5 common leadership worries
By Juliet Morris, Founder and Director, Open Square

Introduction

Leaders are typically described as strong, confident and assured people, knowing what to do when others don't, and having the courage to act. Being a leader, however, can put you in one of the most lonely and difficult places you will ever be, and every leader I've ever met has worries. Some are genuinely terrified of getting it wrong, letting people down or being found out as incapable, and they cope in different ways with these challenges.

1. I can't do this; I'm not good enough (Imposter Syndrome)

Imposter Syndrome is a term that refers to an internal experience of believing that you are not as competent as others perceive you to be. It's those times when you feel a phony. You don't believe in your own capability, might attribute your success to luck ('I only got here because I'm lucky, or there was an error at interview), or could worry that sometime soon you're going to get found out ('I don't really know what I'm doing!').

According to a Blind report in 2018, 58% of Tech employees experience Imposter Syndrome and more than half of employees at Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft and Google, report that they sometimes feel they don't deserve their job despite their accomplishments.

If you're ever feeling like an imposter (or someone you know is), here are some tips:

- Understand your value and worth by writing down your achievements. Keep it with you and remember what you are capable of.
- Recognise that you're not alone feeling like an imposter.
- When the imposter feeling hits, you acknowledge it and say, "ah, here we go this is a new challenge. That's ok brain, thank you for recognising it."
- Talk about it with people you trust. Pick people who can be objective and invite them to tell you what they value most about you and your contribution.
- Talk about it with a professional coach or mentor, but one that has experienced and overcome (or understood how to handle) imposter syndrome themselves.

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2. Fear of failure (and then letting people down)

If this was a list about organisational culture, an environment that does not allow people to safely fail, develop and improve would always be the #1 issue holding back performance. Here I'm talking about the more personal and social worry of not performing and then letting people down.

This worry can be a very deep and powerful motivator in performance and our human desire for acceptance. It's important to remember that everyone has that voice in their head. There's a surge of 'accountability groups', meet-ups and networking appearing that help individuals to achieve more, simply by committing in the group to what they're going to do. Whichever works for you, connecting with others can be better than self-accountability.

Members of the team will also worry about letting people down so how a leader reacts to their fear is important in setting a tone. Here are some tips for handling a worry about letting people down:

- Recognise it's ok to worry about failing and letting people down; that's human.
- If your worry is making you lose sleep or you notice a change in your behaviour, get some help and talk to someone objective that you trust, a coach or a mentor.
- Visualise what you need to do in order to succeed and not let people down. What are the actions you need to take? How do you need to behave? How will you know it's working? Do them. If you have no idea what to do, seek advice.
- Recognise your fear as a new opportunity which can be learnt. Keep a record of particular situations or actions that impact you the most and work on those.

3. Being blamed for something I'm not accountable for

Blame often comes down to the organisational culture and environment where a culprit is sought to be punished or humiliated. For this article, I'll talk about how you can support your teams when they are being blamed or are accepting the blame when it isn't their fault.

Blame leaders love to pass the blame onto someone else. This could be because of all points raised in this article (fear, imposter, etc.) or they have copied from others as a perceived 'good management style'.

Ideally when things go wrong, someone can step up, take accountability and move on, but it doesn't always happen that way. If that happens to you, here are some tips:

- Lead teams with purpose: share your responsibilities and when things go wrong, take accountability.
- Be honest with your team and have their back. You've got to get the team back on their game.
- Clarify responsibilities with your team should a mistake happen.
- If there are multiple teams involved, map the flow of work and sort out grey areas before a crisis.
- If you're a leader blaming each other for the outcome, help them share the responsibility. No organisation wins when people are fighting with each other.

4. Why do I have to get involved in everything?

The pressure and pace of our working world continues. Engaging, motivating and coaching your team is incredibly important and will continue to be.

Leaders often tell me they "have to get involved in everything", and then secondly comes phrases such as performance, trust. Sometimes this is perfectionism, sometimes it's skillset or lack of motivation of the team.

Perfectionism is addictive. You only need to look at social media and how people make judgements and aspirations about lifestyles, careers, or sensationalism. Perfectionism often seeks to avoid failure and prevent a negative outcome. Others may see perfectionism as controlling and nit-picking. It's important to recognise why you believe you need to get involved in everything.

Here are some tips to become less involved and a coaching leader:

- Recognise when you need to be involved in everything and write it down. Once you've done this, you can then categorise what situations these are. For example, it could be the team are new, they don't know what next steps to take, or that they are worried about something.
- Be curious and foster an environment of learning.   Ask what you can do to help before jumping in to quickly to fix it.
- Sit down with your team and decide what and whom you could delegate and empower.
- Allow others to help before you.
- Should you need to help, sit down with them and teach them, rather than doing it yourself.
- If there genuinely is an issue of quality, help your team understand the target and coach them.
- Develop coaching skills. Seek help if you need to.

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5. I just can't work with (person)

Relationship management is important for us all but becomes essential as a leader. As a leader you need to influence others, balance the needs of people and teams and often facilitate situations when relationships break down. All these lead to concerns, so here I'm going to look at the situation of struggling to work with a peer.

There are many circumstances that lead to relationship issues between peers. Issues could arise from competition, distrust, a change in relationship, envy, a feeling of inequity or favouritism, lack of collaboration/secrecy, misunderstanding, … the list is long. The thing is, once there's a real or perceived break in a relationship, it dominates every interaction.

To begin to recover or strengthen a relationship, here are some tips:

- Start with a bit of Stephen Covey: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood". If you're struggling to find a common platform or place to start from, do this. Ask, and be genuinely interested in understanding where the other person is, what they are trying to achieve, and if you can, how they perceive your role in that.
- Look for common ground and find opportunities to support the other person whenever possible – this will help develop trust.
- Take responsibility. Taking the path of 'I just can't work with them' or 'they need to apologise first' or whatever helps no-one. You won't learn, it's uncomfortable and the organisation loses out too.
- Visualise the conversation where you interact with the other person and what you want to say.
- Recognise that if you have a difficult colleague, it is unlikely they have a problem with you – quite often you're seeing a fear or vulnerability in them come through.

About Open Square

We develop IT leaders who want to grow, build amazing teams and deliver better results. We provide skills workshops, coaching and a unique leadership development programme designed specifically for leaders in IT: The Open Leader Method™.

If you would like to find out how we can help you build teams that take more ownership and deliver when everything around them is changing, give us a call or drop us an email for a no-obligation discussion.