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The Great Intimidators

by Roderick M. Kramer

“Since when has being a difficult boss been a disqualifier for a job?” asked Nightline’s Ted Koppel after several abrasive, intimidating leaders of major corporations—Disney’s Michael Eisner, Miramax’s Harvey Weinstein, and Hewlett-Packard’s Carly Fiorina—fell from their heights of power. Picking up on what seemed to be a new trend in the workplace, the business media quickly proclaimed that the reign of such leaders was over. From now on, the Wall Street Journal predicted, “tough guys will finish last.”

But wait a minute, you might think. If they’re just plain bad for their organizations, why have so many of these leaders made it to the top in the first place? Wouldn’t the ones who’ve wreaked nothing but havoc have plateaued or been weeded out long before they could inflict too much damage? Yet many leaders who rule through intimidation have been doing just fine for a very long time. Before we proclaim their extinction, then, it’s worth taking a close look at the pros as well as the cons of their tough-minded approach. Doing so might cast light on some subtle dimensions of effective leadership, especially in organizations or industries that were once rigid or unruly, stagnant or drifting—places where it took an abrasive leader to shake things up a little and provide redirection.

Consider Ed Zander, who’s been hailed as “Motorola’s modernizer.” When Zander took over as CEO of Motorola in January 2004, the company was in steep decline. After being in the high-velocity world of Silicon Valley, Zander found himself at the helm of a company that seemed to be running, in his words, “on autopilot.” In taking on the challenge of turning Motorola around, Zander described his guiding philosophy as, “Whack yourself before somebody whacks you.” He observed, “A lot of companies have clogged arteries.” In Motorola’s case, Zander found that much of the problem was at the VP level. “I don’t know how many dozens of VPs are no longer with us,” he reported in one interview. “Some have left on their own accord, some have not.” The transformation at Motorola is far from com-
complete, but it is off to a good start. In the third quarter of 2004, the company posted sales of $8.62 billion (a 26% increase from the third quarter of 2003). Moreover, shipments of its handsets were up 15% from the previous year.

A similar story can be told about Harvey Weinstein, also notorious for his abrasiveness. When he entered the Hollywood scene, a handful of major studios dominated the landscape. Independent picture producers limped along on the margins of power and influence. Weinstein almost single-handedly pulled the independent film industry out of the doldrums, in the process making Miramax one of the few widely recognized industry brand names. He didn't make a lot of friends over the years, and people who have worked with him often say that they find him hard to take. At the same time, they know that his high-pressure tactics have pushed them to the apex of their professional talents. One former Miramax executive noted appreciatively, “You learned to anticipate…the direction Harvey was going or wanted to go, because most of the time he was right.” And there is no contending with Weinstein’s success: more than 240 Academy Award nominations and 60 wins.

Zander and Weinstein are examples of what I call great intimidators. They are not averse to causing a ruckus, nor are they above using a few public whippings and ceremonial hangings to get attention. And they’re in good company. A list of great intimidators would read a bit like a business leadership hall of fame: Sandy Weill, Rupert Murdoch, Andy Grove, Carly Fiorina, Larry Ellison, and Steve Jobs would be just a few of the names on it. These leaders seem to relish the chaos they create because, in their minds, it’s constructive. Time is short, the stakes are high, and the measures required are draconian.

But make no mistake—the great intimidators are not your typical bullies. If you’re just a bully, it’s all about humiliating others in an effort to make yourself feel good. Something very different is going on with the great intimidators. To be sure, they aren’t above engaging in a little bullying to get their way. With them, however, the motivating factor isn’t ego or gratuitous humiliation; it’s vision. The great intimidators see a possible path through the thicket, and they’re impatient to clear it. They chafe at impediments, even those that are human. They don’t suffer from doubt or timidity. They’ve got a disdain for constraints imposed by others.

The modus operandi of great intimidators runs counter to a lot of our most deeply entrenched preconceptions about what it means to be a good leader these days. We’ve all read the books and articles describing people who lead quietly and with great empathy and humility. But as you’ll see, the leaders I’ve been studying think and work in an entirely different way: They’re rough, loud, and in your face.

Beneath their tough exteriors and sharp edges, however, are some genuine, deep insights into human motivation and organizational behavior. Indeed, these leaders possess what I call political intelligence, a distinctive and powerful form of leader intelligence that’s been largely ignored by management theorists and practitioners. In all our recent enchantment with social intelligence and soft power, we’ve overlooked the kinds of skills leaders need to bring about transformation in cases of tremendous resistance or inertia. It’s precisely in such situations, I’d like to propose, that the political intelligence of the intimidating leader is called for.

