

HOW SENSITIVITIES THROW OFF PERFORMANCE IN EXECUTIVES

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July 2001

FOREWARD

This paper is intended primarily for consultants who coach executives on leadership, although it has relevance for anyone concerned with the development of executives.

We offer a way of construing the part that personal functioning plays in executive leadership and then we draw implications for the work of executive coaches. The paper is a kind of pragmatics of personal functioning in leadership. For those consultants who presently take a purely behavioral approach, our purpose is to demonstrate the utility of also working on the individual's personal development. For those who already work on both the outward and inward levels, our purpose is to elaborate a practical view of inner dynamics that tie directly to leadership. We do not import a theory of personality or a set of defense mechanisms drawn another field. We offer a framework drawn primarily from our firm's extensive experience consulting to top people on leadership.

HOW SENSITIVITIES THROW OFF PERFORMANCE IN EXECUTIVES

Most executives are very capable people. They know a great deal about how the world works; they can make decisions on complex issues full of trade-offs; they assume the burden of being public figures; they work with a wide range of people in many different settings, often under trying circumstances; and they have the stamina to keep it up for months and years at a time. Yet, despite how much capacity they bring to their exquisitely demanding jobs, executives regularly have trouble with their form.

How is their form off? When executives don't perform well in some respect, their form is off in one of two ways. They either overdo it or they underdo it.

We are all familiar with the tendency for intense, driven people to go overboard. So the advice that they offer each other often is: "tone it down." "Temper your intense devotion to that principle." To be forceful is necessary but executives often make the mistake of being overly forceful. Just ask the people who work for them. To empower is good, but individuals inclined in that direction tend to empower to a fault. To be strategic is indispensable to anyone holding a senior line job, but many visionary leaders place too much weight on the strategic part of their jobs. To be operationally adept is highly desirable, yet it is so easy for executives with this gift to get bogged down in operational detail.

If it is fairly commonly recognized that senior managers are capable of overdoing it, it may not be as evident that they are just as susceptible to underdoing— despite their typically aggressive personalities. Top people have to make tough calls but many can't quite manage it or it takes too long for them to muster the courage. Also, it helps in creating followership to treat other people well but some executives are so concerned with being nice people that they have trouble taking stands or confronting performance problems. Some executives unaccountably give short shrift to the strategic part of their jobs, while others stay at a high level and neglect the blocking and tackling needed for their organization to execute.

To point out these distortions in others is one thing. For executives to recognize it in themselves is quite another. They tend to justify their behavior, even see it as necessary. What makes these patterns difficult to break is that they are predicated on assumptions that individuals may take to be axiomatic.

Insiders can tell when an executive's form is off. What we can't see as easily is why. What throws an executive's form off? As with any athlete, it can be something as simple as fatigue or illness. Low on energy, it is harder to be sharp, one's threshold for frustration is lower, one is more likely to overreact. But in addition to circumstantial factors like these, we have found, from years of experience consulting to top executives on leadership, that an individual's "baggage" comes into play. Although it may seem out of character for successful, seemingly self-assured people to be threatened, many executives are. They carry with them sensitivities that predispose them to be threatened. (See figure 1 for a diagram of the link between personal functioning and managerial performance.)

Vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy, they first of all react more strongly than they need to when things go wrong. And, second, they are, often unconsciously, threatened by the situations that confront them. They do everything in their power to measure up—and try too hard. Or they err in the other direction: they don't try hard enough. They make a half-hearted attempt or bail out completely.

This is not as simple as being especially sensitive to failure. Wrapped up in this insidious, yet ever so human, dynamic are distorted beliefs that feed into the problem. Like the rest of us, executives who are unduly threatened by inadequacy subscribe to beliefs that set them up to feel inadequate in the first place. One, they tend to have unrealistically high expectations of what constitutes good performance, and, two, they tend to have unrealistically low estimates of their ability to perform, in general or in a particular respect.

Our point, though, is not that executives are susceptible to feelings of inadequacy. The point is that many performance problems can be traced to sensitivities that predispose them to be threatened when they don't have to be. This paper explores that dynamic and identifies strategies that consultants can use to help contend their executive clients contend with it.

[Insert Figure 1 here – see page 23]

SENSITIVITIES

Underneath it all, many executives are sensitive one way or another—sensitive in the sense of being quick to perceive a particular threat to their self-worth. If you subscribe to the popular idea of senior people as super-capable and supremely confident, then the idea that many of them are saddled with sensitivities may be incongruous. The fact that sensitivities are not visible to the naked eye doesn't mean they don't exist.

Sensitivities are part of everyone's original human equipment. Built into a human being's natural narcissism they are the sensors that pick up threats to the individual's self-interests.

Sensitivities also develop from life experience—bad experiences, that is. Overlaid onto the innate tendency to react to danger, the lesson learned from a painful experience makes for a heightened sensitivity.

When an executive carries around an incipient feeling of inadequacy, that feeling almost always has its roots in bad experiences in the individual's past. These are experiences from which the individual came away feeling inferior or inept or unworthy or hurt. Although experiences that leave lasting negative effects classically occur in childhood, they can also happen to adults, such as when a marriage fails or a career runs aground. The effect can be to instill a sensitivity to inadequacy in the individual.

Seymour Epstein, who has done extensive research on adaptive and maladaptive modes of coping, defined a sensitivity as a conclusion one draws "that certain kinds of situations or events are dangerous" (1990, p. 172). One comes to this conclusion because one was greatly threatened

by that kind of situation or event. According to Epstein, "the hallmark of a sensitivity is that whenever certain stimuli or situations arise, the individual becomes excessively distressed (Epstein, 1990, p. 172)."

In effect, one's sense of self has a hurt place, one that hasn't healed. It remains sensitive to the touch. This is a little like bruising part of your body, your right arm for example. If you happen to bump your left arm against the wall you might not notice. But if you so much as graze the bruised arm against a hard surface, it hurts. When it is a bad bruise, you might unconsciously go out of your way to avoid contact. No one, executives included, wants a repetition of a painful experience. No one with a bad sunburn wants to be out in the sun. To be sensitive then is also to be vigilant. A sensitivity is a vulnerability. Derived from the Latin word, *vulnus*, meaning wound, to be vulnerable is to feel at risk of being wounded.

