



Facing the Fears That Hold You Back at Work

By Rebecca Zucker and Ruth Gotian

Fear is what makes us human — we all feel this emotion to some extent. As Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, experts in the field of adult development, write in their book, *Immunity to Change*, “We have learned something that may be very hard for successful, capable people to believe: more than we understand, most people deal constantly with fear.”

The issue is when our fears (be they conscious or unconscious) keep us stuck in unproductive patterns of behavior, even when we want to move forward and operate in a new way so that we can progress in our careers and achieve our goals.

The kind of fear we’re talking about is not from the level of psychological safety set by leaders in an organization. To be sure, the lack of psychological safety on a team is an important element that affects performance and can certainly compound the fear an individual feels.

The kind of fear that we are referring to is our own sense of subjective safety, which is fundamentally about how we see the world and how safe we feel in it. This sense of subjective safety is often derived from early life experiences that have colored the lens through which we see our everyday situations. We carry the underlying fears that create this sense of safety (or lack of it) with us wherever we go. They stay with us after we get a promotion, change departments, or start a new job — unless we take active steps to surface them, understand them, and challenge them.

In applying the teachings of Kegan and Lahey to our work coaching senior leaders (Rebecca) and studying extreme high achievers, such as Olympic athletes, astronauts, and Nobel laureates (Ruth), we've learned how these underlying fears hold individuals (and teams) back and what it takes to move past them in an enduring way.

Facing and overcoming your fears at work involves a good deal of reflection, vulnerability, and being brutally honest with yourself. It entails taking the following steps. You can work through these steps on your own or, even better, with a trained coach or trusted colleague who can ask probing questions, challenge you, and ultimately help you to see and adopt new perspectives.

Notice where you're stuck, and articulate your core fears.

First, identify where you feel stuck. This is an area you want to improve but haven't yet been able to in a meaningful or consistent way. Perhaps you are hesitant to have difficult conversations and hold others accountable, be more decisive, get out of the weeds to be more strategic, or set better boundaries and say no more often.

Now, name the fears that hold you back from doing these things (there are typically at least a few), and don't sugarcoat them. They might be embarrassing to admit or say out loud, but they are often quite normal, and we all have them. You might fear damaging a relationship if you hold a colleague accountable, fear tarnishing your reputation if you make the wrong decision, fear losing control if you delegate, or fear being seen as uncommitted if you say no to a colleague.

While the types of specific anxieties are infinite, common ones we see that hold people back include the fear of failure or damaging one's career, letting others down, looking bad, or losing control. We also see much more primal fears, such as that of being helpless, marginalized, rejected, or unable to support oneself financially.

While these fears often operate below the surface, they are an active force that drive unproductive behaviors. These behaviors may have served you at one point, earlier in

your life or career, but now only hold you back from achieving your goals. By articulating these worries, you can start to examine them more closely to get to the core of how you might be sabotaging yourself at work.

Monique*, a partner at a professional services firm, was frequently stressed and often had emotional reactions at work. She desperately wanted to create a life for herself outside of work to have more balance. Yet she didn't say no to work travel, she let work prevent her from making (and keeping) personal plans, she prioritized work over her health and physical wellbeing, and didn't set any meaningful work-life boundaries. When she thought about setting some work boundaries, several fears arose: that she'd lose clients, she wouldn't make enough money, and someone else would outshine her at work, among others.

Jason*, a nonprofit leader, had received feedback that he wasn't collaborative. He needed to slow down to bring others along with his thinking, solicit and be more open to others' ideas, and let go of control. The root fears driving his behaviors were that if he did these things, he'd look stupid and would lose control. These fears led him to move quickly so that others couldn't keep up and he'd be seen as "the smartest person in the room," and there wouldn't be space for anyone to question his ideas or share their own.

Imagine if your worst fears were to come true.

Let's suppose these fears were realized. Then what? What do you believe would be the dire consequence to you of failing — whether the failure is losing a client, losing your job, letting someone down, looking stupid, or something else? These limiting beliefs of the dreaded outcomes that you think might happen if your fears were to come true, typically feel quite real or certain, even though they are typically far from realistic.

Monique's fear of failure (i.e., losing clients, not making enough money, being outshined, etc.) wasn't the most powerful factor that held her back — it was her belief that she'd never be able to recover from these things if they happened. That if she lost clients, she wouldn't be able to find new ones; if she had a bad year, she wouldn't be

able to rebound the following year; and if she lost her job, she wouldn't be able to find a new one. Ultimately, she believed that "If I don't work this intensely, I won't be successful."

