

5 Fears of Leadership

Unleashing Your Personal Power and Influence

By Lori Brewer Collins

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"I've been working for a great organization for the past four years; they hired me right after I earned my degree," William told me the first time we met for a coaching session. "I just got my first big promotion, and I was really excited about the opportunity. But things just aren't working out as well as I thought they would.

"It seems like every time I want my team members to go one direction, they all end up going the other way. Sure, I've made some errors and mistakes since taking this role a few months ago, but I know that I had the right intentions, so that has to count for something, right?"

"I'm trying really hard, but I'm not sure I can do this. Everything I thought I understood and knew just doesn't seem to be working for me anymore. I'm used to being very good at what I do, but now I'm worried that maybe I made a mistake. Maybe I'm not really up for this."

William's story isn't unique. What he shared with me during that first conversation is a common fear among people who are stepping into their first major leadership role. This is often the first big move past colleagues and peers. These emerging leaders are experiencing the satisfaction of being rewarded for their efforts, but they're also discovering the challenge of moving past peers — especially when they now have to lead the very people who were their peers just days or weeks earlier.

Over the past two decades, I've worked with hundreds of leaders across the United States and around the world, and I've heard countless individuals echo what William told me. What he shared with me is a fear that I've heard during my conversations with leaders — either as an executive coach or as a facilitator — and it's part of a consistent set of fears that emerge, a set I refer to as the 5 Fears of Leadership.

These fears typically aren't conscious, but they're reflected in the way I hear people talk about their challenges and obstacles. Their stories usually emerge indirectly: He was worried that he'd be caught off-guard about the details; she was concerned her boss didn't take her seriously; he was anxious that the new initiative wouldn't work; she lay awake wondering if she was in the right field; he was sure his inability would be evident to his direct reports.

In the context of a coaching session, my clients and I uncover what is kept carefully hidden under facades of competence, confidence, and charisma. Little do they know that their senior-level peers and colleagues are grappling with similar concerns: fears that belie the external success they seemingly enjoy.

Whenever I meet with a client, I begin to uncover and explore why this person recognizes the need for a coach — and in peeling back the layers, I've identified 5 fears that underlie many of these leaders' concerns:

1. Can I do this?
2. What if they don't like me?
3. What if I fail?
4. Am I worthy?
5. What if they find out?

Ultimately, the 5 Fears lead us toward asking more important questions: How can I achieve my goal of becoming a better person and a more effective leader? What am I here to do? Does what I do matter? Do *I* truly matter — or will it have mattered that I was here at all? What footprint do I want to leave behind?

Let's examine each fear and consider how you, a peer, a direct report — maybe even your boss — might respond to and overcome each fear.

Fear 1: Can I Do This?

Let's consider the situation facing William and other leaders like him. Up to this point, these leaders have been effective individual contributors. They're technically talented, and they've proven themselves — after all, you can't be technically mediocre and be promoted to lead other people in that area. But these individuals typically lack a well-defined "leadership style," so they naturally do or don't do certain things based on their preferences and based on what's been modeled for them by other people in authority — both the positive and negative examples.

These emerging leaders also struggle with the role of intent in their decisions and actions. When they make mistakes or lead poorly, they look at their motive and recognize that they wanted to do the right thing — but results, not intent, matter most to the people they're leading. The level of self-awareness as a leader isn't fully developed yet.

Clearly, this fear can be very disorienting. The things that got people here are not the things that will take them forward. Usually, a lot of the leadership responsibilities are harder than people thought. This may be their first true wake-up call that being a good leader requires more than a sparkling personality and strong expertise.

Key Issues and Challenges

- Handling newfound authority
- Coping with feelings of uncertainty
- Managing time effectively
- Working with direct reports
- Making decisions well
- Staying "out of the weeds"

What's at Risk?

People facing this fear risk losing their sense of competence and their willingness to keep moving forward as a leader. When I talk with these emerging leaders, it can feel like a process of reaching into that tender core of who they are — and there's usually some truth about Self that they feel the need to protect.

So, Now What?