A prime example of a sensitivity in executives is a concern about their intellectual adequacy. It can be a feeling of inferiority from not graduating college or from attending a lesser school. It often has to do with not having been a good student in elementary school or high school, but it also occurs in people who were excellent students. Those individuals who didn't excel academically as young people may have gotten off on the wrong foot and never recovered. Often the root of the problem turns out to have been not a lack of ability but a lack of effort. Once the idea of themselves as poor students formed, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Children avoid the thing they don't think they're good at and thereby make it so. (This dynamic is not confined to children.) Believing that they are not smart, children don't apply themselves at school, their grades suffer, and the poor grades provide evidence of intellectual inferiority. This twisted logic can have a long shelf life. We have seen it in 50 or 60 year old executives. Smart as they are now, they have trouble seeing that the poor grades that led them to conclude they aren't smart resulted from the fact that they didn't try. Yet their injured sense of their intellectual ability makes it hard for them to be objective about this important bit of history. The sensitivity lives on.

What toll does this sensitivity take? We have seen executives, on the one hand, who shy away from subjects containing what they take to be intellectual content—information technology or R&D projects or even strategy. On the other hand, we have encountered individuals who attempt to compensate for their perceived intellectual deficiency by working excessively hard, by having to master every detail, or by having always to be "the one with the answer."

Sensitivities come into play in two ways. One is prospectively, as senior managers come up against a problem. Two is retrospectively, as they react to having not done a good job of solving a problem. The prospect of not proving adequate threatens them, as does the reality, as they perceive it, of not having done well.

Because of the pain wrapped up in a sensitivity, executives are typically either not conscious of it or not inclined to acknowledge it. Since we almost never hear executives talk this way, we were startled one time when one of our clients said to us, "I get threatened," to explain why she was prone to overreact. Likewise we were impressed when another executive in our initial interview referred to his "interpersonal insecurities." But it is unusual for senior managers to talk openly

about their fears. In fact, like all of us, they can be reluctant to acknowledge a sensitivity. In going over a personality profile, one executive was taken aback by how his results revealed a sensitivity to rejection.

"I think it's a more accurate reading of the situation than I would like to admit. This all speaks to some fundamental social insecurity at a deep level. The scores are true but it bums me out. In a backdoor way that I wouldn't expect, it taps something that bothers me a lot. I'm getting touchy now. It's getting too close to home."

Note the use of the word touchy. This is a variant of sensitive to the touch, a readiness to take offense at the least provocation.

Even after an executive has identified a tender spot, it can fade back out of his or her awareness. The light bulb goes on, but does it stay on?

A sensitivity can be global, a readiness to feel bad about oneself across the board. It can also be localized, confined to a particular characteristic like intelligence. Or it can have to do with any of a great range of specific tasks or job requirements like making speeches, setting long-term direction, having a working knowledge of IT, confronting someone about a performance problem, delegating and trusting others, presenting to Wall Street analysts.

How sensitivities come into play

Every day senior managers find the gauntlet thrown down in front of them in the form of a steady stream of challenging tasks. Even minor incidents can constitute a small moment of truth. How well they cope or deal with these things is fundamental to their effectiveness as leaders. Coping is not, however, just a matter of how well individuals respond to an objectively difficult situation but also the stress they create for themselves--as a result of the way they construe the situation and how they react emotionally to that reading.

Every difficult situation that presents itself is a fork in the road. One alternative is to experience the situation as an unwelcome threat, and the other is to regard the situation as a welcome challenge. This is not binary but a matter of degree--the degree to which a given demand placed on individuals poses a threat to them.

As if to ratify the fact that one response is healthy and the other one not, the body experiences them differently (Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993). When people are threatened, their heart rate increases and so does vascular resistance, which, in turn, leads to a dramatic increase in blood pressure and tension. Yet when people experience challenge as welcome, their heart rate may increase but their vascular resistance actually decreases. The result is little or no increase in blood pressure. Because blood flows more freely, the body does a better job of activating itself to meet the challenge.

What do we mean by a good response to a challenge? The ideal response is to engage it fully and unanxiously—and to look upon it as a chance to be effective, a chance to have an impact, a chance to learn. If there is a recipe for happiness, this may be it: to lose oneself in the experience of meeting worthy challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Most of us, executives included, fall short of this ideal. What is it that throws them off? At its most basic it is the threatening anticipation of proving to be inadequate—to a task, to an interpersonal situation, to the overall challenge posed by a job. To a surprising degree, this is what we find when we jointly dig into situations with our executive clients. It is a fear of failing to meet an expectation, along with the unpleasant if not painful feelings that accompany failing. Therefore, how well executives deal with the demands placed on them, more often than one might imagine, comes down to how threatened the individual is in the face of any of one of those demands.

The word adequate means "equal to." When executives feel inadequate, they don't feel equal to the task at hand. Adequate can connote barely sufficient. What we mean is fully capable of meeting the requirement.

The fact of inadequacy does not have to be threatening. If executives determine that a situation is beyond them, that does not have to throw them. If the individual is threatened at first, he or she can regard that as a challenge: how can I construe the situation so that it becomes manageable? How can I contain my anxiety? If the situation is beyond what I am personally able to do, how can I get help to deal with it? Or how I can turn this into an opportunity to learn? Whether executives feel threatened then is not so much a function of whether the situation exceeds their capacities as it is the consequences they expect—anticipating that one will be seen as inadequate, be criticized, or fall short of some ideal leads to a threat response.

When inadequacy threatens the individual and he or she is not able to tamp down the experience of threat, the response is often instantaneous. In the manner of a reflex, the state of being threatened translates so quickly into a reaction that stimulus and response occur almost simultaneously. An executive hears from his direct report that a project won't be done on time, and he comes down on the person. Even though one thing followed the other in quick succession, there was time for the executive to have a lightning-quick response inside. "This person let me down, failed me really, and has made me a failure too."

The fact that executives often react reflexively to what they experience as a threat is another reason why they can easily be unaware that their behavior is a response to being threatened. A major pathway to development and performance improvement is for them to come to know these reflex reactions in themselves and to learn to interrupt the sequence. It is the consultant's job to help them to do it.

Correlates of sensitivities: distorted beliefs about adequacy

Sensitivities go hand in hand with two types of distorted beliefs—about what it takes to be adequate to a given task and how adequate one's ability is to meet that requirement. A distorted idea about adequacy in either sense makes it all the more likely that the person will feel

inadequate, the very thing that is a sore point with the person!

