

Don't Let your Inner Fears Limit Your Career

By Matt Brubaker and Foster Mobley

Fear is a natural and universal human phenomenon, affecting top executives as much as anyone else. The majority of management literature is focused on helping leaders conquer their fears. The problem is that stifling fear doesn't make it go away. In fact, failing to address it can lead to highly unproductive and dysfunctional behaviors.

Through our firm's work with thousands of executives over 30 years, we have come to believe that unrecognized or unacknowledged core fears are almost always a root cause of professional distress and unattained potential. Yet those fears are not necessarily bad. We have met many leaders who have chosen to understand and learn from their fears, turning them into fuel for performance. If you are willing to take a hard look at your fears and where they're coming from, you can channel them productively. If, for example, deep down you're afraid that you don't measure up (a common executive fear), you can find ways to engage that desire to be your best without driving your team into the ground.

It may be that outside help is in order — an executive coach, a good therapist, supportive family and friends. But there is a lot of work leaders can, and should, do on their own. From our work, we've created a four-step process of rigorous self-reflection that countless executives have used to understand their fears and become better leaders.

We'll explain the process and how one leader used it to turn around her career. But before we do, here are the fears we've found that most commonly plague executives. (These fears are generally tied to personality types as defined by the [Enneagram personality model](#); you can find a more complete discussion of the fears and personality types in our [whitepaper on the topic](#).) They are:

- **Fear of being wrong.** People harboring this fear are extremely focused on rules, ethics, standards, and “right vs. wrong.” They are deeply afraid of making a choice that will later prove to be “objectively” wrong. These perfectionists put a lot of pressure on themselves and their coworkers.
- **Fear of not being good enough.** Those with this fear tend to be insecure, intensely focused on their image, and desperate to prove their worth. This may come at a cost to their authenticity, not to mention their capacity for joy. What's more, because their core motivations relate to how they are seen by others, they tend to fudge facts.

- **Fear of missing out.** This drives leaders to constantly seek new opportunities and experiences. The downside? It can scatter their attention and muddy their decisions. As they pursue multiple interests at once, they leave their teams frustrated and confused. Deep down, executives with this fear are afraid of being alone.
- **Fear of being victimized or taken advantage of.** Those suffering from this fear push for truth and justice; they are afraid of being seen as weak. They feel the need to win every battle, and can be defensive and controlling.

Protecting oneself from the imagined consequences of these fears can be helpful — pushing you to work harder and achieve more. But there is also, often, a sizable cost.

The experience of Suzanne (not her real name, but indeed a real person), a highly successful strategy consultant we met 10 years into her career, illustrates both the costs of unacknowledged fear, and the benefits of reconciling it.

Suzanne was a shining example to her peers — a top-performer known for delivering solid results on every project she'd taken on. Nonetheless, she believed her career had stalled, and some feedback she'd received gave her a clue as to why. A 360-degree review revealed her team didn't trust her. That hit Suzanne hard because she'd considered herself a good boss, which was very important to her. What's more, her personal relationships were suffering. Eager to always make a good impression, she had become an expert in putting a positive spin on clearly questionable events. No wonder her team was wary. Those two revelations were sufficient motivation to take on the hard job of change.

What others didn't see — and what Suzanne had to contend with — was her underlying anxiety that she might fail, and how that anxiety was crippling her emotionally. She suffered from *the fear of not being good enough*. While many admired her, they said she seemed more interested in her own image than anything else, and lacked the capacity to care about others. The truth was that she had failed to make true connections because she was overly committed to protecting her own reputation.

Step 1: Acknowledge the fear. As a high achiever, Suzanne cared deeply about how her colleagues saw her. True to her nature, she set about to rectify her behavior. Her first step was to understand and admit her fear — not an easy thing to do. After all, she had done a great job of covering it up for years. On the surface she was very polished and put together, and extremely smart and successful. But cracks were beginning to appear.

In the acknowledge phase, we suggest that people take a close look at their history and examine the choices they've made and the reasons behind those choices. In Suzanne's self-examination, she reached back to the most meaningful times of her life, beginning with high school and onwards through college and her professional life. Looking at the activities she'd chosen, she realized she had not put much effort into pursuing her own interests but rather activities in which she was certain she could excel.

Desperate to project an image of excellence, she lost her sense of self along the way. Recognizing this was a real awakening for Suzanne. She needed to reconsider who *she* was and what *she* wanted. Only then would she be able to let her true self come through and make genuine connections.

Step 2: Interrogate the fear to better understand it. Suzanne had to critically assess her current reality and look at the costs of her fear. After learning her team didn't trust her, she had to face the fact that by constantly comparing herself to others and trying to look good above all, she'd lost touch with what actually mattered to her and how her behavior affected others.

So she spent time considering what it would mean if she failed at something. Who would she be? What would happen if she took on a project that didn't play to her strengths? What if she delivered B+ work? Her instinct told her that failure would leave her with nothing, so she had to acknowledge that instinct but move past it. Other people make mistakes and they move on. They didn't walk around with a scarlet F on their chests. As Suzanne began to see how her unfounded fears were worsening her behavior, she began to understand she didn't have to meet an unattainable ideal.

Step 3: Choose a different course of action. This is about deciding what to do next and making commitments — understanding what truly matters to you. Some questions to ask yourself:

- If I objectively evaluate my actions and behavior right now, what would the evidence say that I'm committed to?
- How does this differ from what I *say* I want?
- Practically speaking, if my desires and actions are not fully aligned, what does that indicate?

Suzanne held honesty as one of her core values. But as she asked these questions, she realized her behavior didn't always match up with it. Similarly, she cared about relationships with colleagues. But in her desire to impress, she'd become less trustworthy, which pushed people away. She made a conscious choice to work hard on aligning her values and behaviors more closely.

Step 4: Act on that choice — in a way that aligns with your values. The last step is to deliver on your commitments. For Suzanne, part of this was taking on projects that weren't a slam dunk — challenging herself to learn from a place of uncertainty. She also made efforts to get in touch with what *she* liked, rather than choose things that other

people admired. One useful exercise she did was to walk through museums and identify paintings that she liked and why, without asking anyone else's opinion. It sounds simple, but it was no easy task for Suzanne, accustomed as she was to pleasing others.

Suzanne's arduous self-examination of her fears has turned her life around. It drove her to make positive changes, both personally and professionally. Ten years on, her career has taken off. She received a series of promotions, taking on bigger and more important projects.

She eventually went on to form her own successful firm, and is regarded as a highly effective and genuine leader. Her employees love her. In the last decade, she's evolved her leadership style to the point where she is now known for being trustworthy and selfless.

When leaders are controlled by fear — or when they pretend it's not there — they can be crippled by it and become powerless. None of us will ever be free from fear, and it's unrealistic to expect that we can always put our fears in their place. But even when the stakes of admitting their fears feel high, leaders are always more effective when they are candid and do the hard work to right-size their fears.

What's more, when executives open up about their fears, it makes them much more relatable and approachable as leaders. That will make any executive team far more cohesive and effective, and ultimately the business they run stronger and more successful.

[Matt Brubaker](#), Ed.D., is CEO at [FMG Leading](#), a human capital strategy firm.

[Foster Mobley](#), Ed.D., is founder and chairman of [FMG Leading](#).