



LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE YOUR  
**LEADERSHIP GAP**

LOLLY DASKAL

# Great leaders want to know, more than ever before, why things begin to go wrong after they have gone right for so long.

What prevents so many leaders from achieving the greatness to which they aspire isn't a lack of skill or opportunity. Rather, it's that they rely on what has always worked for them, even when it is no longer working. But it takes a very special individual to own his vulnerability and find his leadership gap.

Over the past several months, a certain board of directors had become disabled by constant bickering. While there had always been politics among this team of rivals, the tenor had shifted from productive debate to profound dysfunction. The board's inability to agree was negatively affecting the CEO's ability to run the company efficiently.

Called in to assess the problem and provide executive coaching, I sat observing the interactions during the board meeting. Eight accomplished and reputable executives were seated around the table—each a leader in his respective field, each with years of experience and acumen. In a matter of minutes, I could see the root of the problem.

His name was Richard.

This particular board member was in his own right a highly regarded CEO. Richard had started a technology company that eventually attracted massive government contracts. He was known to be financially savvy; he had made a killing in the market, and it was reported that his net worth soared to the hundreds of millions of dollars when he sold his company.

It was clear that Richard had a keen ability for solving complex strategic problems and making quick, pragmatic decisions— skills he honed over many decades as a trusted CEO. But as he spoke, the resentment he stirred up in the boardroom became palpable. When he was asked a question, his reply was short, clipped, and blunt. In fact, his most frequent response to others was a flat “I know.”

Given his success and reputation, I was sure he did know. But he appeared to answer before hearing the questions, and he came across as aggressive and arrogant. He created a gap between himself and the board, and his attitude deteriorated the spirit of teamwork among his colleagues.

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I quickly recognized that Richard had a problem that high performers rarely confront on their way up, but all inevitably face. It's the one problem that even some of the most successful CEOs I've worked with never see coming and have no idea how to resolve.

The problem is that one day, suddenly, what once worked so well to propel their rise stops working. And the very same traits that had worked for them actually start working against them. Another stellar career comes to an abrupt end. Another high-flying executive is brought swiftly back down to earth.

This is the moment when leaders confront a critical and very uncomfortable question: What if there's a gap in what I think I know?

Later, when I had the opportunity to speak with Richard privately, I learned that although he had been a CEO for decades, he had never served on a corporate board. His life had become boring in semiretirement and he was itching to feel productive again; so he let it be known that he was willing to lend and his expertise and experience to a board. The offers poured in.

Richard was a gregarious man who took great pride in his storied career. He loved talking about his business conquests. He was famous in CEO circles for strategy and implementation, and in our first few conversations, I noticed that he frequently began sentences with "The way I always did it was . . ."

I had seen Richard's style of leadership in action many times before. He embodied perfectly the archetype I call "the navigator": pragmatic, decisive, knowing, and trusted. However, the navigator can develop the leadership gap that surfaces in leaders who become unwilling to admit they don't have all the answers. The navigator then becomes a "fixer": impetuous, arrogant, and egotistical. Richard had become a fixer.

As a CEO, Richard had more than forty years of experience identifying problems and quickly coming up with solutions, so naturally this is what he continued to do. But what escaped Richard was realizing that the skill that made him successful— leading a large organization with decisive direction (that is, telling people what to do)— was no longer serving him. Richard's expertise was what the board needed, but his character was not what they wanted. His leadership gap overshadowed his expertise, and his arrogance was becoming increasingly intolerable. Unfortunately for Richard, he didn't have a clue how his gap was affecting his new position or his board members.

I wanted to help Richard see his leadership gap and to coach him into being the kind of leader others would respect and trust. But although Richard might have sensed something was wrong, he held to his beliefs because that's what had always worked for him. How could the skills that had made him successful now be working against him? He refused to accept that his leadership style had become ineffective, or that he was thought to be a know-it-all. He wasn't interested in listening or learning.

This is the mistake that highly driven, overachieving leaders make every day. They have soared to the greatest heights on the basis of what they know. But there comes a time when they must rethink everything and ask themselves: What is the gap between who I am and who I want to be, and do I know what it is I still need to learn?

Richard didn't rethink how his behavior was perceived. Instead, he held to what made him successful in the past, making him, paradoxically, a shadow of his own success. His failure was not due to a lack of skill, experience, or opportunity. His arrogance ruined him.

Richard was asked to leave the board.

Learning to recognize your leadership gap is the factor that determines your greatness as a leader.

Not recognizing it is your downfall.

