



A Leader's Paradox

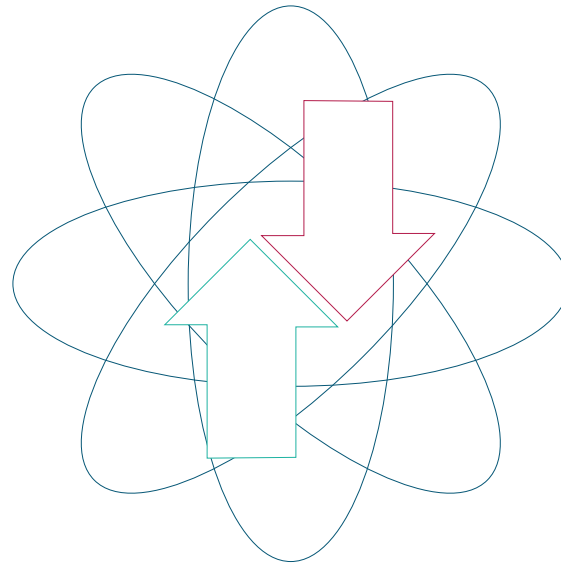
Overview

As a leader grows and elevates in their career, each new stage creates an emotional paradox that must be addressed. Otherwise they risk stagnating their team by holding them back, working below their pay grade, and missing strategic opportunities, just to name a few. Unconsciously, leaders hold on to the work they have always done because they feel most competent and successful.

To combat this common, ineffective, and dangerous pattern, one must first become aware of it and explore what work they must let go of, *recurring work* they used to be *accountable for*, and *also understand the new work they must excel at*. Like being a trapeze artist, a leader can't reach the next bar unless they can let go of the current one.

What is it?

A Leader's Paradox is when a leader holds the following two opposing emotions at the same time: A leader feels *exhilarated* when receiving praise. Therefore, they want to do more of the same work to receive the praise, reward, and recognition. At the same time, they feel *unsettled*, because the responsibility of a leader is to grow their people. Leaders need to effectively work themselves out of the job that they are doing today (not out of the company) so that they can elevate to do the work their team purpose¹ is calling them to do.



This paradox became apparent while working with Stefan (a client pseudonym), a 45-year-old executive recruited by his former boss from a mature pharma company to a rapidly growing biotech firm. His 360 revealed he was micromanaging his people. He complained of never having enough time for his own work and was frustrated by constant interruptions.

In exploring '*What was the work that only he could do?*', he paused and realized that most of the work he was doing and was caught up with was the work of his people. He immediately felt incredibly vulnerable and asked, "*What would I do with all of that time if I delegated the majority of my work?*"



First, fear overcame him. Letting the silence settle in, the insights began to emerge. He needed to change.

“What work have you wanted to do but haven’t had the time for?”

He immediately listed six or seven projects. “Exactly,” I said. Continuing with the line of questioning, I asked, “What of these six or seven projects is the work that only you can do that has the most strategic and highest impact?”

“All of them,” Stefan replied.

The revelation was huge. He realized he was doing the work of his people because that’s what he knew best and had been praised for; however, through additional questioning, this work pattern would only keep him on the rat wheel and remain frustrated and continue to micromanage.

Fear of failure and the unknown had kept Stefan from doing the work he knew he needed to do but was uncertain exactly how to do it.²

Being promoted to a functional lead, he had to work differently now, specifically, think differently about how he would approach and accomplish the results being asked of him. He also needed to consider how to help his direct reports

raise their game and do the work only they should do. He needed to hold his people accountable³ in a new way.

Stefan looks forward to what used to be constant interruptions and realizes this is his job, with the ability to help his people solve problems so that they can prevent future issues from happening. What was formerly an incredible frustration became a considerable joy. Even he was surprised by this.

Questions to consider

- What is the work you’ve been holding on to that you know your people could do? Be honest with yourself and understand that you had to learn how to do what you were doing, and it might be time to finally let go of the work that is someone else’s job.
- Imagine having all this free time. What strategic opportunities would you invest yourself in? What have you not been able to do that you know could have a huge impact?
- What are indeed the fewest, most essential things that only you can do? Consider doing the Calendar Hammer Process². Look back over the last month and see how much time have you been

“Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do.”

— Jessica Jackley



spending doing those things that only you can do? How much work appropriately advances the strategic work in a timely manner?

- What would the ideal calendar look like, with prioritizing the work that only you can do in major chunks of time during the week?

Ideal calendars are never perfect, but we have to strive for doing more of the work that only we can do. By continually addressing Leader's Paradox, and that unsettling feeling head-on, it enables leaders to lead at the level the organization needs to lead. We may not know exactly how to do it all, but we've got to start somewhere, and chances are you're going to be better at it than you think.

Resources:

- ¹ For more about Team Purpose visit <https://laurastone.com/TeamPurposeToPerformance>. This is the process work that CVS used to eliminate tobacco products from their shelves.
- ² Use the Calendar Hammer Test and Leader's Calendar to help you focus on the work that only you can and should be doing. (<https://laurastone.com/CalendarHammerTest>).
- ³ The 3 U's of Accountability <https://laurastone.com/Accountability>.