

The Self-Sabotage Syndrome

And How to Save
Your Own Life



by John
Wareham*

'... The dram of evil doth all the noble
substance offer doubt, to his own scandal.'
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

The apparent decision of Kiwi parliamentarian Golriz Ghahraman to embark on a series of shoplifting expeditions makes perfect sense the moment you realize the unconscious agenda of countless unhappy 'high-flyers' is self-sabotage.

So, too, the choice of former United States President to Bill Clinton to dally with an intern. Or remember Dominique Strauss Kahn, the Parisian ex-chief of the International Monetary Fund; his serial sexual shenanigans earned him a humiliating, handcuffed New York 'perp walk,' as he shuffled before the world press from jail to the Paddywagon. It's the classic syndrome that brings down so many strivers. It happens in business all the time, of course, but the failures are usually a lot less public.

Consider, for example, the case of Ted, a brilliant divisional executive earning a \$500,000 salary and holding several million dollars worth of stock options. He concocted false expense invoices of less than \$10,000 a year. It took five years but finally it happened: the auditors twigged to his luminous trail. I'd personally evaluated Ted at the time of his appointment so I was naturally intrigued to discover why this outstanding executive would trip himself up. He certainly didn't do it for another paltry \$10,000 a year. I went back to the notes of our

* A Kiwi-American, John Wareham splits his time between his New Zealand home and the USA. A coach to international corporate chiefs, John established a complementary career selecting and developing community leaders from the prison population. Widely published, his books include *The President's Therapist*, and the crossover life-changer *How to Break Out of Prison*.

interview along with the results of Ted's psychological testing. What caught my eye was the occupation of Ted's now deceased father. All his life he'd been a *company auditor*! So, in Freudian terms anyway, Ted's behavior suddenly made sense. He'd been trying to replay an unhappy childhood. He'd been leaving clues to catch his father's eye.



The Why of Self Sabotage among Achievers

Most achievers tend to arise from the wrong side of the socio-economic tracks. Such individuals usually harbor a deep, powerful, neurotic drive to prove themselves every bit as good—or, usually, a whole lot better—than the

people whom they worry disdain them. This fierce chip-on-the-shoulder quest for superiority marks just about every achiever. It's the grit that makes the pearl in the oyster.

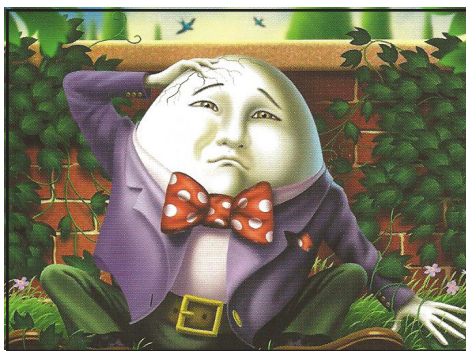
But not all achievers go on to destroy themselves. So, what is the crucial difference, then, between driven winners who hold onto their winnings, and apparent winners who go on to trip themselves up? The answer to that question usually lies in *individual nurturing* rather than mere *familial status*.

- *Winners* are raised secure in the love and respect of their parents. Winners are told — and usually shown by personal example — that they are just as good as anyone. They are urged to strive as a way to escape impoverishment or prejudice. From that point on their every achievement merely enhances an already secure sense of self-esteem. They remain driven by the spur of economic deprivation. But they always know that they are just as good as anyone else. They can live with success because they feel worthy of it.
- *Self-saboteurs*, on the other hand, are typically raised by insecure parents within unhappy homes. Such parents often push their children to become conspicuous winners precisely because the parents themselves feel like losers. Unfortunately such parenting

instills both the will to achieve and the feeling of being unworthy of attaining or holding onto it. In consequence, no matter what level of success is realized, the child never manages to shake off the omnipresent feeling of inferiority. Such achievers feel like ‘impostors’. Success seems to have come too easily. If they win by dint of perseverance they feel like untalented ‘grinds’. If they win by virtue of intellect and brilliance they feel they never really had to work for anything. The greater the achievement the deeper become the feelings of unworthiness. Until the unconscious itself concocts a way to rid itself of all the troublesome anxiety-provoking baggage.

Some say Gallics don’t regard groping the hired help as particularly sinful. Men will be boys, and all of that. Indeed, back in his home country, Monsieur Kahn was reported, with a wink, to be an irresistible serial seducer. In fact, a neurosis was in play. Same, too, with Billy Boy. It’s hard to imagine, when you think of it, the world’s most powerful and brilliant politician, feeling so lonely as to leave late-night lovelorn messages on the answering device of a zaftig intern. One can understand the call itself, such being the underlying motive of every insatiable Don Juan, as the quest to find the milky breast of one’s departed mother. But leaving a message—or sending gifts and indulging in ‘phone sex’—when you already know that a sanctimonious prosecutor is on your tail, this really is asking for trouble.

What is surprising in these cases is the elegance of the actual torpedo. O.J. Simpson was such a beloved icon that just about nothing short of murder could have destroyed his name and reputation. New York State Chief Justice Sol Wachtler effected a similarly dramatic denouement; he attracted the attention of the chief of the FBI and got himself caught in the actual commission of a thoroughly serious crime for which he ignominiously served real time. With approval ratings through the roof, and the reputation of a philanderer pretty well excused, Bill Clinton would have had to work incredibly hard to come up with any kind



of escapade to justify his being kicked out of office. Mr. Clinton's friends sometimes refer to his recklessness. But recklessness suggests the element of chance—whereas, as noted, a remorseless compulsion was in charge.