We all have beliefs about how much is expected of us and how capable we are of meeting these expectations. Thanks to our past experience, these beliefs can be biased in a way that predisposes us to feel inadequate. The first bias: we have unrealistically high expectations. We read situations as requiring more or better work than necessary. The second bias: we have an unrealistically low assessment of our abilities to perform a given task. We see ourselves as less able to handle situations than we actually are.

When a difficult situation presents itself to us, we go through an instantaneous two-step appraisal (R. L. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). First, we quickly scan the situation for its significance to us. If we deem it relevant—that is, if we have a stake in it—we proceed the next instant to an assessment of the demands it places on us and the resources we have at our disposal to meet those demands. When we determine, usually unconsciously, that the demands exceed the resources available to us, we feel inadequate. If our core beliefs are distorted about adequacy, they bias our reading of situations and predispose us to feel inadequate. What in theory could be an eminently rational process of taking stock of a situation becomes fraught with subjectivity.

We have found in our work with executives that many of them subscribe to fear-tinged expectations that lead them to interpret demands as requiring better work or harder work than is necessary. As a result, they come to believe that others hold them to higher standards than those others actually do, that they will be scrutinized closely or judged harshly—all hallmarks of perfectionism (Blatt, 1995). Coworkers may know how unrealistic those assumptions are, but the individuals themselves are captive to them.

We have also encountered many executives who underestimate their ability. They rate themselves lower than coworkers do either overall or in specific areas like interpersonal skills or intellect. When confronted with the discrepancy, they do not immediately surrender their view. Perhaps because they are afraid of not being good enough, they have trouble believing that their fears are unwarranted.

Both sensitivities and the distorted beliefs associated with them typically arise from bad experiences that the individual had earlier on. We all know how early experience can lead children to conclude that they are inadequate—not smart, not acceptable socially, not attractive. If the feeling sticks, it becomes a chronic sore point. We also know how early experience can lead children to internalize excessively high standards—from being burdened by their parents' high expectations or to compensate for being continually faulted or denigrated or even abused. Many times the legacy is a wounded feeling bound up with distorted ideas related to one's adequacy or worth.

It is common for executives to be subject to these sensitivities and distorted notions and not know it. It is common for executives to have their responses to work demands thrown off by these standing predispositions and not know it. The deeper work of executive coaching is to help individuals discover these inner workings and to make the connection to their performance.

OFF THE MARK: IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE

When executive performance misses the mark, it is almost always in one of two directions. Executives overdo a given function or they underdo it. This applies to any immediate task as well as a standing requirement like setting strategic direction. Threatened by the possibility of not doing well at something, they do their damndest to prevail: they overdo it. Or make only a half-hearted attempt to deal with it or they avoid it altogether: they underdo it.

In either case their behavior is off. First, they overreact emotionally to the situation at hand, and that emotion may not be visible to others or even evident to the individuals themselves.¹ Next what they do is wide of the mark, one way or the other. The extent to which they get involved in something is off, the importance they place on it is off.

We think of overdoing and underdoing as being driven by compulsions and inhibitions, respectively. Whereas compulsions are those things that a person feels compelled to do to fight off threat, inhibitions are those things one feels compelled not to do to avoid exposure to threatening situations. Both compulsions and inhibitions are "convictions that certain types of behavior are effective ways to reduce threat" (Epstein, 1990, p. 172). These beliefs are focused primarily on how to minimize the inner experience of threat and anxiousness. Focused on warding off threat, they divert attention away from the external features of the situation and leave the objective problem unmanaged.

It is important to keep in mind that by overdoing and underdoing we mean classes of behavior and not types of executives. The reason is that every executive is both an overdoer and underdoer. Yes, some executives strike all of us as engaging in overkill and other executives create the general impression of holding back. But give us an executive who goes overboard and it will not be difficult to identify corresponding areas in which that individual is inhibited. Likewise, those restrained executives almost always can be found to take corresponding managerial functions to an extreme. Overdoing one behavior at least raises the question of whether the individual underdoes an opposing, complementary behavior. For example, executives who overprepare also tend to be indecisive. Both behaviors stem from perfectionistic tendencies, which cause a person to "loop" repeatedly in search of an air-tight answer (Blatt, 1995).

Consistent with how closely linked overdoing and underdoing can be, we find it useful to think of leadership in terms of polarities. Two basic polarities stand out in executive leadership: strategic versus operational leadership and forceful versus enabling leadership (Kaplan, 1996; Kaiser and Kaplan, 2000). In our work with executives we regularly find senior managers who are lopsided on one or both of these polarities. Most often they are too forceful and not enough enabling and too operational and not strategic enough. We might mention that some executives

¹ We should point out that not all behavior that misses the mark is a result of being threatened. Genetics also come into play. Some human beings are born with innately strong personalities that tend to be overwhelming, just as others enter the world with innately mild personalities and tend to be "underwhelming." Based on his research on children twenty to thirty months of age, Jerome Kagan (1989) identified two types of temperament, which he called "inhibited" and "uninhibited." He found these patterns of behavior persisted into later childhood and beyond.

underdo both sides of a polarity. They are disengaged—for example, neither bringing issues to a head nor containing conflict and fostering harmony.

Recognizing that overdoing and underdoing are often linked, we will delve into them one at a time to bring out their distinctive character. (See figure 2 for a summary of this discussion.)

[Insert Figure 2 here -- see page 24]

Overdoing

Going all out can be a way to prevail; under extraordinary circumstances, it may be the only way to prevail. The drawback, however, is that executives who chronically go to extremes to succeed may, ironically, undermine their performance or waste time and energy. Of the many ways that executives overdo it, we offer three.

Pressing. Like athletes, senior managers impede their performance when they press. Phil Simms, the former New York Giants quarterback who guided his team to two Super Bowl victories, in 1987 (he was the MVP) and 1991 was quoted in the New York Times as saying:

"Overgripping is the most frequent mistake I see among quarterbacks at all levels, including the pros. I found the harder I'd squeeze, the less control I'd have. Your arm should move like a whip. It can't when the muscles are tense."

Desperate to perform well, quarterbacks throw off their form. Following the same principle that it helps to modulate intensity, golf pros advise players to hold the club like a bird. When intense becomes tense, executives, athletes in their own way, impair their performance.

