



By Joe Byerly

Within each of us is a voice. It's size and influence varies between individuals and our environment, and our values shape its contours. This voice is our ego. In his book, [*Ego is the Enemy*](#) Ryan Holiday observes that ego is, "an unhealthy belief in our own importance. [This includes] Arrogance and self-centered ambition."

Ego is hungry and feeds off of power. In [*The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*](#), author Robert Caro brilliantly describes the way power transformed Robert Moses from an idealistic reformer in the 1930s to a power hungry tyrant by the 1950s. He

writes, “For once Bob Moses came into possession of power, it began to perform its harsh alchemy on his character, altering its contours, eating away at some traits, allowing others to enlarge...With each small increase in the amount of power he possessed, the dark element in his nature had loomed larger.”

One thing I’ve learned over the course of my military career is that our egos can grow outsized, often a byproduct of rank and position. In other words, power and success encourage egomania. If we aren’t careful, we start believing the top-rated evaluation reports, the complimentary speeches at promotion ceremonies, and the increasing number of subordinates who are willing to feed this narrative for their own advancement.

Eventually, ego latches on and starts distorting our judgment

It’s easy for anyone who hasn’t experienced the trappings of rank and responsibility to say, “I’ll never be egotistical.” However, living this mantra is more difficult than saying simply, “I’ll never.”

Ego is part of our human nature, reaching far beyond the confines of the military.

Jacob Gawronski and I interviewed Wesley Schultz, the lead singer for The Lumineers, for the FTGN podcast. During our conversation, he provided us with a great observation- we quickly adapt to the level of luxury as our situation changes, and with that our expectation follows. He called it “Hedonistic adaptation.” Wes described the evolution from touring out of a van, playing in living rooms, and having zero expectations to getting caught off guard when his favorite wine wasn’t in the dressing room for his sold-out stadium concert. Even though Wesley came from a humble background and spent over a decade grinding away for pennies, his ego attempted to grow along with his level of success. His ego tried to take credit for the success generated by his humility, hard work, and dedication to music. Wesley Schultz has to fight everyday to stay grounded.

Looking back on history, we find countless examples of leaders whose unhealthy belief in their greatness torpedoed their lives and their careers. For instance, Emperor Nero surrounded himself with sycophants, removed anyone who would speak truth to power, and eventually overstepped his bounds. Born into luxury, he died on the run with only a few supporters at his side. His name is forever associated with the word tyrant.

General Douglas MacArthur, for all of his great tactical and operational exploits, will forever be remembered as an egomaniac. His military career ended when he spoke out against the President of the United States and tried to control foreign policy, rather than inform it. We can even look to recent history for examples of leaders whose ego derailed their success.

So, how do we avoid arrogance, self-centered ambition, and an unhealthy belief in our own importance?

To stay grounded, we have to surround ourselves with people who have the courage to be candid, tell us when we're wrong, and let us know when our ego starts to get in the way of the organization's success. Returning to the interview with Wesley Shultz, he joked that his wife reminds him all the time that he's still "Wes," even joking with him that he should get an applause track installed so when he enters rooms in the house, he can feel like he's still on tour.

U.S. Grant's Chief of Staff, John Rawlins, kept his ego in check.. Rawlins kept a watchful eye over Grant's worse vice: alcohol. Grant struggled with drinking his entire adult life. His inability to stop after a few drinks was so severe that it resulted in his resignation from the Army when he was in his mid-thirties. During the war, his temptation grew. As he became more successful, people lined up to celebrate with him and give him whatever he asked for. It would have been easy for Grant's ego to take over and justify drinking with phrases such as, "I deserve this," or "I'm so good at this warfighting thing, that I can afford a drink or two." Drinking could have clouded his judgment during key battles but thankfully, he had John Rawlins around to save him from himself. Rawlins didn't care that he was a general; he respected him enough to call Grant out when he slipped up.

Following the Union Victory at Vicksburg, Grant got drunk. That night, June 6, 1863, Rawlins sent him an important letter, he wrote:

The great solitude I feel for the safety of this army leads me to mention what I hoped to never have to do -the subject of your drinking...You have the full control over your appetite and can let drinking alone. Had you not pledged me the sincerity of your honor early last March that you would drink no more during the war, and kept that pledge during your

campaign, you would not today have stood first in the world's history as a successful military leader.

Not only did Rawlins call Grant out, he reminded him that it was only because he avoided drinking that he was successful in the first place.

Unfortunately for U.S. Grant, he eventually took on politics and left those he could trust behind. As Ron Chernow pointed out in [Grant](#), “[He] radiated a confidence that could verge on complacency. He wrongly assumed that the skills that had made him successful in one sphere of life would translate intact into another.” His presidency was marred with scandal. He went on to make similar mistakes in business, again without the people he could trust at his side. He entered into a Bernie Madoff level ponzi scheme and lost everything. As his longtime friend and trusted confidant, William Tecumseh Sherman, pointed out, “[Grant] aimed to rival the millionaires, who would have given their all to have won any of his battles.”

In the end, without the people who were willing to tell Grant the truth and push back when he needed it, ego consumed him.

When we surround ourselves with sycophants and people willing to indulge our outbursts, look the other way when we make mistakes, or distort the truth, it puts us on a dangerous path. Our ego eats up the attention and the pomp and circumstance, causing it to grow unwieldy, and eventually jump into the driver seat. We end up like a Bob Moses, Nero, a MacArthur, and unfortunately, a U.S. Grant. However, when we surround ourselves with people like Wesley Schultz's wife or Grant's Chief of Staff, we can keep our egos under wraps and serve those we lead rather than ourselves.

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