Spotting the Self-Saboteur

Spotting the self-saboteur isn't always easy, but red flags include:

- *Over-concern with visibility and status.* Notoriety is not the same as celebrity. A lot of needy people hunger to be celebrated without showing much in the way of achievement. Donald Trump, who according to the *New Yorker*, actually owns comparatively little in the way of property but hangs his name on just about everything in sight, springs to mind. The concern to show outstanding academic credentials can be part of this same syndrome. Diploma mills pander to such people. A lot of so-called doctorates, even some from apparently authentic colleges, are conferred to satisfy the ego-needs of the recipient and the financial needs of the institution rather than to reflect serious study and knowledge.
- *Disorder or addiction.* Addictions or disorders relating to alcohol, drugs, sex, spending, gambling and food are in the province of the person who doesn't really want to grow up. They reflect clear self-destructive tendencies. The sufferer unconsciously seeks to accomplish two goals; to punish himself and to draw attention to his plight. When these problems mark the behavior of an over-achiever, you can be pretty sure that the self-sabotage syndrome is under way, or soon will be.
- *Apparently 'inexplicable losses'.* Self-saboteurs can look very good in pursuit of a prize. But then, just at the moment when success is at hand, the underlying fear of success kicks in and they give it all away. Bill Clinton's failure to complete his degree at Oxford fits this pattern. His name became appended to a very short list of Rhodes scholars who failed to graduate, a lapse that appears to have heralded lesser things to come.

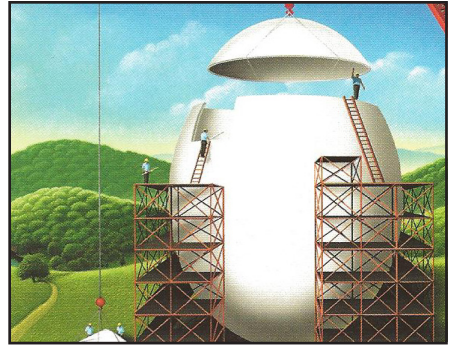
Conflicting Advice for Self-Saboteurs

My own father was a hyper-competitive athlete. I was a pretty good tennis player myself but I never beat him. Not because I couldn't, but because when I got close he would call the score wrong—but always in

his favor. Then, finally, when I awoke to this ruse, he simply strode from the court without completing the match and effectively refused to duel with me ever again. That unfortunate parenting later dogged me in a lot of ball games. I associated winning with the loss of affection. I never quite straightened out that wretched programming. What I did learn, though, was to work on competence rather than feelings.

My neighbor, transgender tennis legend Renee Richards confided to me that this was in fact the secret of her success as the winningest coach of tennis champion and reconstructed loser, Martina Navratilova. “Martina was reputed to be a head case,” said Renee. “But I never worked on her head. We concentrated on her *technique*. I gave her a topspin backhand and a rock-solid forehand. We hit thousands of balls a day. We pored over the detail of every shot, simplifying and grooving it to mere routine. It sounds boring, but it worked.”

Well, that’s Renee’s advice. Would it have worked for Dominique or Bill? Probably not. After having been caught with his pants down earlier, the IMF mogul merely admitted to ‘poor judgment’, so it seems pretty clear that though a brilliant operator, he was a sexual zombie. So too, with the 42nd U.S. President.



Reconstructing Humpty Dumpty

And what about the meteoric crash of Kiwi Green Star Golriz? Well, as Shakespeare observed, there is a history to all our lives. The Ghahraman story that apparently fuelled her lust for high-fashion cladding still seems murky. But the wisest course in all cases is to apprehend that such downfalls stem from a lack of self-awareness; specifically of the unconscious compulsion among ‘over’ achievers to torpedo their own stardom. So the cure, Allah willing, is to identify and shun the kinds of situations and temptations likely to open the way to ultimate grief. Clear advice but, alas, never easy for self-saboteurs in contemplation of the beckoning delights of their own special primrose path to apprehend or follow, or maybe both.#

The Secret to Developing Teams and the mistake that too often thwarts the mission

by **Dr. Jess Maghan**, Wareham advisory board member,
former director of training, New York City Police Department.

The mistake that thwarts most so-called team-building and leadership programs is fixation with organizational housekeeping, operational excellence, and quick fixes.

In fact, obsession with technical mastery merely hobbles the most promising achievers. They become technocrats not leaders.

Leading harmonious, high-performing, new era teams requires a centered heart, not an iron will. It calls for infinitely more insight and understanding than information and intelligence. It demands a way with words, not a whip. That's why the secret to developing leaders is to address the heart, the soul and the tongue, not merely the mind.

"The Wareham development program should be a rite of passage for every leader, and anyone who aspires to be one."

Jack Butler, founder and CEO, Municipal Bond Investors Association

And this is exactly what the *Wareham 3 plus 3* team-building symposium does. Delegates are exposed to the biggest ideas of the world's most influential thinkers—the worst as well as the best. The program challenges the mind, arouses the heart, and creates the exciting state of evolutionary change that unleashes true potentialities. In my experience, whether in the private or public sector, no other leadership symposium is so satisfying or enriching.

The Wareham Leadership Program

may be customized to fit particular client needs, but classic, proven modules include:

- The 3 plus 3 Leadership Symposium ♦
- Leading Inclusive Teams for Profit ♦
- How to Recruit Winning Executives ♦
- Corporate Values and Business Ethics ♦
- Communicating Your Way to the Top ♦