Overpreparing. A common excess among executives is to overprepare. They deal with an important upcoming event, whether a key meeting with the CEO or a Board presentation or an earnings report to Wall Street analysts, by making doubly sure they are prepared. The threat is they will look foolish or be found wanting. It is of course functional to do one's homework and the extra effort can pay off if they perform exceptionally well. But even when the extra effort results in an excellent product, it isn't efficient. Executives can find it difficult to modify this pattern of behavior because in their minds they are being responsible—and they are often rewarded for delivering a polished product, despite its inefficiency.

About one such executive, who thinks through issues with great care, a colleague said the following. "His idea of being ready is to overprepare. He feels like he has to answer every question, think of every angle, and he doesn't." Sensing the underlying feeling of inadequacy that lay behind the behavior, another coworker made the following observation. "He underestimates his capabilities. He's talented but he doesn't give himself enough credit. No one expects him to be perfect. He worries too much." Another insightful coworker sensed a self-protective motivation: "he protects himself—he prepares himself for the worst case." This executive suffered from the double whammy of expecting too much of himself and underrating his abilities. Like other executives who operate this way, his concern about adequacy clouded

his otherwise good judgment, leading him to attach too much importance to preparation. Thoroughness is a virtue. He took it to an extreme.

Too hard on others. Just as executives can put undue pressure on themselves, they can apply too much pressure to others. They may impose excessively high expectations on the front end or they overreact later when their people don't meet those expectations. Experienced as insensitive, their behavior actually springs from being sensitive—sensitive to not being good enough. Sensitivity begets insensitivity. Overdoing it in this way is self-defeating. Not only does it depress the performance of others, it can hurt an executive's chances for advancement. Abrasiveness is a leading cause of derailment (Leslie & Van Velsor, 1996; McCall & Lombardo, 1983).

An outburst is one form of being hard on other people. We might note that outbursts can occur simply because the individual is exhausted or sick—which itself can result from another form of overdoing, overwork. A talented executive had a habit of coming down on people in meetings when he wasn't satisfied with their grasp of the business. At the very instant an outburst occurred, he had what could be described as an anxiety attack, a shot of fear that his people would never know the business well enough. He was most susceptible to overreacting when he first took over a business and was desperately searching for solid ground. "Until I know what to focus on, I'm hopeless; all the destructive behavior centers on not knowing what the vital few are and being deathly afraid I won't ever get there." Early on, before he established himself, he was liable to panic if a small crack in the knowledge base came to his attention. Fear would undo him—"fear that I'm not good enough or I'll never be good enough."

Executives who overreact to a fault in a direct report are in effect overgeneralizing. They jump from the specific failure or failing to a broad judgment about the person. Overreacting throws off their judgment about people.

In general, the problem with overdoing is that it can undermine the executive's effectiveness—which is ironic, since the individual is trying so hard to keep from being ineffective. The other problem with overdoing is that it is inefficient. No self-respecting executive concerned with paring back on bloated cost structures would tolerate the waste in the way many executives function personally. What perpetuates overdoing is that it is rewarded when the extra lengths that executives go to produce good results.

Overdoing is a difficult habit to break because it is hard for the individuals so habituated to see it that way. In their minds it is integral to the success they have enjoyed. Since their success has come after extreme exertion, they come to believe that success depends on extreme exertion and they don't make the distinction between necessary intensity and excess intensity.

Underdoing

In collecting data for an assessment of an executive, we ask coworkers, "Does this person shy away from or avoid anything related to her job?" To a surprising degree, the answer to the question is no—no, this is a hard-driving individual who steps up to what the job requires. Coworkers don't tend to interpret weaknesses in their colleagues as avoidance. Instead they take

the behavior at face value, perhaps because they don't suspect the underlying vulnerability. Yet there is as much underdoing as overdoing out there.

Of the many performance problems that are cases of underdoing, we treat three here: lack of decisiveness, lack of engagement with others, and lack of attention to strategy.

Lack of decisiveness. One thing that breeds indecisiveness is fear of making a mistake, as the following comment by a top executive about a direct report shows:

"He's allowed himself to slip into a mode where he almost sees ghosts in closets. He finds reasons not to make decisions. He finds reasons to do more analysis and he'll raise red herrings. It's lack of confidence in himself, lack of confidence in his organization."

To decide exposes the individual, and the threat of being wrong can lead executives to shy away from committing themselves. They overreact and therefore don't place enough importance on timeliness.

Lack of engagement with others. To a degree that would perhaps surprise their immediate coworkers, many senior managers lack confidence interpersonally. They are able to work with people on tasks but if the truth were known they are uncomfortable relating to people. When interaction is elective, at least in their minds, they have a tendency to opt out. You might find them spending too much time in their offices. You might find them leaving people out of the process. You might find them uncharacteristically shy in purely social settings.

Feeling inadequate in relationships inhibits them, as do the assumptions they make about what other people expect of them. One successful executive—let us call him Harry—possessed good interpersonal skills and, relatively rare among executives, a lovely ability to make a personal connection to people. Yet he hardly ever walked the halls. What held him back? As his HR manager said about him in his presence, "He doesn't know what will come up; he might feel inadequate."

Harry felt the same way: "I might not remember their name. Or I might not know what they are working on and so they would feel, 'he doesn't know the freaking project I'm working on!'"

We clarified: "So you think people expect you to know everything?"

Harry: "Yes. Otherwise I'd leave the person deflated. I say to myself, I should know because that is how I would want to be treated."

Us again: "How would it reflect on you?"

Harry: "Negatively. I'd come across as aloof, unaware, out of touch."

Us: "How bad would this be?"

Harry: "Unacceptable to me. Not okay. I would avoid the negative part (emphasis added)."

Avoidance is the key word. In protecting himself—keeping his guard up—he passes up a chance to use his excellent interpersonal skills to stay in touch with the organization. In cases like this, executives with otherwise good judgment turn out to have little pockets of poor judgment. Objectively, Harry did not have to worry about knowing the names and situations of lower-level people. Yet for years he had operated on this half-conscious assumption.

Neglecting strategy. We have run across a number of top executives who fail to do justice to the strategic side of the job, and we have a hypothesis as to why. Strategy, especially systematic industry analysis and long-term direction-setting, is intellectual work. In addition to any lack of skill, we suspect that some executives who avoid strategy do so for emotional reasons. Whether coincidence or not, our small sample of top people who neglect strategy were not good students and have bad associations with school. Perhaps coincidentally, a number of these executives were younger brothers or sisters of obnoxiously high-achieving older siblings. As a result of an underlying feeling of intellectual inferiority, executives may not only shy away from strategy personally but also devalue the importance of strategy and therefore not see to it that others do that work.

