

5 FATAL FLAWS in EXECUTIVE THINKING

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FLAW 1: PRETENDING THAT A SITUATION IS NOT AS BAD AS IT IS

Most executives, at one point or another, see something that isn't as it should be and then pretend it's not so bad after all. What are YOU seeing but denying? And what are you gaining from the denial? A temporary sense of security? Feelings of comfort? Satisfaction from not rocking the boat? An inflated ego? Just what exactly are you getting from not dealing with the issue?

Over a dozen years I observed executives and others in management positions turn a blind eye to unacceptable situations. Here is a list of examples of such situations:

- drug and alcohol problems in themselves or employees
- health problems in themselves or employees
- poor performance: their own or an employee's
- poor behavior/character defects: their own or an employee's
- lack of healthy communication within the organization
- ongoing errors in judgment: their own or an employee's
- employee dissatisfaction
- low morale
- lack of appropriate policies
- lack of employee retention
- poor relationships between key people in the organization
- philosophical differences between the chief executive and the Board
- chronic lack of follow-up either from the executive or an employee
- affairs between an executive and an employee
- failure to recognize that people in general simply don't like the executive or a key employee
- legal issues/sheer wrongdoing

This is not an exhaustive list by any means. But it's a reasonable start. You get the idea. Every time an executive chooses to ignore these situations, both the executive and the organization pay a price. Don't delude yourself. There is a price to be paid, and it's usually significant. Pretending that these kinds of things aren't happening or continuing allows a poison to seep through the company. Whatever else you may be doing to build and enhance your place of business is either slowly or rapidly ruined by the unacceptable situations allowed to go on.

How do YOU as the executive lose? The most important thing you lose is your credibility among employees, your executive team, perhaps your Board, and the community at large (depending on what the issue is). Can you really afford to lose your most precious asset? You lose your employees' trust. You may lose Board trust. You are viewed as weak, as someone who shies away from tough issues. Essentially, you lose people's confidence. Credibility, trust, and confidence are difficult and even impossible to regain. Keep that in mind the next time you decide to overlook the elephant in the workplace living room. Ask yourself if you're willing to sacrifice your career, your position, your livelihood because you won't deal with problems and situations head-on.

How does the entire organization lose? When the word is out that an executive chose to pretend that something bad wasn't happening, employees feel insecure. They wonder what else could take place that won't be stopped or resolved. They speculate about how awful things might get. Morale often decreases, and people frequently lose respect for the individual who is responsible for cleaning up the mess. The executive may even become the object of jokes in the cafeteria or in brief casual conversation throughout the day. The worst price for an organization as a whole is that productivity is compromised.

Recently someone told me about his experience of directly informing a CEO of serious company-wide questioning of the man's judgment. Furious, the CEO stood up from his desk and, red faced, announced loudly that he had no intention of changing how he does things. He went on to say that the business has annual profits to prove his effectiveness as a manager and leader. What he failed to realize was that the company could enjoy even greater profits if his employees respected him more, trusted him more, and emotionally supported him more than they do. Presently, staff do their work, but they aren't invested in something higher than their own job descriptions.

Pretending that certain situations don't exist—or aren't as bad as they really are—is damaging to all involved.

As an executive, you are called to step up to the plate, take off your blinders, and look truth in the eye. This requires courage. Individuals in the executive chair who aren't willing or able to demonstrate this type of courage need to rethink their reasons for a) accepting the position in the first place; b) staying there.

FLAW 2: REALIZING THAT YOU DON'T KNOW CERTAIN INFORMATION OR LACK PARTICULAR SKILLS AND DECIDING THAT YOU DON'T NEED TO ACQUIRE THEM

No executive is completely one hundred percent well rounded in skill and knowledge. No executive is perfect. While no one expects executives to know and be everything they should be, Boards, employees, and stakeholders generally do expect folks in top positions to assess themselves honestly and make a conscious effort to fill the gaps. This is a reasonable expectation of people who are leading a company or organization.

