

## Unshowy competence brings drawbacks as well as benefits

Dullness and its discontents



The charismatic corporate climber is a common target for resentment in office life. He—and research suggests men are particularly given to such narcissism—hogs the spotlight in meetings, is adept at grabbing undeserved glory, and is a pro at self-promotion. More often than not, he is the boss’s pet. But he rises on the back of another, unsung, corporate archetype: the competent, diligent but unexciting achiever.

Studies find that plenty of confident egomaniacs, unsuited to the subtleties of management, get a leg-up for being, well, confident egomaniacs. Companies disproportionately promote narcissists. Perhaps a fifth of chief executives fit the description, researchers have found, a far higher proportion than within the wider population. Self-absorbed ceos can sap morale and, evidence suggests, produce poor financial results.

A strong case for the dull striver was made by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, a psychologist at University College London, in an article for the Harvard Business Review in 2015 entitled “The best managers are boring managers”. Understated competence does not intuitively scream leadership. Many totemic bosses of the age, from bankers to tech founders, come with big egos, showy antics and volatile tempers. Elon Musk may be accused of many things. Dullness is not one of them. Even so, Mr Chamorro-Premuzic argued, conscientious but unprepossessing characters tend to have little-noticed but precious advantages. They can be depended on to make decisions calmly, manage teams deftly and be emotionally mature. They deserve promotion ahead of co-workers with “flash and vision, and bold displays of confidence”.

A seminal meta-analysis of research on leadership characteristics, published in 2002 by Timothy Judge, then at the University of Florida, and colleagues, indeed found a link between managerial effectiveness and personality traits such as being stable, agreeable and dependable. One explanation is that level-headedness makes it easier to deal coolly with the many subtle problems thrown up by human beings (who may all too easily infuriate a more volatile manager). Emotional maturity is also an indicator of trustworthiness. Studies have found that managers with dysfunctional traits such as narcissism are likelier to get up to no good. Conscientious bosses, by contrast, score highly for integrity.

The dull but diligent could be especially valuable now. As companies claim increasingly to prize soft skills, such as being able to communicate well with all sorts of people, emotionally intelligent workers ought to be in demand. A volatile business environment in which firms face problems from recession to climate change, pandemics and war, favours the steady leader.

Chief executives face tricky decisions about how much risk to

take in pursuit of growth, as shareholders look on nervously. Startup bosses who proudly moved fast and broke things are now falling over themselves to look demure. “We are a very boring company,” Oliver Merkel, head of Flink, a grocery-delivery startup, bragged to the Financial Times recently. The trend is visible in politics, too. Joe Biden in America and Rishi Sunak in Britain rose to their countries’ top jobs partly because their boring dependability promised relief from their predecessors’ noisy incompetence. Testing times call for cool heads.

For all that, quietly competent types hoping for greater appreciation (and remuneration) should not sit still. To rise up the ranks, the boring would do well to raise their profiles, whether by speaking up in meetings or talking up their accomplishments. If they bag bigger jobs they will anyway need to master show-offy things like glad-handing clients, chairing meetings and holding forth on strategy. Though Mr Judge’s analysis revealed emotional stability and general diligence were crucial to managerial effectiveness, extrovert qualities such as sociability were also telling factors.

Companies' penchant for promoting the wrong people is deeply ingrained, despite management theorists' admonitions. By default, many of those dishing out promotions are themselves narcissists who advanced by wowing their superiors. And showy sorts' shameless self-aggrandisement fulfils a convenient function for bosses, giving them a shortcut—no matter how misleading—to finding candidates for elevation. Many managers are too busy to patiently unearth genuine talent. After all, they have other important things on their plates—like impressing their own bosses.

