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Owning up to your own Insecurities

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Here's a nightmare scenario.

You're in a meeting with your managers and several employees. An employee asks you to explain a legal issue that came up the previous week. Several of your managers nod knowingly, but you have no clue. What do you say?

- "Ah, yes, good question... Is that my phone?"
- "I could tell you the answer, but I'd first like to hear what the team thinks."
- "I should be able to answer that question, but I don't understand it either. How can we get more information?"

Admitting that you don't have all the answers is risky, especially when people--your people--are watching. After all, you're the boss. You can't lose face in front of your staff. You're supposed to be the one in charge.

That may be what we all think, but it's one of the biggest myths about being a leader. It's also a great opportunity to create positive change in your organization.

Executives tend to put on a confident exterior. They think that other executives are all "okay" and don't have these insecurities and feelings of incompetence. Keeping their feelings hidden never allows them to deal with it, and certainly doesn't allow others to help them in areas where they may need support in order to be the most effective leaders they can be.

Our research at Discovery Learning shows that most executives think it's a sign of weakness to show that they are fallible and human. They don't see that their own feigned perfection fosters a work environment of pretense and fear. They wear a mask that hides the inadequacies they're so afraid of. They fear being exposed because everyone else appears to be so "together." While it seems like this is something that only affects him, it

actually has a much broader impact on the organization. Employees working under these "perfect" executives feel that they have to fake competence where there is none and sweep unpleasant things under the rug.

When executives are taken out of their corporate environments and come to leadership development programs designed to expose their strengths and developmental needs they typically experience anxiety followed by relief. The initial reaction is "I must be the only person here who really feels incompetent. Just look how confident these other managers appear." But as the process unfolds, often for the first time, they can talk about specific problems, failures and insecurities with other executives. Typically, they say they feel like a burden has been lifted from their shoulders--the burden appearing 100% competent, hiding insecurities, and the isolation that accompanies both.

Once they remove the mask and honestly address their challenges, other people typically respond very positively. We see how accepting and helpful other managers can be. Suddenly that executive becomes a person who can be approached with a problem; he seems more real, more human, more vulnerable and more trustworthy.

This environment of openness and trust is especially important today when customers and the public are so aware and sensitive to corporate ethics issues. Lack of personal honesty and straightforwardness from executives contributes to a corporate climate of dishonesty. In addition, a customer who feels that he can fully trust you and your staff will be loyal to you on a personal level, and won't be easily convinced that he'll be better off with your competition.

Realistic expectations, forthright employees, loyal customers--this is great stuff, but how do you get there?

- Acknowledge when you don't know something,
- Share your past mistakes and failures with others,
- Carefully select confidants with whom you can share problems, and
- Let others know the things that frighten or threaten you.

But the most important piece of the puzzle is to encourage your employees to follow your lead, and reward them when they do.

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