Below are examples of these knowledge and skill gaps as well as a brief discussion of each:

- *How to build and grow high functioning teams*

Do YOU have teams of employees who clearly understand their purpose and role, know how to work together professionally and amicably, and can get the job done on time? Or do your teams wander around in a fog, uncertain of what they are to be accomplishing during what time frame? Do your team members argue nonproductively and simply go around in circles? Are they mindful of the "big picture"? Are they caught up in meaningless minutia? Are they enthusiastic, energetic, and committed to succeed? If you don't know how to develop and grow effective teams, you lack a major skill. This gap impacts every aspect of your organization, including your profits and/or services. This gap absolutely has to be filled in order for your business to flourish and move confidently into the future. If you choose to ignore the fact that you don't know how to build great teams, your organization's bottom line (whatever that looks like) suffers. Further, be assured that your employees sense this deficiency in you and discuss it. Staff need to see evidence that you are doing whatever it takes to acquire team-building skills and then implement them.

- *How to hear and learn from criticism*

This is a big one. In general, people dislike criticism. But, as an executive, you need to get yourself to a place mentally and emotionally where you can deal with it. Lots of it. I guarantee that you will need broad shoulders each and every day. Listening to criticism is part of management and leadership.

If you have not learned to embrace it and even welcome it, you will spend much of your life feeling overburdened, irritated, and unhappy. How do YOU respond to critical statements

or accusations from employees or Board members? Do you bristle in silence, or do others witness your negative reaction? Are you able to see some validity to what's been said? Or do you completely dismiss all of it, failing to consider that perhaps you could learn something valuable? Often there is a kernel of truth in critical remarks, even when they are slung at you in a less than diplomatic fashion. Try to reduce the amount of time you spend prickling and focus on the piece that calls your attention to something important. Something you need to be aware of... something you need to think about...something you need to change....

- *How to model effective communication*

Most people think they communicate well, but in fact most do not. Despite college degrees and advanced degrees, many people simply cannot write. Many cannot give clear verbal instructions. Many cannot tell a story or recount an incident succinctly and in a way that listeners can follow. How well do YOU write memos, letters, and email messages? How well do YOU provide verbal directions? How well do YOU tell a story? How well do YOU share your ideas with others? You may not know just how proficient you are in these tasks and encounters. I assure you that you can find out quickly by asking your peers, employees, Board members, and direct supervisor. Ask them what they think of your emails, phone messages, personal conversations, and guidance. Are you afraid to find out what people really think? While you may hesitate to explore this with others, you must do it in order to excel in your role within the organization. You also must do it to maintain and enhance your credibility. People tend to overlook minor flaws, deficiencies, and quirks if they see evidence that the executive is truly making an effort to get feedback and make necessary improvements based upon what he/she learned. People frequently forgive imperfection but rarely complacency, arrogance, and ego.

- *How to supervise employees*

There is no way to dance around it: if you are in a position responsible for supervising staff, you absolutely have to learn how to do it credibly. No excuses. If you resent having to supervise employees, then you shouldn't be supervising them. The raw truth is that poor supervisors knowingly or unknowingly damage employees on a regular basis. Either way, this is despicable. When you are in a management role, your direct reports are in your care. Yes, you are there to coach them, guide them, mentor them, teach them, develop them, and grow them. You are not there to rip them apart, demean them, ignore them, allow them to flounder, abuse them, punish them, destroy them, or harm them in any way. So if YOU don't know how to supervise your staff appropriately, find out now. Or leave the position. Credible supervision is centered around right intentions, pure motives, and the desire to care for people holistically. If employees get the idea that the only thing on your mind is how much they can produce for you, they won't do their best work. Whatever work they do will be done out of fear. They will have little or no loyalty to you, and they may despise you. If they see your efforts to partner with them and help them exceed their own expectations, they will bloom. They will want you to shine. They will want the company to succeed. They will be excited about work. While a few exceptions exist, generally this will be the case. And YOU will reap the rewards!