Seek honest feedback

If you're a leader struggling with the "Can I Do This?" fear, it's important to get feedback early, often, and accurately. Feedback will help you become far more aware of the actual effect you have on others, and it will help you gain fresh perspectives. Without feedback, you're more likely to judge your own behavior based on your own intention. Others, meanwhile, scrutinize your behavior based on the effect.

As an emerging leader, look for feedback from more people than just your immediate boss. You'll benefit from feedback from the people you lead, peers, customers, and stakeholders or other groups you interact with — the whole concept of a 360-degree evaluation is about getting feedback from every level, both internal and external. You can create this informally — go out and seek the feedback and initiate the process. You don't need to wait for it to formally come to you.

Learn to delegate

Learning the fine art of delegation is essential for emerging leaders. You limit your influence, your capacity to grow as a leader, and your ability to move up the ranks into greater responsibility if you don't learn how to trust and develop others to help carry the workload.

If you rely on technical experience, you'll get right back "into the weeds." The art of delegating is challenging; often it's quicker and easier to just do it yourself. It feels good. It's familiar. And it's very seductive; we all love the feeling of being competent. But without the skill of delegation, you run the risk of burning out quickly, particularly if you've moved into a leadership role and still have responsibility for or take on too much of the technical work. Task-oriented people tend to have a tougher time with this than relationship-oriented people. To develop others requires slowing down in the short term in order to increase efficiency — in other words, speed up in the longer term. Unless you take the time to assess and get other people doing their share of the workload, you'll end up owning it.

If you're battling this fear, you also may get stuck on the thought that for something to be done right, you have to do it yourself. But it's important to work through this. It requires developing a trust in the competence of others — an issue at all levels with these 5 Fears, but this is often where it starts.

Find a coach

This is a great time to have a coach who can help you identify some major bumps that can be tweaked to produce high leverage. These bumps will either get in your way and limit your leadership potential, or these experiences will become reminders of how you grew while confronting this fear.

Fear 2: What if They Don't Like Me?

Client Profile: Angela

"I really didn't expect this. Look, I'll admit that I'm used to being liked by the people around me — and I'm used to people going along with my proposals and my ideas on what should be done. But I've run into a wall. I'm hitting obstacles that I've never encountered before. Suddenly, everything I say and do is being scrutinized. I feel like I'm living in a glass house and people are taking shots at me. Last week, I went into a meeting where we were unveiling a major new initiative, and three of the people who I thought would back the idea suddenly turned on me and raised major objections. What's going on here?"

You probably have some Angelas in your organization. They're the emerging, high-potential leaders who are used to being liked and winning people over, and up until now, people usually have responded positively to their ideas. What changed?

These leaders are quickly discovering that as their influence increases, so does the isolation. Some people in the organization simply won't be OK with these leaders' growing authority and will begin launching either outright or subtle sabotage. Critics will become more vocal about these leaders' decisions and will start dishing up bigger doses of disapproval — scrutinizing, chopping up, and judging actions.

This new reality often hits when these leaders make an unpopular decision. This may be the first time they've had to make the tough call — or had to enact a call made by people higher up in the organization. These leaders are experiencing the trials of being tested and being called to do something that's really difficult.

Key Issues and Challenges

- Making and implementing unpopular decisions
- Handling conflict with peers, direct reports
- Knowing what to say when
- Surviving the challenges of the business environment
- Responding when others feel threatened by your new power position

What's at Risk?

Leaders who once experienced a clear sense of belonging now feel isolated. They miss being "part of the tribe" and having a place to authentically be themselves. The scrutiny from colleagues chokes out the sense of community that once defined these leaders' place in the organization.

Without properly addressing this fear, leaders can begin to withdraw and seek minimal interaction with colleagues because they're anxious about what is being said behind cubicle walls. Leaders must find new ways of creating community and experiencing a sense of belonging — but that may not all be achievable within the organization and may require involvement in other networks of friends and acquaintances.

So, Now What?

Strengthen your own core

If this is the fear you're facing, you must discover how to be comfortable in your own skin. Objectively assess the comments and chatter from colleagues. Some of it might be true. Much of it is false. Decide if you will spend your energy trying to manage how people perceive you. While leaders sometimes must confront people who are undermining team efforts and are causing significant problems, often the issues are so petty and unrelated to legitimate work priorities that they aren't worth being addressed.