Fear of inadequacy would seem to cloud the individual's judgment about the importance of strategic direction.

In general, underdoing is avoidance of something that the job requires. Different from a rational choice, the logic of which coworkers would support, underdoing is a reluctance to engage fully. There is wisdom in opting out of a task which is not a priority or for which one is not well suited. In contrast, underdoing is a self-protective reflex reaction that leaves an important task undone or poorly done. The avoidant reaction may extend to devaluing the function altogether. However they may rationalize their decision, executives who avoid something have given up on themselves in that respect. One individual told us about learning to play a new sport. "I give up too easily. I don't like being bad at anything. I tried golf. After two or three lessons that I took together with my son, he was better than me so I quit." Humans like to be competent and are prone to avoiding situations where they aren't. Underdoing has a tragic aspect: you are fated not to develop competence at something you avoid doing.

Different faces, similar functions

Underdoing and overdoing look like diametrical opposites. When executives overdo it, they pour themselves into something to the point where their involvement nearly knows no bounds. When executives underdo it, the flow of energy into a neglected part of their job slows to a trickle, if it doesn't dry up entirely. They either make no effort at all or make only a halfhearted attempt. Where overdoing is a can-do attitude to a fault, underdoing is can't-do. Where one is overly expansive, the other is self-limiting. Where overdoing can be viewed as under-socialized or undercontrolled, underdoing can be viewed as over-socialized or overcontrolled (McClelland, 1975; J. H. Block & Block, 1980). Where overdoing is fueled by a fear I won't do enough to get

what I want, underdoing is driven by a fear that I will do too much and somehow overstep my bounds (Higgins, 1997).

Underdoing is self-protective, which following the literal meaning of the word protect, is to cover oneself. To protect oneself is, in a sense, to hide. Overdoing is defensive in an aggressive sense: the individual actively fends off or fights off the threat.

As different as they appear on the surface, though, overdoing and underdoing are both strategies for contending with perceived threat. Overdoing and underdoing are also both reflex reactions. The situation at hand acts as a stimulus and executives respond reflexively to it, usually without knowing that fear of inadequacy intervened between stimulus and response.

A classic case of how overdoing and underdoing are two sides of the same coin united by a common emotional need: overpreparing and lack of decisiveness, both driven by perfectionism. Individuals with these twin predilections study an issue to death and hesitate to decide for fear the decision won't turn out to be right. At the core of this brand of perfectionism is a sensitivity to proving inadequate coupled with an unrealistically low estimate of their problem-solving ability and unrealistically high standard for what constitutes good decision making.

Overdoing and underdoing both have a life of their own. One reason is that they often occur outside the individual's awareness. Secondly, executives tend not to regard their behavior as off-target. To the contrary, they tend to look upon it as the right and proper response to the task at hand. In their minds what they are doing is appropriate, even if others don't think so. Because they place a high value on those things they overdo, they have a difficult time seeing how they could do too much of that thing. Because they place a low value on the things they underdo, they have trouble seeing how they could be neglecting that thing. It is no wonder that performance problems don't get corrected easily.

CORRECTIVE MEASURES, LONG-TERM AND SHORT-TERM

How can consultants help executives learn to operate more effectively in a personal sense so that they perform more effectively in a managerial sense and learn to experience challenges of all kinds less as threats and more as opportunities?

The developmental work under the consultant's care divides itself into two levels, both of which can go on at the same time. One level is deep work that gets at the sensitivities along with core beliefs that predispose executives to be threatened in the first place. The desired result is for executives over time to reduce the level of vulnerability itself, so that they are not as easily threatened and prone to overreact, so that there is less emotional perturbation to throw off their leadership. By whatever method, outgrowing vulnerability is a long-run proposition.

The second level of developmental work takes place nearer to the surface and is aimed at directly altering behavior so it is closer to the mark. It amounts to helping executives adopt better coping mechanisms that allow them to interrupt the sequence that distorts their managerial behavior.

While they wait to take the next step in their evolution as a person, they can understand better what about the way they deal with things doesn't work well. And they can gain insight into the feelings and operating assumptions that influence the way they handle things. Armed with better self-awareness, they can learn techniques for modifying their behavior as well as the thoughts and feelings behind the behavior.

Helping executives outgrow their vulnerability

To reduce one's vulnerability at the core entails either doing deep personal work or persisting for years or both. This effort amounts to giving a boost to one's natural evolution as a person. What can executives actually do to help their personal development along, and how can consultants facilitate that? Executives can accumulate experience—ideally, by design, they can learn to recognize their fears, they can raise their unrealistically low estimates of themselves, and they can lower their unrealistically high expectations for themselves.

1. Accumulate experience. When people have had a significant wounding experience way back when, the painful associations and the distorted ideas they form about themselves and about what it takes to be worthy have remarkable staying power. Evidently, the wound becomes lodged deep in the basic part of the brain, the limbic system, that humans have in common with all animals and proves very difficult to heal (Damascio, 1994). In the worst case the individual's faith that he will be safe and secure in the world is shaken. What does it take to heal that wound?

One of the best chances that people have of reducing their essential vulnerability is to accumulate vast piles of experience that eventually proves to them they are adequate to those situations that threaten them. They build up experience doing what they are good at, their work, so that they become comfortable with the idea that they are as competent as others take them to be.

They can improve their chances of reducing their sensitivity to inadequacy, however, by not limiting themselves to those areas where they excel. It is easy to limit oneself to those things that come naturally. We see executives do it all the time, but to have the best chance to grow fundamentally, they are well advised to seek out experiences in other areas. If they are masterful at solving business problems but, truth be know, feel unsure of themselves in relationships, it behooves them to build up vast stores of successful experience in relationships. To start with, they need to come up with a larger idea for who they are and how they might develop—in other words, set a strategic direction for their development. This is where consultants come in. It is so easy for executives never to embark on the journey. They, like all of us, are given to saying, "That's not me." What they are really saying is they have given up on themselves in some respect. We have had highly placed male managers tell us, "I have no desire for close relationships." Feeling no need, they are poor prospects for having experiences of that kind. For executives to transcend basic feelings of inadequacy, we believe they must stop ruling out broad classes of experience, whether it is interpersonal or intellectual or technical. Their best chance of growing is to add dimensions to who they are, and in so doing become more versatile leaders.

