The Human Dilemmas of Leadership

Fear of success and fear of failure can lead to an executive's downfall.

By Abraham Zaleznik

Not too long ago, the citizens of the United States and of the world became witnesses to a political drama that had all the ingredients of a first-class Greek tragedy. Were it not for the fact that the episode revealed some sense of the nature of power conflicts among influential men, one could safely have stopped reflections on the event at the point where its human interest ended and its deeper significance for leadership began. I am referring, of course, to the Adlai Stevenson episode that exploded on the public scene with an article in the Saturday Evening Post by Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett.1

I do not intend to go into a commentary on this article but, rather, I want to use this episode to launch my reflections on the human dilemmas of leadership as they affect every person who works in a position of authority and responsibility. In the course of the Stevenson affair, we became privy to backstage rivalry among subordinates close to the President. We saw attempts at political homicide and character assassination through the use of "the leak" of so-called secret positions in the deliberations of high councils of government. We saw the President of the United States drop his guard, if only momentarily, to show us how difficult it is to make or hold friends while in the Presidency. And throughout the revelations, charges, and countercharges, we learned just what the medium of exchange can be in power conflicts; namely, prestige, personal integrity, friendship and loyalty, jealousy and egotism — all typical human sentiments likely to be found in any human encounter where people care about what they are doing.

In the professional literature on the job of the executive, one seldom finds much reference to or intelligent discussion of the dilemmas posed by the exercise of power and authority. The dramatists, novelists, biographers, and journalists attempt to portray these struggles in their works, but much is left to the sensitivity and intuition of the audience. And least of all are we ever invited to consider the underlying dynamics

1 "In Time of Crisis," December 8, 1962, p. 15.
of leadership dilemmas and the different forms open to us for their resolution.

I should like to try to lift the veil somewhat on the nature of conflicts in exercising leadership. The two points I want to develop are:

1. The main source for the dilemmas leaders face can be found within themselves, in their own inner conflicts.

2. Dealing more intelligently with knotty decisions and the inevitable conflicts of interest existing among men in organizations presupposes that executives, at least the successful ones, are able to get their own house in order. It presupposes that the executive is able to resolve or manage his inner conflicts so that his actions are strongly grounded in reality, so that he does not find himself constantly making and then undoing decisions to the service of his own mixed feelings and to the disservice and confusion of his subordinates.

Tendency to Project

Most of us are accustomed by virtue of our training and inclinations to externalize conflicts and dilemmas. If an executive finds himself immobilized in the face of a difficult problem, he is apt to look to the outside for an explanation. He might perhaps say to himself that he is unable to act because he has inadequate authority delegated to him. Or he might hesitate because he feels subordinates are holding out on him by providing too little information, confused positions, and mixed signals. In this case, he is likely to vent his frustrations on their incompetence.

This generalized tendency to place conflicts in the outside world is part and parcel of a well-known mechanism of the mind called projection. A person projects when, unknown to himself, he takes an attitude of his own and attributes it to someone else. In the example just cited, the executive who despairs because his subordinates are confused and who charges them with holding back and with indecision may well be reading his own state of mind and attributing it to others.

It is just not within us to be able consistently to separate those issues which arise from our own concerns from those issues that reside in the realities of a situation. Let me cite another example:

The president of a large company became concerned with the possibility that his organization had failed to develop executive talent. This concern of his arose in connection with his own retirement. He organized a committee composed of assistants to vice presidents to study this problem and to report to him with recommendations.

The president's forthcoming retirement was well known, and there was private speculation as to who among the vice presidents would be named as his successor. This succession obviously implied that several persons among the assistant vice presidents would be promoted. The task force met several times, but its discussions were not too productive or interesting. The group spent most of its time attempting to define what the president wanted the committee to do, instead of dealing with the issues the organization faced in attracting and developing executive talent.

In other words, they projected their own concerns and anxiety onto the president and attributed to him confused motives in undertaking the assessment of the company's needs in executive development. In reality the individuals themselves shared confused motivations. They were in intense rivalry with one another over who among their immediate superiors would become president and how this change would affect their fate in the organization.

By centering attention on the inner conflicts of the executive, I do not mean to imply that conflicts are not based in the relations among individuals at work. The illustrations presented so far clearly indicate how vicious these relations may become. The point I am suggesting is that external conflicts in the form of power struggles and rivalry become more easily understood and subject to rational control under those conditions where the executive is able to separate the conditions within himself from those existing on the outside.