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As a teenager, I discovered my own personal font of wisdom: a bookshop on the Upper West Side of Manhattan called Shakespeare & Co. I became a fixture among the stacks in the shop, and I exchanged ideas and curiosities with the bibliophiles who worked there. Suddenly, my world opened up. I will never forget the day someone introduced me to the work of Viktor Frankl. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl recounts the suffering he endured in Auschwitz, and exemplifies that a person who finds meaning—significance in his life—could survive anything.

That one insight affirmed that my quest for answers was virtuous. I realized that to thrive as an adult, I had to leave my childhood in the past, question what I knew, and rethink how I looked at my life. Frankl taught me that when we can't change a situation we're in, we have to change ourselves. He taught me to find meaning in everything I do. He gave me hope for my future.

Over the next few years, I immersed myself in the works of many other great thinkers who challenged my beliefs. Like Carl Jung who taught me that the inner workings of our minds motivate and control behavior. His idea of archetypes—personas for our behavioral patterns—continues to influence my work today. To quote Jung:

**“Myths and symbols are strikingly similar in cultures around the world and across the centuries . . . in a form of archetypes—symbols that act as organizing forms for behavioral patterns. Each of us is born with the innate tendency to use these archetypes to understand the world.”**

From Jung, I learned to be reflective and aware of my motivations, to listen to my gut, and to pursue knowledge relentlessly.

For years, I featured his words on my Web site, which are still at the core of my own message today: Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.

And then there was Joseph Campbell, a masterful storyteller who made famous the claim that nearly all myths share similarities regardless of where they originate. Campbell had a tremendous influence on the way I think, and his work became a key part of my coaching practice. “It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure,” he wrote,<sup>1</sup> which I understood to mean that even when things don’t go the way you thought they would, you can still find your treasure.

*“Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.”*

But Campbell's most resonant words for me were these: "We must let go of the life we planned, so as to accept the one that is waiting for us." The life I planned was certainly not to be an executive coach and business consultant; but after years of asking questions, seeking answers, and ardently studying the psychology and the potential of the human mind, I was drawn to this work.

Over decades of advising some of the most prominent chief executives in the world, I developed a coaching style that is rational, a philosophy that is meaningful, and a methodology that is actionable. The essence of my approach is built on the foundation of the seven archetypes of leadership I have seen—and the risk to greatness that lurks in the shadows of our leadership gap.

1. **The Rebel**, driven by confidence; and **the Imposter**, plagued by self-doubt.
2. **The Explorer**, fueled by intuition; and **the Exploiter**, master of manipulation.
3. **The Truth Teller**, embraces candor; and her twin, **the Deceiver**, who creates suspicion.
4. **The Hero**, embodies courage; and **the Bystander**, a coward if there ever was one.
5. **The Inventor**, brimming with integrity; and **the Destroyer**, is morally corrupt.
6. **The Navigator**, trusts and is trusted; and **the Fixer**, endlessly arrogant.
7. **The Knight**, loyalty is everything; and **the Mercenary**, who is perpetually self-serving.

Within each of us are two competing sides, a polarity of character, but only one leads to greatness. Regardless of how successful we become, if we want to continue to have a positive impact on the world and make a difference, we must constantly rethink the instincts that drive us.

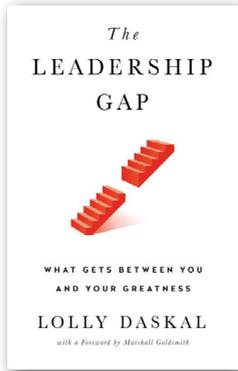
As Leo Babauta said, “At the end of the day, the questions we ask of ourselves determine the type of people that we will become.”

My work requires me to spend countless hours in boardrooms, in executive suites, and on corporate jets. I work closely with some of the greatest minds in business and marvel at their talent and expertise. These leaders confide in me, talk through challenges with me, and enumerate hopes and fears to me. I coach every style of leader in every sort of situation—from the explosive crisis behind the scenes to the celebratory press conference. And after years of careful observation, I have identified the leadership gap that separates the best from the rest:

Great leaders have the ability to rethink who they are—they are open to learning, changing, and growing as leaders.

I believe that leaders at every level and in every position have an intrinsic responsibility to question who they are being while they are leading. **But it takes a committed leader to embrace the search for truth as a criterion for leadership, and not everyone can achieve this. Very few are willing to embark on an inner journey to discover what propels them.** 📖

# Info



**BUY THE BOOK** | Get more details or buy a copy of [The Leadership Gap](#).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Lolly Daskal is the founder of Lead from Within, a global leadership, executive coaching, and consulting firm based in New York City. With more than 30 years of experience with some of the world's largest and most successful companies, Daskal is one of today's most sought-after executive leadership coaches and leadership consultants. She has written thousands of articles and columns for a variety of media, including *Inc.*, *Fast Company* (Ask The Expert), *Huffington Post*, and *Psychology Today*.

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