

When Promotions Cause Anxiety

by Caroline Cerar

Career advancements often are not only a source of pure pleasure, but also can cause anxiety. What sounds counterintuitive at first is a well-known phenomenon. Taking over a new position can cause dormant self-worth topics to arise and can lead to self-defeating behaviour. Such mechanisms function at a sub-conscious level most of the time. The resort for the affected person lies in confronting one's own fears early.

'But I have not been doing anything special. I have done my work as usual.', said Richard M.*, a successful manager in his early forties. My client was searching for an explanation of why he had been chosen to head the new country legal entity. 'I have not aspired to get there.' Sure, he felt happy about it and accepted the promotion, but anxieties arose at the same time.

The Fear of Success

It seems counterintuitive at first glance. Finally, one has taken the long aspired career step, but, instead of a feeling of acknowledgement, feelings of unrest, a nagging emptiness, a lack of courage or even anxiety grab oneself after the first delirium of joy. Over the years, one has climbed rung after rung up the career ladder and fulfilled challenging tasks—and all of a sudden, the pure thought of the new job is causing more than discomfort.

Kets de Vries, psychotherapist and management professor at INSEAD, talks about the fear of success. It may seem illogical that such anxieties arise, specifically, when one achieves the management level one has been working towards for a long time. The new position may be proof of success, but it can cause doubts to arise. 'How long will success last?' 'Can one be successful, specifically, in this new and important position?'

The Self-Image in Question

The image a manager has of himself or herself, as well as the image one thinks others have of oneself, comes under scrutiny. It is a fearsome and stressful situation. Someone, with a rather weak self-image, can feel like an impostor who needs to fear being discovered at any minute.

My client expressed himself in a similar way. His work would not be extraordinary. He would not be the 'tough manager' one should be. In the mutual dialogue, Richard M. learned to estimate his performance and strengths in the right relation and appreciate them for himself. It took some time until he could abandon the presumed ideal of a tough manager and acknowledge that he

was successful in his own way. Richard M. was a highly sympathetic man, who could form and lead teams with ingenuity and a great deal of sensitivity very successfully.

People with an excessive self-image also can be emotionally burdened when promoted. Subconsciously, they try to maintain a positive image of themselves. Such leaders often tend to a very aggressive target setting. They then tend to pursue them, even when the futility is already obvious under a somewhat realistic view. Relationships and information networks start to change. Subordinates, who do not share the same overly optimistic view, are being exchanged by 'Yes-Sayers'. Over time, an illusory constriction and alleged confirmation of one's own opinion comes forth, which makes the input of realistic perspectives even more difficult and unlikely. Excessive demands on themselves are a further, typical phenomenon: excessive demands on themselves to the point where the manager brings himself or herself under so much pressure that he or she fails miserably at simple routine tasks ('choking under pressure') or that he or she loses himself or herself in over-engagement or by running empty.

'Am I allowed to be successful at all?'

Kets de Vries offers a further explanation of why some managers seem to mutate into losers all of a sudden when promoted. 'Promotion' means that someone takes over a position and, thereby, replaces another or wins over someone. 'Success' means stepping forward and standing out from others. For some people, this may be connected with a deep-rooted feeling of conflict or guilt, depending on the specific family history. Unsolved topics of acknowledgement and rivalry in the family of origin can be actualised when promoted. 'Am I allowed to earn more than my father does?' 'Am I allowed to achieve more in life than my siblings do?'

When left untreated, such deep-rooted conflict can exert a far-reaching, negative influence on the manager. Unconsciously, the manager could develop a self-hampering behaviour and thereby defeat himself or herself step-by-step. Being one among many at the foregone promotions, the promotion to the top-position, however, can constitute the final trigger. Now that there is no one else, who can be deemed to share the same position sibling-like.

A similar topic of guilt came forth in my client's story. Richard M. had been raised in a Catholic home, where social engagement took centre stage. Outside success, money or status in the community were of low importance for his parents. Engagement for a good cause was what counted. Despite the fact that his parents have never mentioned anything negative about his career choice, Richard M. nevertheless silently felt guilty for not fulfilling his parents' values and alleged expectations. What is 'disdainfully earning money' as opposed to engagement for others in the Christian sense?! Richard M. needed to realise this conflict first. The more he could say 'Yes' to his own life path and appreciate his own performance and strengths, the more his feeling of

guilt evaporated. He realised that he also applied the values of an appreciative partnership in his work life—simply in his own way.

Be Aware of Self-Defeating Mechanisms

These examples demonstrate that when emotionally stressed, people unconsciously tend to seek resort in diverse coping strategies. When underlying anxieties and conflicts are not handled, the leader can be caught in such mechanisms, which can have self-hampering effects. Out of pure anxiety, people tend to a behaviour of avoidance. Decisions are more and more delayed. Critical topics are left untouched to avoid discussions with employees, colleagues, or superiors. This indeed keeps the harmony and stabilises the psychological well-being; however, it is not very favourable for effective leadership.

Self-handicapping is used as a further means to deal with the fear of failure. Thereby, hindrances and difficulties are put to the forefront. If some undertaking is not successful, one can say, 'One knew it anyways already upfront life'; the own self-worth is untouched. The individual is often not aware that the stabilisation of self-worth comes at the expense of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the opposite case—the case of success—the calculation pays off fully. Success, despite such negative pre-announcements, seems even bigger. This is good for the ego. Misuse of alcohol and other stimulating substances are further attempts of escapism, which render short-lived relief, but at a long-term cost.

It is important to note that all people use coping strategies of varying intensity. Permanently, such coping strategies prove to be dysfunctional most of the time and detrimental to the individual, his or her career, or to the whole organisation. What feels like a good solution at first can prove to be counterproductive in perpetuity.

There Is a Resort

It is not unusual that anxieties and self-doubt (re-)emerge upon promotion. Topics, anxieties, and beliefs come to the forefront, with which the individual could deal well up to that point in time or which had been simply suppressed. To face one's own fears requires courage as a first step—and, it is the better strategy in the end. It is indeed possible to change dysfunctional beliefs and correct inadequate self-images. One can free oneself of self-defeating coping strategies again.

Thereby, one should take into account three simple tips. First, do not suppress fears. Second, take action early enough so that dysfunctional behaviour cannot establish itself at all. Third, do not rely on experience and routine in such a situation. This brings along the danger that one takes resort to mechanisms of suppression and past routine behaviour, which seems to help in the

short-term, but actually could have damaging effects for the own person, the career and the whole organisation.

Confronting fears when promoted could turn be a catalyst for a further step in one's own development. Someone who succeeded in overcoming personal hindrances gains in personality, personal maturity, and effectiveness—as a person and as a manager.

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** Name and characteristics changed*

Source:

- *de Vries, Kets: „Leaders who Self-Destruct: The Causes and Cures”, 1989*
- *Baumeister, Roy F.: “Esteem Threat, Self-Regulatory Breakdown, and Emotional Distress as Factors in Self-Defeating Behavior”, 1997*

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