

Giving Fear a Seat at the Table

How great leaders
manage their hidden
fears to transform
themselves and
their organizations.

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F M G L E A D I N G[®]

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The most successful leaders we've worked with share several traits. But one may be surprising: their ability to recognize a personal fear that was fueling ineffective behavior, harness it and then lead for the better. In doing so, they took their successful careers to an entirely new level.

In this paper, we examine myths about such fears – myths that explain why leaders are reluctant to acknowledge them. We then examine the four most common fears we've seen in leaders, using the Enneagram model of personality types to explain them. We tell the stories of leaders who possessed each fear (but disguise their names and certain details so they can remain anonymous):

- **The fear of being wrong** – being highly afraid to make mistakes and be shown as wrong, which can make them always unsatisfied task masters.
- **The fear of not being good enough** – leaders who struggle with deep insecurities and continually having to prove their value, which erodes their colleagues' ability to trust them.
- **The fear of missing out** – of being deprived of certain experiences, which makes them impatient, impulsive and often self-destructive.
- **The fear of being victimized** – These leaders fiercely protect themselves and others, but can be highly defensive and controlling.

After explaining and illustrating these fears, we explore the four steps that leaders took to acknowledge their previously unrecognized fears and dramatically change their behavior for the better – for themselves and their organizations.

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ear is part of the human condition. In itself it is not unhealthy or dysfunctional, and in some ways it's useful. But fears are uncomfortable, and many people are reluctant to show fear or even to see it in themselves. This is particularly true among executives. Leaders are wary of showing any fear at all, lest they seem weak or ineffectual.

The problem is that stifling fear doesn't make it go away. Failing to address it can lead to highly unproductive and often dysfunctional behaviors that get in the way of leaders' success, making it difficult for others to work with them. As a result they suffer both personally and professionally.

Indeed, we know that executive suffering is at an all-time high, and we believe unmanaged fear is a root cause of it. Senior managers are overworked—dealing with jammed inboxes, overbooked schedules, family problems, too much time on the road, and so forth. Executive coaching, a \$2.4 billion global industry in 2015,¹ continues to explode as people search for new methods to correct their performance. And a large and growing number of executives are turning to coping mechanisms such as burying themselves in work, taking medications, or resorting to drugs or alcohol. A Harvard Medical School study found 96% of senior executives feel burned out to varying extents.² Another study found the percentage of U.S. adults on antidepressants had nearly doubled between 1999 and 2012.³ In some professions, alcoholism rates are through the roof. For example, about a third of American lawyers had drinking problems in 2016, while 28% had depression issues, and 19% had anxiety symptoms.⁴

Over the past 30 years, our firm has worked with thousands of leaders (and each of us has worked with hundreds), in many cases coaching them through their unease. We have found that in nearly every case, the executive is operating on an unrecognized core fear (or fears) that is leading to suboptimal behaviors and get-

1 International Coach Federation and PwC, "2016 ICF Global Coaching Study: Executive Summary," p. 10: Global revenue from executive coaching was estimated to be \$2.36 billion in 2015, with 41% of that coming from North America and 38% from Europe. http://www.coachfederation.org/files/FileDownloads/2016ICFGlobalCoachingStudy_ExecutiveSummary.pdf

2 Leslie Kwoh, "When the CEO Burns Out," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2013. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323687604578469124008524696>

3 Elizabeth D. Kantor, Colin D. Rehm, Jennifer S. Haas, et al., "Trends in Prescription Drug Use Among Adults in the U.S. From 1999-2012," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 314, no. 17 (2015): 1818-1830.

4 Elizabeth Olson, "High Rate of Problem Drinking Reported Among Lawyers," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2016. Study by the American Bar Association and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation.

“Fears can be both healthy and unhealthy. But unless leaders acknowledge their fears and give them an appropriate seat at the table, it’s difficult to channel them productively.”

ting in the way of finding more healthy coping mechanisms. (Indeed, none of the people we worked with came to us claiming that a paralyzing fear lay at the heart of his or her challenges.)

However, executives who acknowledge and understand their fears can learn to set aside the shame and leverage those fears in a powerful and protective way. And that, in turn, can produce extraordinary improvements in personal productivity and satisfaction, both in and outside work, as well as higher productivity and morale in people around them.

One woman we worked with, for instance, was a superstar in a billion-dollar healthcare company. She had been recruited from the outside amid high expectations. However, her aggressive behavior and cynical and sarcastic manner soon wore on her colleagues. While she continued to hit her financial and performance targets, she began to irritate her colleagues, as she seemed to be overly focused on impressing and comparing her accomplishments with those of others.

