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Executive Wisdom:

The 8 Traps of High Achievers

“Many high performers would rather do the wrong things well than do the right thing poorly.”

~ Thomas J. DeLong and Sara DeLong, “The Paradox of Excellence,” Harvard Business Review, June 2011

Leaders are high achievers who continually grow as professionals. But in many organizations, there are high achievers who are floundering. They’re smart, ambitious professionals who aren’t as productive or satisfied as they could be. Many ascend to leadership positions and reach a plateau in their professional growth.

Throughout their careers, they’ve been told they’re high potentials. They should be flourishing, but they often let anxiety about their performance compromise their ability to learn and grow.

Fear of revealing their limitations may cause high achievers to undermine their careers and hamper their leadership abilities. Many know they can and should be doing better, but they fail to ask for help.

If you’re a high achiever, then you’re used to winning and accustomed to turning out remarkable performance. But what happens when you’re in over your head or on an accelerating treadmill that’s going nowhere fast?

For example, when challenged by new technologies or strategic game changes, you’re probably unwilling to admit it and often refuse to ask for help. The very strengths that led you to the fast track can steer you toward poor performance.

High performers exhibit eight typical behaviors, write Thomas J. and Sara DeLong in “The Paradox of Excellence” (Harvard Business Review, June 2011):

- ▶ **1. Driven to achieve results:** Achievers don’t let anything get in the way of goal completion. But they can become so caught up in tasks that colleagues get pushed aside. Transparency or helping others feels like a waste of valuable time.
- ▶ **2. Doers:** Because nobody can do it as well or as quickly as they can, they drift into poor delegation or micromanagement.



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- ▶ **3. Highly motivated:** Achievers take their work seriously, but they fail to see the difference between the urgent and the merely important—a potential path to burnout.
- ▶ **4. Addicted to positive feedback:** Achievers care how others perceive them and their work, but they tend to ignore positive feedback and obsess over criticism.
- ▶ **5. Competitive:** Achievers go overboard in their competitive drive; they obsessively compare themselves to others. This leads to a chronic sense of insufficiency, false calibrations and career missteps.
- ▶ **6. Passionate about work:** Achievers feed on the highs of successful work but are subject to crippling lows. They tend to devote more attention to what's lacking (the negative), rather than what's right (the positive).
- ▶ **7. Safe risk takers:** Because they are so passionate about success, they shy away from risk and the unknown. They won't stray far from their comfort zone.
- ▶ **8. Guilt-ridden:** No matter how much they accomplish, achievers believe it's never enough. They want more. When they do complete a milestone, they don't take the time to savor the moment. They expect to be successful, so they deny themselves the chance to fully appreciate the joy of achievement.

You may recognize yourself as a high achiever. Or, perhaps you started out that way but have let yourself fade into the background. You play it safe, maybe even telling yourself that your average performance is above the norm — so why risk more?

When you're used to having things come easily to you, it's only natural to shy away from assignments that test you and require you to learn new skills.

When you have a successful self-image to protect, you find yourself avoiding risk. Instead, many high achievers like yourself hunker down and lock themselves into routines at the expense of professional growth.

It's possible to break this cycle and get back on track for career success. In fact, it's not only possible — it's essential if you want to flourish in top leadership roles.

Breaking Out of Traps

First, take a hard look at yourself. Identify any of the eight traps into which you've fallen. Which traps escalate your anxieties and cause you to engage in unproductive behaviors?

Next, adopt new practices that give you the courage to step out of your comfort zone. This isn't easy, and it won't hap-

pen overnight. Many leaders require help from a trusted peer, mentor or coach.

It's a hard truth, but the talent and skills that got you "here" won't take you "there." Your best thinking may not be enough. As intelligent as you may be, you simply cannot know what you don't know.

If you're smart and ambitious, you likely have a coach or have experience with one at some point in your career. It's time to review or renew your coaching relationship.

Work with your coach or mentor on these six steps for freeing yourself from traps:

- ▶ **1. Forget the past:** How much are you basing your career decisions on past experiences, either good or bad? Most of us make irrational comparisons between a past bad experience and a current situation. We are notoriously poor predictors of our future emotional states.

Most of what we surmise about our past failures is circumstantial. Look at the past with a different perspective — one that takes into account randomness or luck. We are never in control of situations as much we think, and blaming or crediting ourselves is often irrational and inappropriate. Sure, we've accomplished a lot, and we've made mistakes. That was then; this is now.

