



Managing Yourself: Stop Holding Yourself Back

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From the world's poorest communities to the corner offices of its largest corporations, ambitious leaders face the same basic challenge: how to gain the strength and insights not just to manage but to lead. From different perspectives, we have been investigating what gets in the way. Robin conducts research on leadership; Frances focuses on coaching senior executives; and Anne works on unleashing the potential of the world.

We've worked with hundreds of leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, in industry and in more than 50 countries at various stages of development. Amid all the diversity, one common theme: Organization builders, fire starters, and movement makers are unintentionally stopping themselves from being great leaders. As a result, companies aren't getting the best from their people, and employees are

📄 Leadership Diagnostic: Are You Having Maximum Impact? (Located at the end of this article)

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 yourself better in your absence. That doesn't mean leaders are selfless. They have personal goals—to build a retirement plan, among other things. But the narrow pursuit of those goals can lead to self-interest, 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 companies. His bosses had always valued his drive and accountability. But when customer complaints began to pile up, he was managing, he pinned the blame on the "mediocrity" of the product development division. He refused 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 were on his watch. To shore up his position, Troy started working to win over senior colleagues one by one. He put it—by asking for feedback on his performance. His strategy worked to some extent. Senior colleagues were committed to improving his leadership skills. But the customer service problems just got worse. The company on influential blogs, and demands for refunds kept rising. The more Troy worked to improve, the more he became.

Troy had a leadership breakthrough when one of his service representatives asked for help from the product development team. The rep's despair triggered a shift in Troy's thinking—away from a defensive position and toward healing the split between the two divisions. Troy hosted a series of cross-division meetings that both groups felt heard. By the third meeting, the teams were brainstorming about ways to come 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 team, sure that customers were happy. Within a few weeks, demands for refunds began to decrease. Troy 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 back and look toward the horizon for predators. Risk aversion is a protective mechanism wired into our DNA; that's why it has such a trump impact. But all breakthrough leaders find ways to tame their security impulses. Most do so by finding 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. They feel heightened pressure to protect their interests in a world that seems (and often is) rigged against them. If attitudes contain built-in questions about your competence, it takes a lot of energy to keep trying to do the right thing.

We don't underestimate this challenge. But if your goal is to lead, our advice is the same: don't focus on *yourself*. Start with a commitment to make another person, or an entire team, better—and then use your resources to pull it off.

Barrier 2: Protecting Your Public Image

Another common impediment to leadership is being overly distracted by your image—that identity in your mind. Sticking to the script that goes along with that image takes a lot of energy, leaving little room for leadership.

There are more-nuanced costs as well. Once you've crafted your persona and determined how to be seen, effectiveness often suffers. The need to be seen as intelligent can inhibit learning and risk taking. Being seen as likable can keep you from asking tough questions or challenging existing norms. The result is the cause you to shut down critical feedback loops.

One woman we interviewed, Anita, was an executive vice president in charge of the regional operations of a large company. The public image she'd created—tough, decisive, analytical—had been a powerful asset in 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." Analytics suggested that the company gained little advantage from long-term employees, and Anita

to replace experienced salespeople with lower-paid part-timers. The experiment reduced pay the culture and service experience in those stores—an outcome the data didn't immediately

Store managers tried to communicate their frustration to Anita, but the interactions invariably any concerns that weren't supported by numbers and recklessly concluded that her manager resignations started to roll in. Like many leaders, Anita had decided she could be tough or er unable to hear feedback, particularly from people below her, or to risk looking bad by making 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 executive education program she'd attended, she thought about teams she'd been part of th then spoke with some of the people involved in an attempt to figure out why. Her conversatic coach rattled her. He gave this advice: "If you want your people to care what you think, first r *they* think." Within a few days, Anita reached out to one of the managers who had just resign experience making retail spaces work. She invited the manager to come back and help her r collaboration was a professional turning point for Anita.

This type of journey is not uncommon. At some point in their leadership trajectory, ambitious image and impact, between looking powerful and empowering others. They must choose, in 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-dir other people is a common response to conflict, but it carries significant leadership costs. It se you reliably incapable of exerting influence. As you turn others into caricatures, you risk becc

Consider Sarah, the COO of a global medical devices company. She specialized in integratir was unambiguously great at her job. But she became easily frustrated by the "incompetence CFO. Sarah was quick to dismiss his abilities, having decided that he was out of his league a he fawned over other senior leaders, particularly the CEO. She began to dislike everything a cufflink collection, his goatee.

Sarah started to rethink her judgment only when she was seated next to Max on a flight from engage, she learned the reason for his apparent sycophancy—he was concerned about the and senior managers. By the time the plane landed, Sarah and Max were not only mapping c more effectively but also talking about working together on business opportunities in Asia. Ju made Sarah realize that her hastily formed aversion had caused her to miss out on valuable worthy colleague.

Circumstances forced Sarah to humanize Max, but we recommend a more proactive approach to interact with colleagues whose agendas seem opposed to your own. Recognize that these colleagues can even become your allies.

Barrier 4: Going It Alone

Most people opt out of leadership for perfectly good reasons. The road, by definition, is unshared. Troy, the software service division manager, found it deeply unsettling to try working in a brand new role. He learned how to cope with his fears: by relying on the advice and support of select friends and family—people “the team.”

Troy’s team played a key role in his shift from focusing on his own career to helping his colleagues. After a few sleepless nights, Troy decided to host a casual dinner for the people whose opinions he valued—from college, and a software entrepreneur he’d met at a recent Ironman competition. Halfway through the meal, 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 focus on the organizational silos that were making his life difficult and threatening the company as well. The next day he decided to change his behavior according to what he called “Raj’s intervention.” The changes he created in his division and with the product development division became a model for other divisions. Troy continues the monthly dinner ritual so that he and his “team” of family and friends can keep each other grounded.

We heard similar stories from other effective leaders. Almost all of them have a strong team and a strong grounding, and faith. Your team members can be family, colleagues, friends, mentors, spouses, or even the leader in you regularly show up in their presence? Find the people who believe in your dreams and support you with them. Or at least meet them for drinks on a regular basis.

Barrier 5: Waiting for Permission

Like risk aversion, patience can be a valuable evolutionary gift. It’s a main ingredient in discipline and 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 wait and soldier on, waiting for someone to recognize our efforts and give us the proverbial tap on the shoulder or formal authority.

The problem with this approach is that healthy organizations reward people who decide on their own. People who influence are intimate companions, but their relationship isn’t the one we tend to imagine. Most people wait for power, not the other way around.

Most of the exceptional leaders we’ve studied didn’t wait for formal authority to begin making their mark. They stepped up in a corner office, but their leadership started elsewhere. In one way or another, they all started with the informal power they had.

A personal trainer named Jon was in the middle of a workout session when he made the decision he was trying to help a client lose her post-pregnancy weight, his mind kept wandering to all sorts of worries that he might have joined a gang. In the middle of counting crunches, Jon realized his life was different with his life.

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

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

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

Our Closing Plea

We're sharing this research because we're quite selfishly invested in having you get out of your world—we want our children to grow up in a world—in which your talents are fully unleashed. You should learn to recognize and overcome the self-imposed obstacles to your impact. The lines, building better organizations.

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're not getting the leadership traction you want—ask yourself these questions. If most of you're not getting in your own way.

1. Overemphasizing Personal Goals

Do I spend most of my time as a manager thinking about what other people in the organization are doing?

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

Does their best version endure in my absence?

2. 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?

3. 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?

4. 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?

5. 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?

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