Political Intelligence at Work
What exactly is so special about political intelligence? And how does it help set the great intimidators apart from other kinds of effective leaders? To answer these questions, we need to start by looking at conventional conceptions of leader intelligence.

Over the past decade, management theorists and practitioners alike have come to appreciate the roles that different forms of human intelligence play in effective leadership. Psychologist Howard Gardner—who first articulated the theory of multiple intelligences—suggested, for example, that social intelligence is what makes some leaders so adept at getting others to follow them and at extracting maximum performance from subordinates. Gardner defined social intelligence in terms of leaders’ interpersonal skills, such as empathy and the ability to influence others on the basis of that understanding.

There’s no question that it’s important for all leaders to have these skills. Indeed, social intelligence is the sort of competency leaders rely on every day to accomplish the routine work of an organization. However, it’s not the only kind of intelligence they need. What’s more, in some settings (a rigidly hierarchical organiza-
The findings and observations reported in this interview recognized the downsides of even transformational. To be sure, the people I interviewed recognized the downsides of leaders. In fact, some of these relationships were part of a larger, ongoing research program on what I call the genius-to-folly syndrome. That research focuses on why some leaders focus on people's weaknesses and insecurities. Speaking of President Lyndon B. Johnson, one of history's truly great intimidators, former press secretary Bill Moyers noted that he possessed "an animal sense of weakness in other men." As one political scientist elaborated, Johnson "studied, analyzed, catalogued, and remembered the strengths and weaknesses, the likes and dislikes, of fellow politicians as some men do stock prices, batting averages, and musical compositions. He knew who drank Scotch and who bourbon, whose wife was sick...who was in trouble...and who owed him."

Not only do socially intelligent and politically intelligent leaders notice different things; they also act differently on the basis of their divergent perceptions. While leaders with social intelligence use empathy and soft power to build bridges, politically intelligent leaders use intimidation and hard power to exploit the anxieties and vulnerabilities they detect. Both kinds of leaders are good judges of character. But instead of having empathy for others, the politically intelligent leader adopts a dispasionate, clinical, even instrumental view of people as resources for getting things done. This absence of empathy opens up branches of the decision tree, exposing options that other leaders might reject.

Perhaps the starkest point of contrast between these two kinds of leaders is how willing they are to use hard power. Politically intelligent leaders appreciate the power of fear and its close relation, anxiety. As Harvard University's president, Larry Summers, once observed: "Sometimes fear does the work of reason." He went to Harvard determined to shake up the institution—and whatever else may be said about him, he has succeeded in doing just that. Interviews with faculty, staff, and students at Harvard who've had close encounters with Summers reveal a common pattern in his interactions: initial confrontation, followed by skeptical and hard questioning. "Perhaps we don't really even need a department like this at Harvard," he is said to have told one group of faculty at a "let's get acquainted" session. Such questions may not make a leader popular, but they certainly wake people up. And they sometimes compel people to think more working under intimidating leaders—the anxiety, the trepidation. Yet many of them had no regrets and indicated that they would happily do it again.

The more I probed, the clearer it became that these leaders possessed something different from the social and emotional intelligence touted by management theorists. They had political intelligence. They used coercion, but they did so creatively and strategically.

It turned out that many of the truly great intimidators were concentrated in a few domains, including Hollywood, the high-tech world, and Washington, DC. In some ways, that pattern isn't altogether surprising. All of these places are famous for the bad behavior they elicit. Woody Allen once said about Hollywood bullying, "It's dog-eat-dog. No, it's worse than dog-eat-dog. It's dog-doesn't-return-other-dog's-phone-calls." I think we see a lot of such behavior in these select domains because the rewards are potentially huge and the competition for them is intense.

Political intelligence can be just as important as emotional and social intelligence in helping leaders achieve the results they desire, especially in highly competitive, contentious, or political environments. There is a sort of Darwinian logic to the efficacy of intimidation. It can give an edge in situations where any advantage, no matter how small, might make the difference between success and failure.

