

HOW TO LEAD WITH CONFIDENCE IN AN ERA OF INFORMATION IMPOSSIBILITY

Leaders feel the pressure to know it all, in a time where they simply cannot.

If there is one thing we've learnt about certainty at the most senior levels of leadership, it's this: in public, almost everyone has it in abundance, and in private, almost everyone would like more of it.

That's not to say that some sort of hidden weakness is rife – far from it – but senior leaders are finding it harder than they once did to feel certain in their decisions and visions. Acknowledging this matters. Pretending that pressure is not real is probably the most direct path to burnout.

The post-pandemic executive burnout epidemic – so called 'boss loss' – may be well concealed, but it is also undeniable. In 2020, 60% of leaders reported feeling 'used up' at the end of the day.¹ A year and half later leadership burnout was up 7.5% again from this already staggering baseline.²

The culprits behind uncertainty and pressure do not need an introduction. A simple google search will show hundreds of articles that point the finger at more or less the same things: post-pandemic isolation, digitization, climate anxiety - down to figuring out whether it's worth figuring out the impact of the metaverse.

But the destabilizer most singled out – as the underlying force created by all the other problems – is the exponential pace of change and the resulting increase in complexity rising beyond all reasonable proportions. Information overload has become 'information impossibility' – the phenomenon whereby it is not merely difficult, but impossible, to assess all the information relevant to a complex decision or job.

One leader we spoke to lamented the volume of publications from market leaders, competitors, and academics; after all, anyone can publish anything in today's information system. Another leader spoke of how the impact of information impossibility is multiplied by the vast number of geographies she works across.

SO HOW IS INFORMATION IMPOSSIBILITY KNOCKING THE CONFIDENCE OF LEADERS TODAY?

1 Our sense of mastery is coming under attack

One senior leader – an accomplished, highly resilient functional leader – told us how 20% of her job used to feel new whilst 80% felt mastered, but that today those numbers are flipped on their head. Leaders have a huge range of topics they 'should' be conversant on: cybersecurity, AI, the latest developments in their field. The impossibility of mastering everything can leave us feeling fraudulent. Psychologists consider mastery (or 'competence') to be one of the three things required for motivation at work, along with belonging and autonomy. Leaders need it to feel engaged. No wonder so many leaders come to us asking where their drive has gone and why their sense of mission has dissolved.

2 We no longer just go to information – it comes to us

Information overload might be nothing new - 13th century monks were complaining of "the multitude of books, the shortness of time and the slipperiness of memory". But information impossibility is different. Now information comes to leaders whether they want it or not. Be it push notifications, live streams or suggested content, all sorts of platforms and news outlets offer the temptation to scroll through long lists of opinions – individually compelling but collectively incoherent. Yes, we could turn our devices off, but that would mean a loss of social connection and a disengagement tantamount to bad leadership.

3 The sheer volume of negativity and our hopeless filtering system

Whilst the overall ratio of good news to bad news might be no better or worse than at any other point in history (and there is good reason to think that it might be better)³, the absolute amount of negative information we are exposed to has exploded as a function of the point above – that information comes to us ceaselessly. And filtering out irrelevant negative information is not only draining, but something that the human mind is just plain bad at. Research shows we pay more attention to negative information – the so called 'negativity bias'. Bad news has a greater emotional impact, too: losing \$10 feels worse than finding \$10 feels good. So whilst the situation today might not be historically troubled, our minds are telling us a different story.

HOW CAN LEADERS OVERCOME THE EFFECTS OF INFORMATION IMPOSSIBILITY?

1 Update how you measure your sense of worth as a leader

Not that long ago, leaders got into senior roles because they had mastered every level of a vertical. In basic terms, they not only knew more than anyone else, but they knew almost everything about their domain. Carrying this image of what a 'good leader' is into the era of information impossibility is a recipe for feeling permanently behind. The answer is a mindset shift away from mastery over domains of knowledge and towards true leadership. This means developing the skill to intuitively assess the optimum level of information, not the maximum.

2 Make others the hero

Given the dynamics facing leaders today, more than ever effective leadership is about facilitation, coaching and providing a vision that brings clarity of objectives. This means that power – and with it, both risk and limelight – is necessarily devolved. Remember that leadership is moving more to a collective model, so leverage the team rather than putting pressure on yourself to 'know it all'. This requires trust, and therefore knowing who to trust is an increasingly valuable skill.

3 Stay literate on what actually matters by 'timeboxing'

Leaders know that things have a habit of expanding to fill the time available. They can also contract when precise boundaries are set. Demarcating specific time for reading and learning helps to keep the drive for ever more information under control. This helps leaders to be more intentional with what it is they actually want to read about – turning the tide on the 'information just comes to me' dynamic. The goal is to become literate in the fields that matter so that you can talk to your subject matter expert, without feeling like you need to be the subject matter expert.

4 Allow a little self-compassion: it's not just you

There's nothing wrong with a little uncertainty. It can be a healthy leadership emotion – its absence all too often signals overconfidence. That doesn't mean uncertainty feels comfortable. Research into resilience reminds us that when we consider our problems to be a normal part of humanity, not unique to ourselves, the problems have less emotional impact. So remember that it is normal to feel pressure to know it all in an era where you simply cannot. All leaders across different sectors, markets, and jurisdictions feel this pressure at times.

IN A NUTSHELL

It is impossible to be abreast of all the information relevant to your job as a leader. Technology has changed the dynamics of information, in turn changing what good leadership looks like. Leadership based on mastery of a domain is increasingly hard to sustain. The best leaders are not the ones who have all the answers, but those who build teams and systems they can trust to provide them.

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