What counts is stepping up to learn new tasks and skills. An open mind — one that is willing to admit limitations, as well as strengths — means you're available for new challenges. You've conquered your fear of making new, and inevitable, mistakes.

Too much reliance on the past will stifle your courage to "fail upward" and use missteps as learning opportunities for growth.

- ▶ **2. Develop and use your support network:** When you pride yourself on being an independent self-starter, it's difficult to ask for help. You tell yourself you don't want to bother people unnecessarily.

You may fear feedback because you don't want to hear your work isn't up to par. You may even choose to consult a colleague who's going to tell you what you want to hear.

If so, you're hurting your chances of stretching and growing.

Instead, challenge yourself to ask respected individuals for regular feedback, even if it's painful at first.

Having a structured feedback plan makes it easier. Find a mentor who's familiar with your work, and tell him you'd like to run something by him. Ask these three questions:

- » a. What should I stop doing?
- » b. What should I continue doing?

» c. What should I start doing?

► **3. Become approachable in a high-achiever way:**

Learn to ask questions. Doing so doesn't imply you're ignorant, as long as you phrase them correctly. Let people know you're trying to explore different perspectives and that you'd like to learn their opinions or thoughts.

Share small mistakes with others. When you practice acknowledging uncertainty or confessing to mistakes, you're showing your human side. This makes you more approachable and trustworthy.

When you open up to others, you send a powerful message. Others will reciprocate with their own stories, and they'll be more willing to help you out.

► **4. Focus on the long term, but concentrate on next steps:** Long-term success requires a willingness to take short-term risks. Fear of failure or of looking inept, however, can stop you from taking chances.

You have to be willing to leave your comfort zone to complete the new tasks required for changing career demands. Long-term goals can withstand minor setbacks. Look at the big picture, and give yourself the necessary latitude to make a few missteps along the way.

► **5. Adopt a positive mindset:** Recent studies reveal that a happy, positive mindset is a prerequisite for success — not its byproduct. When you approach a project by focusing on what's good about it, you set yourself up for great results.

Try framing an assignment as a challenge instead of a problem, and you'll be better able to think calmly and creatively. When your boss gives you extra work, you have two choices: feel put upon and overloaded, or take satisfaction in knowing she trusts you to get the job done.

► **6. Embrace humility, practice and patience:** Doing the right thing poorly is painful at first but well worth the effort. Sure, it's more satisfying to do something well, but think about the best use of your time. Routines and easy success can set you up for stagnation.

To move your game to the next level or in a new direction, be willing to exhibit vulnerability and even humility. Professional growth takes practice and patience. Most of us need to move beyond our comfort zones to enjoy continued success.

Make Good Use of a Coach

Mediocrity is the gateway to disengagement and boredom. To sustain high achievement, you need to be continually learning

and growing, in spite of uncertainty and anxiety. You need to ask for, and receive, feedback.

Even the act of asking for help can be risky. In your private sessions with an executive coach, discuss who to approach for help and how to frame requests.

Anyone in a leadership role faces high-stress decisions each day. In the absence of a consistent commitment to growth and development, executive teams are prone to create and experience "groupthink."

With groupthink, group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative ideas or viewpoints. The safe road beckons strongly when there is accumulative stress and rising risk.

Developing Character and Wisdom

You want to maintain the best path for your career, yet still support short- and long-term organizational goals. Knowing how to navigate these tough environments is crucial for any achiever who wants to ascend to the top ranks.

History requires leaders to find and do the right things, in the right way, against the right time frame. It requires them to develop the capacity for executive wisdom and the ability to deploy it. It requires that they both see and pursue the development of virtue in their own characters.

Leaders routinely face situations for which they have no rules to guide them and all too often for which they have little or no knowledge. In these circumstances, they are always anxious and face incredible pressures to behave badly because they more often do not know what they do not know. Almost nothing is more difficult, anxiety arousing, and humiliating than for a leader to admit that he or she does not know the right thing to do.

~ Richard R. Kilburg, *Executive Wisdom: Coaching and the Emergence of Virtuous Leaders*, APA, 2006

Developing wisdom, virtue and true expertise in any domain takes time, a determined spirit and the courage to ask for help. With the right coach, you can further your professional growth in spite of the risks and anxieties.