**Sometimes Fear Works**

The findings and observations reported in this article are part of a larger, ongoing research program on what I call the genius-to-folly syndrome. That research focuses on why some leaders wield their power so effectively, while others overplay their hand and lose the game (see Roderick M. Kramer, "The Harder They Fall," HBR October 2003). Initially, I was interested in documenting people's negative experiences working under abusive, demanding leaders. Counter to my preconceptions, however, a fair number of individuals reported having positive relationships with intimidating leaders. In fact, some of these relationships were described as profoundly educational and even transformational. To be sure, the people I interviewed recognized the downsides of
While leaders with social intelligence use empathy and soft power to build bridges, politically intelligent leaders use intimidation and hard power to exploit the anxieties and vulnerabilities they detect.

deploy deeply about their purpose in an organization and the value they add to it. In asking them to justify their existence, for instance, Summers has forced professors and administrators at Harvard to become more thoughtful about what they do. So though it can be painful, that exercise in justification leads to greater clarity about purpose and strategy. As Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz bluntly pointed out in a television interview, “Most [university] presidents are too careful, too cautious, too frightened, too worried about tipping the boat, too worried about alienating anybody, too worried about offending anybody.” Dershowitz went on to add that Summers “is a provocative president. I think in my 41 years at Harvard I have never seen a more exciting time, more diversity of views…and I think Harvard is a better place for it.”

Summers’s sentiments regarding the virtues of inculcating a little fear echo one of President Richard Nixon’s convictions: “People react to fear, not love—they don’t teach that in Sunday school, but it’s true.” For Nixon, leadership wasn’t about inspiring others or being liked; it was about producing tangible results. And although too much fear or anxiety may induce trepidation and paralysis, too little may result in lackluster effort and complacency.

The great intimidators force people to review how strongly they feel about an issue. Are they really willing to go to the mat for it? If so, then they had better have a strong argument. It’s then that the debate gets interesting, both for the individuals involved and for the organization. One Microsoft manager told me, “Bill Gates relishes intellectual combat. He hires the best and brightest— and most articulate—individuals because he wants the conversation to be at the highest possible level.”

The Intimidator’s Tactics

When it comes to understanding how politically intelligent leaders achieve such stunning results, the devil is in the details, and the details are to be found in the effective—but sometimes extreme—tactics these leaders use to coerce their subordinates to overperform.

Get up close and personal. Many intimidators operate through direct confrontation. At times, they will even invade the personal space of the people they want to control. This mode of intimidation fits our stereotype of the hulk-ing organizational bully.

Universal Pictures chair Stacey Snider found herself on the receiving end of this sort of treatment during an unexpected confrontation with Miramax’s Harvey Weinstein at a cocktail party. Weinstein was upset because of rumors circulating throughout Hollywood that he had started a whispering campaign to discredit Universal’s film A Beautiful Mind. At a celebratory dinner following the Golden Globes, at which A Beautiful Mind won several awards, including best drama, Weinstein cornered Snider. In a New Yorker article, Ken Auletta described their close encounter this way: “To the petite Snider, [Weinstein] was a fearsome sight—his eyes dark and glowering, his fleshy face unshaved, his belly jutting forward half a foot or so ahead of his body. He jabbed a finger at Snider’s face and screamed, ‘You’re going to go down for this!’” This was the calculated sound and fury of a skillful intimidator. Snider understood that, and she held her ground with Weinstein.

A sure sign of the extent to which truly great intimidators are putting on an act is the fact that many of them work on their tactics when alone. General George Patton used to practice his scowl in front of his mirror. He called it his “general’s face,” and he wanted it to be as terrifying and menacing a countenance as he could make it. Entrepreneur Reggie Lewis also admitted that he spent time in front of his mirror perfecting what became his trademark frown. He believed that to really excel at hardball, it helped to have a face that fit the part.

In addition to aggressive physical demeanors, intimidators routinely use the weapons of language—taunts and slurs—to provoke their victims. This behavior is designed to throw others off balance. It’s hard to think clearly and follow your own game plan when your buttons are being pushed. Clarence Thomas, associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, used this tactic to browbeat his Democratic opponents on the Senate judiciary committee during his nomination hearings. When accused by Anita Hill of sexual harassment, he asked the members of the committee how they would like to be so accused. The discomfort of the committee (which included an understandably subdued Ted Kennedy) was palpable. To complete the trick, he threw the race card down on the table, calling the procedure “a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to
Managing Great Intimidators

To be on the receiving end of an intimidating leader’s unreasonable behavior is never easy. Legend has it that film producer Scott Rudin has gone through more than 250 assistants over the past five years. (Rudin says that he fired only 19, but that doesn’t include people who didn’t make it past his two-week trial period.) As we’ve seen, though, the payoff is big for those individuals with staying power. As film producer Craig Perry, Rudin’s protégé, has acknowledged, “I attribute an enormous amount of whatever success I’ve been able to attain directly…[to] how I saw [Rudin] operate.”

