

Stop Holding Yourself Back

Five ways people unwittingly sabotage their rise to leadership

by Anne Morriss, Robin J. Ely, and Frances X. Frei

FROM THE WORLD'S poorest communities to the corner offices of its largest corporations, ambitious employees struggle with the same basic challenge: how to gain the strength and insights not just to manage but to lead. For more than a decade, from three different perspectives, we have been investigating what gets in the way. Robin conducts research on race, gender, and leadership; Frances focuses on coaching senior executives; and Anne works on unleashing social entrepreneurs around the world.

We've worked with hundreds of leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, in industries spanning more than 30 fields, and in more than 50 countries at various stages of development. Amid all the diversity, one very clear pattern has emerged: Organization builders, fire starters, and movement makers are unintentionally stopping themselves from becoming exceptional leaders. As a result, companies aren't getting the best from their people, and employees are limiting their opportunities.

Why does this happen? We've identified five major barriers.

BARRIER 1

Overemphasizing Personal Goals

True leadership is about making *other* people better as a result of your presence—and making sure your impact endures in your absence. That

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doesn't mean leaders are selfless. They have personal goals—to build status, a professional identity, and a retirement plan, among other things. But the narrow pursuit of those goals can lead to self-protection and self-promotion, neither of which fosters other people's success.

One leader we studied fell into this destructive behavior after a long, successful run at a number of software companies. Troy's bosses had always valued his drive and accountability. But when customer complaints began pouring into the service division he was managing, he pinned the blame on the "mediocrity" of the product development division, claiming that his team had to support an inferior product.

Troy's COO disagreed and began to hint that Troy's job was on the line: After all, the complaints had started accumulating on his watch. To shore up his position, Troy started working to win over senior colleagues one by one—"picking them off," as he put it—by asking for feedback on his performance. His strategy worked to some extent. Senior management recognized that he was committed to improving his leadership skills. But the customer service problems just got worse. People began trashing the company on influential blogs, and demands

for refunds kept rising. The more Troy worked to save his job, the harder his job became.

Troy had a leadership breakthrough when one of his service representatives asked for help resolving the growing conflict with the product development team. The rep's despair triggered a shift in Troy's thinking—away from worrying about his own position and toward healing the split between the two divisions. Troy hosted a series of cross-team meetings and made sure that both groups felt heard. By the third meeting, the teams were brainstorming about ways to solve the service problem together, by improving the software and helping customers learn how to better use it.

Like other effective leaders, Troy changed his focus from protecting himself to supporting the members of his team and making sure that customers were happy. Within a few weeks, demands for refunds began to decrease, even though the company hadn't yet made any upgrades to the product.

The decision to focus on others can feel dangerous. It forces you to take your eyes off your own welfare and to stop scanning the horizon for predators. Risk aversion is a protective mechanism wired into our DNA; that's why security concerns

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generally trump impact. But all breakthrough leaders find ways to tame their security impulses. Most are amazed by the energy and meaning they discover when they no longer define themselves by their personal needs and fears.

Making other people a priority is perhaps most challenging for emerging leaders—especially women and minorities, who may feel heightened pressure to protect their interests in a world that seems (and often is) rigged against them. When

wreaked havoc on the culture and service experience in those stores—an outcome the data didn't immediately reveal.

Store managers tried to communicate their frustration to Anita, but the interactions invariably went badly. She pushed back on any concerns that weren't supported by numbers and recklessly concluded that her managers simply feared change. Their resignations started to roll in. Like many leaders, Anita had decided she could be tough or empathetic—but not both.

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societal attitudes contain built-in questions about your competence, it takes a lot of energy to keep trying to prove those attitudes wrong.

We don't underestimate this challenge. But if your goal is to lead, our advice is the same no matter who you are: First, *get over yourself*. Start with a commitment to make another person, or an entire team, better—and then go back for the skills and resources to pull it off.

BARRIER 2 **Protecting Your Public Image**

Another common impediment to leadership is being overly distracted by your image—that ideal self you've created in your mind. Sticking to the script that goes along with that image takes a lot of energy, leaving little left over for the real work of leadership.

