

LeaderShift Perspectives

For twenty-seven years, the Executive Edge has been a value added service to support our clients and candidates in their Personal & Professional Development. Now known as LeaderShift Perspectives, it will continue to provide the same value and insight its readers have appreciated for years.

Volume 17, Issue 3

LeaderShift
Perspectives

by Hunt Executive Search



The Sixth Leadership Challenge: Fear of Failure

By Joe Hunt

Last month, I profiled what my fellow executives, clients, and significant research all indicate are 5 of the biggest challenges business leaders face in today's corporate landscape. Of all these challenges, none can be conquered without first overcoming the pervasive – yet often hidden – fear of failure.

Leadership is a tough job that requires courage. Doubts, insecurities and fears make organizational challenges more difficult and, in extreme cases, insurmountable. No matter how confident you may appear, anxiety can occur at pivotal times in your career.

Fears are normal emotions that emerge in times of crisis. It's been said that courage has no benchmark unless one grasps the reality of fear. Fears are real, often strong and quite disruptive, but your response to them defines your leadership hardiness.

Fearful leaders can debilitate their organizations' ability to function, compromising productivity, decision-making, strategic thinking and employee management.



“Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.” – Robert F. Kennedy

Organizations rely on their leaders to set a vision; provide direction; and implement plans that instill trust, confidence and the performance needed to meet desired goals. When challenges present major obstacles to success, leaders must demonstrate self-confidence in their vision and effectively deal with the fear of failure, or risk fear itself undermining their organization and becoming their biggest hurdle.

Recognize the Signs

Fear of failure has several telltale — and observable — signs. “You’re likely to set your ambitions too low or too high,” explains entrepreneurship expert Robert Kelsey, author of *What’s Stopping You? Why Smart People Don’t Always Reach Their Potential and How You Can*.

Goal setting is an important skill for leaders to hone. It is also a skill that is highly susceptible to fear. Goals too low reflect a lack of self-confidence and a fear of setting elevated expectations. I see this all the time in managers who underachieve, and as a result, plateau early in their careers.

Conversely, goals set too high serve to mask insecurities or shortcomings. Failure is expected when targets are set unrealistically high, which creates a shield for deflecting criticism. We see this all the time through executive turn over, especially in functions like sales and marketing. Liken it to an attempt to swim the English Channel in rough seas: No one is expected to accomplish it, so we bestow admiration on those who try, yet fail.

A second sign of fear of failure is a tendency to procrastinate as an avoidance tactic. By putting off the completion of a task, fearful leaders can also delay the dreaded failure. Look for unfounded hesitancy, second-guessing, and finding “reasons” to delay or alter plans.

Other signs of fear of failure include:



- A consistent pattern of indecision
- Anxiety over risks or change
- An excessive desire or attempt to control circumstances
- An inability to delegate or trust others to perform tasks “correctly”
- Perfectionism (often leading to micromanagement)
- An overriding fear of “things going wrong”
- Obsessing over details
- Making sure everything is “just so”

The Causes

Several factors can contribute to the growth of a fear of failure. Adolescent history of pain or suffering can lead one to anticipate the worst and expect negative outcomes. Developing in an environment of fearful people can also play a role, as can a lack of positive role models. Traumatic experiences framed by failure can train the mind to distrust life in general. Past humiliations and rejections can scar one’s spirit to the point of dismay and fear.

Placing too high a value on a specific goal transforms it into an unrealistic objective. This can distort reality to the point of obsession and magnify the possibility of failure.

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The dire need to obtain something creates the illusion that life will be awful if the goal isn't accomplished; the consequent failure becomes traumatic. This all-or-nothing perspective has a potentially crushing outcome, one to be truly feared. Perhaps the common denominator for all causes of fear of failure is an overarching necessity for validation through achievement.

Fear: Name It, Claim It, Reframe It

- Several process-oriented changes can lessen the effects of failure or reduce its likelihood. In general, conquering fear is a process of naming it, claiming it and reframing it.
- Assess the possible outcomes of a given situation. Make a list of the general causes and probabilities of each outcome. Most of the time, the likelihood of success is greater than that of failure if you apply your best planning and management efforts.
- Recall past experiences where positive outcomes occurred in situations where failure was possible. A track record of positive results is not an accident. You devised plans and allocated resources that set you up for success. Failure rarely strikes out of the blue, and even when it seems imminent, you can adjust to counter it.
- Reflect on colleagues' experiences. When failure hit them, did it do them in? Not likely. They likely kept forging ahead, adjusting, learning, growing and getting better at their jobs.
- Focus on the journey instead of fixating on the destination. We usually experience achievement in incremental steps, as we plan, adjust, correct and calibrate. Individual steps are easier to grasp and foresee, and failure is less likely as this process plays out. If failure becomes a concern, handle it incrementally, as well.
- Set smaller, achievable goals to build confidence and moderate risks. Raise the bar gradually to enhance self-assurance. Emphasize the positive aspects of each step, while correcting or adjusting, to minimize the negative aspects.
- Ask for help or advice, when necessary. You'll feel more secure when trusted colleagues, mentors or coaches offer input and guidance. They can help reinforce action plans and improve your chances of success. There's no need to go it alone.



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Perspective Is Everything

Living with a frequent fear of failure is a significant personal struggle. While fear may not be completely eliminated, it can be overcome. A major shift in perspective is required—something with which an experienced leadership coach can assist you.

Begin by recognizing that no one is immune to failure. It happens to everyone. Coming to grips with fear, understanding that it's real, and recognizing when it's affecting your leadership (and life) are steps in the right direction. Fear is not always bad. Healthy fears allow us to respect and remain aware of potential hazards.

Another positive shift in perspective is recognizing that people survive failures all the time. Failure is not the black cloud some believe it to be. It's rarely the final blow. Everyone has experienced failure at one time or another, so it tends to make us less critical of others.

Failure actually has intrinsic benefits. We learn and grow through failing. Wisdom, work ethic, strength and self-improvement are seldom attributable to a continued string of successes. There's no better way to discover your strengths and weaknesses than through failure's lessons. Furthermore, ask yourself which you would prefer: a leader who strived to achieve but failed, or a leader who never tried.

Transforming Fears into Feats

Successful leaders make failure a challenge to be grasped and managed, not feared.

Transformational leaders tap into their emotional and social intelligence skills to create a more fulfilling future – both for their teams and themselves. One of the most powerful questions you can ask yourself is “Am I a transformational leader who inspires others to push their limitations, flourish in their roles, experience elevated purpose, and enables their potential to achieve greater things?”

Allowing past successes and failures to define one's identity is an easy trap for leaders to fall in. These measures are, in fact, far easier to quantify and assign value. When evaluating talent, most hiring managers error by placing too much focus on past performance as a predictor of the future. Leaders who are overly aware that they will be judged in this manner, face a significant challenge in separating their fear of failure from the business plans they implement.

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A truer measure of a leader's ability to succeed is found by examining one's capacity to possess and agility to access the core competencies of effective leaders. Our LeaderShift Architect is a proprietary tool we implement with our clients to evaluate how talent will behave in a given environment, identify leaders' strengths and growth opportunities, and to develop the skills and competencies that are universally important regardless of function or industry.

By observing and assigning value to traits such as Managerial Courage, Resilience, Self-Awareness and Learning Agility, we are empowering leaders to recognize their value extends beyond the numbers produced on any budget report. By putting fear of failure in the proper perspective, you too can become empowered to set aggressive but measured goals, eager to attack the challenges facing their teams, and most importantly – transform your fears into feats.

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