



How to Spot & Reform a Gonnabee

Instead of Getting Stung by One

John Wareham

*“Real successful people have to cut corners and manipulate.
That’s the way things get done.”*

John De Lorean

WHAT A WORLD! At the apex of his narcissistic career, failing casino operator Donald Trump gets to fire aspiring tycoons—on “reality” TV no less—for what he calls *their* failure to measure up to his demonstrably non-existent principles.

Or consider the late Ken Lay, former Enron chief and pal to United States presidents. This supposed scion’s official defense to charges of corruption was that he was never the genius he claimed—nor the knave that people came to see him for—but, instead, merely a poor fool who got duped.

And then there’s Paul Kahn, former wizard of the AT&T credit card company. He got himself recruited to head up ailing *Safecard*, and by virtue of hubris, baloney, blindness, incompetence, and truly breathtaking profligacy ran up a fifty million dollar loss—in just one quarter.¹

On the bright side, at least Mr. Kahn got fired. Better late than never. But here’s the sixty-four dollar question: How—really—can we spot such phonies before getting stung by one?²

The key, of course, is to begin by suspecting every executive hailed as any kind of genius. Such praise typically conceals the proverbial can of worms. Trouble is, however, that such phonies become highly adept at cover-up and misdirection. So, the most reliable prophylactic for the sophisticated hirer begins with an appreciation of the overall style of this particular genre of Brummagem.

1 Fully reported in the *New York Times*, Sunday Business Section

2 Another question raised by this tantalizing article might be why, when presenting him to the Safecard board did Heidrich and Struggles, the major executive search firm retained by Safecard shareholders to “search” for Mr. Kahn, apparently conceal key negative items of intelligence from the proffered resume of this smelly candidate?

Sigmund Freud first noted this narcissistic personality style³. Some senior executives—like GE’s Jack Welch—have acted it out with great success. Michael Macoby, author of *The Gamesman*, calls such individuals “productive narcissists.” Most of the time, however, this narcissistic genre is imbedded with the seeds of personal self-destruction, and I call this torpedo variant *Gonnabee*. Let’s look—

Gonnabee

So badly do Gonnabees dream of becoming big shots that they can often gull you into believing they already are. Gonnabees look the part and play it to the hilt. Under pressure, however, they just don’t have what it takes. Like ill-fated auto “tycoon” John De Lorean, Gonnabees are magnificent empty shells, all style and no substance, all cocaine and no car.

You’ve encountered a few Gonnabees, I’ll bet, for there sometimes seems to be one in every company. Few get as far as Trump, or Lay, (or, among the fair sex, such stingers as good-life-guru Martha Stewart, or Manhattan hotel “Queen” Leona Helmsley) but all can be mesmerizing to watch—and nowhere more so than when you’re the person who’ll have to mop up after them.



I spend a lot of my time distinguishing among subspecies of the Gonnabee genre, and reporting their failings to clients who want me to say that some particular Gonnabee is destined to rise to the top of the company, and then lead it on to greatness. In fact, unless they receive professional help, most Gonnabees are fated for failure. Their true destiny is to go up like rockets and fall back like sticks.

When you meet a Gonnabee, your immediate impression is almost always of an aggressive go-getter, jaunty and confident to the point of arrogance. Gonnabees usually dress for where they hope to be going, and thus usually look like advertising photographs of top executives. However, a touch too much look-at-me dash—a gold wrist bracelet, a Rolex watch, a Gucci tag—usually gives them away. Or they may simply be just too perfect, or too gaudy. Or, in this “dress-down” era, a Gonnabee may go all the way, arriving in torn jeans and tee-shirt.

³ Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection, then tumbled into the water and drowned. Freud’s three fundamental personality styles—Narcissistic, Obsessive, and Erotic—parallel three of the styles from my book of *Basic Business Types*; Gonnabee, Boyscout, and Wooer.