It's more advantageous to focus your attention on simply moving forward and developing a consistent pattern of behavior that can be used to build trust and respect. In this kind of situation, actions truly do speak louder than words.

Learn how to enlist and engage

Being respected and being a person of integrity is more important than being liked. You may have heard that statement before, but it's the key to success and growth when facing this fear. You must find ways to enlist and engage colleagues — yes, even those individuals who don't like you.

In every work situation and decision, leaders have people who are their allies, their detractors, their associates, and their adversaries. Effective leaders have developed the savvy to recognize that building coalitions and working the politics can be a positive tool to get good things done.

Trust plays an interesting role in enlistment and engagement. In a way, you can have a higher level of "trust" with an adversary because you can predict how an adversary will act — there's little uncertainty about behavior and attitude. Adversaries deliver their rationale for opposing a project or change initiative, and you can use that rationale to build a better case. Trust becomes trickier when working with someone who exudes a high level of open agreement but is acting differently behind the scenes.

Find a coach

As with the other 5 Fears, coaching is an effective way to discover answers and experience personal growth when confronting this fear. "*What do I need to change? What do I need to leave alone? What do I need to accept? What do I need to let go? How do I gain the gravitas to know when something is a legitimate issue or if it's just a reflection of someone else's pain being projected on me?*" A coach can help you accurately assess and gauge the situation and determine ways to help you move forward.

Fear 3: What if I fail?

Client Profile: Andrew

"Please don't tell anybody, but I'm scared. My organization has invested \$100 million in this new initiative, and the outcome will brand my career. If it succeeds, I'll be a hero. But if this fails, people will look at me as the person who squandered all the work hours, all the equipment, and all the resources we've consumed. And if this fails, who will ever want to hire me again?"

Leaders confronting this fear are high-potential individuals who are receiving lots of leadership development opportunities. They've been identified for grooming, with the possibility of executive-level leadership at some point — maybe even C-suite roles.

This fear emerges when leaders feel they have been given a make-it-or-break-it situation. The organization has heavily invested in them to execute a major strategy — perhaps leading a new initiative or developing a new team. Usually it's a chance to create something, not just improve an existing area within the organization. This specific role may not have existed before, so there are few roadmaps for how leaders should operate.

This type of leadership role requires a whole new level of thinking and working with others. Leaders in these situations recognize the excitement of a new endeavor, but they also know they're on the edge of a cliff. The assigned endeavor often surfaces through the work of a strategic executive committee, and it frequently emerges when an organization undergoes a restructuring or acquisition.

These leaders must be both strategic and tactical. They may not have clear lines of authority, and structure can become very complex. The situation is dynamic; even if you put together a perfect project timeline, there are still many contingencies because there are so many moving parts.

Key Issues and Challenges

- Walking into unknown terrain
- Working with global and virtual teams
- Coping with expectations and demands
- Creating new structures, systems, teams
- Holding it all together

What's at Risk?

Reputation is most at risk for people confronting this fear. These leaders worry about what might happen if they're connected with failure: Will this company or any other company hire a person with that image? Relationships within the organization also might be damaged if these leaders fail. Other people likely wanted this opportunity but were passed over; detractors will have a heyday because they'll be "proven right" about them; and other people will simply feel let down.

So, Now What?

Develop greater agility

If you're in this situation, you genuinely face individual and organizational risk; that's why it's so scary. I see agility as being akin to exquisite radar — it's the wisdom to know how to proceed into unknown terrain. Agility is the real-time capability to lead while keeping the horizon in sight.

Agility also carries over into the team you'll assemble to help lead this new initiative. How do you identify the right talent, how will you persuade those individuals to join you, how can you use political and personal savvy to convince people to leave their "comfortable" role for this bold but risky endeavor — truly, there are so many levers to pull.

