Stop Holding Yourself Back

Five ways people unwittingly sabotage their rise to leadership by Anne Morriss, Robin J. Ely, and Frances X. Frei
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From the world’s poorest communities to the corner offices of its largest corporations, ambitious employees struggle with the same basic challenge: how to gain the strength and insights not just to manage but to lead. For more than a decade, from three different perspectives, we have been investigating what gets in the way. Robin conducts research on race, gender, and leadership; Frances focuses on coaching senior executives; and Anne works on unleashing social entrepreneurs around the world.

We’ve worked with hundreds of leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, in industries spanning more than 30 fields, and in more than 50 countries at various stages of development. Amid all the diversity, one very clear pattern has emerged: Organization builders, fire starters, and movement makers are unintentionally stopping themselves from becoming exceptional leaders. As a result, companies aren’t getting the best from their people, and employees are limiting their opportunities.

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 sure your impact endures in your absence. That doesn’t mean leaders are selfless. They have personal goals—to build status, a professional identity, and a retirement plan, among other things.
The rep’s despair triggered a shift in Troy’s thinking—away from worrying about his own position and toward healing the split in the company.
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 find yourself in this category—if you’re not getting the leadership traction you want—ask yourself these questions. If most of your answers are “no,” you may be getting in your own way.

Overemphasizing Personal Goals
Do I spend most of my time as a manager thinking about what other people in the organization need to succeed?
Does the “best version” of my employees show up in my presence?
Does their best version endure in my absence?

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?

an executive education program she’d attended, she thought about teams she’d been part of that had worked together well. She then spoke with some of the people involved in an attempt to figure out why. Her conversation with her high school volleyball coach rattled her. He gave this advice: “If you want your people to care what you think, first make it clear that you care what they think.” Within a few days, Anita reached out to one of the managers who had just resigned, a woman with a decade of experience making retail spaces work. She invited the manager to come back and help her repair the damage. Their collaboration was a professional turning point for Anita.

This type of journey is not uncommon. At some point in their leadership trajectory, ambitious people must choose between image and impact, between looking powerful and empowering others. They must choose, in effect, between impersonating a 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-dimensional enemies. Distorting other people is a common response to conflict, but it carries significant leadership costs. It severs your links to reality, making you reliably incapable of exerting influence. As you turn others into caricatures, you risk becoming a caricature yourself.

Consider Sarah, the COO of a global medical devices company. She specialized in integrating acquired businesses, and she was unambiguously great at her job. But she became easily frustrated by the “incompetence” of coworkers, including Max, the CFO. Sarah was quick to dismiss his abilities, having decided that he was out of his league and held his position only because he fawned over other senior leaders, particularly the CEO. She began to dislike everything about him—his voice, his ridiculous cufflink collection, his goatee.

Sarah started to rethink her judgment only when she was seated next to Max on a flight from London to the U.S. Forced to engage, she learned the reason for his apparent sycophancy—he was concerned about the CEO’s credibility with investors and senior managers. By the time the plane landed, Sarah and Max were not only mapping out a plan to present the CEO more effectively but also talking about working together on business opportunities in Asia. Just as important, the conversation made Sarah realize that her hastily formed aversion had caused her to miss out on valuable chances to collaborate with a worthy colleague.

Circumstances forced Sarah to humanize Max, but we recommend a more active approach. Take a hard look at how you interact with colleagues whose agendas seem opposed to your own. Recognize that these colleagues are real people who may even become your allies.

BARRIER 4
Going It Alone
Most people opt out of leadership for perfectly good reasons. The road, by definition, is unsafe. It leads to change, not comfort. Troy, the software service division manager, found it deeply unsettling to try working in a brand-new way. Eventually, though, he learned how to cope with his fears: by relying on the advice and support of select friends and family members. We call these people “the team.”

Troy’s team played a key role in his shift from focusing on his own career to helping his colleagues succeed. After more than a few sleepless nights, Troy decided to host a casual dinner for the people whose opinions he valued most: a sister, two friends from college, and a software entrepreneur he’d met at a recent Ironman competition. Halfway into the appetizer course, he put aside his pride, described his problem, and asked for advice.

Find the people who believe in your desire and ability to lead. Fall in love with them. Or at least meet them for drinks on a regular basis.
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?

His new triathlete friend, Raj, pushed Troy to stop worrying so much about his own job and instead try to break down the organizational silos that were making his life difficult and threatening the company as well. Troy initially resisted the idea, but the next day he decided to change his behavior according to what he called “Raj’s intervention.” The collaborative culture he created in his division and with the product development division became a model for other groups in the company. To this day Troy continues the monthly dinner ritual so that he and his “team” of family and friends can keep sharing problems and ideas.

We heard similar stories from other effective leaders. Almost all of them have a strong team that helps provide perspective, grounding, and faith. Your team members can be family, colleagues, friends, mentors, spouses, partners. The litmus test: Does the leader in you regularly show up in their presence? Find the people who believe in your desire and ability to lead. Fall in love 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 hope. It helps us uncover 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 keep our heads down and soldier on, waiting for someone to recognize our efforts and give us the proverbial tap on the shoulder—a better title and formal authority.

The problem with this approach is that healthy organizations reward people who decide on their own to lead. Power and influence are intimate companions, but their relationship isn’t the one we tend to imagine. More often than not, influence leads to power, not the other way around.

Most of the exceptional leaders we’ve studied didn’t wait for formal authority to begin making changes. They may have ended up in a corner office, but their leadership started elsewhere. In one way or another, they all simply began to use whatever informal power they had.

A personal trainer named Jon was in the middle of a workout session when he made the decision to lead. One morning, while he was trying to help a client lose her post-pregnancy weight, his mind kept wandering to a teenager he knew, and especially to worries that he might have joined a gang. In the middle of counting crunches, Jon realized he wanted to do something different with his life.

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

Jon’s career change was not a logical pivot, at least not from an outside perspective. He was young, he was inexperienced with youth development programs, and he’d grown up with limited exposure to urban life. His friends and family thought he was crazy to give up his lucrative personal-training practice for what seemed to them a pipe dream. But Jon was impatient, unwilling to wait until he’d gained experience and legitimacy. He went for it anyway, and the program’s early results gave him enough influence 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 own way. We want to live in a world—in which your talents are fully unleashed on the issues that matter most. You should learn to recognize and overcome the self-imposed obstacles to your impact. The rest of us need you on the front lines, building better organizations.