If Gonnabees rise far enough to hide their non-U origins, they often cultivate and display “refined” interests, becoming “connoisseurs,” snapping up works of art imagined to be great, falling asleep at the opera, developing a taste for expensive wines, or perhaps affecting Mandarinesque table manners.

Gonnabees spend their lives responding to a Western culture that exhorts people to “succeed,” first by making money, then by flaunting it. Gonnabee thus aches to join the ranks of those who have overtly “made it,” the so-called Big Shots.

Gonnabees learn—from self-help books and magazines, at inspirational seminars and meetings, on syndicated television shows and in training films—that “making it” is merely a matter of desire and dedication: that anyone who wants It badly enough can have It if only they will do “what It takes.”

Gonnabee dreams are of success and celebrity, of money and fame, of status and power. They foresee penthouse offices, sensuous assistants, lush hotel suites, limousines with extravagant communication systems, finely paneled boardrooms, lavishly furnished private jets. They envision profiles in *Forbes*, portraits in *People*, maybe even the cover of *Time*. Gonnabees like to be around star athletes and dream of owning professional sports teams.

All such things mean vastly more to Gonnabees than whatever they’re actually doing right now, for they never know the satisfaction of genuine job achievement. All they want is the status.

Understanding Gonnabee.

The key to comprehending Gonnabees is to perceive that they are “reactive dependents,” emotionally dependent people whose behavior is forever a reaction to that pervasive emotional ache. Thus, no matter their chronological age, Gonnabees are typically children trapped in emotional time warps, endlessly denying their dependence, endlessly seeking and failing to prove themselves serious adults.

In response to doting parents, Gonnabees become first-rate manipulators, alternately charming or fuming, to make a parent respond instantly to Gonnabee’s every need or whim.

Like John De Lorean, who lived with his mother until he was twenty-nine, most Gonnabees also tend to be slow in leaving the nest,

preferring the cocoon and comforts of the parental home to the gritty frustrations of the real world, and, of course, such cosseted upbringings further impair their emotional growth. Gonnabees thus always need people to stroke, smooth, and comfort them, to tell them what to think, to look after them.

For male Gonnabees, a series of wives—often one-time models or starlets—normally do the stroking. Advertising and television do the telling what to think, as in designer labels directing choice of clothing. Gonnabees usually live beyond their means and are often pledged to a credit-card company for the full amount of this year’s anticipated bonus, sometimes much more.

Gonnabee’s Sting

Gonnabee emotional dependence is a source of constant frustration and anger, which they normally mask either with great charm, a macho pose, or both. The anger is often further exacerbated by an ever-growing sense of social inferiority, springing in many cases from feelings of having been born on the wrong side of the tracks. Gonnabees never realize that the tracks exist only in their own heads, of course, and so they often ache to get even with the world by beating those from the right side of town at their own silly games.

Gonnabees are quick to say, their voices usually rising a quaver as they do so, that “you’ve gotta believe in yourself.” When wound up, they confide that their own success stem from their vision, their courage in believing in themselves, and the capacity to bring their dreams to fruition. The problem, however, is that what Gonnabees call positive thinking is what psychologists call “magical thinking.” They want, indeed, *need*, to believe that their own amazing thought processes in and of themselves can actually cause miracles to happen.

This kind of magical thinking, and the hunger and greed that fuel it, is carried over from childhood, when Gonnabees discovered they could get whatever they wanted by throwing a tantrum.

In reality, behind the macho mask, Gonnabees are invariably deeply negative thinkers, forever worried sick about ever making good on their grandiose goals. To ease the underlying pain, Gonnabees normally devote a great deal of time and effort to getting themselves noticed. Indeed, recognition is typically the entire *raison d’etre* of their lives. Gonnabees persuade the corporate public relations department to concoct and emit

unrelenting releases in which they figure prominently. They aspire to become spokespeople, aligning their names with the corporate product or service, often to the point of figuring in the company's advertising, especially on television, until a general uncertainty prevails as to where they begin and the company ends, or vice versa.

