Self-Handicapping Leadership

Jordan P Mitchell, PhD
Self-Handicapping

What
• An attempt to externalize potential failure
• By means of:
  • An excuse
  • Reduced effort
  • Creating problems (obstacles)

Why
• Impression management
  • Offensive v. defensive
• Because we are:
  • Uncertain
  • Apprehensive
  • Habitual
• Reinforced in the short term
• Goal orientation - Performance vs. mastery

Self-handicapping is almost always hidden, subtle, and hard to nail down - often denied by the individual and undiscussable by the crowd
Consequences Of Self-Handicapping

Positive
• Discounting blame
• Positive attributions from others
• Better short-term performance and less perceived stress
• Less punitive sanctions for failure

Negative
• Poor attributions long-term
• Self-defeating behaviors leading to serious employee issues
• Low job satisfaction
• Poor job performance
• Reduced learning and mastery
• More self-handicapping
• Little focus on adding value
There are Two Types of Self-Handicaps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claimed</td>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>“I don’t know how to use PowerPoint very well”</td>
<td>“My boss said to recruit/reach out to that employee.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>Reduce Effort</td>
<td>Not learning how to use PowerPoint more effectively</td>
<td>Lack of training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create Obstacle</td>
<td>Produce poor PPT slide deck</td>
<td>Bias against employee and lack of mentorship</td>
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The Ways We Self-Handicap

- Avoiding Accountability
- Tunnel Vision
- Lack of Awareness
- Poor Analysis & Decision Making
- Poor Communication Culture
- Poor Engagement
- Poor Talent Development
- Micro-Managing
- Not Driving for Results
# Self-Assessment - Manager

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SH CATEGORY</th>
<th>ITEM #</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Awareness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A lot of managers often don't know what's really going on with staff and customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Employee Engagement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Once my manager gets his way, it seems like he/she sees me as useless or even dead to him/her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Accountability</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>People around here seem to spend a lot of time making excuses, blaming others, and avoiding confrontation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunnel vision</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Managers here often focus intently on solving one problem or step in a situation and ignore other problems needing solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro Management</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>I wish my managers would leave me alone and do their own job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Talent Management</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Managers here tend to staff their departments with people who only say &quot;yes&quot; to them or those that don't speak up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective Communication Culture</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>There are a lot of issues here that are no one talks about openly and are &quot;under the table.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Driving for Results</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Managers here often talk about what should happen - but then don't do anything about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Decision Analysis</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Our managers often cope with uncertain or unexpected problems and crises poorly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
UNCERTAINTY/PERFORMANCE APPREHENSION

PROVIDE EXCUSE

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT
- ENHANCEMENT

REINFORCEMENT FOR SELF-HANDICAPPING

SELF-HANDICAPPING Step | Outcome | Psychological State

--- | --- | ---
PROVIDE EXCUSE | IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT - ENHANCEMENT | UNCERTAINTY/PERFORMANCE APPREHENSION
REDUCED EFFORT | SAVE TIME - AVOIDANCE GOALS | LOWER SELF-EFFICACY & ESTEEM
CREATE OBSTACLE | POOR PERFORMANCE - EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT | SELF-DECEPTION

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Self-Handicapping is a Slippery Slope to Poor Leadership
Why We Self-Handicap

• Uncertainty - self-esteem, self-efficacy, shame, etc.
  • Pump up self worth
  • Help individual disregard other’s opinions of him/her

• Competitive Environment
  • Limit competition or change rewarded outcomes

• Goal Orientation - performance vs. mastery goals
  • Build or select mastery orientation (look for humility not certainty)
Goal Orientation

• Performance-approach goals—a concern to demonstrate competence by outperforming others

• Performance-avoidance goals—the desire to avoid appearing incompetent or less competent than others

• Mastery goals—a desire to develop competence and continually learn.

  • Performance goals cause more worry about external judgments of others. Those with performance goals (especially performance-avoidance goals) do more self-handicapping.

  • Those with mastery goals do not self-handicap—they don’t need to because they see the task as a challenge to be mastered and to be learned. They know they can find a way.