Admit to mistakes you make — and learn from them

The truth is, not everyone is wired to lead in these kinds of moments, and even the best of leaders likely will make mistakes along the way. I've met many HR people who say they'd never hire anyone who hasn't had at least one major blow to their career — whether it was from the individual's choice or because of other circumstances. It's the resilience factor — how did you choose to respond to your mistake or the daunting circumstances, and what did you learn from it? How are you a better leader because of that experience?

You may want to talk about your mistakes with colleagues or your spouse or a close friend, but I'd also encourage you to see this as a great opportunity for coaching. A coach who has the right balance between personal self-discovery and real-world know-how can effectively aid you in learning from your mistakes.

Fear 4: Am I Worthy?

Client Profile: Elizabeth

"I've been part of this organization for 15 years, and I never saw it coming. No one gave me a warning. I feel like I've given my heart and soul, but now they're cutting me loose, setting me free, letting me go — all the different phrases people use to mask the pain of getting fired.

"Why did I trust everyone around me so much? Why did I invest so much of my life in this job? I believed in the company and felt I had a long-term contribution to make. The moment I learned that I was being fired, I suddenly felt like my identity had vanished. Am I in the wrong profession? Was I ever any good at this? If I don't do this, what will I do — and how on earth can I make a living?"

Elizabeth lost her job, but this same fear can be experienced by people who don't receive an anticipated promotion or who get shifted into a different division or who in some other way have the floor fall out from underneath them — really, any kind of major loss or disappointment. When you're in freefall, you wonder where the bottom is, and if you've never dealt with this challenge before, it gets really, really scary.

Mid- to late-career leaders are the most common people facing this fear. They've benefitted from a natural organizational progression, and they've been on the normal leadership track. They've found much of their identity through their organization; their job has significantly defined them. They often haven't thought much about self-development in the past because they've been focused on deliverables and objective, quantitative results.

These leaders ask some of the deepest human questions we can ask. They're seeking perspective and trying to understand what has happened. Something has shaken up their world.

I've found that people go in one of two directions: They either direct their anger and disappointment inward, or they externalize and blame others. If directed inward, they think they've done something wrong and they deserve it. Their self-talk may be *"I'm to blame"* or *"Of course this happened to me."* If they direct it outward, they think they've been wronged and they've been a victim of circumstance. Their self-talk might be *"You're to blame," "They're to blame,"* or *"It's to blame,"* and *"Why did this happen to me?"*

Key Issues and Challenges

- Reacting to rapid and unexpected changes
- Proving yourself
- Guessing at the right answers
- Understanding what it's all about
- Coping with control issues

What's at Risk?

For these leaders, their sense of worth and identity are most vulnerable because those two concepts have become intimately connected to their job. Their work has become their life, so without the work, who are they? They worry about whether they can find respect and admiration simply for being themselves, not for filling a certain role or position. Without effectively addressing

this fear, these individuals run the risk of dangerous patterns of depression, a significant lack of direction or drive in finding another job, and a quick return to another situation where their work fuels their identity.

So, Now What?

Develop compassion for Self

If you're grappling with this fear, you've been given the wonderful opportunity to experience greater compassion for yourself, which leads to the capacity for greater compassion for others. You may not see this change in your life as a blessing, but it can be when you choose to pursue this very important developmental step. You can reach a place where you're comfortable with all your imperfections, where you're no longer judging yourself so harshly, and where you can focus more on being than doing — defining yourself more broadly than through your work alone.

Learn to identify and deal with triggers

You can get flooded with exaggerated emotional responses when confronting this fear. Your sense of self has been questioned and challenged, which can unleash anger at yourself and anger at others. When we're triggered in these situations, we tend to behave in our least-best selves, so we're confronted with the worst version of ourselves. Working with a coach can help you unravel some of the issues surrounding what has happened to you when you're wrestling with a lost dream or lost aspiration.

Pursue an expanded self-awareness

As an executive coach, I believe you can address the 5 Fears through meaningful conversations with peers, your spouse, and a coach. But I also believe that in this situation, you may benefit from someone who can help you with even deeper self-work — perhaps a spiritual adviser or a professional therapist or counselor. These individuals can help you travel the necessary journey of exploring why you find so much significance through your work and can aid you in finding new answers about your core identity. They can help you with the hard work of not living according to other people's scripts.

