

The Seven Fears Overcome By Highly Inspirational Leaders



Most of the challenges in the world are sustained by people clinging to the past. It's as if they are addicted to bad ideas and habits. That's probably why in the Narcotics Anonymous Handbook, they remind recovering addicts that:

“Insanity is repeating mistakes and expecting a different result”

Fear triggers us to move away from pain and towards less painful or pleasurable feelings. Having a purpose which is bigger than ourselves ignites inspiration. Inspiration trumps short term motivation over the long haul. The ego is never satisfied for long, so a higher calling is necessary if a leader wants a team to be engaged on a grand adventure.

Innovators, mavericks and entrepreneurs have the ability to inspire fundamental change. People such as Buddha, Charles Darwin and Nelson Mandela challenged all sorts of social, scientific and religious beliefs. They were leaders who developed unique perspectives. They took the road less travelled and as such made a big difference. But taking the road less travelled and inspiring others to follow means overcoming inertia and facing difficulties purposely.

We generally consider the maxim, *'change is the only constant'* to be true. But we mostly act as if we live in a state of *'permanence'*. Our fear drives us to cling to certain delusions in the hope that we can feel comfortable. Even when life isn't all that comfortable, we remain comfortably uncomfortable in our comfort zones.

But adaptability is the real key to survival. All success is a result of successful adaptation, and failure is really a failure to adapt successfully. Inspirational leaders must learn to recognise and overcome the debilitating effects of fear.

Fear is a normal response and paradoxically not something to be feared. It is common to all humankind and has kept us at the top of the evolutionary tree. By attempting to control much of our lives we've become less able to recognise and respond effectively to fear. Here are seven fears overcome by inspirational leaders that can lead to more effective responses:

1. Letting other people be right

Inspirational leaders want people to be inspired to journey alongside them. What leaders don't need is a bunch of sycophantic 'yes-ites' who are dependent on them to solve every problem. Treating people as though they are adults demands from leaders more complex behaviour, especially if they want to unlock more of their team's potential. Leaders have to let others be right, even when *they* might not be completely right or if their solution is in opposition to the leaders own.

Dealing with ambiguity is just one of the skills an inspirational leader has to handle. There is a great sense of freedom for a leader when they let go of the need to be right all the time. Reality is malleable and as Nietzsche explained:

“You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.”

2. Vulnerability

Being open to new ideas, beliefs and behaviours feels counter-intuitive. All wisdom tends to be when we're first exposed to it. Imagine telling the novice boxer to move towards the big opponent who's throwing punches in their direction. But that's what they must do if they are to slip past the opponents attack to launch their own. Leaders must lean into fear not run away from it.

Think about the crab. A marine creature which must, every now and then, let go of its protective shell in order for it to replace it with a larger one. Without allowing itself to be vulnerable at times, it cannot grow. Of course it makes sure it has the best chance of survival during this dangerous period, but as Brene Brown points out:

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.”

3. Accepting reality

Many things blind us to reality. We are influenced by our personality biases, we think we're strong, lucky, entitled, that everything will be okay. Actually, the Buddhists have a different view, they accept the belief that life is painful at times, but suffering more than we have to; that bit's optional.

Becoming an enlightened leader is a continual journey of increasing self-awareness and compassion. There will be times when everything doesn't work out the way the leader had hoped. They have to accept this reality time and time again.

We are partners and co-creators with the universe. We can do our best, then it's up to the universe what happens next. That means average ideas can do really well and great ideas can bomb. When coaching entrepreneurs or leaders wanting to try something new, I advise them to do as much preparation as is possible, then have a go. But I always introduce the caveat that clients should *“get to reality as quickly as possible”*. Even a slow 'yes' from a prospective client can put a new venture into deep water.

I was talking about timing being very important at a recent workshop. Afterwards, an attendee shared his story. He'd attempted several business ventures. One in particular took ten years before the time was right. Fortunately he had another business that provided a living in the meantime. They say it takes ten years to become an overnight success. In its tenth year his venture shot from zero to £35 million turnover in one year. But if he'd relied solely on that business in the beginning, he would have starved despite it being a great idea.

Combining intuition and practicality is always the best way forward. Being adaptable is the ultimate security and as Lao Tzu wrote:

“Life is a series of spontaneous changes. Don't resist them that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.”

4. Stopping

To accurately predict what people will be doing in five minutes, ask them what they're doing now. There's every likelihood that they'll still be doing the same thing. The default setting for people is to continue doing what feels familiar. Stopping to pause and reflect on the eventual outcome when everybody else is charging forward is difficult. Ask the lemming who's at the front of the migration.