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### Characteristics of Managers with Mastery Vs Performance Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Managers with Mastery Goals</th>
<th>Managers with Performance Goals (especially performance-avoidance goals)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are more likely to be interested in and intrinsically motivated to learn and be more competent</td>
<td>Are more likely to be extrinsically motivated (i.e., motivated by expectations of external reinforcement and punishment) and more likely to cheat to win</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are more likely to seek information outside the job to learn - whether rewarded for it or not</td>
<td>Do not search for information outside the job unless rewarded to do so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe that competence develops over time through practice and effort</td>
<td>Believe that competence is a stable characteristic (people are either competent or not) and think that people shouldn’t have to try hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibit more self-regulated learning and behavior</td>
<td>Exhibit less self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use learning strategies that promote comprehension</td>
<td>Use learning strategies that promote achieving more “wins”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend not to procrastinate and work ahead</td>
<td>Tend to procrastinate and do assignments at the last minute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose tasks that maximize opportunities for learning and seek out challenges</td>
<td>Choose tasks that maximize opportunities for demonstrating competence and avoid tasks that make them look incompetent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are more likely to seek conceptual understanding of things</td>
<td>Are less likely to seek to understand things at a conceptual level</td>
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<th>React to easy tasks with feelings of boredom</th>
<th>React to easy tasks with feelings of pride or relief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seek feedback that accurately describes their abilities and helps them improve</td>
<td>Seek feedback that flatters them and shows their competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingly collaborates with peers to enhance learning</td>
<td>Collaborates when doing so helps them look competent or helps avoid error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interprets failure as a sign to work harder</td>
<td>Interprets failure as a sign of low ability and therefore predictive of future failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views errors as a normal part of learning and uses errors to improve</td>
<td>Views errors as a sign of failure and incompetence. Engages in self-handicapping as a way to change attributions about failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views boss and peers as a resource</td>
<td>Views boss as a judge, rewarder, or punisher and peers as competitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are satisfied with performance as long as they make progress</td>
<td>Are satisfied only if they succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are more likely to be enthusiastic about the job and become activity involved in innovative activities</td>
<td>Are more likely to distance themselves from the job environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tend to maximize the effort done in projects in order to maximize learning</td>
<td>Does just enough to achieve what the boss expects or achieve a feeling of self-perceived competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network or join organizations to maximize learning and growth</td>
<td>Do not network or join organizations unless rewarded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from: [http://www.wou.edu/~girodm/100/mastery_vs_performance_goals.pdf](http://www.wou.edu/~girodm/100/mastery_vs_performance_goals.pdf)

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Triggers for Self-Handicapping

- *It all starts because of one’s apprehension about doing well in a task.*
- **Expediency** - Excuses are given automatically, choose what is easy, requires less time; mind is on “auto-pilot”.
- **Avoidance** - Trait-based habits (introversion, pessimism), don’t see a need to change, avoiding recognizing lack of competence (low self-efficacy), “fake it till you make it” mentality, excessively managing up.
- **Apprehension** - Legitimate fear, activities driven by culture (fear of doing something else), risk-avoidance, fear of failure, self-shame.
- **Self-Deception** - Unconsciously doing things to protect self-esteem, fear of losing what makes sense only to you, can stem from childhood fears (18-36 mths). “I can’t fail”, “It’s not my fault”, “Everyone else is wrong”.
- *It ends where it is all someone else’s fault and nothing works right.*

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Eliminating Personal Self-Handicapping

• **REFLECTION**
  • *Recognizing* is understanding what one does.
  • *Acknowledgement* is understanding what triggers it.
  • *Admitting* is accepting how your behavior affects others.

• **NEW BEHAVIOR PRACTICE**
  • *Adjusting* is finding and practicing new ways of operating.
Adjusting: Overcoming Self-Handicapping

**Deliberate Action** - before taking an action, pause and vocalize what you will do. This helps eliminate “automatic responses.” In taking deliberate action, you can reflect the long-term impacts of your actions on employees, the team, and the firm.

**Self-Efficacy** is one's belief in their ability to complete tasks and reach goals. Self-efficacy is developed through successful successive small achievements – baby steps to a more complex goal.

**Face the Fear** - the best way to deal with fear is to face forward and deal with the situation. If we fear a work task, face it; prepare well and practice doing it. *Move toward what is uncomfortable.*

**Self-Deception** is hard to recognize. If you have an excuse for everything or blame others continually, you may be deceiving yourself. Our prescription is to *look and listen carefully* - pay attention to the feedback coming at you from others. Increase your awareness.

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Driving for Results

Skills Practice
What is Driving For Results?

• Having clear goals and well-defined action plans
• Constant attention to how daily actions align with a larger goal and having a mindset to master that goal
• A tendency to “continually improve” and weigh risks against outcomes
• Identifying and controlling distractions
• Quickly finding the root cause for problems and fixing them
• Not working for the sake of being “busy,” focusing on themselves or monetary reward, trying to be better than everyone else, or focusing on staying out of trouble
• Always trying to master the process and adding value for customers

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A Leader That Drives For Results:

- Sets personal goals based on personal vision that aligns with customer needs
- Develops action plans to meet those goals
- Consistently meets or exceeds his / her goals and deadlines
- Attends to all projects until completion
- Challenges himself / herself and meets his / her own high expectations
- Meets all commitments
- Prepares for barriers to success by planning for them before they happen

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Impact of Not Driving For Results

• Many companies do a great job visioning, aligning, and developing dashboards and other tools to keep that alignment. They stay focused and driven this way.

• Most do not have these tools. Many are not focused.

• Even when focused with such tools, what fails is the drive—there is no mastery mindset and the drive diminishes over time.