Fear 5: What if They Find Out?

Client Profile: Robert

“Ask anyone, and they’ll tell you: I’m successful. Well, there’s one person who would disagree: me. When I honestly look at my life, I see all the flaws and mistakes. People have this image of who I am, but I see myself so differently. If they knew all the ways I fail, they’d call me a fraud.”

“I have a terrible relationship with my kids, and I can’t seem to break some bad physical habits. Here I am, benefiting from people at my organization thinking I’m really good at leading and finding solutions, yet I can’t even fix my own problems away from work. If I were really good at it, my overall life would be so much more successful.”

“Am I really getting this much reward for what I do? Am I really adding value to the organization? I think about the teams that I’m responsible for — the vast array of output and what they know, and my job is somehow to hold it all together. Sometimes that doesn’t feel like it’s enough. If I weren’t here, what difference would it make? Am I doing enough good in the world? What kind of kids have I raised? I’m doing my own personal, internal inventory, and I’m coming up short.”

Leaders like Robert are typically individuals who have followed a natural groove toward upward mobility and upper-level management. The inner circle of executive management often knows these individuals well.

These leaders have reached mid-life, and they’re conducting their own personal, internal inventory and finding that they’re coming up short. They’re confronted by the fact that materialistic things have come to define their lives — even though they often say they don’t care about those things. Their questions about Self typically are more about personal than professional areas — where they are in life, how they got here, and other big questions about purpose.

But the personal examination spills over into the professional realm. Leaders grappling with this fear wonder if they’re contributing much value, as opposed to people on lower levels who are doing the “real” work of the organization. Let’s face it: Life at the upper echelons of most organizations revolves around people and meetings, not technical work. Some of these individuals never dreamed of reaching such a high-level position or thought they’d enjoy so many of the external trappings of success.

Most organizational people are not overly philosophical, so this may be the first time they’ve paused to truly reflect on their careers — or at least the first major time of introspection in years. They question if they’re living in a way that reflects what they say they value. These leaders feel overstressed and unfulfilled and sometimes over-privileged by their positions, raising many questions of personal insecurity and uncertainty.

Key Issues and Challenges

- Taking time to reflect
- Responding to the inner dialogue
- Managing a complex life
- Containing the many uncertainties
- Pretending to be someone you’re not

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What's at Risk?

These leaders face the risk of letting people down and “discovering” that they’ve taken the wrong path in life or made major mistakes that can’t be undone. Some of these fears are irrational, but they’re real and legitimate to the leaders experiencing them. “*Perhaps the organization made a mistake placing any faith in me,*” they wonder. “*I feel like a fraud.*”

So, Now What?

Find someone to mentor

If this is the fear you’re facing, finding people to mentor can help you discover — or rediscover — a measure of self-worth and can point to legitimate ways you’re positively impacting individuals and teams within your organization. This kind of mentoring can be focused more on wisdom and experience, instead of specific technical skills. Actively search for people to mentor if you don’t have anyone directly approaching you to serve in this role.

Ironically, leaders who mentor can gain as much from the relationship as the mentees. You enter the relationship as the teacher, yet you also become a student. It’s a mutual learning situation that can help you build what essentially is a “new room” in your consciousness — a place where you can be both teacher and student, strong and soft, definitive and flexible.

You’re moving into a stage where you pay it forward by reaching back and contributing to the development of others a few steps behind you on the journey.

Pursue a path of humility

As you grapple with this fear, it’s an opportunity to develop a greater sense of humility, especially toward colleagues and other people who’ve contributed to your success along the way. This fear forces you to acknowledge that you DO stand on the shoulders of other people, but that doesn’t mean you must abandon your leadership role and responsibilities. It’s simply a chance to do some serious inner work and embark on a journey of self-discovery. You will discover that it’s OK to not have all the answers.

Work closely with a coach

Because you’re highly cautious about where, when, and how you reveal your vulnerabilities and self-doubt, a coach serves a vital role as a safe place to have those conversations. You’ve probably created a level of armor around yourself as protection, but this fear is an opportunity to lower your guard and find the treasure that lies beneath.

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