This process of separation is more easily said than done. Nevertheless it is crucial for the exercise of leadership, and sometimes the separation is the very condition for survival. One wonders, for example, whether the failure to maintain this separation lay at the basis of the breakdown and subsequent suicide of such a brilliant man as James Forrestal. At the very least, by attending to the conditions within himself, the executive can expect to be dealing with those situations most susceptible to his rational control. It is in the long run a lot easier to control and change oneself than it is to control and change the world in which we live.

Forms of Inner Conflict

But before we examine some of the ways in which a man can learn to deal more competently with his inner life, we need to know some-
thing more about the nature of inner conflicts. Let us take two types that are quite prevalent among executives in organizations:

1. **Status anxiety** — This refers to those dilemmas frequently experienced by individuals at or near the top in their organizational world.

2. **Competition anxiety** — This refers to the feelings generated while climbing to the top.

These two prevalent types of anxiety, while resembling each other in a number of respects, are worth keeping separate for purposes of furthering understanding.

### Status Anxiety

When an individual begins to achieve some success and recognition in his work, he may suddenly realize that a change has occurred within himself and in his relations with associates. From a position of being the bright young man who receives much encouragement and support he, almost overnight, finds himself viewed as a contender by those who formerly acted as mentors. A similar change takes place in his relations with persons who were his peers. They appear cautious with him, somewhat distant, and constrained in their approach, where once he may have enjoyed the easy give-and-take of their friendship. The individual in question is then ripe for status anxiety. He becomes torn between the responsibilities of a newly acquired authority and the strong need to be liked.

There is a well-established maxim in the study of human behavior that describes this situation tersely and even poetically; namely, that “love flees authority.” Where one individual has the capacity to control and affect the actions of another, either by virtue of differences in their positions, knowledge, or experience, then the feeling governing the relationship tends to be one of distance and (hopefully) respect, but not one ultimately of warmth and friendliness.

I do not believe that this basic dichotomy between respect or esteem and liking is easily changed. The executive who confuses the two is bound to get into trouble. Yet in our culture today we see all too much evidence of people seeking to obscure the difference. Much of the current ethos of success equates popularity and being liked with competence and achievement. In Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Willie Loman in effect was speaking for our culture when he measured a person’s achievement in the gradations of being liked, well liked, or very well liked.

### Reaction & Recognition

In what ways do executives react when they are caught in the conflict between exercising authority and being liked?

Sometimes they seek to play down their authority and play up their likability by acting out the role of the “nice guy.” This is sometimes called status stripping, where the individual strips in a variety of ways to discard all the symbols of his status and authority. This ranges from proclaiming the open-door policy, where everyone is free to visit the executive any time he wants, to the more subtle and less ritualistic means such as democratizing work by proclaiming equality of knowledge, experience, and position. And yet these attempts at status stripping fail sooner or later. The executive may discover that his subordinates join in gleefully by stripping his status and authority to the point where he becomes immobilized; is prevented from making decisions; is faced with the prospect of every issue from the most trivial to the most significant being dealt with in the same serious vein. In short, problem solving and work become terrorized in the acting out of status stripping.

The executive soon becomes aware of another aspect of his dilemma. Much to his horror, he finds that attempts to remove social distance in the interests of likability have not only reduced work effectiveness, but have resulted in an abortion of the intent to which his behavior has been addressed. He discovers that his subordinates gradually come to harbor deep and unspoken feelings of contempt toward him, because he inadvertently has provided them with a negative picture of what rewards await them for achievement — a picture unpleasant to behold. In effect, the process of status stripping helps to destroy the incentives for achievement and in the extreme can produce feelings of helplessness and rage.

There is yet another side to the dilemma of status anxiety which is well worth examining. This side has to do with the hidden desire to “touch the peak.” Executives frequently want to be near the source of power and to be accepted and understood by their bosses. Such motivations lead to excessive and inappropriate dependency bids, and to feelings of lack of autonomy on the part of the subordinate and of being leaned on too hard on the part of the superior.
Under such conditions, communication between superior and subordinate tends to break down. So far I have discussed the problem of status anxiety as an aspect of seeking friendship, warmth, and approval from subordinates and bosses. Status anxiety is also frequently generated by the fear of aggression and retaliation on the part of persons who hold positions of authority. Executives sometimes report feeling lonely and detached in their position. A closer look at the sense of loneliness reveals a feeling that one is a target for the aggression of others. This feeling occurs because the executive is called upon to take a position on a controversial issue and to support the stand he assumes. He must be able to take aggression with a reasonably detached view, or the anxiety can become intolerable.

