

When Promotions cause Anxiety

by Caroline Cerar

Career advancements are often not only a reason for pure pleasure, but can cause also anxiety. What sounds counterintuitive at first is a well-known phenomenon. The taking over of a new position can cause dormant self-worth topics to arise and lead to self-defeating behavior. Such mechanisms do function at a sub-conscious level most of the time. The resort for the affected person lies in confronting one's own fears early.

„But I have not been doing anything special. I have done my work as usual.“, said Helmut M.*, a successful manager in his early forties. My client was searching for an explanation, why he had been chosen to head the new country legal entity. “I have not aspired to get there.” Sure, he felt happy about it and accepted the promotion, but first anxieties arose at the same time.

The fear of success

It seems counterintuitive at the first glance. Finally, one has taken the career step long aspired for, but instead of a feeling of acknowledgement feelings of unrest, nagging emptiness, a lack of courage or even anxiety are grabbing oneself after the first delirium of joy. Over the years, one has been climbing one rung after the other on the career ladder and fulfilled challenging tasks and all of a sudden, the pure thought of the new job is causing more than discomfort.

Kets de Vries, psychotherapist and management professor at INSEAD, talks about the fear of success. It may seem illogical that such anxieties arise, when one achieves the management level one has been working towards for a long time. The new position may be a proof of success, but it can cause doubts to arise. How long will the success last? Can one be also successful specifically in this new and important position?

The self-image in question

The image, the manager has of him- or herself, as well as the image one thinks others have of oneself, come under scrutiny. A fearsome and stressful situation. Someone, who developed a rather weak self-image, can feel like an impostor, who needs to fear being discovered any minute. In a similar way, my client expressed himself. His work would not be extraordinary. He would not be the “tough manager” one should to be actually. In the mutual dialogue, Helmut M. learned to estimate his performance and strengths in the right relation and appreciate them for himself. It took some time until he could abandon the presumed ideal of a tough manager and acknowledge

that he was successful in his own way. A highly sympathetic man, who could form and lead teams with ingenuity and a great deal of sensitivity very successfully.

People with an excessive self-image can also be emotionally burdened when promoted. Subconsciously, they try to maintain the positive image of themselves. Such leaders often tend to very aggressive target setting. They then tend to pursue them, even when the futility is already obvious under a somewhat realistic view. Relationships and information networks start to change. Subordinates, who do not share the same overly optimistic view, are being exchanged by “Yes-Sayers”. Over time, an illusory constriction and alleged confirmation of one’s own opinion comes forth, which makes the input of realistic perspectives even more difficult and unlikely. Excessive demands on themselves is a further, typical phenomenon; excessive demand of themselves up to the point that the manager brings him- or herself so much under pressure that he or she fails miserably specifically at simple routine tasks („choking under pressure“) or that he or she loses him- or herself in the own over-engagement or runs empty.

“Am I allowed to be successful at all?”

Kets de Vries offers a further explanation, why some managers seem to mutate into losers all of a sudden when promoted. Promotions mean that someone takes over a position and, thereby, replaces another or wins over someone. Success means stepping forward and standing out over others. For some people, this may be connected with a deep-rooted feeling of conflict or guilt depending on the specific family history. Unsolved topics of acknowledgement and rivalry in the family of origin can be actualized when promoted. Am I allowed to earn more than my father does? Am I allowed to achieve more in life than my siblings do?

When such deep-rooted conflicted are left undealt with, they can exert a far-reaching, negative influence for the manager. Unconsciously, the manager could develop a self-hampering behavior and thereby defeat oneself step-by-step. Being one among many at the foregone promotions, the promotion to the top-position, however, can constitute the final trigger. Now, there is no one else, who can be deemed to share the same position sibling-like.

A similar topic of guilt came forth in my client’s story. Helmut M. had been raised in a catholic home, where social engagement took center stage. Outside success, money or status in the community were of low importance for his parents. The engagement for the good cause was what counted. Despite the fact that his parents has never mentioned anything negative about his career choice of their son, Helmut M. silently felt guilty of not fulfilling his parent’s values and alleged expectations nevertheless. What is “disdainfully earning money” as opposed to the engagement for others in the Christian sense?! Helmut M. needed to realize this conflict first. The more he could say “Yes” to his own path of life and appreciate his own performance and

strengths, the more his feeling of guilt has evaporated. He realized that he also applied the values of an appreciative partnership in his work life – simply in his own way.

Be aware of self-defeating mechanisms

All these examples demonstrate: When emotionally stressed, people unconsciously tend to seek resort in diverse coping strategies. When underlying anxieties and conflicts are not dealt with, the leader can be caught in such mechanisms, which can have self-hampering effects in the end. Out of pure anxiety, people tend to a behavior of avoidance. Decisions are getting more and more delayed and critical topics are left untouched to avoid discussions with employees, colleagues or superiors. This indeed keeps the harmony and stabilizes the psychological well-being; however, it is not very favorable for an effective leadership in the end. Self-handicapping is used as a further means to deal with the fear of failure. Thereby, hindrances and difficulties are put to the forefront. If some undertaking is not successful, one can say, “One knew it anyways already upfront”; the own self-worth is untouched. The individual is often not aware that the stabilization of self-worth comes at the expense of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the opposite case, the case of success, the calculation pays off fully. Success despite such negative pre-announcements seems even bigger. This is good for the ego. Misuse of alcohol and other stimulating substances are further attempts of escapism, which render short-lived relief, but at a cost in the long term.

It is important to note that all people are making use of coping strategies at varying intensity. Permanently, such coping strategies prove to be dysfunctional most of the time and detrimental to the individual, his or her career or to the whole organization. What feels like a good solution at first, can prove to be counter-productive in perpetuity.

There is a resort

It is not unusual that anxieties and self-doubt are (re-)emerging when being promoted. Topics, anxieties and believes are coming to the forefront, with which the individual could deal well up to that point-in-time or which had been simply suppressed. To face one’s own fears requires courage as a first step; it is the better strategy however in the end. It is indeed possible to change dysfunctional believes and correct inadequate self-images. One can free oneself of self-defeating coping strategies again.

Thereby, one should take into account three simple tips: Firstly, do not suppress fears. Secondly, take action early enough so that dysfunctional behavior cannot establish itself at all. Thirdly, do not rely on experience and routine in such a situation. This bring along the danger that one takes resort to mechanisms of suppression and past routine behavior, which seems to help in the short

term, but actually could have damaging effects for the own person, the career and the whole organization.

To confront upcoming fears when being promoted could turn out to be a catalyst for a further step in one's own development in the end. Someone, who succeeded in overcoming personal hindrances, gains in personality, personal maturity and effectiveness – as a person and as a manager.

MMag. Caroline Cerar MSc.

Executive Counselor &

Managing Director – Management Counterparts

www.executive-counseling.com

** Name and characteristics changed*

Source:

- *de Vries, Kets: „Leaders who Self-Destruct: The Causes and Cures“, 1989*
- *Baumeister, Roy F.: “Esteem Threat, Self-Regulatory Breakdown, and Emotional Distress as Factors in Self-Defeating Behavior“, 1997*

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