

How to Prevent the Fear of Failure from Derailing Success

By Anne E. Collier

IT'S NO SURPRISE that successful lawyers tend to be high achievers. They are perfectionists who drive results; they ensure that every detail is correct, no stone is left unturned, and every “i” is dotted and “t” is crossed. They often become technical experts in their particular field.

GETTING CAUGHT IN THE ‘SHADOW SIDE’ OF POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES

The flip side of perfectionism is the fear of failure. In fact, it's often the fear of failure that drives perfectionism and the willingness to do what it takes to win. That's the upside of fear of failure. The downside is that in its extreme, the unmitigated fear of failure *causes failure*. This is the concept called “paradoxical intent,” which posits that the more one fears something, the more likely one is to experience it.

Stressful circumstances can trigger this unintended consequence by transforming the very attributes that are necessary for a lawyer's success into negative “dark” manifestations of those same attributes. These dark manifestations are referred to as “shadow behaviors” and are set forth in the table below. The shadow behavior is the amped-up negative version of a positive attribute that provides a strength.

Attributes	Shadow Behaviors
Organized	Micromanaging
Detailed	Tedious and Cautious
Structured	Perfectionistic, Obsessive
Thorough	Critical and Pessimistic
Analytical	Narrow-minded, Stubborn

The transformation from strengths to shadow behaviors occurs when one fails to manage his or her own behavior under stress. Consider this: The lawyer strives to be the technical expert from Day 1 of law school. When stressed by triggers such as ambiguity regarding the task or outcome, imperfection in results or the prospect of losing, the lawyer micromanages (especially when the team lead) and becomes tedious, cautious, pessimistic, critical, obsessive and narrow-minded, all but guaranteeing personal and team failure. As the lawyer tries *even harder* to ensure success, the lawyer becomes less effective with each obsessive iteration because the fear of failure manifests itself in more extreme counterproductive versions of positive attributes. Worse yet, when operating under stress and trying to avoid failure, the lawyer believes and operates as though the obsessive, micromanaging behaviors are *necessary* to avoid failure. The paradox is that the behaviors only make matters worse as the lawyer's judgment becomes further warped, efforts become more ineffective and failure becomes more likely. This is the mind game that the fear of failure shadow plays. Add to this that no one wants to work with a micromanaging, pessimistic, stressed-out lawyer, and the very team members who are necessary for success detach from the project and the lawyer as soon as practicable.

Some might be skeptical of the existence of shadow behaviors or their effect on efficacy. Consider that it's almost impossible to be creative or see options when pessimistic. It's almost impossible to calculate and take the risks necessary to succeed when tedious and cautious. It's almost impossible for a team to function well with a micromanaging and perfectionist leader. Achieving results requires staying out of the shadows.

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CHOOSE OBJECTIVITY INSTEAD

Thankfully, the lawyer *can* choose a different behavior, even when under stress. While this is a simple concept, it is most assuredly not easy to effectuate. It requires awareness of the mind game the paradox plays, which is difficult because when a lawyer is caught up in the fear of failure, the lawyer feels compelled to obsess and micromanage; the lawyer is wearing blinders. Another paradox: Since the lawyer doesn't believe there is choice, there is no choice. Without perspective, the lawyer is rendered ineffective, unable to be flexible, consider options and make well-reasoned strategic decisions. The rub is that the lawyer must remain objective, not just about the work; the lawyer can't believe every thought without questioning it.

A lawyer cannot be objective in questioning the lawyer's own thinking without perspective, and that perspective can be achieved by understanding the Ladder of Inference. The Ladder of Inference is the process by which the mind makes giant leaps from simple observations to what the observations mean, to taking action based on the observations. When a person is under stress, the meaning attributed to the observation is exponentially magnified, misguided and negative. Consider the example in figure 1. The lawyer climbs up from learning about the facts of a case, to focusing on negative implications, to concluding that the matter can't be won, further concluding he or she is a failure and is going to be fired or lose the client. The lawyer then becomes micromanaging, obsessive and pessimistic, working a counterproductively excessive number of hours because the lawyer is unable to maintain judgment and efficacy. The wheels are spinning but going nowhere.

The Ladder of Inference never goes anywhere good or productive. For example, every lawyer has received constructive feedback from a colleague or client at some point. The lawyer usually does not embrace the feedback, thinking, "Isn't this great! I am so lucky someone took the time to critique my work. I'll be a better lawyer for it!" Instead, the typical lawyer climbs up the ladder even if for just a minute, worrying about career and financial security. How long the lawyer stays in the shadow—up the Ladder of Inference—depends on how quickly the lawyer realizes he or she has lost perspective and climbs down the ladder, out of the shadow.

INITIATING THE CLIMB DOWN THE LADDER OF INFERENCE

An occasional climb up the Ladder of Inference is almost inevitable. The key to achieving good client outcomes and maintaining personal efficacy and resilience is to climb down, and to do so quickly. This requires the lawyer to be objective about the lawyer's own thought processes, which means distinguishing between what happened and the meaning the lawyer has attributed to what happened. To do so, the lawyer must ask him- or herself several questions:

Figure 1 Ladder of Inference



- What happened here?
- What am I making it mean?
- What is going on?
- What else could it be?
- What perspective will be most productive?

Once the lawyer has answered these questions, the lawyer can choose both a different interpretation, causing the lawyer to choose different behaviors. This is because what a person thinks about a situation influences what the person does. How does a lawyer know which alternative interpretation and behaviors to select? The best choice is the one that results in the lawyer feeling a sense of relief and even excitement about moving toward resolution and success. If the lawyer is anxious or paralyzed, then the lawyer is still in the fear of failure shadow, at the top of the ladder. While these concepts are simple, they are assuredly not easy to implement when most needed. And yet, it's worth developing this intellectual muscle. It's worth it because the swirl of doubt and fear is debilitating. It's worth it because being the oasis of calm in the middle of the storm makes you a leader. It's worth it because resilient lawyers lead, succeed and enjoy their practice.

To learn your primary leadership style and corresponding shadow—which is based on the work of Dr. William Sparks, who also developed the Actualized Leader Framework and Profile—take the free short form version at www.alpfree.com. **LP**



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