In fact, in spending some time with her, we discovered she behaved like this to tamp down a deep-seated fear of letting people down, of not being “good enough.” She was introduced to us for coaching relatively early in her tenure at the firm, as her boss was concerned she would adversely affect the trust and performance of the executive team. In coaching, it became clear that she had been motivated through her formative years by a “not quite good enough” message. That message, in turn, drove her to continually strive for high performance. However, it crippled her ability to relate to her peers. She got exceptional results out of her teammates and thereby shielded herself—preemptively—from her boss’s criticism.

Only when she was able to confront this fear did she find a constructive way to manage it so that it would no longer cause undue distress. In working with a coach, she became more self-aware and recognized it wasn’t really rational to hold others to unreasonable standards. The act of making this subconscious dialogue conscious was the beginning of a sustainable change. Through awareness and regular dialogue with her coach, she was able almost immediately to make different kinds of choices. The impact on her team was quick and powerful. They were already impressed with what she had achieved; now they were also able to relate to her.

The point is that fears can be both healthy and unhealthy. But unless leaders acknowledge their fears and give them an appropriate seat at the table, it’s difficult to channel them productively.

It’s a process that takes great courage. But it’s also a journey that most executives eventually have to make if they want to develop into strong leaders. While it is not comfortable, the alternative is to continue to suffer and perhaps derail entirely. In

this paper we'll look at the most common fears afflicting executives and spell out strategies for how to channel them in a healthy, productive direction. But first let's take a look at some myths about fear.

FIVE MYTHS ABOUT FEAR

The archetypal leader is a heroic figure, fearless and confident. The business world's most legendary figures—think Jack Welch, Steve Jobs, John D. Rockefeller, Bill Gates—have this aura. But while you might see an indestructible persona on the outside, you don't know what's going on on the inside. What's more, that image is actually destructive when it comes to running a healthy organization because it prevents people from showing any hint of fear and, hence, their true selves.

In fact, we see leaders (and their followers) often believing one (or more) of five debilitating myths about fear, all of which need to be debunked:

- **Myth 1: Fear is bad or unproductive.** In fact, pretending that it's not there is dangerous. Deep fear creates a filter through which we process and interpret reality. For instance, if you are afraid of not being good enough, you may push yourself too hard or make unreasonable demands of your employees.
- **Myth 2: Fear is irrational.** Actually, fear is the most primal and consistent source of fuel in the human experience. It keeps us alive in dangerous situations. However, our instincts haven't been effectively tuned to the corporate experience, so these fears may be misplaced.
- **Myth 3: Fear only exists in "weak" people.** Fear is not the opposite of strength or courage. Indeed, facing your fears honestly takes a great deal of both.
- **Myth 4: Fear can be eliminated.** No, it can't. It's a basic instinct. We can no more rid ourselves of fear than we can any of our other basic instincts.
- **Myth 5: Fear should be eliminated.** In certain situations, fear is an extremely rational instinct and should be heeded. Most of us don't have to worry about trying to outrun a tiger, but a little fear can warn you of potential trouble and even provide a healthy shot of adrenaline.

The point is that fear is here to stay. The healthy thing is to recognize it, respect it, and let it guide you in positive ways rather than into problematic behavior.

Myth 1:
Fear is bad or unproductive

Myth 2:
Fear is irrational.

Myth 3:
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Myth 4:
Fear can be eliminated.

Myth 5:
Fear should be eliminated.

THE MOST COMMON EXECUTIVE FEARS

The Enneagram is a model of the human psyche with deep roots in multiple cultures and traditions. Adapted for use in modern coaching, the [Enneagram Institute's personality model](#)⁵ defines nine basic personality types, and we have depicted the fears of each type as they play out in a business setting. Here we'll focus on the four most common. (For the full list, see the sidebar, "The Nine Workplace Fears.")

Fear of being wrong

This is the fear harbored by people characterized by the "reformer" personality type, according to the Enneagram Institute's model. These executives are extremely focused on rules, ethics, standards, and "right vs. wrong." They strive to make positive contributions, but are deeply afraid of making a mistake, of choosing a course of action that will later prove to be "objectively" wrong.

Like all fears, the fear of being wrong comes with some advantages. For instance, reformers are well-suited to operational work, where there often is a clear right and wrong way, and getting it wrong can have dire consequences. They also excel at turnarounds or tumultuous environments, where the old rules are no longer working and new ones must be put into place.

However, reformers are highly critical perfectionists. They create cultures in which others struggle to meet their standards, so they are hard to work for. Their followers often feel like they will never measure up.

Consider, for instance, the case of Dennis, a leader of health care companies who had an impressive track record of managing turnarounds.⁶ We met him under the premise of an HR-initiated 360-degree feedback process. His boss positioned it as routine—and in fact, such feedback initiatives were commonly conducted. But in this case HR initiated the 360 because Dennis was beginning to create friction in the organization. The interviews we conducted with Dennis' direct reports and peers differed significantly from what we heard from his superiors in this organization.