If in your experience you have encountered an executive who seemed unable to take a stand on a problem, who seemed to equivocate or talk out of two sides of his mouth at once, then the chances are reasonably good that you have come upon a man in the throes of status anxiety. Sometimes this will appear in the form of hyperactivity — the case of the executive who flits from problem to problem or from work project to work project without really seeing an activity through to completion. In this case, the executive is utilizing the tactic of providing a shifting target so that other persons have difficulty in taking aim at him.

Constructive Approach

Now, in referring to aggression and the avoidance of aggression as aspects of status anxiety, I do not mean to imply hostile aggression. I mean to suggest instead that all work involves the release of aggressive energy. Solving problems and reaching decisions demand a kind of give-and-take where positions are at stake and where it is impossible for everyone concerned to be equally right all the time. But having to give way or to alter a position in the face of compelling argument is no loss. The executive who can develop a position, believe in it, support it to its fullest, and then back down, is a strong person.

It is just this type of person who does not suffer from status anxiety. He may love to provide a target because he knows this may be a very effective catalyst for first-class work accomplishment. He is secure enough to know that he has nothing to lose in reality, but much to gain in the verve and excitement of interesting work.

This type of executive is able to take aggression, and in fact encourage it, because he probably has abandoned the magical thinking that seems to equate his position of authority with omnipotence. No one has the power to make everyone else conform to his wishes, so it is no loss to learn that one has been wrong in the face of the arguments aggressively put forth by others. In fact, such ability to retract a stand results in heightened respect from others.

I am suggesting, in other words, that we should not be misled into equating the virtue of humility with executive behavior that appears modest, uncertain of a stand, and acquiescent toward others — behavior which frequently is feigned modesty to avoid becoming a target. True humility, in my opinion, is marked by the person who thinks his way through problems, is willing to be assertive, is realistic enough to encourage assertiveness from others, and is willing to acknowledge the superiority of ideas presented by others.

Competition Anxiety

The second main pattern of inner conflict that badly needs attention is what I have termed competition anxiety, a close kin of status anxiety. It goes without saying that the world of work is essentially a competitive one. Competition exists in the give-and-take of solving problems and making decisions. It also exists in the desire to advance into the more select and fewer positions at the top of a hierarchy. An executive who has difficulty in coming to terms with a competitive environment will be relatively ineffective.

From my observations of executives — and would-be executives — I have found two distinct patterns of competition anxiety: (1) the fear of failure and (2) the fear of success. Let us examine each in turn.

Fear of Failure

You have perhaps seen the fear of failure operate in the activities of the child, where this type of problem generally originates:

The child may seem to become quite passive and unwilling to undertake work in school or to engage in sports with children his age. No amount of prodding by parents or teachers seems to activate his interests; in fact, prodding seems to aggravate the situation and induce even greater re-
luctance to become engaged in an activity. When this child progresses in school, he may be found to have considerable native talent, and sooner or later becomes tabbed as an “underachiever.” He gets as far as he does thanks in large measure to the high quality of his native intelligence, but he does not live up to the promise which others observe in him.

When this child grows up and enters a career, we may see the continuation of underachievement, marked by relative passivity and undistinguished performance. Where he may cast his lot is in the relative obscurity of group activity. Here he can bring his talents to bear in anonymous work. As soon as he becomes differentiated, he feels anxious and may seek to become immersed once again in group activity.

An important aspect of this pattern of response is the ingrained feeling that whatever the person undertakes is bound to fail. He does not feel quite whole and lacks a strong sense of identity. He is short on self-esteem and tends to quit before he starts in order to avoid confrontation with the fear that he might fail. Instead of risking failure he is willing to assume anonymity, hence the sense of resignation and sometimes fatigue which he communicates to those near to him.

A closer study of the dilemma surrounding the fear of failure indicates that the person has not resolved the concerns he has with competing. It may be that he has adopted or “internalized” unrealistic standards of performance or that he is competing internally with unreachable objects. Therefore he resolves to avoid the game because it is lost before it starts.

If you recall James Thurber’s characterization of Walter Mitty, you may get a clearer indication of the problem I am describing. Walter was a meek, shy man who seemed to have difficulty in mobilizing himself for even the simplest tasks. Yet in his inner world of fantasy, as Thurber portrays so humorously and touchingly, Walter Mitty is the grand captain of his destiny and the destiny of those who depend on him. He populates his inner world with images of himself as the pilot of an eight-engine bomber or the cool, skillful, nerveless surgeon who holds the life of his patient in his hands. Who could ever work in the world of mortals under standards that one had best leave to the gods!

