards
237 attaining them. How? By being technically competent **and** by motivating his subordinates to also do
238 their best in the accomplishment of their jobs. He will combine goal attainment with care for the
239 personnel involved.

240 Here many people think of money as the great motivator. Of course it plays a crucial role. It is a
241 necessary factor of motivation but alone will not succeed in bringing people to be proactive,
242 cooperative and creative in their work. The other prime factor is the quality of human relationships
243 established in the work milieu. And in this domain the leader may exert a very positive influence or,
244 on the contrary, involuntarily hinder energy investment by people who work at his level or under his
245 authority. Furthermore, in any organization leadership style tends to ripple down from the top leader
246 to the various levels of authority under him. Mid-level managers will treat workers in their charge as
247 they themselves are dealt with by top management.

248 So a top leader has the potential to create in his organization a work atmosphere where the
249 individual worker feels part of a larger group. Then the worker

- 250 - feels a sense of belonging and solidarity
- 251 - pays attention to the quality of the products or services produced with his participation
- 252 - is considered as an individual with rights, competence, ideas, a sense of responsibility
- 253 - participates in a group oriented towards productivity and creativity

254 - willingly participates in the development of his organization.
255 What has just been described is called an ideal model. It cannot be found totally realized in a
256 given work milieu but serves as a guiding light for the whole organization, from top management
257 to first level workers.
258

259 The above mentioned outline can tell us how detrimental a very aggressive leader can be, for he
260 does little or nothing in the way of creating a motivating culture in the company. Why such blindness
261 and deafness to the basic elements required for building a constructive culture? Most probably
262 because the leader has developed a personality imbued with an attitude of mistrust and antagonism
263 to human contact, defining every encounter as a match to decide who will win, who will lose. If he
264 learned in his young years that the best defense is quick counterattack, this will be his reaction when
265 he feels in danger. Or he will retreat in sullen solitude, become unreachable. In other aspects of his
266 work he may have developed high competence. Also, during his phase of life where he was up and
267 coming, he may have learned to convert anger into positive action, thus earning praise by his
268 superiors and nomination to posts of responsibility. In almost literal terms he has fought his way to
269 the top.

270 But once at the top, problems start to accumulate for he lacks the social skills to motivate the people
271 in his organization. Not being able to really listen cuts him off vital information. His tendency to
272 counterattack or isolate when he feels in danger creates a social void around him: he gradually loses
273 the support of highly competent assistants with a sharp sense of their own value. They expect to be
274 treated in a considerate, cooperative manner. If this expectation is not met in day to day encounters
275 with their leader they find work elsewhere or, little by little, he replaces them with subservient
276 people who exert little or no creativity. His constant quest of dominance in every encounter turns
277 off lower level workers and their representatives so personnel morale tends to decline, resulting in
278 high absentee and turnover rates, accompanied by serious declines in productivity as workers,
279 consciously or not, tend to lower standards.

280 Faced with little support by incompetent but docile assistants, unable to motivate and keep
281 competent first line workers, the highly aggressive leader quickly faces bad business results. Under
282 even more pressure, he reverts to the only style he knows, one that has brought him "success" till
283 now; he becomes more aggressive and bullies those around him even more, thus perpetuating the
284 vicious cycle... Ultimately such leaders can bring massive organizations crashing down.

285 **Strategies of Personal Change for the HAL**

286 His greatest temptation is to look outside of himself for culprits to whom he can attribute the
287 decline. That will only aggravate the problem. A much more productive move is to "go inside", to
288 introspect. Is there something in my personality that puts me in trouble as a top leader? If so what
289 can I do to change that?