Both sets of feedback described Dennis as a man of strong convictions and principles, both morally and operationally. He had very clear methods of operating and was convinced that these were key to his success, having achieved a top executive role in one of the industry's most admired companies. His superiors viewed him as a powerful leadership asset—Dennis knew what needed to be done, and he was willing to make very difficult "asks" of his team as well as himself to achieve it.

⁵ Enneagram Institute, "The Nine Enneagram Type Descriptions," Enneagram Institute. <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-descriptions>

⁶ All names and certain identifying characteristics have been changed to protect individuals' privacy

But his team told a different story. They respected Dennis—but they also feared him. He was seen as unwilling to compromise, and the team suffered under the weight of his high standards. Dennis’ unresolved fear of being wrong made it difficult for his team to tell him when he was wrong. They were afraid such honesty would set him off. But that meant they didn’t inform Dennis early about problems that he said wouldn’t be problems. So while they knew he was committed to doing the right thing for the company, they didn’t believe he was willing to do the right thing for them.

As we began to share this feedback with Dennis, he was deeply affected by the reality that much of his team lived in fear of him and, thus, were not forthright when he was in error. Indeed, the plus side of his personality type kicked in quickly; his sense of integrity drove him to get to work on solving the problem. He wanted his team to see that he was now going to do the right thing—just not the way he’d originally thought of it.

With time, he began to understand his core fears and motivations. No one in his world had any idea that he continually judged himself as a deeply flawed person and was always compensating for it. Now he could better see how his secret feelings about his own flaws were affecting his team.

Over time, Dennis became sophisticated in explaining his own “operating system/worldview” to his direct reports. He explained to his folks how he was likely to frustrate them and invited them to engage directly with him in the midst of such conflicts. The simple act of opening up to the team and welcoming pushback helped Dennis and others put his fears into perspective. (This type of “how I think” orientation is a best-practice for leaders getting on board with new teams.)

In the three organizations where we worked with Dennis, he achieved remarkable turnarounds of failing business units, largely through his keen focus on “doing the right thing, even when it’s hard,” coupled with self-awareness. Dennis was even able to create a small group of loyal followers who were so engaged with his authentic leadership style that they were eager to move with him to each successive company.

Fear of not being good enough

This fear characterizes the type referred to as “[the achiever](#).” Achievers are confident, highly driven, and diplomatic and poised. But beneath that shiny exterior, they struggle with serious insecurities, deeply concerned about their image and desperate to prove their worth. They’re always comparing and want others to know how well they’ve done.

But this may come at a cost to their authenticity, not to mention their capacity for joy. Such a leader might, for instance, decide to climb a mountain, not because it would be a rewarding experience but because he or she wants to be seen as having

“No one in his world had any idea that he continually judged himself as a deeply flawed person and was always compensating for it.”



done it. Because their core motivations relate to how they are seen by others, they are at risk of fudging the facts. Indeed, while the qualities of the achiever may seem to overlap with the reformer, the achiever is more concerned with appearances, looking like she has it all together.

Suzanne, for instance, was a highly successful strategy consultant we met 10 years into her career. She delivered on every project and made it look easy. She was a shining example to her peers and was already, even at a relatively young age, a role model for others.

What other people didn't see, however, was Suzanne's underlying anxiety that she might fail or how that anxiety was crippling her emotionally. So while her career continued to thrive, her personal life was deteriorating. By the time she met us, cracks were starting to show in the workplace—particularly when it came to her relationship with the truth. She worked harder than she needed to spin the facts to ensure they painted a positive story.

Behind this, Suzanne struggled with real closeness with her colleagues. In a private feedback session with her manager, she received a devastating message: While many of her colleagues admired her, they didn't trust her. She seemed more interested in her own image, they felt, and had no capacity to care about others. The truth was that she was in fact terrified of not measuring up.

The good news was that, as an achiever, she cared deeply about how her colleagues saw her, so true to her nature, she set about to rectify her behavior. The breakthrough came in simply recognizing the impact of the behaviors and the degree to which they caused alienation, rather than connection. Over the course of a few years, Suzanne was able to become far more aware of the situations in which her fear was driving her interactions, and over time she developed a much broader set of skills to manage the fear. In the last decade she's evolved her leadership to the point where she is now known for her trustworthiness and selflessness.

Fear of missing out

This is the “*enthusiast*” in the Enneagram Institute's model. Such people are spontaneous and high spirited, constantly seeking new experiences and multitasking in the extreme. They are full of optimism and curiosity. They seem to have an almost magical ability to catalyze the energy of others.

