

Four Fatal Fears

Leaders' fears and anxieties have a direct impact on their team(s) and organization. The fear of failure, being wrong, rejection, and being emotionally uncomfortable all impede effective interaction with others. Becoming aware of how these fears play out allows you to manage them more effectively.

-Play to Win, Larry and Hersch Wilson

I fear failure; therefore, I need to succeed.

When leaders operate from a fear of failure, they are often reluctant to act. They may procrastinate in making decisions and miss opportunities. This fear impedes their sense of adventure and playfulness, as well as their ability to take the risks necessary for innovation and growth. A fear of failure can manifest itself as a need to have every piece of available information before making a decision. Leaders who fear failure can become imaginatively stuck and in the constant mode of finding answers, rather than reframing questions. Their thinking can become polarized into black- and-white or all-or-nothing approaches that limit creativity and risk-taking.

I fear being wrong; therefore, I must be right.

For leaders, the fear of being wrong can make it extremely difficult to tolerate members of their management team who challenge their ideas or conclusions. Over time, dissenting voices become quiet and the management team becomes nothing more than a rubber stamp for the leader's thinking. The creativity and imagination of the team is lost to the leader and the business. Ultimately, leaders' fears of being wrong leads to an increased likelihood that they will be wrong. Leaders who need to be right tend to dominate discussions and attempt to control the thinking of others, rather than see others as resources who can expand their understanding of issues and opportunities.

I fear rejection; therefore, I need to be accepted or liked.

Fear of rejection makes it difficult for leaders to take a stand and define themselves in situations where relationships feel endangered. Leaders who fear rejection seldom confront the poor performance of subordinates or challenge the thinking of others in a way that promotes lively discussion and debate. These leaders tend to rely exclusively on a consensus decision-making style because they believe it is more important to be liked than respected. Fearing rejection, leaders often try to present themselves in a way that is palatable to everyone, except themselves. This leads to stress, burnout and lack of confidence. More introverted leaders deal with the fear of rejection by pulling away from relationships and cutting themselves off from the very people with whom they desire connection.

I fear being emotionally uncomfortable; therefore, I need to be comfortable.

When leaders need emotional comfort, they lack the capacity to remain present and engaged when faced with resistance or anger from others. They tend to avoid emotionally charged discussions, and therefore, miss the opportunity for mutual learning and growth. The need to avoid emotional discomfort can make the intrinsic loneliness of leadership unbearable. Leaders who attempt to maintain constant emotional comfort become cut off from their own emotions and unable to respond appropriately to the emotions of others. It is almost impossible for leaders to make difficult decisions when they are paralyzed by the fear of others' emotional responses.

Reflection



Use the space below to answer the questions on the four fatal fears.

In what situations do you observe these fears playing out for you? Is there one that shows up more than the others?

How might these fears get in the way of your leadership?

What might you do to recognize and overcome when one of these fears are at play?

Taking it Deeper



Use the space below to dig into each fear, reflecting on the past few weeks.

I fear failure; therefore, I need to succeed.

- What did I not attempt for fear of failure?
- How did I rationalize not trying?
- What did not move forward as a result?

I fear being wrong; therefore, I must be right.

- In what situation did I feel the need to be right?
- How did I behave in that situation?
- What impact did that have on others?

I fear rejection; therefore, I need to be accepted or liked.

- In what situation did I feel rejected?
- How did I react in the situation?
- Looking back, what would have been more effective?

I fear being emotionally uncomfortable; therefore, I need to be comfortable.

- In what situations did I feel emotional discomfort arise?
- What did I do to avoid or eliminate the discomfort?
- What did not get resolved because I avoided it?