The trick for reaping those big benefits is to find a way to work effectively with the great intimidators and get them to want to mentor you. Here are a few suggestions that may help:

**Do your homework.** It pays to check out the great intimidator’s past. Find out which people have managed to work effectively with him or her. Learn what worked well for them. For every great intimidator I’ve studied, there have always been a few individuals who’ve discovered a way to work successfully with him or her. Before becoming Secretary of State, notes biographer Ann Blackman, Madeleine Albright managed to collaborate with Ed Muskie because “she wasn’t cowed by him. She actually liked going into his office, which they called ‘The Lion’s Den.’” Muskie would rant, and Albright would push back. As a result, he respected her quite a lot. And that became the basis of one of her early and most important mentoring relationships. Muskie also taught her more than a little bit about dealing with intimidators.

**Work harder.** The saying “Work smarter, not harder” is popular for a reason. There’s a lot of wisdom behind the notion that being efficient and clever with one’s time and effort is important. But putting in the time may impress great intimidators even more. Matching their energy and drive is one way to get their attention. Back when he was a newcomer to the Creative Artists Agency mail room, Stuart Griffen used this strategy to secure the coveted spot as Michael Ovitz’s assistant. “He knew I worked hard. He’d come back to the office at eleven o’clock at night, and I’d still be there. He’d come in on a Sunday, and I’d be there. I was in, both feet, plus 200%. I remember writing a note to myself: ‘Get anything, anywhere, anytime.’” It took months of sustained effort, but eventually, Griffen got the job.

**Laugh at their antics—and earn their respect.** President Lyndon Johnson was famous for trying to intimidate aides by asking them to meet with him while he was using the toilet. “Come closer! I can’t hear you!” he would yell at them while dictating memos and giving orders from the commode. But film industry magnate Jack Valenti, who was Johnson’s special assistant back in the day, has noted that Johnson did this primarily to see how much aides would bend to his will. One aide used humor to show that he wasn’t easily flustered or dominated. He extracted a laugh from Johnson by calmly responding, “I’d be happy to move closer, Mr. President. But it seems you have the only seat in the room.” Proving yourself unfappable is a terrific way to impress a great intimidator.

**Call their bluff.** When dealing with great intimidators, it can help to simply call their bluff. This tactic is particularly effective when you’re dealing with an informational intimidator, especially when you suspect that he or she is mixing truth and fiction. Just saying, “I don’t believe it” will buy you time. This puts the ball right back into the intimidator’s court, and it shows that you aren’t a pushover. Displaying a toughness under pressure often impresses great intimidators, who are looking for people whose inner steel matches their own.

**Keep your perspective.** Don’t take things too seriously. David O’Connor, another young and ambitious CAA agent determined to become Ovitz’s right-hand man, described what it was like interviewing for the position:

> When I walked in, Ovitz was behind his desk, on the phone. He said, “Sit down—over there,” pointing to the couch. Ovitz’s office got pretty heavy afternoon sun so I couldn’t see his face, only his shadow, which I later learned was intentional. He also kept interrupting our conversation. He’d tap a phone next to him, and moments later [his secretary] would come in. He’d say a few things, then she’d go. Then she’d come back. I later learned he was buzzing her in, for no real good reason other than to shake me up. He wanted to see if I could handle the distractions. He wanted to keep me on edge.

O’Connor did handle the distractions, and he won the job.

**Stick around.** Too often, we are tempted to pack our bags and find an easier job. That instinct is understandable—an early exit can look awfully attractive. But remember why you wanted to work for the intimidator in the first place: to learn. If he is just sometimes unreasonable in his demands, take comfort in the fact that in the process of working with him you can sharpen your own negotiation skills. As Columbia Pictures’ Dawn Steel, the first woman to run a major movie studio, put it: “Barry Diller taught his protégés to bite, kick, and yell. Now they’re running Hollywood.” You can go the distance if you can learn how to appreciate genius at work.
think for themselves...[and don't] kowtow to an old order.” By putting the committee on the defensive, Thomas pulled the moral high ground right out from under their feet.

