

Seven Common Fears Leaders Face (and How to Defuse Them)

Description

Most leaders feel fear. I am no exception. I was in my late 30s and had just been promoted to a vice president role. I was attending my first senior executive meeting with two recently hired executives. While I knew the people in the division I worked in well, I could not say the same for the people around the table that morning. My first thought was, *I don't belong here. These people are smarter than me and have better degrees than I do.* I was feeling fear that I was not good enough and didn't belong. But I stuck it out and in a short time I felt connected to the group and did begin to feel that I belonged.

Fear is often explained as the feeling one gets when they anticipate an unpleasant situation or consequence. I find most people are afraid in some fashion. The question is, has the fear reached the point that one has more difficulty than normal? If so, it needs to be confronted head-on. This is an important part of the leadership journey.

Here are some fears that I find are not uncommon for leaders and others in the workplace.

1. **Fear of failure.** When an organization studies their employee turnover, they are often surprised that so many employees leave within the first 90 days. The person was obviously excited about the new job. The boss hired them believing they could do the job. Yet within the first three months, the person quits. Why? It is usually because once on the job, they found the skills they needed were not in place. The fear of failure leads the person to leave the job before they are asked to leave.

This is why onboarding new people is so important and why those doing the onboarding need development in mentoring. When I was the president of a hospital, I had been there only a few weeks when I ran into a person who was nearing the end of her first 90 days. We talked for a while. To my surprise, she told me she had resigned and that her last day was in a few days. I asked her why. She replied, "I am not going to make it." I asked her how she knew that and she said, "The person training me told me that."

I shared with the trainer that this person had quit because, "You told her she was not going to make it." The trainer was stunned. She stated, "I never said that. I said she needed more experience." New people hear things differently. I will cover this in the tips.

1. **Fear of not fitting in.** Here I am talking about the feeling that the team is in place and you're an outsider. Years ago, I was a new member of an executive team. My office was right by the CEO. People who had worked with him for a while would be in his office. I would hear laughter and think, *I am an outsider and don't fit in.*
1. **Fear of getting and giving feedback.** While it's nice to say, "I appreciate feedback," is it true? When I speak, many organizations conduct a survey in which attendees rate the presentation. The person in charge always lets me know they will be sending the results. I thank them, but do I want the results? Yes and no. If they're good, you bet I do. If not, I don't think so. When the

feedback comes in, it's fine—after I get through that initial fear.

This also holds true in giving feedback. We may withhold needed feedback out of fear that we will hurt the person's feelings or that it will lead to a confrontation. We often rationalize not giving feedback by saying, "I don't want to step on anyone's toes."

1. **Fear of making the tough decision.** In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes to hire slow and fire fast. In workshops I ask, "Who here has fired someone?" Most hands go up. I then ask if they felt that they rushed it. No hands go up. Tough decisions range from firing someone to quitting a job to stopping a product. Leaders must make a whole array of decisions that not everyone will like. "Making oneself comfortable" is not in the definition of leadership. Leaders need to be comfortable with the uncomfortable.
1. **Fear that "I can't do this."** Many times, early in one's career, a leader will ask someone else to do something they themselves need to do. For example: "You explain this so much better than me." But being a leader means communicating. When someone in a leadership role asks you, their supervisor, to explain something to those who report to them, it's best not to. Let the leader know you will work with them so they can explain it; however, if you do it, you enable them not to do their job and to not develop.
1. **Fear of not being liked.** We all would prefer to be liked. However, being a leader means that we must at times take action that some or even most will not like. Another danger in this fear is to make someone else the bad person. It might be tempting to say things like, "This was not my call. I just carry out these decisions; they are above my pay grade." Or, "I fought for us, but you know how they are." However, this creates a we/they culture. Leaders carry their own messages. They don't make others be the bad guy.
1. **Fear of "ghosts."** Sometimes we fear things that aren't real. We invent things to fear or at least wildly exaggerate the danger. I've heard fear explained as Fantasized Experiences Appearing Real or False Evidence Appearing Real. Sadly, we react to fantasy or false evidence that leads to more fear and failure. We see ghosts and let them drive our actions.

Fear is an eroding force that damages lives and cultures. A few tips:

1. **Make sure all new hires understand that the first several months are difficult.** Feeling that you will not make it is normal. However, reassure them that they will get the training and support they need. Train anyone who is providing training on how to explain things. The person in example one above could have said, "Just like me and everyone else, you need to keep getting experience." This would likely have led to a much more positive outcome.
1. **Help yourself fit in.** Don't become a victim. Don't wait to be asked. Make it a point to know your coworkers and get tips from them.
1. **While painful at first, learn how to carry your own messages.** It is best to start with saying, "This is my perception," and not to be judgmental. When you have something to say, don't procrastinate. Waiting does not make the message easier. In fact, you may hear, "Why didn't you

say something sooner?”

1. **If you need to fire someone, move quickly.** Move quickly on feedback, and if it is evident the situation is not working, move on. Follow all human resources protocols. And be aware that you are not helping the person by keeping them in a role they are not going to be successful in. The longer they stay, the more you will end up lowering the bar.
1. **The more skilled you are, the less fear you have.** Seek development. If your company does not provide it, get it on your own. There are many good professional development opportunities with books, videos, local offerings, and podcasts. Your classroom is all around you. Be a good student.
1. **Accept that your job is not about being liked.** It is about leading with integrity and values.
1. **Share your fearful thoughts and feelings with others.** Get a mentor or talk with close friends about how you feel. Ask them, “Is this real, or am I seeing ghosts?” It’s amazing how things can change when you get an outside perspective.

Fear is not a subject that’s often discussed. Leaders may hesitate to say that they are afraid. Yet fear needs to be brought into the light of day, because it’s a factor that keeps people, companies, and communities from achieving their full potential. We can face it, confront it, and overcome it. When we do, it’s amazing how much we can grow as leaders.

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