290 Hence the first move is internal, where the leader is not examining other persons' behavior but his
291 own, especially in the field of interpersonal relationships. The aggressive leader must recognize that
292 there is a problem and that he can become more effective by changing his style of leadership.
293 Without this self-awareness the leader will not change. Many companies have tried to dictate
294 behavioral change on aggressive leaders with very little success. The decision must be personal and
295 the leader must recognize that he is part of the problem. Very often this recognition can be

296 prompted by a number of circumstances: difficulties at home with spouse and children, a 360
297 feedback showing clearly that the leader has lost the cooperation of his peers and subordinates, or
298 repeated feedback from trusted advisors about problematic behaviors leading to negative results.

299 Once the leader has developed increased self-awareness, he may take time off work for a short
300 period, a few days or a few weeks, to retreat in a quiet, pleasant and secure place. There he reflects
301 on his whole life, past, present and future. This will allow him to contact memories of his past where
302 he has been emotionally deprived or abused, to examine his present situation, professional and
303 personal, and his near future. Such *facing within* can also take place without quitting the work scene,
304 by allowing oneself a few periods of undisturbed reflection during the day. In fact, experience shows
305 that effective leaders often take 5 or 10 minutes per day of undisturbed time to reflect on issues,
306 people, and events. This introspection may generate much anxiety, sometimes great anguish, but by
307 facing it the very aggressive leader will be able to consider the root causes of his difficulties with
308 subordinates or clients.

309 To push his search further he may seek the counsel of one or two persons (coaches,
310 psychotherapists) who have acquired competence in relationships with self and others. There is a
311 reason for such suggestions: if the leader is very aggressive, his attitude and behavior probably
312 developed during his formative years, by living in close contact with people who had not acquired
313 high quality communication skills, hence could not transmit them to him. He has not learned
314 adequate self-regulation and did not develop his potential for empathy, two skills that are
315 indispensable in managing and motivating people. Should he feel condemned to failure because of
316 this? Not in the least, for interpersonal competence may be acquired at any age, in active and regular
317 contact with chosen people who will provide him occasions to learn how to self-regulate his anger,
318 and how to develop authentic empathy. Two major questions to be examined by the aggressive
319 leader: what are the present and past sources of my aggressiveness, how to regulate it in the actual
320 situation? Many techniques and activities are effective to progress in self-regulation in the face of
321 attacks, real or perceived as such. The whole area of aggressiveness integration and expression while
322 maintaining emotional contact with the interlocutor(s) is here a major area of "work on self".

323 One successful coaching process involves the leader enlisting help and feedback from peers,
324 subordinates and bosses to coach him on the desired behavior. The leader must first recognize that
325 he needs to improve the quality of his relationships with others, highlight those areas with trusted
326 advisors and define with them how he prefers to be coached and monitored on improvements.³ It is
327 also important for the leader to understand his strengths and focus on developing them further. An
328 aggressive leader, for example, may have an exceptional ability to foresee the future of his company.
329 Such ability to create a vision should not be forgotten for the sake of focusing on shortcomings.
330 Shortcomings can be managed while qualities or strengths continue to develop.
331

332 However, few executive coaches have the training and experience required to deal with more
333 fundamental personality disorders. In such cases, the leader may seek the help of psychotherapists
334 or other professionals.

335 We are here at the junction of individual personality traits and organizational accomplishment. A
336 leader who is incompetent in human relationships may do limited damage to his organization if he is
337 at a low level of authority. But as he ascends the authority ladder, his shortcomings have more and
338 more influence on the fate of the organization he belongs to. Conversely, a relational leader centered

339 on goal attainment and authentic care for the personnel involved will lead his organization through a
340 durable series of achievements.

341 To communicate with the authors:

342 **Vincent Gauthier:** Director, Insight Leadership Inc. Tel: 514 927-7713 vincentgauthier@yahoo.com; Web:
343 www.insightleadership.com.hk

344 **Pierre Gauthier, Ph.D.:** Psychotherapy, training and organizational coaching.

345 Tel. : 514-288-3216 (Canada); pgauthier32@videotron.ca; Web : <http://pages.videotron.com/vltnxzla/>

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