

Leadership is often about getting out of your own way

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Whenever people make statements about wanting to meaningfully change the trajectory of their lives, organisations, or the world, they tend to converge on one topic: Power. This is a fundamental dimension of organisational and social life. Yet, as Rosabeth Kanter noted years ago, power is a topic that makes people uncomfortable—one that they sometimes shy away from. Is this a reason that so many otherwise promising careers get derailed by political setbacks?

Power is one of the most important social forces, and is essential for major accomplishments. It often involves challenging assumptions and taking people out of their comfort zones. But it shouldn't make us uncomfortable. It's foundational to success at work—for chief executive officers (CEOs), political leaders, managers and new recruits alike. Research by a Florida State professor shows that possession of a political skill, the ability to develop and wield power effectively, leads to better performance, employee support,

and superior outcomes on compensation, career success, life satisfaction, etc. Having worked with a multitude of people around the globe, we are convinced that people themselves are often their own biggest barrier to achieving the power and positions they seek.

Here are four things that could overcome those hurdles:

One, pay attention to how you define yourself. We know of an Indian Institute of Technology gold medalist who went to Stanford to do his masters in artificial intelligence and had landed a top-notch job, but his LinkedIn profile and biodata were matter-of-fact. He felt he could have done more courses at Stanford and that he was not much of an expert in his chosen field despite the fact that he was chosen as a research assistant in his first term by a top professor for a coveted project. He also had two patents under his belt before taking up a cushy job at a global corporation. He underplayed his achievements because, as it appeared, he was misled by the notion of modesty, given his Indian middle-class background. Modesty is fine once your accomplishments are well recognised, but not early in your career. He has since then redone his profile since for others to get a better-rounded view of his

abilities.

Those who believe modesty is a virtue often use self-deprecate, fail to promote their accomplishments and act in ways that give away their power. Don't be one of those people. Self-handicaps are harmful.

Two, don't accept constraints imposed by others. We closely know at least three women leaders who broke the glass ceiling to run their respective global conglomerates at a young age. What's common to them is their resolute unwillingness to conform to gender-norm expectations—or to let others impose constraints on who they are and what they can (and will) do.

As one of them said in a recent email: "I don't choose to be relegated to a lower status role. I have no problem challenging people or making them rethink their assumptions. There are many examples—you are a woman or you are a surgeon. I don't feel like I have to 'stay in my lane'. The head honcho who hired me asked me, 'Do you not see the boundaries between disciplines?' I

replied, 'No, why should I?'" This leader is currently running an adaptive drug design study for covid-19, although she is a breast cancer surgeon. If you have something you think you can contribute to a decision, refuse to let others keep you out of it.

Three, stop worrying about being liked.

People worry too much about this. Look at most leaders you see around today. If you want to be liked as a leader, get a pet that will love you unconditionally. Enterprises do not hire executives for them to win popularity contests. Your responsibility is to get things done and make the business successful. Many CEOs of startups, including those of Zomato and Tesla, never feared taking hard decisions and have said in

public that they aren't worried about being disliked by many.

In one study, we saw that when people's outcomes—their rewards and success—depended on the overall success of the group, they were willing to prioritise competence over sociability (or niceness) in choos-

ing people to work with. Fundamentally, people love to be part of a winning effort. Your first responsibility as a leader is to produce success, not to be loved.

Four, don't let unfairness become an excuse. There are at least two ways in which to respond to any unjustness—gender- and race/caste-based discrimination, for instance—that remains all too pervasive. One is to use being unfairly treated as an excuse for under-performance. Reframe things in ways that tell you what to do, instead. If being an "only" makes you stand out, use that uniqueness to your advantage.

It may be comfortable to make excuses and impose self-handicaps, but it diminishes the likelihood of achieving power. Power is leverage—allowing you to change things for the better. Power accelerates careers, permits bold accomplishments, and increases life satisfaction.

Yet, one of the biggest barriers to acquiring and using power is our own feelings, and our reluctance to acquire and use influence. Remember, the first rule of power is to get out of your own way. The most powerful people describe themselves as fearless, shameless, bold and brave. They have gotten out of their own way by dropping the scripts that hold them back.

Too many of us seem to handicap our own chances of a leadership role without even realizing it