But deep down they are afraid of being deprived and of being painfully aware of their own imperfections. Their enthusiasm for taking on responsibility is often a way to cope with their fear of being alone with themselves. We call it the fear of missing out, but deep down it's about not really liking who they are. They seek out stimulation as a distraction, and they can be highly impatient and impulsive. Needing anesthesia, they may also turn to other types of excess: gluttony, sub-

stance abuse, over-exercising. They have a tendency toward self-destruction.

Scott was one of the most dynamic leaders we'd ever encountered. He'd been able to get even the more experienced and seasoned professionals in his organization to follow him. His boundless enthusiasm and energy, coupled with a clear set of values, made him an easy leader to follow. He was also extremely smart and motivated by a desire to positively affect the world through his job. He was responsible for scaling a very unique business from a startup to nearly a billion dollars in revenue. During the first few years, his willingness to try to new things and keep many options open led to rapid business improvements, key hires, and significant growth.

Three or four years into it, however, some clear deficits in Scott's management style began to emerge. There was enough "mass" to the organization that his last-minute changes of mind and unwillingness to make difficult decisions had dragged down the performance of his management team. This continued, unchecked, for several years, buoyed by Scott's boundless enthusiasm. People wanted to give him a pass simply out of love for him.

But by the time he was ultimately removed from his position, that love had run out. He had created an unworkable management structure with dozens of direct reports and many critical strategic decisions unmade or half-made. The executive team he had put in place was badly misaligned and suffered from infighting and skepticism. Ultimately, they found themselves in the midst of several very difficult years due to serious operational and compliance issues. It took the organization, and Scott, several years to recover from this.

But when enthusiasts keep the fear of missing out in perspective, they can be truly transformational leaders. They are optimistic and charismatic and make people want to be their better selves. And they are wellsprings of ideas, constantly scanning the universe for possibilities and seeking out opportunities that others might miss.

Fear of being victimized or taken advantage of

The leaders suffering this fear are "challengers" in the Enneagram Institute's model. They are bold, confident, independent, and resourceful—heroic types, if you will. They push for truth and justice and they are likely to protect the underdog. But deep down, they are protecting themselves as well. They are afraid of being seen as weak or vulnerable, so they believe they need to win every battle. They can be very defensive, and they tend to create unnecessary tension. They can also be very controlling, especially of other people, and are the least likely to admit how deeply fear drives them.

Roger, the COO in a hospitality business, is a classic example. We met him 10 years after he was discharged from the military, where he served in an elite unit. His foray into corporate America was an almost immediate success. Drawing on his clarity,

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resolve, and focus, Roger turned around a number of struggling businesses in a variety of industries. His instincts as a leader distinguished him quickly from others who had been in the corporate world for much longer.

But eventually Roger's winning leadership approach began to fail him; his intensity started to wear thin on his colleagues. His direct reports were struggling to meet his expectations, and his "unstoppable" image created distance between him and his peers. As we began to get to know him, it became clear that he viewed his team members and colleagues as refusing to take accountability for their outcomes and relying on excuses he didn't consider valid. He did not want the perceived failures of others to reflect on him. That made Roger feel vulnerable and powerless.

Roger wanted to work diligently with his coach—as he worked at all things—to “push through” whatever he was struggling with. The reality is, he had failed to create connections and intimacy with folks who badly wanted his approval. While they respected his formidable energy and resolve, they struggled to find commonality with him.

When challengers allow their fear to take over, they can become abusive and manipulative. But when they channel their fear in a healthy way by giving it an appropriate seat at the table, challengers can put their power to good use. They can stand up for what they believe in and wield their power in very positive ways.

TRANSFORMING FEAR INTO FUEL

The solution we propose is not to attempt to eliminate these fears; they are essential aspects of humanity. Indeed, pretending we are fearless is a sign of weakness or blindness as a leader. But in our experience, leaders get lost or overwhelmed when fears consume most of their available energy; they may be rendered nearly helpless without knowing how it happened. The antidote is putting fear back into proportion—that is, acknowledging it's a normal response to a perceived threat—and recognizing it doesn't have to preclude productive choices.

Working with leaders on this, we've seen remarkable transformations in people's relationships with fear. And it's not only possible; we believe it's also essential for leaders. The best leaders we've worked with are aware of their fears and able to make conscious choices in spite of those fears. And the antidote we'll describe is the same, regardless of what frightens you. There are four parts to the process: acknowledge, interrogate, choose, and act.

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The **Nine** Workplace Fears

We have taken the Enneagram Institute's model of personality, which identifies nine personality types and the things they fear, and studied how these fears play out in the workplace.

1. Fear of being wrong (called “the reformer” in the Enneagram Institute’s model – principled, self-controlled, perfectionistic). The leader driven by a fear of being wrong focuses on rules, standards, deep moral rigor, and doing the “right thing.” In the process, these leaders create cultures where others struggle to meet their standards. Followers often feel like they never measure up. Deep down inside, this leader is afraid of choosing a course that will later be seen as wrong, so they exercise incredible discipline to ensure it doesn’t happen.