**Be angry.** Most intimidators use anger and rage to get their way. A calculated “loss of temper” does more than help intimidators prevail in the heat of the moment, though. It also serves as a chilling deterrent for potential challengers. While in some instances they are clearly putting on an act, intimidators aren’t always in full control of their emotions when they go off on tirades. But even then a loss of control can be useful. As political pundit Chris Matthews once said, “Don’t have a reputation for being a nice guy—that won’t do you any good.” He cited his experience working with former Maine senator Ed Muskie: “Muskie was the best of them all, the absolute best, because nobody wanted to tangle with the guy. You know, why tangle with the guy? Why ruin your day? A bad temper is a very powerful political tool because most people don’t like confrontation.” People will think twice before confronting you if you’ve got a reputation for being willing to scorch a little earth rather than back down.

This point may seem simple and obvious, but it’s worth emphasizing because people often don’t fully appreciate how much ground they may yield simply to keep intimidating leaders from getting in their face or ruining their day. Without consciously or completely realizing it, they may even leave the playing field in order to avoid an unpleasant encounter. Or they may hold back in the hope that someone else will stand up to the great intimidator. Either way, intimidators end up getting what they want. Contrived anger of this type is especially prevalent among politicians. Indeed, Pulitzer-winning journalist Hedrick Smith has even given a name to it: porcupine power.

**Keep them guessing.** Many leadership books these days tout the importance of transparency. We trust leaders when we feel we know their intentions and motives, a lot of authors say. According to this view, leaders must take great pains to be sure other people understand them and why they are doing what they’re doing. Intimidators don’t buy into this idea at all. They prefer to remain unfathomable because this keeps subordinates on their toes and makes it easier to change direction without losing credibility. If people don’t know where you’re coming from or where you’re going, it’s easier to catch them by surprise.

Some leaders preserve their mystery through deliberate distance; many of the great intimidators I’ve studied cultivated an aloof demeanor with subordinates. When he was U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara was especially famous for his cold and distant style. As journalist and historian David Halberstam noted in *The Reckoning*, “He shunned small talk. Small talk wasted time and encouraged intimacies. Intimacies were unwanted, at least with employees.” McNamara’s intimidating demeanor with subordinates and rivals was an act. He had no trouble turning on the charm with those he wanted to please. With presidents Kennedy and Johnson—the men he had chosen to serve—he was uniformly described as warm, witty, and attentive. He was such an interesting and pleasant conversationalist that his presence was enthusiastically sought at Washington cocktail parties. As McNamara’s behavior illustrates, great intimidators can also be great ingratiators and seem to be able to change their demeanor in a chameleon-like way to suit their needs.

Silence and sullenness are also powerful tools. “You’re not sure why the person is displeased with you, but you sure sense it,” one former HP employee told me when describing a meeting she’d had with Carly Fiorina. Subordinates of silent, sullen intimidators end up spending a lot of time huddled around the watercooler trying to figure out whether they’re in or out—and then go and sit in their offices and dream up ways of pleasing the boss. The really skillful silent intimidators even make it hard for followers to know for certain that they are even intimidating you. If confronted about their behavior, they are likely to protest innocence, claiming you’ve got them all wrong: “Who, me? You’re just being paranoid!” Many subordinates have accused Disney’s Eisner of this kind of behavior.

**Know it all.** Mastery of the facts—or at least the appearance of it—can also be hugely intimidating. “Informational intimidators” always have facts and figures at their fingertips, while their opponents are still trying to formulate an argument or retrieve something from memory. British prime minister Margaret Thatcher was legendary for her ability to silence or paralyze her opponents with her superior command of whatever topic was being debated. As one observer noted, Thatcher was
a “demon for information, for research, for numbers. She devoured them, [and] she remembered them...No one could out-study or out-prepare her.” In one famous confrontation in the House of Commons, Thatcher took on and “battered into submission” the able and respected Richard Crossman. “It was obvious,” recalled John Boyd-Carpenter, the cabinet minister in charge at the time. “She had done her homework, and he had not done his.”

Often, it doesn’t even matter all that much whether the “facts” are right. When it comes to making a good impression or anchoring an argument, the truly great intimidator seizes the advantage. Even the misleading or inaccurate factoid—when uttered with complete confidence and injected into a discussion with perfect timing and precision—can carry the day. In a negotiation or board meeting, less confident individuals are likely to remain silent and avoid challenging someone presenting her case with assurance. It’s only later, when there might be time to check out the accuracy of a statement, that people realize they’ve been hoodwinked. By then, however, it’s too late: The moment is gone, and the informational intimidator has walked away with all the marbles. Robert McNamara raised this technique to the level of an art. When he and Lee Iacocca were at Ford, Iacocca once commented to another executive, “That son of a bitch [McNamara] always has an answer, and it always sounds good. But you know,” he added, “I checked some of it out after a meeting, and some of it is really bullshit. Stuff he just made up.”

