

Fear Number 3: Being Incompetent

Research shows that a major (often unconscious) fear of international business leaders is to be incompetent and to consequently be discovered as a “fraud”.

This is a common anxiety among the entire population (affecting about 70% of people worldwide).

However, this anxiety tends to escalate to a rather stressful and highly tormenting fear among high achievers, especially in situations and contexts that value accomplishments more than learning.

It is therefore not surprising that a survey performed in 2014 by Roger Jones among more than 100 CEOs and top executives revealed that this is the Number 1 Fear at the top of the hierarchical ladder.

Other studies indicate that the fear of being incompetent, while present at all levels, tends to significantly increase with the hierarchical position. So it is not uncommon for brilliant talents to accept their first job offer as an obvious “proof” of their competence, for then begin to doubt themselves and their abilities with subsequent promotions.

In a few extreme cases of highly risk-avoiding cultures, or cultures that are characterized by a “fixed mind-set” one can more easily find a clearer and more strategic view at the bottom of the ladder, whereas at higher levels the fear of incompetence may induce such dysfunctional protective-defensive mechanisms as micromanagement, intimidation and poor/unilateral decision process.

In Roger Jones’ study the CEOs themselves indicated the numerous risky consequences of this fear, including focus on survival rather than growth, lack of honest discussions, silo thinking and tolerating unethical behavior.

In our executive coaching pool of clients (ca. 300 international leaders), we also observe a similar trend, with middle management revealing this fear more often than first liners and top executives more than middle managers. When unaware of this fear, leaders can easily deceive themselves into believing that there are external causes for their choices, rather than clearly seeing them as endless attempts to prove or defend themselves. The complications of international communication may further exacerbate the situation, by creating additional doubts as to being understood and accepted by other cultures.

- Many unaware middle managers may struggle to “prove their legitimacy”. One of the most common consequences of this, is poor prioritization: such unaware leaders may drown themselves and their teams in endless to-do lists of “urgent priorities”, while deceiving themselves into believing that everything is necessary for the business. Others may hesitate to share their insights for fear of “not having enough data to support them”, forgetting or underestimated the value of an educated “hunch”.

- In turn, unaware Top Executives may feel the need to “be right” and to “reassure others of their reasons and knowledge”; one of the main consequences is over-explaining and closing the door to alternative views, which may seriously affect the decision process.
- Leaders who move from working within their own culture to working within a different culture or in contact with several different cultures, may often start to doubt their competence, simply because they may lack preparation and training to correctly interpret different signals. One of the most common consequences is loss of authenticity, while trying to second-guess what others mean, in order to give them what they supposedly want, and not be seen as inadequate.

Self-awareness is the first important step to overcome this fear.

Via coaching, mindfulness and self-awareness training, leaders are able to recalibrate in several areas:

- Recalibrate diligence: FROM obsessing to do everything perfect to the last details, overworked and with poor sleeping patterns TO learning to select and choose, double-checking with others and challenging assumptions, while implementing healthy patterns of rest/sleep
- Recalibrate assertiveness: FROM giving others the answers that we guess others want TO giving our answers as one possible view, while enquiring as to alternative views.
- Recalibrate feeling of self-worth: FROM seeking praise and acceptance, then doubt if we deserve it and challenge the honesty of the compliment according to our own criteria TO accepting praise as a natural reflection of other people’s perception and a sign of their appreciation according to their criteria
- Recalibrate confidence: FROM “modestly” insisting on our inadequacy, in order to pre-empt disappointing others TO honestly claiming our capabilities, in order to take responsibility and our best with it.

Fear Number 2: Underachieving

As suggested by Carol Dweck in her insightful book “Mindset: The New Psychology of Success” our beliefs shape every aspects of our lives. If we believe that we have a fixed set of skills that determine our success in life (the “fixed mindset”), we run our lives in a defensive mode, where failure becomes a major defeat as well as a serious blow to our self-esteem. If we instead believe that we can continuously develop and grow (the “growth mindset”), failure is simply a natural step in our learning curve, essential to stretch further towards success and happiness.

(remember Edison’s famous quote “I have not failed, I have simply found 10,000 ways that it won’t work”?)