## 不显山露水的能力带来的弊端和好处

### 沉闷和它的不满

在办公室生活中，富有魅力的企业攀比者是一个常见的怨恨目标。他--研究表明，男性特别喜欢这种自恋，在会议上抢夺聚光灯，善于抢夺不应有的荣誉，是自我推销的专家。更多时候，他是老板的宠物。但他是在另一个默默无闻的公司原型的支持下崛起的：有能力、勤奋但不激动的成就者。

研究发现，大量自信的自大狂，不适合管理的微妙之处，因为他们是自信的自大狂而得到提升。公司不成比例地提拔自恋者。研究人员发现，可能有五分之一的首席执行官符合这一描述，这一比例远远高于广大民众。自我陶醉的首席执行官会消磨士气，而且有证据表明会产生糟糕的财务结果。

伦敦大学学院的心理学家 Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic 在 2015 年为《哈佛商业评论》撰写的一篇题为 "最好的管理者是无聊的管理者" 的文章中，为沉闷的管理者提供了有力的证据。低调的能力并不能直观地喊出领导力。这个时代的许多图腾式的老板，从银行家到科技创始人，都有巨大的自我，炫耀的滑稽行为和不稳定的脾气。埃隆-马斯克可能被指责为许多事情。沉闷并不是其中之一。Chamorro-Premuzic 先生认为，即便如此，认真但不失风度的人物往往具有鲜为人知的宝贵优势。可以依靠他们冷静地做出决定，巧妙地管理团队，并在情感上保持成熟。他们应该比那些拥有 "闪光和远见，以及大胆展示自信" 的同事更早得到晋升。

2002 年，时任佛罗里达大学的蒂莫西-贾奇 (Timothy Judge) 及其同事发表了一份关于领导力特征研究的开创性荟萃分析报告，确实发现管理效率与稳定、合群和可靠等人格特征之间存在着联系。一种解释是，平和的心态使人更容易冷静地处理人类提出的许多微妙的问题 (他们可能很容易激怒一个更易怒的经理)。情绪的成熟度也是一个值得信赖的指标。研究发现，具有自恋等功能障碍特质的经理人更有可能胡作非为。相比之下，认真负责的老板在诚信方面得分很高。

沉闷但勤奋的人现在可能特别有价值。由于公司越来越重视软技能，例如能够与各种人进行良好的沟通，因此对有情感的工人应该有需求。在一个动荡的商业环境中，公司面临着从经济衰退到气候变化、大流行病和战争等问题，这有利于稳定的领导者。

首席执行官们面临着棘手的决定，即在股东们紧张的注视下，为追求增长而承担多大的风险。那些以快速行动和打破现状为荣的初创企业老板们，现在正努力让自己看起来很端庄。"我们是一家非常无聊的公司，"杂货配送初创公司 Flink 的负责人奥利弗-默克尔最近向《金融时报》吹嘘说。这种趋势在政界也很明显。美国的乔-拜登和英国的里希-苏纳克升任他们国家的最高职位，部分原因是他们枯燥的可靠性使他们摆脱了前任的嘈杂无能。测试的时代需要冷静的头脑。

尽管如此，希望得到更多赞赏（和报酬）的安静的能人不应该坐以待毙。要想升职，那些无聊的人最好提高自己的知名度，无论是在会议上发言还是谈论自己的成就。如果他们获得了更大的工作，他们将需要掌握炫耀性的东西，如与客户打招呼、主持会议和就战略问题发表意见。虽然 Judge 先生的分析显示，情绪稳定和一般的勤奋是管理效率的关键，但交际能力等外向型品质也是很重要的因素。

尽管有管理理论家的告诫，公司对提拔错误人员的偏好是根深蒂固的。默认情况下，许多负责晋升的人本身就是自恋者，他们通过让上级满意而获得晋升。炫耀型的人无耻的自我吹嘘为老板们提供了便利，给他们提供了一条捷径--无论多么具有误导性--来寻找升迁的候选人。许多经理人太忙了，无法耐心地发掘真正的人才。毕竟，他们还有其他重要的事情要做，比如给自己的老板留下好印象。