As they get to know their fear and distill it, these leaders develop the courage to cope with more ambiguous situations while still holding people to high standards. The overbearing weight of their own fear is dissolved, and they now embody “doing the right thing” even when it’s inconvenient or costly.

2. Fear of being all alone (“the helper”—caring, generous, people-pleasing). The leader driven by a fear of being alone or without connection to others develops a sophisticated set of relationship management skills. Such leaders seem to be able to pre-emptively discern what their followers need and provide it without even being asked. They model a type of selfless, sacrificial leadership that others become deeply reliant upon. When asked what they need, they frequently brush it off, saying they are fine, and refuse to accept help.

Ultimately this falls apart, as these leaders, like all human beings, have real needs. Their generosity and kindness can turn into rage in an instant when they realize that no one else in their lives is as committed to serving others as they are. Their selfless acts eventually stand in the way of real relationships with others; followers can’t relate to them until they acknowledge their own needs as well. But as they become healthier, they are quite successful at building highly engaged teams with deep interpersonal connections.

3. Fear of not being good enough (“the achiever”—pragmatic, driven, image-conscious). This is the star performer and over-achiever. These folks constantly excel and exceed expectations. Often they have a “perfect” family to match the perfect job or some other combination of impressive assets. They inspire and motivate followers to higher performance. However, driven by a fear of never measuring up, they set the hamster wheel in motion at an unsustainable pace.

Followers tend to struggle to connect with the super-human persona these leaders project. They’re hard to relate to and actually come across as having no fear. But when they finally open up, they can be truly inspirational, modeling superlative performance and deep honesty about what it means to be human.

4. Fear of being just like everybody else (“the individualist”—sensitive, dramatic, self-absorbed). These leaders are deep thinkers who are also very connected to emotions and feelings. They can be exceptionally creative and lead through innovation, thought leadership, and profound ideas. To a degree, a sort of narcissism comes into play—they revel in their own profundity. They become frustrated when others see things as well or as deeply as they do. Honest or deep relationships are difficult to maintain.

Because they tend to be lone wolves, it’s difficult for individualists to gain alignment among followers. They isolate themselves with their thoughts, and they tend to make myopic decisions and orient themselves toward their thoughts and feelings. They struggle to implement a plan or strategy. But as they become healthier, they recognize that their emotional connection to their own thoughts is a function of personality, and their expectation that others share this connection diminishes. From this perspective they are able to give the gift of their ideas without the disappointment cycle when others don’t regard them as well as they do.

The **Nine** Workplace Fears

5. Fear of not being able to figure it out (“the investigator”—perceptive, innovative, isolated). Such leaders are drawn to industries and professions where problem solving and technical insight are paramount. They emphasize knowing over relating and can devote enormous amounts of energy and rigor to solving complex problems. They need a degree of isolation to do this kind of work and followers can frequently feel shut out or disconnected from them.

As they mature, these leaders realize they have a broader calling. They come to understand that the most complicated problems must be solved by a group of aligned, engaged followers and can see their role as creating connections for the purpose of solving problems. They begin to find joy in experiences and interactions in addition to the deep satisfaction they get from knowledge.

6. Fear of trusting oneself (“the loyalist”—engaging, responsible, anxious). These leaders are driven by the belief that safety and security are to be found somewhere out there, rather than internally or intrinsically. Accordingly, they become extremely astute at reading situations and pre-empting problems. The ultimate scenario planners, they look around every corner yet never feel completely confident in the solution they choose, even when others are awestruck by its thoroughness and comprehensiveness and are ready to stop planning and get to work.

Followers can struggle with the anxious energy behind this leader’s actions. Because these leaders are always casting about for new solutions, they project a level of ambiguity that makes it difficult for followers to operate under a coherent vision. The good news is that these leaders create very solid solutions; their challenge is to learn when to stop.

7. Fear of missing out (“the enthusiast”—engaging, versatile, scattered). Enthusiasts are energetic, optimistic, and enthusiastic. They inspire followers with possibilities and their willingness to consider new ideas. They have a constant appetite for innovation and trying new things, making the future seem full of opportunity. Such leaders are some of the most charismatic, easily engaging followers with their personal energy. And while they are serious, they can also bring a degree of joy and playfulness to problem solving.

They run into difficulty when their attention span ultimately falls out of alignment with the needs of the organization. They

struggle with focus, and their followers struggle with a lack of clarity about precise direction and alignment around the organization’s goals. But as these leaders mature, they become better at identifying and following through with key priorities. They find a new type of joy in seeing initiatives through to completion.