There are more-nuanced costs as well. Once you've crafted your persona and determined not to veer from it, your effectiveness often suffers. The need to be seen as intelligent can inhibit learning and risk taking, for instance. The need to be seen as likable can keep you from asking tough questions or challenging existing norms. The need to be seen as decisive can cause you to shut down critical feedback loops.

One woman we interviewed, Anita, was an executive vice president in charge of the regional performance of a large retail company. The public image she'd created—tough, decisive, analytical—had been a powerful instrument in advancing her career. But it left little room for her humanity—an essential part of the leadership equation.

Anita thought that using intuition was intellectually lazy; she was known for the phrase "Show me the data." When in-store analytics suggested that the company gained little advantage from long-term employees, Anita ordered some store managers to replace experienced salespeople with lower-paid part-timers. The experiment reduced payroll costs, but it

She was unable to hear feedback, particularly from people below her, or to risk looking bad by making a high-profile course correction. And so she lost some of the company's best managers.

Once the turnover on her team reached 50%, however, Anita decided she had to take action. Inspired by an exercise in an executive education program she'd attended, she thought about teams she'd been part of that had worked together well. She then spoke with some of the people involved in an attempt to figure out why. Her conversation with her high school volleyball coach rattled her. He gave this advice: "If you want your people to care what you think, first make it clear that you care what *they* think." Within a few days, Anita reached out to one of the managers who had just resigned, a woman with a decade of experience making retail spaces work. She invited the manager to come back and help her repair the damage. Their collaboration was a professional turning point for Anita.

This type of journey is not uncommon. At some point in their leadership trajectory, ambitious people must choose between image and impact, between looking powerful and empowering others. They must choose, in effect, between impersonating a leader and being one.

BARRIER 3 **Turning Competitors into Enemies**

One particularly toxic behavior is the act of turning those you don't get along with into two-dimensional enemies. Distorting other people is a common response to conflict, but it carries significant leadership costs. It severs your links to reality, making you reliably incapable of exerting influence. As you turn others into caricatures, you risk becoming a caricature yourself.

Consider Sarah, the COO of a global medical devices company. She specialized in integrating acquired businesses, and

she was unambiguously great at her job. But she became easily frustrated by the “incompetence” of coworkers, including Max, the CFO. Sarah was quick to dismiss his abilities, having decided that he was out of his league and held his position only because he fawned over other senior leaders, particularly the CEO. She began to dislike everything about him—his voice, his ridiculous cuff link collection, his goatee.

Sarah started to rethink her judgment only when she was seated next to Max on a flight from London to the U.S. Forced to engage, she learned the reason for his apparent sycophancy—he was concerned about the CEO’s credibility with investors and senior managers. By the time the plane landed, Sarah and Max were not only mapping out a plan to present the CEO more effectively but also talking about working together on business opportunities in Asia. Just as important, the conversation made Sarah realize that her hastily formed aversion had caused her to miss out on valuable chances to collaborate with a worthy colleague.

Circumstances forced Sarah to humanize Max, but we recommend a more proactive approach. Take a hard look at how you interact with colleagues whose agendas seem opposed to your own. Recognize that these colleagues are real people who may even become your allies.

BARRIER 4 **Going It Alone**

Most people opt out of leadership for perfectly good reasons. The road, by definition, is unsafe. It leads to change, not comfort. Troy, the software service division manager, found it deeply unsettling to try working in a brand-new way. Eventually, though, he learned how to cope with his fears: by relying

Find the people who believe in your desire and ability to lead. Fall in love with them. Or at least meet them for drinks on a regular basis.

on the advice and support of select friends and family members. We call these people “the team.”

Troy’s team played a key role in his shift from focusing on his own career to helping his colleagues succeed. After more than a few sleepless nights, Troy decided to host a casual dinner for the people whose opinions he valued most: a sister, two friends from college, and a software entrepreneur he’d met at a recent Ironman competition. Halfway into the appetizer course, he put aside his pride, described his problem, and asked for advice.

