**LEADERSHIP NARCOSIS™:** Symptoms and Solutions
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I use this useful metaphor of "nitrogen narcosis" from my Navy Diving and Explosive Ordnance Disposal experience to describe the adverse behavioral effects and disruptive organizational impact of **Leadership Narcosis™**. For those scuba divers who have taken the time to read this article, you know that nitrogen narcosis is a reversible alteration in consciousness producing a state similar to alcohol intoxication in divers at depth. It occurs to some small extent at any depth, but in most cases doesn't become noticeable until deeper diving depths, usually starting around 30 to 40 meters.

Due to its perception-altering effects, the onset of nitrogen narcosis may be hard to recognize, its severity is unpredictable, and in scuba diving, the resulting illogical behavior can be fatal. However, the cure for nitrogen narcosis is a simple one, as effects disappear within minutes upon ascending to shallower depths.

In diving, dangerous characteristics of nitrogen narcosis include the loss of decision-making ability, loss of focus, or impaired judgment. In the more extreme cases, some divers demonstrate a sense of invulnerability, extreme anxiety, exhilaration, giddiness, depression or even paranoia.

Regardless of the term used to describe the current and future marketplace (e.g., turbulence, unrelenting change, uncertainty, organizational compression, etc.) the fact is that the world around us is accelerating at an alarming pace. Without a focused effort on the identification of strengths and weaknesses followed by targeted and often preemptive developmental activities, some leaders are starting to show signs and symptoms similar to nitrogen narcosis that I refer to as **Leadership Narcosis™**.
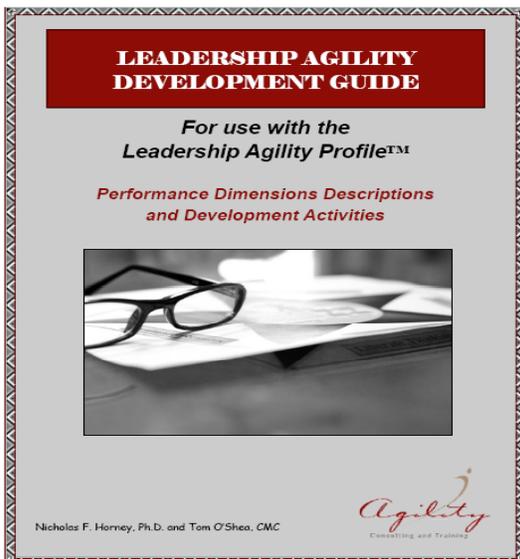
Our observations from research combined with our consulting experience reflect an increasingly alarming trend of senior C-level officers exhibiting characteristics of **Leadership Narcosis™**. A recent study by Kaplan and Minton (2006) reported that only 35% of CEOs in place in 1992 remained as CEO in 1997, while only 24% of CEOs in place in 1998 remained CEO in 2003.

Leadership assessment, development and coaching can help companies identify the risk and possible courses of action. In an effort to help identify and prevent the occurrence of

narcosis, many organizations are focusing on the development of strategic agility as a critical competency of leadership (e.g., Dell, ARAMARK, Genentech, Aflac and others).   One of the tools that has been introduced to help focus a company's initiatives and support executive coaching has been the Leadership Agility Profile - 360® (LAP).  A customized version of the LAP has been used by the American Management Association since 2006 in its Strategic Agility and Resilience Seminars offered throughout the U.S. and Canada.