8. Fear of being victimized or taken advantage of (“the challenger”—self-confident, decisive, confrontational). These leaders embody strength, power, and confidence. They take charge readily and are very willing to be held accountable for the results they promise. While they may not always have the capability to deliver on their commitments, you’d never know it from the confidence they project. These leaders gravitate toward situations others may avoid where there is lots of opposition. They are comfortable dealing with resistance and can even see it as a validation that they are pushing in the right direction.

They get into trouble when their strength is not coupled with a genuine sense of their own limitations. Their bias toward power and self-preservation impels them to hide the very weaknesses that their followers need to see in order to be able to relate to them. As they mature, however, these leaders can become truly heroic, standing up to power when necessary and choosing the battles that truly matter. Even in the toughest situations, they can build confidence and loyalty among followers.

9. Fear of conflict (“the peacemaker”—receptive, agreeable, complacent). These leaders tend to steer around disagreement and confrontation almost intuitively. They easily create harmony and alignment. They are tremendously effective in development and other multi-stakeholder complex situations; they always seem to find a middle ground.

They tend to struggle, however, when conflict is unavoidable—and where conflict may actually be productive. Their own discomfort leads them to ignore hard decisions or conversations, even when those things are in the best interest of the organization. Followers tend to lose faith as they wonder whether their leader can actually see what needs to be done or simply doesn’t have the courage to do it. As they mature, these leaders begin to realize that the thing they most fear can be highly productive if handled well. They can go from avoiding conflict to managing it in extremely clean ways, able to isolate the key issues and focus on problems rather than people.

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Acknowledge

The majority of leaders we work with attempt to skate over the reality of their fear. But as simple as it sounds, the first step is recognizing the reality of a deeply held fear that has the potential to limit leadership effectiveness, life satisfaction, and even organizational results. Consider the work of [Brené Brown](#), who has written and spoken extensively on vulnerability. (You can find her TED Talk on the subject [here](#).) She argues persuasively that allowing yourself to be truly authentic makes you feel vulnerable, but that's okay; it is powerful in deepening connections with other people. The reality is that when leaders create those connections, they build resonance with their followers. The boss becomes easier to relate to.

Consider how this played out for Suzanne, the leader described earlier as fearful of not being good enough. She is a classic achiever in the Enneagram Institute's model. On the surface, she appeared to be the among the least "broken" of the leaders we've worked with on this. She was very polished and put together, very smart and successful, with a lot going for her.

But in reality she was deeply disconnected from herself. That made it hard for her to know what she really wanted—and it made it difficult for others to connect with her. She was constantly comparing herself to others, and you couldn't get a straight answer from her about what she actually believed. Even as simple a question as, "Where do you want to go to dinner?" was met with, "Where do other people want to go?" As a result, while people respected her performance, they didn't find her trustworthy. When she got this feedback from her manager, she was shocked and wanted to turn that around.

To help her understand where this was coming from, we started with her biography, looking at the most meaningful times of her life, beginning with high school. More specifically, we wanted to look at the choices she made and how she defined success. In her teen years she was excellent at sports, top of her class—choosing things that she knew she could excel at, not necessarily the things that intrinsically held interest for her. The same held true in college. We talked about what she did during the add/drop period. Again, she would take classes where she was sure she'd get an A.

Compounding her trouble, her lack of sense of self had created difficulty in her marriage, which had recently ended when we met her. The fact of her failed marriage created some dissonance for her—it didn't look right because "successful people don't get divorced."

Such people stand out as employees and move up quickly, but often come off as inauthentic.



“When people are mired in fear, they have difficulty challenging the reality of the situation. They see the cost of changing as inordinately high and worry that it might cause their worst fears to come true.”

Interrogate

The next step is to interrogate the fear. We ask: What is my current reality? And what role does the fear play? Suzanne, for instance, had been recently hit with the reality that her team didn't trust her. Her epiphany was that she was so afraid of not measuring up that she spent all of her life comparing herself to others and trying to look good. As a result, she was unaware of what truly mattered to her and which situations brought out her best.

During the coaching process, our team conducts a painstaking audit of the costs of the fear: its impact and implications. We talk about key relationships, performance against goals, aspirations, and happiness or satisfaction, not just on the job but in life. To do this, people may need assistance from others, such as from 360-degree reviews, friends, relatives, and therapists.

Then we look at whether the fears and their implications are grounded in reality. When people are mired in fear, they have difficulty challenging the reality of the situation. They see the cost of changing as inordinately high and worry that it might cause their worst fears to come true. With some interrogation, though, they can begin to see that their fears are out of proportion. In rare cases, the worst scenario does come true, but far more often it does not.

So with Suzanne, for example, we talked about what it would mean if she failed. Who would she be? Her perception was that if she failed, she had nothing. And when it came to her divorce, there was no ignoring the fact that her marriage had failed. But with some coaching she began to come to terms with the fact that she was still a successful, competent person. She also realized her definition of success wasn't just to look good; she also wanted to be a good boss, which meant that she had some work to do.

