

# LeaderShift Courage: Overcome Your Fear

by Joe Hunt

Leadership is a tough job that requires extreme courage. Even though most executives don't admit it, everyone from sitting CEO's to middle managers have doubts, insecurities and fears that make organizational challenges more difficult and, in extreme cases, insurmountable. I have seen many seemingly confident leaders wrestle with anxiety and successfully overcome their fears. But there are countless executives who don't, taking down their company with:



- Indecisiveness, leading to missed opportunities
- Emotional deception, which prompts bad decisions
- Suppression of people, forcing high turnover
- Insecurity that manifests as self-centeredness
- Confusion that causes leaders to miss threats at the doorstep

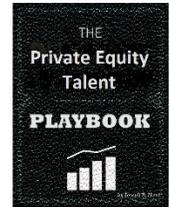
Fearful leaders often cannot deal with difficult issues or conversations, so moderate troubles balloon into true crises. They also resist taking the risks necessary to move their companies forward.

Fears can take many forms: discomfort, incapacity, negative feelings, failure and self-criticism. Each carries numerous side effects, most rooted in a fear of rejection. Fears make a leader ineffective and paralyzed. Plans are often forfeited, as is success.

We often forget that fears are part of the universal human experience. They're normal, to some degree, even for leaders. The goal is to avoid compensating for them and, instead, identify and overcome them.

The fear-reduction process has four fundamental pillars, as outlined in a great book I read on the subject called *Leading with Emotional Courage: How to Have Hard Conversations, Create Accountability, and Inspire Action on Your Most Important Work* by Peter Bregmen.

1. Fears are greatly influenced by a lack of self-confidence. Leaders who boost their confidence address the most challenging of the four pillars.
2. Strengthen your relationships and support structure.
3. Practicing intentionality moves leaders farther away from fear through focus and an effective game plan.
4. Facing fears directly and exposing them puts them behind you for good.



### **Confidence in Times of Uncertainty**

Becoming aware of your feelings is the first step to gaining more confidence. Identifying feelings as they occur can help you pinpoint their causes, which are likely not as traumatic as you may fear. Envision yourself confidently navigating the complexities of your job, as you've done before, and regain your confidence.

Most executives think they are self-aware, but actually have blind spots and weaknesses that actually demonstrates a lack of self-awareness. Understanding the motives behind your actions can prove helpful. Build self-confidence by examining your motives. Honorable and reasonable motives help ensure successful outcomes.

Look for patterns in people's responses when you act. If their responses are unfavorable, make corrections and learn from them. Positive staff feedback is a fear suppressor.

Gaining a healthier perspective can help you conquer your fears. Bregman suggests mastering irrelevancy. Step out of the limelight and accept more of a behind-the-scenes role for a greater sense of freedom and confidence boost. You're actually worth more to everyone when you lead with self-assurance.

### **Building a Solid Foundation**

Self-confident leaders have a support network of solid relationships, which helps reduce fears and fosters unity. Trusted and respected friends can offer critiques without causing offense. Building relationships with colleagues and subordinates similarly helps you grow and improve.

Leaders must pave the way in building staff trust; it starts with valuing and engaging people. Show sincere interest in your people with active listening, where you ask questions and do less of the talking. Offer your people understanding and empathy in their times of struggle. Sometimes people just need to be heard, but if you can help with a solution, you can establish even greater trust.

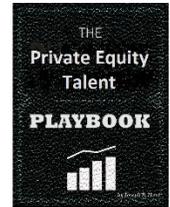
Improving your communication skills helps mitigate fears, especially when you're faced with serious challenges. Be clear, and ask others for clarity. Make points that are relevant to the other person's perspective.

Leadership expert Tony Robbins (who keeps getting better with age) stresses the importance of discovering others' needs with openness and sincerity. When both parties express their needs with mutual understanding, they honor each other and establish respect. You're more likely to find workable solutions that meet everyone's needs when respect is evident.

### **Grace Under Fire**

Leaders who convert critiques into improvements develop the strongest followings and have the fewest fears. They not only welcome feedback, but they request it. They view constructive feedback as free self-development lessons.

Take intentional action on the feedback you receive. Admit you need to improve, take the required steps to do so and share the results. Knowing that every person can improve eases fears; no one has cornered the market on personal and professional development.



Take intentional action on the feedback you receive. Admit you need to improve, take the required steps to do so and share the results. Knowing that every person can improve eases fears; no one has cornered the market on personal and professional development.

Being intentional about preparation builds confidence. Gather facts and data, anticipate different outcomes and weigh the pros and cons. Understand the truth and scope of circumstances, and trust the people who help you determine them.

Intentionally sharpen your focus on the tasks at hand. Tempting opportunities often muddle the picture and invite confusion and doubt. As negative emotions gain a foothold, fears quickly follow and self-confidence plummets.

Intentionality is perhaps best seen in leaders who show resilience when facing setbacks. If you can quickly dispatch disappointments and find something positive in the problem that confronts you, your people will feel more encouraged. This, in turn, encourages you.

### **Effectively Deal with Fears**

As with many aspects of leadership, the direct approach is best. Facing fears is no exception. With the help of an executive coach, you can craft a plan to deal with your fears head-on.

Bregman encourages leaders to use fear as an incentive. By exposing your thoughts and perceived weaknesses to your coach, mentor or trusted colleague, a secret's power is broken. Talking through your fears is therapeutic, and you may see how powerless they really are. Freedom eludes you when you bottle up your fears. Solutions are usually less complicated than you first perceive.

If appropriate, admit past fears to your staff—a move that can further reduce their impact. By being transparent and accountable, you'll earn people's admiration and avoid criticism or rejection. Strong leaders needn't fear showing vulnerability if they deal with their fears directly and effectively.

There's no reason to allow fear to debilitate you. Organizations run more effectively—and employees have greater regard for their jobs—when leaders have the courage to lead boldly.

### **About the Hunt Group**

The Hunt Group is the leading private equity executive search firm and advisory specializing in consumer goods & services, diversified industrial and related professional services markets. We partner with investors throughout the deal cycle to help them Invest in, Grow and Exit their portfolio companies by appointing senior operating executives (CEOs and Direct Reports), Chairs and Outside Directors with Private Equity DNA. Our industry and functional vertical connections and engagement guarantees we're in the know, have broad insight and full access to the best talent in the marketplace. Our mission is to create and exponentially grow accretive value for all client stakeholders.