Long-run evolution is the path out of stasis. It is the way to escape the patterns that we adopted long ago to deal with the original trying circumstances: "It becomes all too easy to settle down into the narrow boundaries of the self developed in adolescence" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 47).

It is through a consistent practice of meeting a wide variety of challenges that people gain strength. Slowly, in a process of accretion akin to the gradual way a coral reef grows bit by organismic bit, even managers with chronic feelings of inadequacy can build up their faith in themselves. Consultants who are lucky enough to have a long-run relationship with their clients can serve as a guide.

2. Recognize one's fears. For executives to recognize that they are afraid may be the hardest work of all. There is a reason why fear of inadequacy so often has its effect below the level of consciousness. To feel inadequate is itself threatening, all the more so for self-respecting males. But what we are talking about goes beyond feelings of inadequacy in the moment. These are the historic fears, the sensitivities that have their roots in earlier painful experiences. Given the reluctance of executives to acknowledge their fears, consultants can serve as a catalyst. Empathy is perhaps the most useful agent. To draw out the individual is often the greatest service. All it may take is the simple question, "What keeps you from doing that, what holds you back?"

One executive client, some considerable time after the feedback session, initiated a conversation with us about how easily threatened she was. She understood that under certain conditions she felt "unsafe." What impressed us was her ability to see how feeling threatened led directly to her counterproductive behavior. She described vividly how at those times her focus narrowed sharply and all her energies were directed at countering the perceived threat.

As much as executives may resist knowing that they are afraid, acknowledging their fears is liberating. It is a form of self-acceptance. "I may not want to be this way but this is who I am." To do so begins to dispel the sense of oneself as unworthy and to better accept those parts of oneself that have troubled the person. By a curious process of disidentification, one moves from a condition of "being" those things to "having" those things (Kegan, 1982). As our colleague Bill Hodgetts pointed out, there is tremendous potential released from achieving deep self-acceptance.

3. Raise unrealistically low estimate of oneself. Low self-evaluations prove to be durable. Of the specific ways that individuals can attempt to alter their estimate of their abilities, one that we have found to work is intensive assessment, which many executive coaches have in their repertoire. What they may not do is make strategic use of the positive feedback for this purpose. One way we have found to help executives correct self-evaluations that are pegged too low is to expose themselves to a heavy and concentrated dose of feedback on their strengths (Kaplan, 1999).

We find that the majority of our clients underestimate their capability one way or another. They either underrate their overall effectiveness or they underestimate how effective they are in a particular respect, often interpersonal or intellectual. Suffused with emotion, these self-deprecating self-perceptions resist change.

When executives receive 360-degree feedback, the data on weaknesses exert a strong gravitational pull. For years we allowed ourselves to be pulled in the same direction. Like our clients, we took the data on weaknesses to be the meat of the assessment. Only recently did we

in our consulting practice learn to exploit the power of positive feedback. We have found that a heavy dose of the good things that coworkers have to say can temper an executive's fearful, self-diminishing notion of himself or herself, and result in greater self-acceptance. Beware the careless assumption that the strengths that an executive's coworkers report are as obvious to him or her as they are to the those looking on. In our capacity as consultants, we have learned to carefully check out whether the individual takes exception to any of his or her coworkers' high opinions—always a telltale sign.

When executives allow themselves to be influenced by the data and revise their depressed self-estimate upward, they are then less likely to be threatened by problems and they are less inclined to overdo or underdo their response to demands placed on them. They bring their estimate of the resources at their disposal into alignment with the demands on them.

4. Lower excessively high expectations of oneself. We all have them, archaic beliefs about the way we must behave. These imperatives, things we feel we must do or must avoid doing, exert an extraordinary power over us. Tinged with an almost religious feeling, these potent "shoulds" and "should not's" acquire the status of unquestioned truths in our lives, absolutes. Some executives are driven by a sense of responsibility that dictates that they absolutely do their part, that they never fail to take accountability. Other executives, a smaller proportion, are possessed by an expectation that they respond to the needs of others, that they never fail to put other people's needs ahead of their own. Still others have internalized a stricture against arrogance to the point where they have become constitutionally unable to take credit for their contributions—a coercive modesty.

The consultant's role is to engineer a retooling of these unrealistic expectations—to help senior managers get a perspective on these standards that dictate how good their work must be and how much work they must do. The challenge for the individual is to stand outside the tightly wrapped system of thought. It helps to look upon these articles of faith relative to the conditions under which they originally arose, as conclusions reached at an earlier time about how to keep the self out of harm's way. If executives achieve this distance on their impossible expectations, they take some power out of them (Kegan, 1982). Those executives who succeed in this effort are often those who at the same time have internalized their strengths. The result is to take some of the internal pressure off.

Helping executives take short-term corrective action

Apart from doing deep personal development and banking on long-term maturation, there are steps that executives can take that are managerial in character. They can go after the problems with their performance in the same way that go after any problem—understand what isn't working, understand why it isn't working, and take corrective action. This is the stock in trade of the vast majority of executive coaches. Here we inform the behavioral approach by redefining it somewhat in terms of our framework.

The object is first of all to help individuals recognize that their behavior is off. Then it is to help them become aware of the fast sequence of steps, starting with emotional overreactions that spring from skewed operating assumptions, that clandestinely throw off their reading of

situations and then their actions as a leader. Executives must come to recognize this sequence so that they can learn to interrupt it. Among the immediate corrective steps that can be made available to them, executives can modify their behavior directly, they can learn to know it when they are threatened, they can identify the operating assumptions that underlie the behavior in question, and they can learn to draw on other people's resources.

1. Attack the behavior. The most straightforward approach is to help the individual work out a plan for attacking the behavior in question directly. Simply put, what is required is that executives recognize that they are overdoing it or underdoing it in some respect that matters to them and that they resolve to change. This is simply put but not simply done, however, because efforts to show executives the error of their ways collide with their cherished beliefs in the value of what they are doing.

Fresh from having their eyes opened, executives frequently report "catching themselves" as they are about to fall into an old pattern of behaving. They narrowly avert doing the old thing. Many find it helpful to recognize the emotions that immediately precede the behavior. One individual, overcoming a tendency to hold back in meetings, reported, "I now notice when I'm uncomfortable, I notice when there's tension." He uses the feeling as an indication that he is at risk of hanging back and, recognizing that he has a choice, pushes himself to the fore. Since emotions are always accompanied by a physical sensation, it is helpful to pick up on bodily cues, one of the best ways of recognizing that one is threatened. These cues can include: increased heart rate, headache, perspiring, tension in one's neck or shoulders, stomach pain, a tic, and so on.

