11 Ways Fear Cripples Your Leadership
And What to Do About It
By David Dye

This question has perplexed me for many years: With the wealth of leadership wisdom available, why do we continue to struggle to lead well? Why do employee engagement rates continue to hover around 30% despite the obvious advantages for leaders who choose to lead well?

The more time I spend with managers and leaders, the more I see three reasons aspiring leaders struggle:

1) They do not know how.
2) They know how, but fear gets in the way.
3) They know how, but pride gets in the way.

From our work on the book Winning Well: A Manager’s Guide to Getting Results—Without Losing Your Soul, my coauthor Karin Hurt and I have found that after a lack of skills, fear, manifesting as insecurity, lack of confidence and pressure are the most common obstacles to effective leadership.

Ways Fear Cripples Leadership

Healthy humans experience fear. It is part of the gig. Leaders will have anxiety and fear as they face unexpected problems and take risks to move the team forward.

This is okay; in fact it is natural and normal to have these fears. However, if leaders do not learn how to manage the fears that come with leadership, they will succumb to shortcuts that compel, but do not influence.

1) You avoid dealing with the very thing that needs attention.

You know that unease that creeps up and prompts you to procrastinate or avoid doing something? Listen to it. But instead of doing what it says (avoiding the problem), use it as a signal flare; the thing you feel like avoiding is exactly what should have your full attention. Dive in and get it done.

2) You lose credibility.

Even if you do not tell them what is going on, your team will figure it out. When paralyzed with fear, your leadership credibility slowly erodes.

3) You feel like you are all alone.

When you are scared, you forget your team. This one is particularly brutal because it cuts you off from one of your greatest strengths. Your team is smart; working together, you can get it done, but not if fear isolates you.

4) You react and create chaos.

Have you ever had a squirrel get inside your house? It is scared and panicked. It overreacts to every little noise or motion, scampering back and forth, climbing up the walls, knocking things over—chaos.

When we get scared, we can do the same thing and leave our teams frustrated and confused about their own priorities and expectations. [If you are not sure if this is happening to you, take the author’s free assessment (see sidebar) and learn what is working for you and what is not.]

5) You demotivate others.

Fear only motivates for a little while. When teams are confused and leaders are reactive, it sucks the energy out of the team.

6) You give up your ability to create the future.

When you act out of fear, you are not working toward a positive vision of the future. You are just trying to avoid problems.

7) You clamp down on information.

Without information, people jump to the most pathological conclusion possible. And yet, when you work out of fear, you often stop the flow of information (because you worry about communicat-
ing the wrong thing or are not sure who to trust). This feeds into the isolation that cuts you off from those who can help you the most.

8) **You withdraw or lash out.**
This behavior goes by many names. You have probably heard it called our flight-or-fight response. Kerry Patterson calls it our tendency to silence or violence.

Whatever you call it, it is surely familiar: When scared, you protect yourself—either by hunkering down in reinforced concrete bunkers or by launching an all out attack. Whether you run and hide or go on the attack, it cripples your leadership credibility.

9) **You avoid risks and personal growth.**
When worried about making mistakes, you do not take risks. When you avoid taking healthy risks, you stop learning new things and stop learning altogether. Leaders who do not grow lose credibility.

10) **You do not apologize, own and correct mistakes.**
When you make a mistake, if you are frightened of being seen as a failure, you might not own up to it and apologize. Of course, everyone already knows and so once again you fritter away your credibility.

11) **You inspire fear in others.**
This one is really bad: Leaders recreate themselves. Your team is learning from you. If you stay in fear mode, it will not be long before your team acts the same way. Now you have multiplied the mistakes on this list.

**Reclaim Your Power**
If more than one of those mistakes sound familiar, it is time to conquer your fear and be the leader your team needs.

1) **Listen to your fear.**
You will never get rid of it; fear is a normal emotion and we experience it for a reason. What is it trying to tell you? What is it warning you about? Take some time to examine what is going on and understand it. Just listening to your own thoughts and emotions will help. Then you can begin addressing those things.

2) **Connect with your team.**
When alone or isolated, things grow out of proportion. Reconnecting with your team will help gain healthy perspective and engage many more minds in problem solving.

3) **Give yourself power.**
If fear leads to victimhood, one of the best antidotes is to re-empower yourself by asking two simple questions: What are the results I want to achieve? What can I do to accomplish those results?

4) **Examine the actual consequences (not just what you imagine).**
Your mind can play tricks on you and grow imagined problems to epic proportions. What is it you are afraid of? What would actually happen if that came to pass, what would you do? If you can find people who have been in the same situations and learn what they did, that is even better. The point is to reduce the imagined problem to real-life and know you can handle it.

5) **Leave room for mistakes.**
When you plan, count on making mistakes. Allow some margin of error and know where your error limits really are. Perfectionists and high achievers sometimes let fear paralyze them because they fear making a mistake. But even engineers sending a ship to another planet know the acceptable margin of error.
Mistakes are a good thing. They mean you are trying something new and stretching. Use them well—they have much to teach if you let them.

6) **Practice.**
Overcoming leadership fears takes time and practice. In the future, situations that caused you 2 weeks of anxiety will only give you 2 hours of serious thought.

7) **Start small.**
What is the easiest step you can take? Sharing your concerns with the team? Looking for someone who has been in the same situation? Writing down the situation you need to address? Take one step. Then another.

8) **Get help.**
Sometimes we need help. Do not let your fear of being seen as weak or inadequate keep you from getting the help you need to be effective. The best professional athletes in the world have private coaches and sports psychologists. If they can do that for what is essentially a game, aren’t you worth even more?

**Your Turn**
Left unchecked, fear will cripple your leadership and either keep you from inspiring others with confidence or drive you to insecurity where power and control reign.