For Jason, examining more closely his anxieties of looking bad or losing control revealed a limiting belief that if someone else shared a good idea, it meant his ideas were no good (effectively, zero-sum thinking). He feared that people would then think he wasn't competent and would not want to work with him — that effectively, he'd be marginalized. These visceral fears and associated limiting beliefs fueled his ongoing need to be in control and appear as though he was the smartest one in the room.

Reflect on the origin story.

Where do these fears and limiting beliefs come from in your life? It may be immediately apparent, or you may need to sit with this question a bit. Awareness of where and when this limited or incomplete view of the world was formed can help you to break free from it by illuminating how very different the circumstances or situation were at that time in your life and not relevant in your current context.

For example, Monique feared that not working so intensely and setting work-life boundaries would put her family's financial security in jeopardy. As we dove deeper into this, she realized that her insecurity came from her father losing his job when she was young and the family's financial struggles. It was terrifying for her as a young girl, knowing that a potential eviction was only a month away. The feeling of helplessness and vulnerability hung over her like a dark cloud and stayed with her as an adult.

Jason realized that his fears and limiting beliefs (and resulting behaviors) were only triggered when he was with peers but not with those more senior to him or with more junior colleagues. This small, but important detail helped reveal the origin story of his underlying fears which stemmed from a sibling rivalry his parents had created between him and his brother. Hence, he saw his peers at work as automatic rivals or competitors to be outshined, but not other coworkers.

Conduct safe experiments.

Since limiting beliefs have been formed by prior direct experiences, breaking free can take having new, different experiences and/or seeing different or broader perspectives of others whom you trust and respect. To do this, you'll want to conduct a series of safe experiments to test your limiting beliefs and gradually loosen the grip of your core fears.

A safe experiment doesn't risk reinforcing your big assumption, nor does it have the potential for materially negative consequences if it fails — that is, you don't want to get yourself fired to see if you can recover from it. Instead, a safe experiment or test is small, low-risk, and easy to do. The goal is to collect information about the validity of your limiting beliefs to start to debunk them. Doing so will start to loosen the control they have over you and your behavior, giving you more freedom in how you operate. Over time, this will allow you to unlearn old patterns and develop new, more productive behaviors and reduce the risk of backsliding into your old ways.

A safe experiment might involve talking to people you know, reading about other leaders, or making very small behavior changes. For Monique, she wanted to find out whether it was possible to have a life and be successful, too. So, she spoke to people she respected in her sector and asked them a series of questions including “What boundaries are you able to set and keep?” and “How does having a life (and not working all the time) help you to be more successful?” A second test that helped her to feel less fearful was to meet with a financial planner, who helped her see she had more financial cushion than she thought. She also spoke with one of the many executive recruiters who regularly contacted her about her marketability as a job candidate. This conversation helped her see that, in the unlikely event she lost her job, she'd be highly employable elsewhere. In conducting these tests of her limiting beliefs, she realized that her underlying fears, held since childhood, were no longer an accurate reflection of her current reality. Seeing this clearly for the first time allowed her to let go of much of the fear and vulnerability she had felt and gave her a greater sense of agency. It allowed her to write a new story.

Likewise, Jason conducted a few experiments that helped him to start to let go of his limiting assumptions. First, he held a brainstorming session for a project where he played the role of facilitator and focused on letting others contribute their ideas to see

if it was possible for there to be multiple good ideas, versus just one idea that rendered all others without merit. The second part of this test was to see if others sharing their ideas actually made him feel less capable, which — to his surprise — didn't. He also asked a peer to teach him about an area of the organization he knew less about (finance) to see how he felt during the learning process, and in doing so, realized that it didn't need to feel threatening for someone to know more about a topic than him. These experiments allowed Jason to slowly let go of his residual fears and engage in more collaborative behavior.

It's normal to feel fear and anxiety in your life and in your work, but by using the strategies above, you can "turn down the volume" on some of your more limiting fears and beliefs that are currently holding you back, allowing you to move forward more productively and successfully. The version of the truth you told yourself in the past likely does not reflect your current reality. Unpacking and challenging these fears and limiting beliefs will allow you to dismantle your self-imposed barriers and achieve greater success.

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