To catch oneself is to fight the gathering potential to engage in an habitual behavior and recognize a choice to substitute a new behavior. This applies to efforts to correct both overdoing and underdoing. Executives who are resisting a habit of going overboard make themselves keep their commitment to themselves to tone it down. Executives struggling with a tendency to avoid doing something make themselves produce the behavior.

It is no small job to contain the urge that would throw off one's performance in either direction. If executives can succeed in catching themselves at the moment of truth, they free themselves to try new behavior. Should they fail to interrupt the sequence, it still helps to realize after the fact and at least clean up after oneself.

Behaving in new ways can contain an element of coercion in the sense that in the early stages it requires an act of will. Up against a tendency to overdo, senior managers have to battle it—and forcibly allay the anxiety that if they moderate their hard driving, they will no longer get the same results. Others, up against their tendency to underdo, must push past their resistance if they are to demonstrate to themselves that they can engage in the feared behavior and not suffer ill-effects.

As long as the impulse to do what they have always done remains strong, executives can invent little outlets for it, and consultants can help them do it. Bursting at the seams to take on one's superior in a staff meeting, a senior manager can bleed off the tension by writing down one's views rather than voicing them. Fairly shuddering with apprehension about having a difficult

conversation with a direct report, the individual can calm himself by applying some form of applied relaxation (e.g., Ost, 1987).

Desensitization is a proven strategy for helping people overcome phobias like these (A. Lazarus, 1971; Seligman, 1993). By doing the thing that fear precluded—and doing it not just once but consistently—we gradually learn that our fears are unwarranted. "Phobias" become self-sealing by depriving the individual of the very experience that could disprove the fearful assumption, and therefore it is no small accomplishment to get over this barrier. The way to reduce one's fear is to do what one is afraid of, safely.

By producing the feared behavior, managers put themselves in a position to experience its benefits. An executive learning to be more potent informed us after a couple of months of trying out the new behavior, "I actually enjoy myself being more assertive." The rewards for him were not just having a greater impact but also the satisfaction of using his powers more fully: "This sort of flexing around these issues is a good thing to do."

2. Recognize being threatened. Beyond developing a vague sense of the discomfort that triggers one's actions, executives benefit from coming face-to-face with the not so pretty reality that they get threatened. To know that underneath it all one's fears are the culprit equips executives to exercise better control over their behavior. Assisting their clients in their attempt at self-honesty and self-acceptance is a vital role for consultants who are equipped to do it.

Earlier we mentioned an executive who would get upset if he found that a direct report didn't have a commanding knowledge of the business. Mistreating people gave him no pleasure and, in exploring its roots, he discovered that it was fear of inadequacy that prompted his outbursts. Once he identified the source, he had better luck in containing his overreactions. When he felt the panicky feeling coming on, he could short-circuit the threat response by "pressing the pause button," as we put it to him.

Another executive adopted the same mechanism for ameliorating a relationship problem with subordinates, who complained that he was not only inaccessible but also distant when they did manage to get time with him. In talking with us it came to light that he felt uncomfortable, unsafe, inadequate in relationships in general. To protect himself, he avoided interaction. Or if he began to feel uncomfortable in a conversation he would end it. We suggested to him that, at the point when he was ready to bolt, he interrupt the reflex reaction. The pause would give him a chance to ask himself whether it was the present situation that made him uneasy or the old sensitivity carried over from the past.

Knowing what threatens us gives us a distinct advantage in managing our fears and even helps us avert their disruptive effects. Executives so armed are in a much stronger position to catch themselves, as well as to contain their emotional reactions. Having made a study of the state of being threatened, they also become acquainted with the bodily sensations that accompany this state. They come to know when these feelings are about to waylay their ability to think rationally and be under control.

3. Call operating assumptions into question. In addition to fear of inadequacy, operating assumptions can throw off an executive's performance. In contrast to sweeping core beliefs about oneself, these are specific "truths" that translate directly into the tactics an individual employs. The first step towards improving one's effectiveness is to question what has been taken for granted. It is the consultant's job to enable the individual to make these tacit assumptions explicit.

Harry, the executive who avoided walking the halls because he assumed that people would be offended if he didn't know their names or what they were working on, proved able to see the assumption for what it was: faulty. It had survived intact for years, escaped scrutiny, and led him to give short shrift to an important part of his job as the head of a large organization—to keep his finger on the pulse and to be visible to people lower in the organization. The shame of it was that he had a singular ability with people—the personal touch—that he did not exploit. An otherwise smart, rational person, he came to see that his expectation of himself had been unrealistic: "I realize now that people will give me more slack than I think. So I don't have to be so fortified or guarded." Because being out and about no longer posed the same threat, he could stop using his office as a kind of fortress.

Another example: in working with an executive on the problem of imbalance between her work life and her private life, we ran across an inviolate operating assumption she made. Although she had two young children whose soccer games she wanted to see, she would not permit herself to leave work early during the week. Having the quality of a compulsion, this principle she followed gave her no choice. When she exposed the assumption to the light of day and acknowledged to herself her extraordinary dedication, which other people gave her credit for, she was able to consider making an exception to her ironclad rule. As she told us, it was not just the principle that dictated her behavior, it was the guilt she would feel if she departed from the principle.

Operating assumptions in another form come into play when executives contemplate a change in their behavior. These are assumptions as to what is more or less important for them to do—values. In executives who overdo a behavior, we find a high value placed on that behavior. They see it as important to their effectiveness. They prize it, place their faith in it. Because they depend so much on it, they continue to work at improving the capability. For executives to moderate a behavior taken to an extreme, they need to come to place somewhat less value on it. By the same token, they need to come to place somewhat greater value on the complementary behavior that they underplay—and, because they have underplayed it, that they have not developed fully. So in addition to the fear of proving inadequate at the neglected side, their prejudicial attitude toward the other side stands in the way of making better use of it and getting better at it. Consultants can provide a valuable service by helping executives be honest with themselves about their biases for or against the various functions they must perform.

4. Make better use of other people. According to the model pictured in Figure 1, people are susceptible to feeling inadequate when they read the demand on them as exceeding their capacity to respond. It follows then that one way to respond to this imbalance is to draw on the resources of others. It doesn't have to fall entirely to the individual to meet the challenge. One can extend one's capabilities indirectly. The consultant is one such resource. In fact, at the risk

of seeming self-serving, we have found that an individual's ability or inability to involve others in his or her development is one index of their prospects for growth.