Also consider the work we did with Scott—the “enthusiast,” described above as suffering from the fear of missing out. He led with enthusiasm, charm, and energy without realizing the impact his scattered behavior had on others. For example, Scott's strength at engaging with new things got in the way of making timely decisions—he was always keeping his options open. His people became increasingly frustrated with him. Because he was so engaging and appealing, people put up with his scatteredness. But it began to interfere with work—especially as he reached higher levels of authority, where clear decisions became more and more important.

We began our coaching work with him as the business he led was starting to fall apart, which became his wake-up call. Looking at where his fear came from, we talked about the fact that he had endured a number of very challenging circumstances in his elementary school years. From an early age he was coping with things his peers had never experienced, and because his childhood had been uncomfortable, he learned to escape.



In his efforts to stave off feelings of pain or deprivation, he constantly sought new experiences to avoid being alone with himself. He learned that he was uncomfortable creating boundaries or saying no and took ownership of the impact he'd had on the people in his life. And he got to work cleaning up his relationships, particularly with his spouse.

Scott is now entertaining job offers—and taking care to think about his next move in a healthy way.

Choose

Knowing what you now know, what do you want to do next? This aspect of working through fears rests on clarifying commitments. This can help you open your mind to choices when it comes to deciding what changes you truly want to make. Some questions to ask:

- If I objectively evaluate my actions right now, what would the evidence say that I'm committed to?
- How does this differ from what I say I want?
- Practically speaking, if my desires and actions are not fully aligned, what does that indicate?

Once you gain clarity around your choices, you must gather the resources you will need to achieve what you've committed to do. You'll need to enlist aid from colleagues and others in the organization, as well as trusted outsiders such as family and friends. Not everyone is suited to this role; they must be able to hold you to your commitments, and many people avoid such confrontations. Once you have the right people, they may also need some coaching to learn to do this. You also need to grant them permission to relate to you in a new way.

For Suzanne, this phase involved choosing to be truthful and taking on work projects that weren't a slam dunk—challenging herself to learn from a place of potential incompetence. She also worked to get in touch with what she liked rather than choosing things that other people admired. One helpful exercise she did was walking through museums and thinking about what she liked and why—without asking anyone else's opinion.

Ten years on, her career has taken off. She received a series of promotions, taking on bigger and more important projects. She eventually went off to form her own successful firm and is regarded as a highly effective and genuine leader. Her employees love her, and she works in a team environment where people are drawn to her, which means that she has the freedom to choose who works for her. And with a completely new foundation for intimate relation-

“The choice Roger made was to become more honest about who he was—to himself and others—and become a more forgiving person.”

ships, she has remarried and is more settled and content in her personal life.

Roger, the former military officer driven by the fear of being taken advantage of or victimized (a “challenger” per the Enneagram),. This personality type is both a force of nature and extremely vulnerable. It’s not surprising he pursued a military career, with a clear chain of command, and power-based hierarchical relationships.

He went into corporate America with the same attitude toward power. He inspired people with his formidable presence but also evoked great fear. He was especially triggered by what he perceived as excuses. Roger’s view of underachievers was, “It’s not that you can’t, it’s that you won’t.” He didn’t hesitate to dress people down, and usually in front of other people. We asked him how he felt in these situations. His response: “furious.”

While coaching wouldn’t necessarily be something Roger would naturally choose, he became willing to engage with us once he realized that one person on his team routinely set him off, even though he knew at a rational level this shouldn’t be the case. Roger tried to do what he’d always done—push a team member through sheer power and intimidation—but it wasn’t working and he couldn’t understand why. His boss suggested that he take advantage of the coaching that was offered as part of the company’s leadership development process.

Ultimately, Roger and his coach focused on orchestrating interactions where he very intentionally revealed his humanity to his team. He explained that, behind his resolve, he asked questions and suffered insecurities just like they did. The choice Roger made was to become more honest about who he was—to himself and others—and become a more forgiving person. In fact, he had the ability to be nurturing. He then surrounded himself with a cadre of advisers. Among many things, they helped him become more open about his own weaknesses—to show that he had a vulnerable side just like everybody else.

Over the past six years, this has transformed Roger’s leadership style. Retaining his intense focus on results, he’s learned to share more about himself. That has enabled him to develop genuine relationships with the people he works with. He’s also softened his appearance. Earlier in his career, he projected an intimidating look, with a shaved head and intense stare. Today he’s grown his hair out; it’s wavy with plenty of grey, and he looks more like a CEO. In short, he managed to develop a personal brand as a thoughtful, introspective leader who people want to follow.

