Press Release

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Paranoiacs Get to the Top

Paranoia helps people climb the professional ladder. This is what Dr. Niels Van Quaquebeke, a professor at Kühne Logistics University (KLU) in Hamburg, finds support for in a recent study. High levels of distrust of others goes hand in hand with the constant awareness of potentially disadvantageous situations, helping paranoid people to ascend the corporate ladder faster.

What do people need to get ahead at their companies? Degrees and experience are not the only things that play a role. Specific character traits are also important. “You have to be able to dance on the social parquet,” says Van Quaquebeke, listing one of the requirements. In his view, people with paranoid personalities have an advantage in this domain.

“One of the paranoid personality’s traits is the feeling of being deceived and exploited. Hence, those affected think that most people in their surroundings are hostile towards them. In response, paranoid people make an effort to manage relationships in a way that exposes as few of their weak spots as possible. This makes them, for instance, constantly examine their social environment and respond with frequent changes as to whom they consider friend and foe.” According to Van Quaquebeke, that helps their careers. “It is important to avoid situations that could damage your career. People with paranoid tendencies are very good in that.”

In his study, Van Quaquebeke surveyed 441 employees in different departments over a 6-month period. They answered questions about their positions in the company, how many employees they were managing, and also completed a questionnaire on paranoid ideations. The results revealed that higher scores on paranoid cognitions were indicators of success at climbing the corporate career ladder over time.

“A paranoid tendency doesn’t have to be a negative character trait for managers,” explains Van Quaquebeke. “Paranoiacs always expect the worst and develop protective strategies.” This can refer to the behavior of employees and
colleagues, the intentions of business partners, and even supposed attempts at sabotaging the company or its products. Van Quaquebeke mentions Andrew Grove, Intel’s former boss, as an example of a business executive with a paranoid personality. Grove was constantly worrying about the quality of his company’s products, the factory’s ability to perform, his employees' work ethic, and the plans his competitors were making. And that drove him to make advance preparations for many situations. "The business world is becoming more and more uncertain," says Van Quaquebeke. "We are being faced with economic crises, global competition, and new, disruptive technological developments. Managers with paranoid characteristics may often be better prepared for challenges like these because they have already played out all the scenarios in their heads."

The article Paranoia as an Antecedent and Consequence of Getting Ahead in Organizations: Time-Lagged Effects Between Paranoid Cognitions, Self-Monitoring, and Changes in Span of Control was published in Frontiers in Psychology, one of the most widely cited scientific journals of psychology.

About KLU
Kühne Logistics University – Wissenschaftliche Hochschule für Logistik und Unternehmensführung (KLU) is a private university located in Hamburg’s HafenCity. The independent, state-certified university focuses on the areas of logistics and management. With one BSc and two MSc degree programs, a PhD program, and a part-time Executive MBA, KLU offers its students a high level of specialization and excellent learning conditions. In open, customized management seminar series, industry specialists and managers benefit from the application of academic findings to practical issues. KLU has an international team of professors who teach in English. The programs are oriented toward students from Germany and abroad. The outstanding research at KLU is concentrated on the Key Competence Areas of Digital Transformation, Creating Value, and Sustainability for the benefit of transportation, global logistics, and supply chain management.

The 2014 Handelsblatt rankings identify KLU as one of the leading research universities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland based on research output per professor. In the 2014 CHE university rankings, KLU obtained the highest ranking in all major criteria.

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