The Intimidator’s Magnetism

At this point, you might be wondering just what the draw is. Great intimidators trample on people’s feelings and set impossible standards. Even when others meet those standards, they’re given little if any credit.

But despite all the drawbacks, my research shows, great intimidators are often magnets for the best and brightest. Consider the brilliant Nobelist James Watson, one of the scientists who discovered the helical structure of DNA. Edward O. Wilson, the famous Harvard sociobiologist, recounted what it was like to be a colleague of Watson’s: “He arrived with such a conviction that biology must be transformed...[He felt that] what had gone before was infested by stamp collectors who lacked the wit to transform their subject into a modern science.” Wilson continued, “At department meetings Watson radiated contempt in all directions. He shunned ordinary courtesy and polite conversation, evidently in the belief that they would encourage the traditionalists to stay around...[and he spoke] with casual and brutal offhandedness.” Not surprisingly, few dared call Watson on the carpet. But Watson’s students—many of whom achieved their own eminence—pointed out that he was inspiring as well as demanding. As one put it, Watson “always introduced the right mixture of fear and paranoia so that we worked our asses off.”

There are many such stories in business. A former executive of Martha Stewart’s told me what it was like to work with Stewart on a project:

She had the most amazingly well-organized and disciplined mind I’ve ever known. She grasped things instantly, and she had the ability to direct your attention to the single most important thing you should be thinking about or doing at that particular moment. She could be incredibly impatient and brusque if you were slow on the uptake—but if you could keep up with her, and perform to her standard, it was tremendously satisfying.

A former Apple executive who had been involved with the launch of the original Macintosh computer in 1984 had similar things to say about Steve Jobs: “[He] was the most difficult human being I’ve ever worked for—but he was also the most technologically brilliant. No one knew technology better than he did, and no one had a clearer sense of where it was going.”

Intimidators instill fear in their employees, but the really great ones instill something else as well—and that’s another way in which they are different from your run-of-the-mill organizational bully. As one former aide of legendary tough guy Admiral Hyman Rickover told me, “Not measuring up in his eyes meant more to me than anything else—even my father’s.” In a similar vein, a former Pixar employee said of his time working under Steve Jobs, “You just dreaded letting him down. He believed in you so strongly that the thought of disappointing him just killed you.”

As these quotes make clear, people like to work for great intimidators because of what can be learned from them and because they inspire great performance. Many of the people I spoke with said they did their best work ever
When Are They Too Tough?

Using intimidation to maximum effect hinges, as we’ve seen, upon the politically intelligent leader’s shrewd appraisal and manipulation of others’ weaknesses and insecurities. Unfortunately, it’s all too easy for great intimidators to cross the line between demanding and abusive. Indeed, many intimidators walk so far past that line that they’re heading out the door before they know it, as evidenced by the recent fates of several leaders mentioned in this article.

So what causes great intimidators to drift from creative coercion and effective manipulation into unchecked arrogance and self-destructive folly? There seem to be several factors. First, many intimidators who set themselves up for a fall tend, ironically, to be too good at what they do. Because they are so adept at bending others to their will, they win even the arguments they should lose.

Relatedly, the more effective and successful they become, the more these intimidating leaders risk isolating themselves from critical or dissenting views. Because they tend to push away anyone who disagrees with them, great intimidators often end up surrounded by sycophants who parrot back only what the intimidator wants to hear, singing his every tune. Everyone needs checks and balances to make good decisions. It was after Disney president and COO Frank Wells’s tragic death in a helicopter accident that Michael Eisner’s recent travails at Disney had this to relate:

What is lost in the stories about Mr. Eisner’s arrogance, greed, and insensitivity is the more illuminating tale of how he transformed a fal-
tering animation and amusement park company into one of the world’s most successful entertainment companies. When he assumed command in 1984, Disney had a market value of $1.8 billion. Today its market value is $57.1 billion.

So before we throw out all the great intimidators—and turn the organizational helm over to those gentle, humble, self-effacing leaders who’ve apparently been waiting in the wings—we might stop to consider what we would lose. Great intimidators may create disharmony, but they also can create value.
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