Executives can call upon others for two types of help. One is to get assistance in performing the task that they experience as beyond them. The other is to get a hand in containing the anxiety triggered by not feeling adequate. Besides providing moral support, others can help correct a distorted reading of a situation. Consultants are responsible for helping their clients expand their capacity to draw on others in their lives.

The logic that other people can extend one's capabilities, however, can escape a person under stress. It may also fly in the face of an assumption an individual makes about what he or she should know or should do personally. Sensitive to feeling inadequate, executives may instinctively view asking for help as a sign of weakness. This particular inhibition can derive from a spotty record in relationships. It can also come from a compensatory need to be the "hero", someone who unfailingly does outstanding work. A ruggedly individualistic management culture can further militate against seeking help and morale support.

CONCLUSION

A feeling of inadequacy often lies at the root of executive dysfunction, even if it is the last thing that onlookers suspect. The individuals themselves may have a better sense of what they are feeling than we might give them credit for, but we find that their grasp on that uncomfortable reality is typically weak. The work of coaching executives on their leadership is as much to help their clients come to grips with their sensitivities as it is to grapple with sub-optimal behaviors. Ours is not an ideological position. This is practical: executives have a better chance of getting their behavior into line if they address the sensitivities that throw that behavior out of alignment.

Attaining this sort of self-awareness holds one important key to development and performance improvement, but it is difficult for adults to do, especially successful adults. And executives—the usually proud, masterful possessors of positions of power—can find it difficult to acknowledge weakness. To be threatened can be viewed as a form of weakness. It is likewise difficult for them to uncover past hurts that have not healed. Like a thorn in one's foot that the skin has grown over, it continues to bother them but they have learned to live with it. This is where guides like leadership consultants come in.

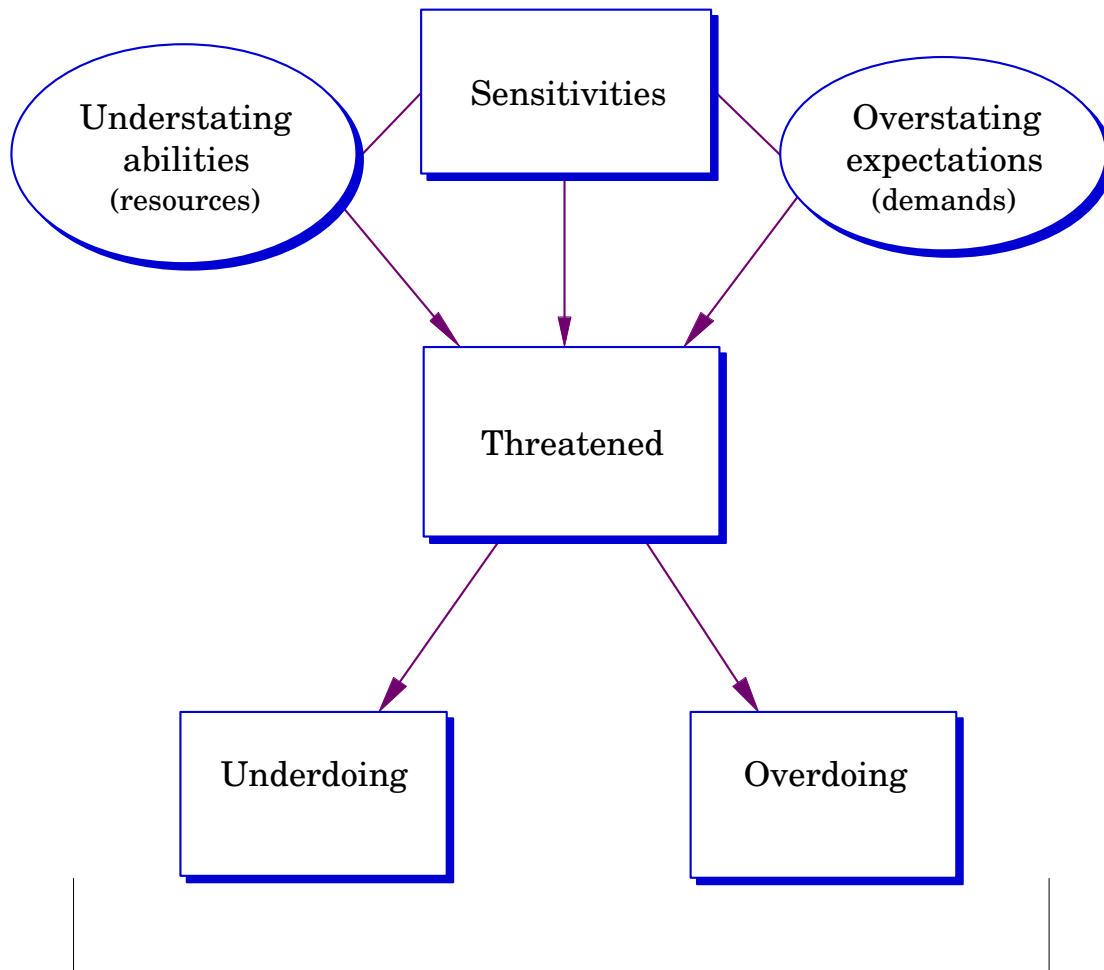
At a minimum, progress is climbing out of the closed system of our self-protective beliefs and rationalizations sufficiently to see the distortions in our performance for what they are and make modifications. A step beyond that is to make the explicit connection between the off behavior and feelings of inadequacy and begin to manage the dysfunction at the source. We learn to take our sensitivity into account and make allowances for it. In shifting from being utterly subject to it to attaining some degree of objectivity about it, we take a step towards releasing ourselves from it (Kegan, 1982). The best case is when, through a variety of means, we are actually able to outgrow the sensitivity and the associated outdated beliefs and attain a greater comfort with ourselves, one that simultaneously liberates us and takes the ragged edge off our intensity.

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Figure 1

How Sensitivities Throw Off Performance in Executives



1. Tendency to not be aware of underlying emotions/motivations.
2. Tendency to justify/rationalize behaviors.

Figure 2

Some Types of Overdoing and Underdoing

Overdoing

Underdoing

Pressing—trying too hard Overpreparing Being too hard on others	Indecisiveness Lack of engagement with others Avoiding strategy
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