And he’s done very well in his career. When we met Roger, he was running an operating region of a business. Today he’s the CEO of one of the largest companies in his industry, leading a group of sophisticated top-level executives who can now connect with him—people who would not have put up with him before.

Act

This part of the process is just what it sounds like. Leaders need to learn to act mindfully, aware of how their actions affect others and staying true to themselves. This is not always easy, but good leaders can work to improve their mindfulness to the point where it significantly enhances their authenticity and strength.

Consider the case of Dennis, described earlier as an exemplar of the “reformer” category. Though he was extremely good at turning around businesses, he was creating undue stress on himself and his colleagues thanks to his fear of being wrong. A look deeper into his personality and experiences helped us see what was going on.

He came from a tough background. While ascending the corporate ladder, he was also nursing a private addiction. He overcame his addiction and set his path straight, drawing on his strong religious beliefs. But then, Dennis was dogmatic about everything. He believed that there is a single “right” way to do anything. He might, for instance, ask a question which had, say, five synonymous answers. If you didn’t hit on the one he was thinking of, he’d be inclined to quickly say, “You’re wrong.” A task master, Dennis had a corrective, pedantic style that was hard to relate to. People had become afraid of him and began to steer around him, rather than work with him.

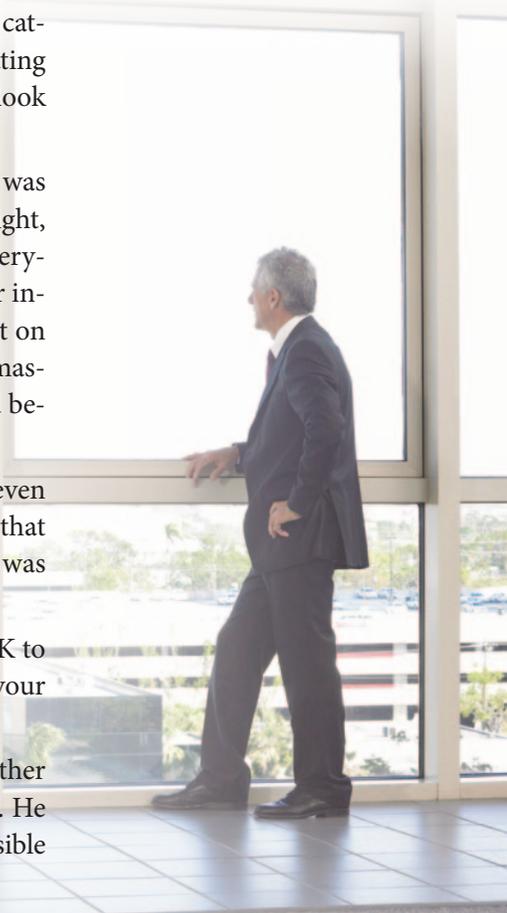
What people didn’t understand about Dennis was that he held himself to an even higher standard than he did others. His deep fear under all of this was his belief that he was fundamentally wrong, and the resulting rigor that this brought to his life was unbearable, at times, to himself and to others.

Dennis went through our process and had to learn to acknowledge that it is OK to be wrong sometimes, that perfection is not an achievable standard. Sometimes your team won’t meet your expectations, but they may very well still meet the goal.

When he came to the “act” phase, Dennis began to proactively tell his story to other people—sharing how his difficult background shaped how he viewed the world. He would explain that he was a perfectionist and would hold others to his own impossible standards. As he evolved, he gave people permission to challenge him.

He also learned about the types of organizations where he could create the most value—those that can benefit from a rigorous focus on doing the right thing. He can spot what’s broken and figure out how to fix it. He also keeps true to his values; he wouldn’t work for people he doesn’t like or doesn’t respect. Ethics, honor, and respect matter to him a great deal.

And over the seven or eight years we worked with him and his organization, Dennis learned to relate to his own shortcomings in a new way and create cultures that allowed people to be imperfect. In his last three organizations, he conducted very successful turnarounds, the last being a company that had good margins and large contracts but essentially no operating system. In this essentially untended garden, Dennis installed processes and metrics that brought much-needed order.



When leaders are controlled by fear—or when they pretend it's not there—they can be crippled by it and become powerless. None of us will ever be free of fear, and it's unrealistic to expect that we can always put fears in their place. But even when the stakes of admitting their fears feel high, leaders are always more effective when they are candid and do the hard work to right-size their fears.

What's more, when executives open up about their fears, it makes them much more relatable and approachable. That will make any executive team far more cohesive and effective, and ultimately the business they run stronger and more successful.

ABOUT FMG LEADING

FMG Leading is a human capital strategy firm that partners with visionary leaders and investors who are committed to transforming the healthcare industry in America. Working at the intersection of humanity and high performance, the advisors at FMG Leading partner with clients to design integrated development strategies that accelerate growth, build enterprise value, and create industry-leading results.

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