- *Lack of technical skills*

Whether its computer skills, specific processes, procedures, or other technical how-to, you need to acquire this knowledge as it relates to performing your job. Typically, this type of knowledge is rather easy to gain. You recognize that you don't have it, you research resources that can supply it, and you take steps to get it.

In many cases businesses pay for executives to improve these skills. If not, invest the money now to change these circumstances. The longer you wait, the more you appear deficient to everyone in the organization.

You can't afford to delay. People expect executives to have certain basic, integral knowledge, information, and skills. When you don't have them and it shows, you feel embarrassed every time, right? Take charge and do what you need to do to fill in those gaps. At the very least, people want to trust that you are on top of these kinds of things. Actually, these are some of the easiest skills to master in an executive role. If you are perplexed about other, more complex skills, start here. Always start with the low-hanging fruit first.

- *How to inspire genuine commitment to and enthusiasm for fulfillment of the mission organization-wide*

Inspiring and motivating Board and employees to WANT to live your company's mission statement every day is no small task. How are YOU succeeding with this now? Are you succeeding with it? If you are wondering where to start, know that it starts with YOU. To what extent do YOU support the mission? To what extent do YOU feel excitement for whatever your organization seeks to achieve? To what extent are YOU loyal to your business? Or is there a significant mismatch between your own mission in life and the mission of your company? If so, it's going to be difficult, if not impossible, to muster what it takes to bolster enthusiasm in Board members and/or employees. Most people can detect playacting rather quickly. YOU are going to have to be real, and only YOU can decide if you can pull it off. A phony cannot inspire anybody to do anything. An authentic love of your mission is the biggest and best motivator tool you have in your pocket.

Although executives don't and can't know everything, they are responsible for finding out what they don't know and then doing something about it. The key lies first in a thorough, honest self-assessment followed by a proactive effort to fill in those knowledge/informational gaps.

FLAW 3: DECIDING THE ONLY THING YOU NEED TO GIVE EMPLOYEES IS A PAYCHECK

When you are in a supervisory position, you have been entrusted with people's lives. You have been given "holy work". You have accepted serious responsibility. Coaching, teaching, guiding, mentoring, and evaluating staff require significant investment of time and energy on your part. Many people wear the hat of "supervisor", but few do it well. Few care enough about the job in the first place to learn HOW to do it well. What a shame! Supervising employees provides a marvelous opportunity for both you and the employee to grow together. And to grow in ways neither of you ever dreamed....

As long as someone is on the payroll, that individual earns regular paychecks. This is a given. Paychecks reimburse employees for the work they do in one way or another. Paychecks do not, however, develop human beings. People deserve more than paychecks: they deserve and they need YOU as their supervisor to BE and DO certain things. Here are several examples:

- *Build their confidence.*

In order for people to do their best work they need to believe in themselves and their abilities. You as the supervisor can do a great deal to increase their confidence. Too often persons in authority erode employee confidence via demeaning remarks, lack of praise and recognition, failure to provide regular feedback, inappropriate displays of anger, lack of communication, and poor conduct in general. It is YOUR job to build up your staff, not tear them down. Confident employees perform at high levels, feel valued, and contribute willingly to the organization's mission.

- *Be consistent.*

Although worldly security doesn't really exist, you can provide a certain amount of "security" for your employees by behaving consistently as you interact with them. Inconsistent or volatile behavior keeps people off balance. When employees are never sure about what's going to happen next, particularly as it relates to YOU, they tend to feel vulnerable, nervous, uncertain, and distracted. They certainly don't do their best work under such conditions. They spend too much time speculating and worrying and not enough time producing. The organization suffers, and their relationship with you may be strained.