• Employees and leaders alike can only keep up with the superhuman level of work so long without some internal motivation.

• Burnout and self-handicapping set in.

• At this point, you begin to see the self-handicapping ERO Spiral.

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What To Ask Yourself Everyday

• Does everything I do further an organizational goal?
• How did I help customers today?
• Are there any project / client obstacles; how do I overcome them?
• Does my to-do list today align with larger project outcomes?
• Before I go home for the day, do I have a game plan for tomorrow?
• How will I handle distractions throughout my day?
• What am I doing to detract from this organizational goal?

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What to Do

• Creating a culture of driving for results occurs at both the personal and organizational levels. It is the constant force of forward and directed motion

• There are several reasons why this is avoided:
  • lack of company vision (where are we going?)
  • lack of personal vision (what do I need for the next step of my career/life?)
  • lack of action plans (how do we get there?)
  • lack of company or personal values (why?)
  • lack of personal action plan (how do I get there?)
  • or just a simple disinterest in customer outcomes (what do they need?)

• So what to do?
  • Many leaders think motivation and payment are the same things—*they are not to workers*

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What to Do

There are five things to do to drive for results:

1. *Get Yourself Straight*—Why are you there?
2. *Adjust to the Work*—Understand your “why do it?”
3. *Organize*—Create “mastery goals” and figure out the “what” and “how.”
5. *Recharge*—Find ways to keep motivated.
Get Yourself Straight

• The first step is to literally decide between leadership and followership—employees are paid to be there, leaders are paid for results

• All leaders must accept that adding value for all customers (internal employees or customers outside the organization), is a key to their position
Adjust to the Work

• Even if you were destined for leadership, believe the community and customer come first, and have fully equipped yourself mentally for the job of leadership, your organization may not put you where you belong.

• You have to find something to lead that suits you.

• Some of us are entrepreneurs who want to build and sell; some are helpers who want to make other peoples’ lives better; some of us want to build things, be first, make a splash; some want to be part of a larger organization and make a contribution wherever it is required.

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Organize

• Organizing consists of two main activities:
  • Setting goals
  • Planning

• Setting goals includes determining customer needs and wants. It is asking nothing but “what” and “how”
  • This will require a plan—a detailed, actionable plan and a commitment right now to take charge of mastery and execute it
  • This is where you break the Spiral. Action plans, focus on mastery rather than performance, and courage will get you beyond excuses and reduced effort to the places you want to be

• Break the cycle before it breaks you

• Employees who are mastery-oriented focus on effort, use appropriate learning strategies, are persistent, make choices that are challenging and engaging, and develop a positive orientation toward learning

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Work Better

• Leaders are usually smarter—they keep improving the “how’s” of what they do

• They plan ahead, organize, are efficient, and bundle - they practice efficiency, avoid unnecessary meetings, organize teams and delegate, skip “make work,” and find all the loop holes

• And, they teach others their methods

• Leaders organize to solve problems and produce desired customer outcomes. Great leaders know their customers well and add value to their customer outcomes

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Recharge

• We all wear out; we need to find ways to keep motivated
• Leaders know this and keep their resume current and in their back pocket at all times
  • They realize that they learn and recharge by moving
  • They will never settle for the organization “owning them” when they are prepared to move on
• Leadership is a transportable skill; it is needed everywhere
Key Behaviors - *Modeling a Commitment to Mastery Goals*

1. Model a positive attitude, a willingness to take on tasks, and continual learning whenever you personally encounter challenging tasks

2. Approach all tasks as learning tasks—not something for punishment or reward

3. Focus attention on persistent effort and strategy, not on staff intelligence

4. When an employee fails, give constructive feedback on best practices and strategy use

5. Emphasize that success is related to one’s preparation, effort and continual learning

6. Teach adaptive strategies. Model how employees should plan, monitor, and evaluate their own work, and especially, their learning

7. Encourage involvement and a sense of personal accountability. Let employees own their work

8. Don’t dwell on the negative consequences of making errors. Plan, train, review and review again to ensure staff improve their skills

9. Decrease any emphasis on social comparison at work—the “have to win” mentality. Recognize them as individuals taking responsibility for their own competence

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## Your Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Driving for Results Self-Handicap</th>
<th>What is the Situation</th>
<th>Trigger</th>
<th>Impact on Others</th>
<th>What to Do/When</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expedient</td>
<td></td>
<td>Deliberate action</td>
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<td>Avoiding</td>
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<td>Self-efficacy</td>
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<td>Fear</td>
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<td>Face it</td>
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<td>Self-deception</td>
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<td>Look and listen</td>
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Self-Handicapping Leadership: The Nine Behaviors Holding Back Employees, Managers, and Companies, and How to Overcome Them

For more information about self-handicapping in leadership and how to overcome it can be found in our book.

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Published by Pearson Education, Inc.
Old Tappan, New Jersey 07675
Questions & Resources

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