You can observe from this description that fear of failure can be resolved only when the person is able to examine his inner competitive world, to judge its basis in reality, and to modify this structure in accordance with sensible standards.

**Fear of Success**

The fear of failure can be matched with its opposite, the fear of success. This latter pattern might be called the “Macbeth complex,” since we have a ready illustration available in Shakespeare’s Macbeth. The play can be viewed symbolically for our purposes:

Macbeth was an ambitious man. It is interesting to note that the demon ambition is projected out in the form of the three witches and Macbeth’s wife, who, Macbeth would lead us to believe, put the idea into his head to become king. But we do not believe for a minute that the ambition to become number one existed anywhere but within Macbeth himself. You remember that to become king, Macbeth killed Duncan, a nice old man who had nothing but feelings of admiration and gratitude for Macbeth.

As the story unfolds, we find the crown resting uneasily on a tormented head. Macbeth is wracked with feelings of guilt for the misdeed he has committed and then with uneasy suspicion. The guilt is easy enough for us to understand, but the suspicion is a bit more subtle. Macbeth presents himself to us as a character who committed a foul deed to attain an ambition and is then suspicious that others are envious of him and seek to displace him in the number one position. So, there are few lieutenants to trust. And, paradoxically, the strongest subordinates become the ones least trusted and most threatening.

The play portrays in action the morbid cycle of the hostile-aggressive act followed by guilt and retribution. In addition, if we view the play symbolically, we can say that the individual, like Macbeth, may experience in fantasy the idea that one achieves position only through displacing someone else. Success, therefore, brings with it feelings of guilt and the urge to undo or to reverse the behavior that led to the success. If such concerns are strong enough — and they exist in all of us to some degree — then we may see implemented the fear of success.

The form of this implementation will vary. One prominent pattern it takes is in striving hard to achieve a goal, but just when the goal is in sight or within reach, the person sabotages himself. The self-sabotage can be viewed as a process of undoing — to avoid the success that may generate guilt. This process of self-sabotage is sometimes called snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory.
I am not certain just what Theodore H. White had in mind in his book, *The Making of the President — 1960*, portraying Nixon's defeat in the 1960 Presidential election, but he certainly conveys the impression that Nixon may have been going through a cycle such as the one described here — the fear of success. There were just too many errors of commission and omission that prevent us from passing off the election simply in terms of external events and forces, as important as these were.

**Managing Inner Conflicts**

To summarize the discussion thus far, I have called attention to the not easily accepted notion that conflicts of interest can and do exist within individuals and are not restricted to the relations among men in the ordinary conduct of affairs. I have said that the inner conflicts rooted in the emotional development of the individual are at the core of the leadership dilemma. It is misleading, in other words, to seek for causes of conflict exclusively in external forces.

Then, touching on a few of the inner conflicts of executives, I grouped them into two main types: (1) status anxiety and (2) competition anxiety. Both of these forms of inner conflict are rooted in the very process of human development in the strivings of individuals for some measure of autonomy and control over their environment. The forms happen to be especially crucial in the executive's world simply because he acts in the center of a network of authority and influence that at any point in time is subject to alteration. In fact, one can think of decision making and action in organizations as a continuing flow of influence interchanges where the sources of the power to influence are many. But whatever the external source through which any one person achieves power to influence, its final manifestations will reflect the inner emotional condition of the man.

Let us now see what guidelines exist for resolving and managing inner conflicts. There are six ideas I would like to suggest.

1. **The necessity of acknowledging and accepting the diversity of motivations.**

   The control of one's own responses and actions presupposes some accurate understanding of one's motivations. Everyone would like to believe that his inner world is populated only by the socially nice drives and wishes. But this is not the case. It is fruitless to attempt to deny awareness of the less nice, but equally human, feelings that we all experience such as rivalry, dislike, rebelliousness, anger, and contempt. I am not urging executives to express these feelings impulsively. I am not of the school of thought that believes the catharsis of feelings in everyday relationships at work and at home is a good thing. But the awareness of how one is reacting in a situation is beneficial and permits more flexibility in thinking and action. Unless an executive establishes a close connection between his realms of thought and feeling, the two can exist in relative isolation from one another to the detriment of his effectiveness as a manager. At the very least, such self-estrangement involves considerable costs in the waste of energy.