S P E C I A L R E P O R T

- *Give honest feedback.*

You owe it to your staff to be truthful. Tell them directly what you think about their projects: the positive and the negative. Let them know they can count on you to share your honest opinions. But do it with diplomacy and care. Harsh, nasty feedback is cruel, not constructive. Even bad news can be delivered in a way that people can absorb without feeling destroyed. Learn strategies for offering negative feedback if this is your area of weakness. Cruelty kills creativity and desire.

- *Serve as a resource.*

One of your major roles as a supervisor is to function as a primary resource to staff. People need to know they can go to you for help, direction, ideas, and alternatives. Constantly telling employees that you are inaccessible to them is unacceptable. That does not mean you are available twenty-four/seven; however, you let employees know you are there FOR THEM regularly during mutually convenient time periods.

- *Value them.*

Recognize each employee's unique value to the company and demonstrate your appreciation of their contribution(s). People sense if their supervisor holds them in esteem or simply uses them. Any supervisor who plows through the workdays using employees for his/her own glory is not respected and certainly fails to contribute to the development of people. When staff feel valued, they want to work hard, smart, and timely. In addition, they want to work WITH YOU rather than against you.

- *Communicate clearly.*

Speaking and writing in ways that allow you to be understood easily and quickly solidifies your relationship with staff, saves time, and moves the organization forward. Talking in circles confuses people. Poorly written instructions frustrate people. Bad grammar models communication you don't want. Sending an email containing ten different pieces of information invites errors. Assess your ability to be understood accurately the first time around. Take the risk and ask your staff how well you do this. They will tell you.

- *Present challenges.*

Employees often thrive on special challenges to their creativity. When people show you they are ready, give them a particularly challenging task, project, or assignment. Give them something that isn't "business as usual". Let them run with it. Let them have fun if appropriate. Fresh challenges can excite, re-energize, and motivate. Don't be afraid to try this, at least with some people. It could ignite the spark in someone who is merely sitting on the fence of mediocrity.

- *Reward excellent work.*

An executive director once said that his people get paid for the work they do; they don't need recognition or rewards. Wrong! People crave recognition for doing an outstanding job on a project. Universally, you need to give employees the recognition they need and desire. Make sure, however, that you choose the appropriate form of recognition for the individual. This means that not everybody likes to stand up on a stage at a microphone. Not everybody appreciates gift certificates to restaurants. Not everybody wants time off. Find out what suits the person and then give him/her what he/she deserves. Keep in mind that, while monetary bonuses work, so do simple handwritten thank-you notes.

Supervision involves a lot more than distributing paychecks. If YOU are unwilling to give and do all of the above, perhaps you need to reconsider the position you hold. Maybe it's not right for YOU. Maybe you should let someone else handle it. Supervision done poorly hurts employees, you, and the organization at large.

FLAW 4: BELIEVING YOUR BEHAVIOR DOESN'T IMPACT THOSE AROUND YOU

Don't kid yourself: your behavior influences and impacts other people. Good or bad, you reveal who you really are, and you touch many lives. It's a fact you cannot run away from. How well do YOU control yourself? How self-disciplined are YOU? How much do YOU care if people are hurt by what you say and do?

Everyday employees, Board members, stakeholders, and peers are victims of somebody's poor behavior. This is inexcusable. It's both amazing and sad how many persons hold executive positions, earn large sums of money, and shoulder enormous responsibility yet have little self control. The \$64,000 question is: Are you harming other people because you can't harness your temper, quell your ego, or stop talking? Do you see yourself in the following list of bad behaviors? If so, how will you correct that personal flaw? What steps will you take to move beyond that which, to be sure, is a huge stumbling block for you and those around you?

