

AVOIDING THE
**FEEDBACK
BUBBLE**

THERE ARE COUNTLESS STORIES OF SUCCESSFUL LEADERS WHO, UPON ACHIEVING POWER, PUSHED AWAY THEIR TRUSTED ADVISORS IN FAVOR OF A GROUP OF YES MEN.

Each ends the same: the leader, buoyed by his or her success, takes a miscalculated risk, and, instead of correcting course when things go wrong, doubles down on his or her position, plunging him or herself and his or her followers into disaster.

Although not all of these stories make it into the headlines, they are all devastating to the people involved, and they happen with alarming frequency. Why? Because leaders get stuck in the feedback bubble.

LONELY AT THE TOP

It turns out that executives are a lonely bunch. According to RHR International's CEO Snapshot Survey, a survey of 83 U.S. CEOs, 50% of respondents reported experiencing loneliness in their role. That makes sense – the corporate world can be a nasty and competitive place, and it's easy to lose friends and make enemies on the way to the top. Although many executives consider loneliness a fair trade for the power, money, and prestige that comes with the corner office, it could end up damaging their careers.

Leader performance depends on self-awareness – knowing your strengths and weaknesses and how they impact your behavior. Without it, people tend to overestimate their strengths and ignore critical feedback, eventually derailing their careers, often at tremendous cost to their employers.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE HIGHER UP THE LADDER
SOMEONE IS, THE HARDER IT IS FOR HIM OR
HER TO GAIN A REALISTIC VIEW OF HIS OR HER
STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.

1

THEY DON'T ASK

People in positions of power aren't particularly good at asking for feedback. In an analysis of more than 1,200 New Zealand business leaders, assessment and consulting firm Winsborough Limited found that the chief complaint against poorly performing managers was that they didn't seek or accept feedback.

"With every move up the ladder, you're more impressed with yourself as you impress other people," says Geoff Trickey, managing partner at Psychological Consultancy Limited. "When you are massively successful and you no longer feel that you need to make any concessions to anybody because you're now top of the heap. You're admired, successful, powerful, and wealthy, so why the hell should you bother with what anyone thinks?"

2

NOBODY TELLS THEM

Few employees are willing to risk their careers to give their boss negative feedback. As North Jersey Community Bank CEO Frank Sorrentino III said in an article for Fortune, "When people look at you, they look at your title first. They're not coming in to talk to Frank, they're coming in to talk to the CEO. And when they're coming in to talk to the CEO, they're not going to tell you what they really think."

"You're on your own at the top," says Trickey. "Nobody is speaking truth to power. No one's telling you you're a fool or that's a stupid idea. Everyone's saying how great it was. You're beginning to feel indestructible, so at that point, the dark side is just lurking around the corner. It's been creeping up on you as you've moved up the building."

3

THEY CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH

Finally, when bosses do get honest feedback, they don't always handle it well.

"When most people are confronted with the fact that they have made the wrong decision, they are unwilling to admit it," says Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, vice president of research and innovation at Hogan. "In order to save face and avoid feeling stupid, they engage in a range of unconscious tactics that help them distort reality in their favor."

3 WAYS TO DERAIL

Without the feedback needed to keep their dark sides in check, people tend to overuse their strengths and downplay their weaknesses, leading them to behave in ways that can damage their careers in one of three predictable ways:

1

MOVING AWAY

Some people manage insecurities by intimidating and avoiding others. Individuals in this category are often criticized for being AWOL in high-pressure situations, or of managing up – catering to senior management and often throwing their employees under the bus in the process. Eventually, this aloof management produces a shortage of allies and causes leaders to lose a handle on day-to-day operations.

2

MOVING AGAINST

In sharp contrast to the reclusive executives in the moving away group, individuals in this category manage self-doubt by charming and manipulating others. This combination makes for a magnetic personality at first, but these people tend to step on fingers on their way up the ladder, leaving them alone and surrounded by enemies at the top.

3

MOVING TOWARD

This group is made up of individuals who manage insecurities by micromanaging and building alliances. The problem is, human beings thrive on autonomy, and micromanaging robs employees of their sense of responsibility and independence. The result is often a blow to engagement and morale that could lead to an exodus of talented high-potential employees.

FIXING THE FEEDBACK LOOP

How can executives avoid getting stuck in a feedback bubble?

1

START WITH DATA

Although high-power executives are unlikely to seek out or receive honest feedback, personality assessments provide objective, scientifically valid data about leaders' strengths and weaknesses and how others view their behavior.

"When performance feedback comes directly from another individual, we tend to react badly," says Chamorro-Premuzic. "Showing people objective data from personality assessment can give them unbiased information about their strengths and weaknesses around which you can build feedback and coaching."

2

MAKE FEEDBACK EASIER

"In order to change, we need to start by building self-awareness, which is best achieved by obtaining and believing honest and critical feedback from others," says Chamorro-Premuzic.

Sorrentino said in *Fortune* that he "holds focus groups with representatives from every level in the company, where people can air their grievances." Regular anonymous 360-degree feedback is another way to get reliable feedback.

3

USE A COACH

"High-quality personality assessments provide powerful information about participants' strengths, weaknesses, and reputations," says Trish Kellett, director of the Hogan Coaching Network. "However, without an effective developmental framework, it's difficult to translate that information into measurable improvement."

Organizational coaches can provide the feedback and suggestions necessary for leaders to create such a framework.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Self-awareness doesn't immunize leaders against making mistakes. At some point in his or her career, everyone makes a bad call or has an emotional outburst. However, gaining an objective, data-backed view of their strengths and weaknesses can help executives cope with the stress, pressure, and isolation of an executive position, and help ensure that even when the dark side shows, it won't derail their careers.