His new triathlete friend, Raj, pushed Troy to stop worrying so much about his own job and instead try to break down

the organizational silos that were making his life difficult and threatening the company as well. Troy initially resisted the idea, but the next day he decided to change his behavior according to what he called “Raj’s intervention.” The collaborative culture he created in his division and with the product

THE IDEA IN BRIEF

Five barriers to exceptional leadership often get in the way of up-and-coming managers.

- **Barrier 1: Overemphasizing Personal Goals.** Instead of focusing on your own welfare, figure out how to support the members of your team.
- **Barrier 2: Protecting Your Public Image.** Rather than thinking of how others see you (intelligent, likeable, powerful), empower others. *Be* a leader instead of impersonating one.
- **Barrier 3: Turning Competitors into Enemies.** Your instinct may be to demonize those you don’t get along with, but humanizing them will turn them into allies.
- **Barrier 4: Going It Alone.** The road to leadership is unsafe and frightening, so surround yourself with trusted people to offer perspective and give you good advice.
- **Barrier 5: Waiting for Permission.** Don’t patiently wait for formal authority to make changes. Start now.

Learn to recognize and overcome the self-imposed obstacles blocking you from fully unleashing your talents on the issues that matter most.

development division became a model for other groups in the company. To this day Troy continues the monthly dinner ritual so that he and his “team” of family and friends can keep sharing problems and ideas.

We heard similar stories from other effective leaders. Almost all of them have a strong team that helps provide perspective, grounding, and faith. Your team members can be family, colleagues, friends, mentors, spouses, partners. The litmus test: Does the leader in you regularly show up in their presence? Find the people who believe in your desire and ability to lead. Fall in love with them. Or at least meet them for drinks on a regular basis.

Leadership Diagnostic: Are You Having Maximum Impact?

For most of us, the high-impact leader lurking inside comes out only on our best days. If you find yourself in this category—if you're not getting the leadership traction you want—ask yourself these questions. If most of your answers are “no,” you may be getting in your own way.

Overemphasizing Personal Goals

Do I spend most of my time as a manager thinking about what other people in the organization need to succeed?

Does the “best version” of my employees show up in my presence?

Does their best version endure in my absence?

Protecting Your Public Image

Do I ever stop monitoring myself and simply do my job?

Have I been willing to “look bad” in the service of my team or organization?

Do I explicitly model the attitudes and behaviors I want others in my organization to adopt?

BARRIER 5

Waiting for Permission

Like risk aversion, patience can be a valuable evolutionary gift. It's a main ingredient in discipline and hope. It helps us uncover the root cause of problems. It keeps us from hurting someone at the DMV.

But patience can be a curse for emerging leaders. It can undermine our potential by persuading us to keep our heads down and soldier on, waiting for someone to recognize our efforts and give us the proverbial tap on the shoulder—a better title and formal authority.

The problem with this approach is that healthy organizations reward people who decide on their own to lead. Power and influence are intimate companions, but their relationship

isn't the one we tend to imagine. More often than not, influence leads to power, not the other way around.

Most of the exceptional leaders we've studied didn't wait for formal authority to begin making changes. They may have ended up in a corner office, but their leadership started elsewhere. In one way or another, they all simply began to use whatever informal power they had.

A personal trainer named Jon was in the middle of a workout session when he made the decision to lead. One morning, while he was trying to help a client lose her post-pregnancy weight, his mind kept wandering to a teenager he knew, and especially to worries that he might have joined a gang. In the middle of counting crunches, Jon realized he wanted to do something different with his life.

He sketched out his vision that night. He knew that weightlifting could appeal to young people at risk for gang involvement, so he decided to start a program that would offer them physical empowerment, independence, and community, and help them build self-esteem. Two years later InnerCity Weightlifting was serving more than a hundred kids in East Boston. Its gyms are among the few places in the city where rival gang members come together peacefully. Jon is now poised to expand the concept to other cities.

Jon's career change was not a logical pivot, at least not from an outside perspective. He was young, he was inexperienced with youth development programs, and he'd grown up with limited exposure to urban life. His friends and family thought he was crazy to give up his lucrative personal-training practice for what seemed to them a pipe dream. But Jon was impatient, unwilling to wait until he'd gained experience and legitimacy. He went for it anyway, and the program's early results gave him enough influence to recruit students, schools, parents, and funders.