- *Displays of anger*

Anger is a big problem in today's society. No doubt about it. Most folks are angry about something. Some are simmering quietly; others are boiling over. If you are chronically angry, do you know what you are angry about? How does the anger manifest? How is it affecting your work and home life? Although you may feel entitled to or justified by your anger, know that screaming at staff, pounding your fists on a table, cursing at customers, and slamming office doors are not acceptable behaviors. No matter what the circumstances, those sorts of things must not happen. If YOU are choosing even one of those behaviors, you are out of line as an executive. You are demonstrating your character flaw to your world. Is that really what you want to do? Is this the kind of behavior you wish to model for employees? Is this how you want people to remember you? Do whatever it takes to get a grip on your rage. Enroll in an anger management program, read books, hire a therapist. Just do it!

- *Excessive talking*

There are individuals who don't know when to stop talking. These same persons generally don't listen well to others. Worse, some aren't interested in listening, and some just like to hear themselves talk. If you're talking too much, you are focusing on yourself too much. You need to work on switching your focus to the other person. Excessive talkers are often self-absorbed and egocentric. This wears very thin with other people. When others get the idea you aren't interested in them, they feel diminished. They may also feel exhausted in your presence. A good rule of thumb is to listen three times as much as you speak. You learn more that way, and people enjoy rather than dread being around you.

- *Attention seeking*

Do you need to be the center of attention on a regular basis? Are you a clown? Do you play the game of one-upsmanship? Do you thrive on lots of people physically surrounding you and paying attention to you? Do you need to have others concede that your ideas are always the best? Do you engage in behaviors that create drama? Stop doing these things now. They are off-putting, frustrating, annoying. Perhaps you are not as mature as your position requires. Shed the limelight on others and forget yourself, at least for a little while. You will see how positively others respond to you as soon as you decide to let THEM shine.

- *Taking all the credit*

Executives who take credit for ideas and successful work projects they know they didn't think of or do are shooting themselves in the foot with staff. Pure and simple. People want to be recognized for what they have contributed or accomplished. They resent a boss taking the credit that rightly belongs to them. If you are insisting that the credit is yours when you know it isn't, you need to change this behavior. It isn't winning you a loyal staff or a devoted Board. Instead you are making enemies fast. Your enemies may not be obvious, but know they are out there. Executives absolutely must give credit where credit is due or else suffer the consequences.

- *Loss of control*

There is no excuse for executives losing control, whatever form that takes. Weak, undisciplined people lose control in the workplace. If you are constantly losing control, re-evaluate your suitability for your position. You probably don't belong in the executive chair. Telling people off, interrupting, shouting, ordering, swearing, throwing things, and the like cannot continue if you want to be respected. Keeping employees off guard gains nothing for you or the business. Get control of yourself, or get the help you need to do so. No one sanctions an executive who cannot govern himself/herself appropriately. Further, you are setting a deplorable example for others who are watching you.

- *Ego feeding*

You are not in the executive chair to feed your own ego. You are there to serve your employees and the organization as a whole. It is time to grow up and invest yourself in something far greater than you. Do you find that you seek and desire constant praise? Constant recognition? Constant pats on the back? Constant reinforcements of your power? While everybody needs some of this, executives need to be giving these gifts to staff and others. It is dangerous for executives to use their positions as a way to elevate themselves at the expense of others. Be very careful if you are engaging in this type of behavior. Someone may enjoy cutting you down to size when you least expect it because they believe you deserve it. Get off of your ego trip as fast as possible!

Bad behavior has no place at work. Frequent displays of bad behavior evidence poor character and lack of discipline. Blast these things out of your life and see the difference that makes. If you cannot do it yourself, admit it and get the professional help you obviously must have to shake free of these chains.

FLAW 5: CONVINCING YOURSELF THAT YOU DON'T NEED PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

All professionals, especially executives, need to engage in several types of professional and personal development over the course of a year. There are no exceptions. If you aren't growing and evolving, you are stagnant. Stagnant executives are stale. You can't lead people effectively and move a business forward if you're stuck, uninspired, and satisfied with the old status quo. Avoid convincing yourself that you don't need the following:

- *Periodic conferences*

Scheduling time to leave your office and actually traveling to a conference that's meaningful for YOU can rejuvenate the most weary executive. It's a great opportunity to network with peers from various geographic locations. It's a chance to unwind, get to know other people in similar positions, and learn new skills in a more relaxed atmosphere. Often conferences are the spark you desperately need. Check out what's coming up. See what interests you. Then register!

