

SUICIDAL CEOS: HOW SUCCESS CAN KILL

BY BERNICE MAUNE | January 30, 2014



Suicide among top executives is unfortunately not a rare occurrence. In the wake of the suspected suicide of Tata MD Karl Slym this week, DESTINY examines this disturbing trend

In the case of Slym, it is believed the head of what was once India's fastest-growing car maker was under intense pressure to turn Tata's struggling sales around. On Slym's watch, the company had experienced a dip in sales for the first time in years. The substantial loss in profits has been attributed to the economic downturn. The Tata executive plunged to his death this week. According to Thai police it was impossible for Slym to have "slipped" out of the small window he fell from.

In July last year Swisscom CEO Carlton Schloter was found dead at his home. According to the [Huffington Post](#), Schloter had served as CEO of the predominantly government-owned company from 2006 to 2012. Police reports strongly suggest that Scholter killed himself although the company declined to comment on the circumstances regarding his death.

When Kari Kairamo, former CEO of Nokia died in 1988, the mobile group sent out a statement that he had died of a sudden illness. However reports soon emerged that Kairamo had in fact committed suicide. The [New York Times](#) reported a short time later that Nokia executives had not denied reports that Kairamo had killed himself and had stated his death had no connection to company-related matters. Kairamo is credited with drafting a corporate plan which has yielded profitable results for Nokia some 25 years after his death although it may have come at the expense of his life.

The executives at the helm of global corporate giants are undeniably under heavy pressure to perform. After all, the buck stops with them. They are responsible for high-level decision making, including creating and instituting strategies, and managing the overall operations and resources of a company.

Carrying the responsibility for the livelihoods of thousands of people, and protecting often-legendary brand identities and profits can put these executives under unbearable strain at work and at home. When the pressure becomes too much to bear, suicide is sometimes seem the only escape.

Penny Holburn, business coach and owner of [lifecoachingbusiness.co.za](#), says people contemplate suicide for two main reasons: feeling burdened, and/or feeling a deep sense of isolation. The heavy responsibility of their positions can leave top execs vulnerable to both.

According to Holburn, many CEOs solely derive their sense of worth from their job, their salary and the prestigious lifestyle afforded by their position.

“They present a successful front to the world. When this looks like it is going to crumble, such as when the company does badly, they lose their job, they are in financial trouble, get into legal trouble or get very bad press, it becomes too much,” she explains.

Consequently the masks these executives may present to the world, to their families, and to themselves dissolve. Holburn believes this leads to decreased self-confidence and eventually the mindset that their successes and accomplishments are worthless.

Long work hours, extensive travel away from home and strained relationships with family and friends may add to an already poor self-image says Holburn. In addition, a lack of experience of personal failure and the inability to deal with setbacks builds up to a depressed state of mind in these high achievers.

“Suicide is also found where there is untreated depression. CEO’s are often people who have to present a front of competence and capability, and being able to deal with everything. Such people, especially men (and most CEOs are still men) are not likely to turn to family or to doctors for help. They are acculturated to tough it out. The need to be macho and get ahead also means they are not likely to go for help until it may be too late,” says Holburn.