Leaders shouldn't stop asking questions. But it's also important to realise that a fear of stopping can influence people to follow the same path. Even when that path is not such a great direction to be going in anymore

A common mistake that entrepreneurs make, driven primarily by their '*just get it done*' personality, is to keep doing everything themselves. Including solving the challenges the team face. This behaviour becomes addictive. Solving problems leads to spikes in Dopamine levels, a neurotransmitter which rewards certain behaviours such as being heroic.

Eventually though, this takes all the creative confidence out of the team. It leads to *burnout* of the entrepreneur and an unhappy family life too. Stopping is usually promoted as a big thing. But in the right context stopping is a very positive response. Think about smoking and as Mark Twain advised:

"Whenever you're on the side of the majority, it's time to pause and reflect"

5. Letting Go

There is a tribe of bushman in the Kalahari Desert who have a novel approach to finding water. They first dig a small hole in a termite mound in front of a troop of watchful baboons. They then push some seeds into the hole and walk away from the mound and wait. The baboons, being very inquisitive animals, cannot help but go over to the hole and discover what's in there. A baboon will insert its hand through the small opening and grasp hold of the seeds. The only problem now is that the baboon's fist is too large to exit the hole.

Meanwhile, the bushman walks over and captures the baboon. Only when it's too late will the baboon let go of the seeds. The bushman then feeds the baboon salt, the baboon gets thirsty and runs off to the nearest water supply followed by the bushman.

In our evolutionary history there was a time when we were ape-like creatures. Our brains have evolved but the '*inner monkey*' is still very much part of our internal operating system. *Letting go* is not something that the inner monkey enjoys. Once we've got our mitts on something shiny, we prefer to keep hold of it. In fact, we'll often keep hold of things even when we don't particularly value the object.

Marketing people know this only too well. With their '*buy now – pay later*' and '*Money back guarantees*'; they know which part of us they're talking to. You can see the monkeys coming out to play on, '*Black Friday*'.

As Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh knows well:

“People have a hard time letting go of their suffering. Out of a fear of the unknown, they prefer suffering that is familiar.”

An inspiring leader, will sometimes have to let go of the familiar if they want to remain relevant. The need to let go, might involve products which have become the victim of disruptive innovation, clients who aren't the right fit any more or team members who prefer not to adapt to a new direction the organisation is moving in.

6. The Unknown

Who knows the future? We live in a world governed by chaos theory. Where the approximate present does not equal the approximate future and it's impossible to know everything about the now to accurately predict the then.

It's difficult within the confines of a monetary system to be able to explore the future fully. Leaders often fear they will run out of money before they reach

the next source of income. However, leaders have to step into the unknown and inspire others to follow.

When stood at the entrance to a corridor, doors on both sides, the leader cannot know what's behind each door without first stepping inside. Fear will often keep people rooted to the spot wondering which door to try first.

It's often safer to remain with the familiar, However as Oliver Wendell Holmes points out:

"I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving in. To reach the port of heaven we must sail sometimes with the wind, and sometimes against it. But we must not drift or *lie at anchor.*"

7. Transformation

It's said that people fear change. Actually that's not true, people change all the time to stay in the same place. What people are really scared of is transformation.

There is a difference between fundamental solutions and symptomatic stop gaps. The economy recovering is a symptomatic solution to a fundamental problem. The problem is that the economic system we're using is not suitable for the health of the world's population. Sure some people are doing okay and some developing countries are experiencing more prosperity than they did previously, but they'll reach threshold points quicker and experience the same problems sooner. Furthermore the problems will return quicker, last for longer and be increasingly more painful. Lessons are repeated until they're learnt.

When we create a system, we have to delete a certain amount of potential to make reality 'fit' the system. What we'll see over the coming years are hybrid innovations as we move towards a fundamental transformation i.e. a totally new system. A system that allows more people to be able to contribute more of their potential.

Automation will make a lot of work obsolete so relying on low skilled workers to drive the economy is already becoming untenable. Cheap goods and cheap lives will not satisfy the population forever, after all, who actually wants to work at McDonalds for life?

When we accept this and begin transforming the world, we'll rise above the present ego driven challenges. Sure we'll have new challenges, it won't be utopian, but they'll be nicer challenges to have. When we stop making businesses out of problems and start to actually tackle them together, then we'll see transformation. Inspired leaders know this and as Napoleon Hill explained:

“First comes thought, then organisation of that thought, into ideas and plans; then transforming plans into reality. The beginning, as you will observe, is in your imagination.”

Martin Murphy~ The Performance Consultant