- *Tele seminars*

There is an array of tele seminars available: some are excellent, and others are mediocre. Launching Lives offers monthly hour-long tele seminars on different topics relevant to YOUR work life. These seminars consist of conversational instruction followed by an interactive segment between me and the participants. Why not register for the next one? This is an easy and relatively quick way for you to grow your skills. The series is titled, "Solutions By Sylvia", and sessions cut to the chase on real issues.

- *Audio CDs*

They are out there. Getting them is as easy as ordering them online. For starters, try my downloadable 15 minute CD on “making change” available in the resource center of my web site home page. *Career Track, Fred Pryor, and Sounds True are several great resources for audio CDs.*

- *Special reports*

Experts write about particular topics all the time. Many are published on the internet. Explore what’s out there. Find out what resonates with YOU. Meaningful material abounds! I also invite you to download my own special report titled, “Five Fatal Flaws in Executive Thinking”. You can locate this easily in the resource center of my web site home page.

- *Professional memberships*

What groups excite you? Motivate you? Who do you want to be affiliated with? Why? Figure out which groups will enhance your job performance in big ways. Research the groups’ history, membership requirements, fees, benefits, list of members (if possible). Then take that next step and join. Don’t put it off. Your future may be impacted by these sorts of connections.

- *Books/Articles*

Schedule time to visit a favorite bookstore. When was the last time you physically stepped inside of one? Browse through the business/management section as well as “self help”. An abundance of fabulous resources await you. Step outside of your comfort zone and pick up something unusual for a change. Invest in YOU, and have fun doing it.

- *Travel*

Is it years since you took a real vacation away from home? Do you believe you deserve a vacation? You really do deserve a physical, emotional, and spiritual rest. Know that this is very important, and pen it into your crazy calendar. Check out a variety of possible locations; weigh the pros and cons of each. Choose a trip that will relax you holistically, and book it. Go alone or with people you enjoy.

- *Coaches/Advisors*

Every executive deserves a coach! That’s my motto. Having been an executive for almost a dozen years and being in the position of figuring it all out on my own, I highly recommend hiring yourself a good coach. A well trained executive coach/trusted advisor who is well grounded and experienced in the real world of management and leadership can help you soar. Don’t blow this off. Selecting a coach for yourself may in fact be one of the best things you’ve ever done for both your professional and your personal life. A large part of my Launching Lives business is devoted to individual and group executive coaching. Or, google “executive coach” to check out additional options. Tell yourself it’s time to stop struggling with whatever keeps you awake at night, gives you stomach ulcers, or detracts from your general happiness.

- *Therapy*

If you are out of control, chronically depressed, constantly unfulfilled, unable to sleep, and/or thinking of suicide, YOU need a therapist NOW. Take advantage of your company’s employee assistance program (EAP) or hire your own counselor. Just do it. Waiting only compounds the problems you are experiencing. Remember: you owe it to you and your organization. Companies want and need healthy people to work for them. Ongoing sadness, frustration, grief, and/or rage is not normal.

CONCLUSION: WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

Your job as an executive is to keep your head out of the sand, do whatever it takes to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy, and move your organization forward. What is preventing YOU from being and doing each of these to the best of your ability? Perhaps you are not succeeding the way you had hoped. Perhaps you even feel like a failure. Or, maybe you are someone who already is a good manager. A good leader. Well, what could you do to become an even better one? An outstanding one? An exemplary one? What could you do right now? Why aren't you doing it?



I urge you not to wait. Don't delay. Take the first step towards clearer vision, increased skill, enhanced relationships, improved health, greater life balance. Make the commitment to shed mediocrity and embrace excellence. You cannot lose. You can only win.

Take advantage of my special gift:

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