Unfortunately, our competitive Western culture is so focused on short-term individual achievements that we may be induced to accept the logic of a fixed mindset.

In subsequent publications, Dweck also talked about the dangers of companies that hire and promote based on a fixed mindset: looking for acquired skills rather than potential, and praising short-term gains vs. significant learning’s. Dweck suggests that only the organizations that value a growth mindset are able to get the best out of their workforce; they encourage daring to go out of the beaten path, not playing safe, learning from mistakes and persistently pursuing discontinuities and innovation, without loosing faith when we face the inevitable hick-ups.

Yet, the fear of underachieving or not achieving is still very much ingrained in many Western organizations and this is reflected in the admissions of several top business leaders. The 2014 survey performed by Roger Jones among more than 100 CEOs and top executives revealed that fear of underachieving is the Number 2 at the top of the hierarchical ladder. Clearly this influences the levels below and results in risk avoidance.

The paradox is that the same organizations that encourage prevention of mistakes and implement strong corrective measures to praise achievement and punish failure, are often the same companies that desperately seek to be more innovative.

When we are able to switch from seeing failure as a fixed statement of our inabilities rather than an opportunity to learn, we waste a lot of time and energy proving again and again to be right, rather than moving on to stretch, continue to learn and grow.

There is no other “medicine” for these situations than to recalibrate our communication.

Research shows that the single most important difference between top performing management teams and medium to poor performing management teams is the ratio of positive comments (e.g. encouragement, reassurance, optimism, belief that something useful comes from every learning, also the most painful ones) and negative comments (e.g. correcting, measuring against criteria, tackling compliance and reflecting upon missed deadlines or overspending). The ideal ratio is 5:1. Correction is necessary, but it needs to be overcompensated by optimism and a dedication to continuous learning. (see Kim Cameron’s “Positive Leadership”)

Our Leading with a Smile leadership programs fully endorse and deploy this positive approach.

FEAR OF BEING VULNERABLE

The fear of showing our vulnerability is probably the deepest, most underestimated and least admitted fear of every human being. We are hard wired to protect ourselves from any potential or real threat by showing a stronger and more confident persona, while living in solitude, in the silence of our souls, the fear of rejection.

Yet, several studies show that we are slowly becoming aware of this unconscious anxiety and we are learning the liberating feeling of accepting and showing ourselves as we are, trusting that we are marvelously OK in our human weaknesses; accepting our imperfections and accepting the imperfection of others. After all, who likes an infallible robot?

The 2014 survey performed by Roger Jones among more than 100 CEOs and top executives revealed that fear of showing our vulnerability holds a third position among the top fears of senior executives. We infer that it is amazing that this fear is actually admitted by top executives and that it is the uneasiness with this very admission that prevents it from reaching the “correct” place as Number One.

Research from “Vulnerability Queen” Brene Brown (2010 TED talk https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability) clearly identified the shame and fear of connection, which is linked to the fear of showing ourselves as we are, as an overwhelming challenge that makes us less than what we can be.

She discovered throughout years of research that those who have a strong sense of worthiness are the people who have “the courage to be themselves, they have the compassion to be kind to themselves and to others, they are willing to let go of whom they think that should be in order to be who they are.” They are the people who are not afraid of being vulnerable. They embraced vulnerability as essential to connections.

The important discovery is that when we numb vulnerability, when we put up a mask and pretend we are strong and confident, we also numb all other emotions; we numb joy, passion, drive, curiosity, empathy and love, thus inhibiting connection.

The liberating effect of asking for help, of saying “I do not know” and of accepting our flaws, has until recently been systematically underestimated in business education. Traditional leadership training asked to leave emotions at the doorstep to rely only on rationality. Many a leader are still believing that emotions, a natural part of our intelligence, must be “controlled”, that feelings have no values and that we need to put up a poker face or an infallible mask at work. Happily, Daniel Goleman and his followers have started to teach us the value of Emotional Intelligence, so we are gradually allowing concepts like “gut feeling” and “emotional validation” to have a place in our business world. Yet, at the top of hierarchy we still see many who listen to others’ feelings, but fail to admit or share theirs.

There is still a long way to go!