2. **The necessity of establishing a firm sense of identity.**

   The exercise of leadership requires a strong sense of identity — knowing who one is and who one is not. The myth of the value of being an "all-around guy" is damaging to the strivings of an individual to locate himself from within and then to place himself in relation to others. This active location and placement of one's self prevents the individual from being defined by others in uncongenial terms. It prevents him also from being buffeted around the sea of opinions he must live within. A sense of autonomy, separateness, or identity permits a freedom of action and thinking so necessary for leadership.

   Not the least significant part of achieving a sense of identity is the creative integration of one's past. There is no tailor who can convert a hayseed into a big-city boy — any more than a dude can become a cowboy for all the hours he spends on the range. Coming to terms with being a hayseed or a dude permits the development of a unique person who goes beyond the stereotypes offered to him as models.

3. **The necessity of maintaining constancy and continuity in response.**

   Closely related to the need for a sense of identity is a constancy in how one represents and presents himself to others. Constant alterations of oneself are confusing to work associates. These shifts are particularly damaging to sub-
ordinatcs who are entitled to the sense of se-

curity that comes from a feeling of reasonable

continuity in the responses of their boss. For

instance:

I knew of one group of executives, many of

whom had the practice of taking tranquilizers be-

fore a meeting with the president of the company.

They claimed that they needed the tranquilizers to

help them withstand the angry reactions the presi-
dent demonstrated when people acted as though

they had not thought through the ideas they were

presenting. I think they were mistaken. They

used the tranquilizers because they were very un-
sure as to just what he would get angry about or

when. If they had had some sense of the standards

of performance to which he reacted kindly or harsh-

ly, they would have been able to spend less time

worrying and more time working.

4. The necessity of becoming selective in

activities and relationships.

Most executives believe that gregariousness

and participation in many activities at work and

in the community are of great value in their

life. In a sense this belief is true. But I would

urge that greater attention needs to be paid to

selectivity. Without carefully selecting the mat-
ters he gets involved in, the executive faces a

drain on his emotional energy that can become

quite costly. Selectivity implies the capacity to

say “no” without the sense that one has lost

esteem. The capacity to say “no” also implies

that one is so constituted that he does not need

esteem from diffuse persons and activities to

enhance his self-worth.

5. The necessity of learning to communicate.

Conflict resolution, both inner and external,

depends on the capacities of men to communi-
cate. Communication is a complex process and

one that requires careful thought and attention.

Here are two suggestions for improving com-
munication:

1. Try to develop a keen awareness of your

own reactions (a point I referred to previously).

2. Try to make your opinions and attitudes

known without wasteful delays. (An unexpressed

reaction that simmers and then boils within is apt
to explode at inappropriate times; this may lead to

increased confusion and concern in the minds

of listeners, to the detriment of information inter-
change.)

6. The necessity of living within a cyclical

life pattern.

The effective utilization of energy seems to

involve a rhythmic pattern of alternating be-
tween quite different modes or cycles of re-

sponse. The prototype of alternating modes is

probably best found in the comparison of wake-
fulness and sleep. Wakefulness suggests activity,

conscious attention to problems, and the ten-
sion of concentration and action. Sleep is the

epitome of passivity in the adult as well as in

the child; here concerns are withdrawn from

the outside world to a state of inner bliss. In

this passive state the organism is rejuvenated

and made ready for a new cycle of activity.

This prototype can be applied to a wide range

of events in the daily life of the executive.

Building oneself into a rhythmic pattern, wheth-
er it be around work or play, talking or listen-
ing, being at work alone or in association with

others, may be essential for dealing with the

strains of a difficult role.

Summing Up

Training oneself to act and react in the ways

just discussed may sound like a formidable task.

Formidable it is, but perhaps the basic neces-
sity is to overcome the sense of inertia to which

we are all susceptible from time to time. While

it sounds puritanical, the most elementary step

necessary for achieving a mature orientation as

an executive is to assume responsibility for one’s

own development. Basic to this responsibility is

the experiencing of one’s self in the active mode.

(The sense of inertia referred to before is just

the opposite; here life and events appear to oc-

cur apart from one’s own intentions.) As soon

as an executive is able to assume responsibility

for his own experience and in the course of

doing so overcomes the sense of inertia, he is

on the road toward experiencing leadership as

an adventure in learning.

Fortunately, increasing recognition by execu-
tives of the importance of their continuing de-

velopment has made it possible for them, in con-

junction with universities and institutes, to ex-

amine the dilemmas of leadership and to experi-

ment with new approaches for their resolution.

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