Jon's story holds a lesson for every aspiring leader: You must simply begin.

FURTHER READING

ARTICLES

Managing Away Bad Habits

by James Waldroop and Timothy Butler
HBR September 2000
Product no. R00512

We've all worked with highly competent people who are held back by a seemingly fatal personality flaw. The authors identify concrete tactics they have used to help people recognize and correct the behaviors that are undermining them.

Success That Lasts

by Laura L. Nash and Howard H. Stevenson
HBR February 2004
Product no. R0402H

The authors have built a practical framework for success that endures. It has four components that must be pursued simultaneously: happiness, achievement, significance, and legacy. They also teach you how to build your own version of the framework.



More Reading
@ hbr.org

Turning Competitors into Enemies

Is it rare for me to feel defensive, insecure, or judgmental?

Is it rare for people to feel defensive, insecure, or judgmental around me?

Is my environment generally free of people I can't stand to be around?

Going It Alone

Do I have a core group of people who help me make important decisions?

Do I have people around me who can handle both my audacity and my insecurities?

Do the most important people in my life participate in my leadership dreams?

Waiting for Permission

Is it possible to make a difference from my current position?

Do I have control over when I'll be able to have a meaningful impact?

Could I become a leader before other people see me as one?



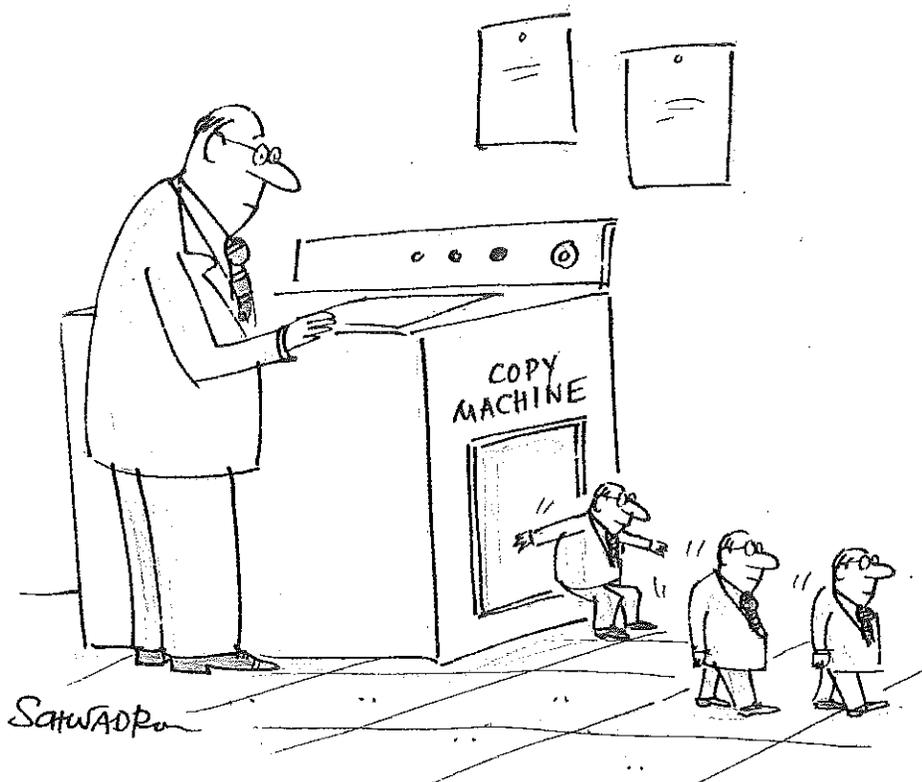
Our Closing Plea

We're sharing this research because we're quite selfishly invested in having you get out of your own way. We want to live in a world—we want our children to grow up in a world—in which your talents are fully unleashed on the issues that matter most. You should learn to recognize and overcome the self-imposed obstacles to your impact. The rest of us need you on the front lines, building better organizations. ♡

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