Winning Through Intimidation

Gonnabees are inherently unsuited by their inability to live in the real world to perform any kind of high-pressure management role. Things usually start to go awry from the moment Gonnabee is named leader. The pampered child takes over and makes terrible, infantile decisions. Then, when these off-the-wall directives create or compound problems, Gonnabee angrily breaks down. His "leadership" style could be labeled "winning through intimidation." He wants to post outstanding results by any means necessary. His subordinates are not people to be lead, but pawns to be manipulated. His superficial charm masks an absence of authentic empathy. Other than a craving for admiration he is totally unconcerned with his followers' feelings. If they "fail him"—or even dare to utter a word of criticism—he fires them without a second thought.

If Gonnabee manages to hang on to his job, it is always at great cost to his colleagues as well as to his own physique. He will suffer from asthma, colitis, migraines, ulcers, alcohol problems, while, of course—for as long as he can—carefully hiding such problems from public view.



Gonnabee's Good-bye

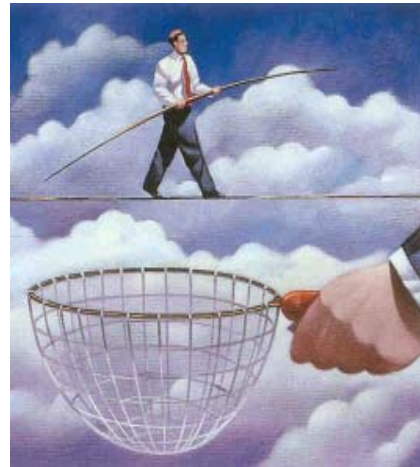
The great irony of the Gonnabee life is that despite the fantastic (a very apt word) drive for success, any *actual* success never satisfies or lasts. For, whenever Gonnabees fall upon good times, they continue to suffer pervasive feelings of guilt, unworthiness, and anxiety. Then, unless something or someone is around to save them from themselves, a remorseless mental pressure builds, forever forcing the unconscious to find some way to ease this essentially neurotic discomfort. The dilemma is normally resolved by some kind of unconscious self-sabotage whereby Gonnabee finds some ingenious means of torpedoing his own

achievements; which is why so many apparently “successful” men and women suddenly fall to such apparently mysterious, self-destructive behavior. (It might possibly be argued that Jack Welch ultimately embarked upon this route by descending into a flagrant affair with an all-too ardent *Harvard Business Review* reporter.)

Dealing with a Gonnabee

My colleague Dr. Harry Levinson says that five or so years of classic psychoanalysis can release Gonnabee from his neuroses. My personal experience, in both corporate and prison settings, has been that a pressure cooker approach can sometimes effect swifter modification. The key is to breach entrenched defenses, and introduce a set of carefully structured transformational concepts—I call them *transcepts*—aimed at breaking old emotional paradigms, instilling new values and effecting authentic transformation. The success or failure of this methodology depends upon Gonnabee’s willingness to suspend denial for long enough to process and absorb new ideas.

So, yes, lightning can strike. Gonnabees are shrewd, manipulative, and go-getting. So long as they are not pathological liars—and, be warned, many are—their status needs and manipulative skills can be harnessed, usually into sales roles. But they need to be kept on a tight leash. If you acquire a Gonnabee consider making him “president” of a tightly structured marketing division. As long as Gonnabee doesn’t have to make important decisions, sales results may be posted. Just *never* give a Gonnabee a *real* president’s role, for this will assuredly sink the enterprise. If he insists on such promotion, let him go.



Later, when you read or hear of how Gonnabee has become a big success somewhere—maybe even with a close competitor—just reflect that it’s *Gonnabee* whose putting out the puffery and that he’s likely riding for a fall. And just rejoice that it won’t come at your expense. □

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 a 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 be one."

Jack Butler, founder
and CEO, Municipal
Bond Investors
Association

And this is exactly what the *Wareham 3 plus 3* teambuilding 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 and 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 ♦