## LEADERSHIP AGILITY PROFILE™

| Agility Drivers™ | SELF | ALL | TEAM | BOSS | PEERS | DIR RPTS | Agility Gap Assessment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Engaging** | | | | | | | |
| 26. Create positive climate where all team members contribute to fullest potential | 4 | 4.2 | 4.4 | 5.0 | 4.0 | 3.5 | |
| 27. Empower team members with appropriate responsibility, authority and resources | 4 | 3.9 | 4.3 | 4.0 | 3.4 | 4.5 | |
| 28. Actively develop team members to achieve both personal and organizational goals | 5 | 4.1 | 4.2 | 5.0 | 3.6 | 3.5 | |
| 29. Demonstrate effectiveness in building and managing high performance teams | 3 | 3.3 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.5 | |
| 30. Create capacity for individuals and entire team to bounce back from failure | 4 | 4.1 | 4.1 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 4.0 | |
| **INITIATE ACTION** — Self 4.7 / ALL 4.3 | SELF | ALL | TEAM | BOSS | PEERS | DIR RPTS | |
| 31. Act with and communicate a sense of urgency | 5 | 4.5 | 4.2 | 5.0 | 4.2 | 4.0 | |
| 32. Promote flexibility in action response | 5 | 3.9 | 4.1 | 4.0 | 3.6 | 3.0 | |
| 33. Continuously look to shorten cycle times in key processes | 4 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 3.6 | 3.5 | |
| 34. Demonstrate and encourage resourcefulness in making the right things happen | 5 | 4.1 | 4.4 | 5.0 | 3.6 | 4.0 | |
| 35. Hold people accountable for delivering on expectations | 5 | 4.7 | 4.1 | 5.0 | 4.4 | 5.0 | |
| **Decision Making** | | | | | | | |
| 36. Enable decision making at the lowest possible levels | 4 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 3.6 | 4.5 | |
| 37. Use logical and effective framework for making sound decisions | 5 | 4.4 | 4.2 | 5.0 | 4.0 | 4.5 | |
| 38. Make timely decisions often with limited or sometimes ambiguous information | 5 | 4.1 | 4.5 | 5.0 | 3.6 | 4.0 | |
| 39. Reach out to others for information or input before making decisions | 5 | 4.3 | 4.1 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 3.5 | |
| 40. Take appropriate risks and make bold moves to aggressively grow the business | 4 | 4.2 | 4.0 | 5.0 | 3.6 | 4.0 | |
| **Collaborating** | | | | | | | |
| 41. Actively listen to internal and external customers | 5 | 4.1 | 4.2 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 3.5 | |
| 42. Encourage others to share Best Practices and challenge those who don't | 5 | 4.5 | 4.0 | 5.0 | 4.0 | 5.0 | |
| 43. Create detailed plans that embed improvement ideas into standard operating plans | 4 | 4.0 | 3.7 | 5.0 | 3.4 | 4.5 | |
| 44. Follow through on commitments and stated intentions | 5 | 4.8 | 4.5 | 5.0 | 4.8 | 4.5 | |
| 45. Partner with others to provide the organization's best response to challenges | 4 | 4.4 | 4.1 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 4.0 | |
| **LIBERATE THINKING** — Self 4.5 / ALL 4.1 | SELF | ALL | TEAM | BOSS | PEERS | DIR RPTS | |
| 46. Personally employ "out-of-the-box" thinking | 4 | 3.9 | 4.1 | 4.0 | 3.2 | 4.0 | |
| 47. Recognize & reward fresh, innovative thinking for on-going improvement in key areas | 5 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 4.0 | 3.4 | 4.0 | |
| 48. Create new idea forums and mechanisms to develop and implement new initiatives | 5 | 4.1 | 3.8 | 5.0 | 3.6 | 3.5 | |
| 49. Encourage and promote enthusiasm for fresh new ideas from all team members | 4 | 3.9 | 4.1 | 4.0 | 3.4 | 4.0 | |
| 50. Minimize fear for trying new things | 4 | 3.9 | 4.1 | 5.0 | 3.8 | 3.5 | |

**LEADERSHIP AGILITY DEVELOPMENT GUIDE**

*For use with the Leadership Agility Profile™*

*Performance Dimensions Descriptions and Development Activities*

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The figure above illustrates a portion of the output from an LAP designed as a 360-degree assessment.  This LAP example focuses on Anticipating Change which is one of the five major drivers of Leadership Agility.  When combined with the developmental recommendations from the Leadership Agility Development Guide, the LAP is an extremely useful resource for addressing **Leadership Narcosis™**.  Some of the additional interview questions to support **the LAP results might include:**

**1.   Scans the horizon for trends and forces of change:**

- What approach does the leader use to scan the horizon for trends and forces of change?
- departments, units, front-line, support staff, level of employee, etc.)
- How has the process of scanning the horizon for trends and forces of change been improved?
- *How are the plans, processes and actions for scanning the horizon for trends and forces of change aligned with other needs of the organization?*

2. **Actively monitors the competition:**
- What approach does the leader use to actively monitor the competition?
- How well deployed is the process senior management uses actively monitor the competition (e.g., departments, units, front-line, support staff, level of employee, etc.)
- How has the process of actively monitoring the competition been improved?
- How are the plans, processes and actions for actively monitoring the competition aligned with other needs of the organization?

3. **Maintains a trend monitoring system:**
- What approach does the leader use to maintain a trend monitoring system?
- How well deployed is the process senior management uses to maintain a trend monitoring system (e.g., departments, units, front-line, support staff, level of employee, etc.)
- How has the process of maintaining a trend monitoring system been improved?
- How are the plans, processes and actions for maintaining a trend monitoring system by senior management aligned with other needs of the organization?

4. **Regularly recalibrates focus based on trends:**
- What approach does leader use to recalibrate its focus based on trends?
- How well deployed is the process senior management uses to recalibrate its focus based on trends (e.g., departments, units, front-line, support staff, level of employee, etc.)
- How has the process of recalibrating the focus based on trends been improved by senior management?
- How are the plans, processes and actions for recalibrating the focus of senior management aligned with other needs of the organization?

5. **Builds flexibility for rapid change:**
- What approach does the leader use to build flexibility for rapid change?
- How well deployed is the process senior management uses to build flexibility for rapid change (e.g., departments, units, front-line, support staff, level of employee, etc.)
- How has the process of building flexibility for rapid change been improved by senior management?
- How are the plans, processes and actions for building flexibility for rapid change of senior management aligned with other needs of the organization?

By applying a process that is focused, fast and flexible and effectively aligned with the overall talent management approach and philosophy, companies can preemptively address the symptoms of **Leadership Narcosis™**.

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