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Managers, You're More Intimidating Than You Think

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Summary. Managers need to accept that people see them as much scarier than they realize — and it's hurting their businesses. The authors' research found that while most managers can't imagine that they're intimidating to their teams, that's actually a prime reason... **more**

Most of us believe that we're approachable to our employees. In a survey we conducted with 4,000 professionals, two-thirds reported they are never or rarely scary to those junior to them.

We're even more sure that we're approachable to those who are our hierarchical equals or superiors. Asked whether their peers and their bosses would find them scary, 75% of respondents said it was extremely unlikely in the case of their peers and 80% in the case of their boss.

Yet we know from our other research streams of the last five years that many people think twice before speaking up in organizations because they find colleagues intimidating. This doesn't add up. Other research shows that managers in particular need to accept that people see them as much scarier than they realize — and it's hurting their businesses.

For example, the friendly COO of a global bank told us that it took him years to realize that the light suggestions he made when walking the trading floors were causing chaos. His colleagues took each suggestion as a firm instruction and followed it to the letter because they were scared of him — and nobody felt that they could tell him. He had never imagined that people wouldn't come to him if there was a problem.

Of course, there are times when managers might *want* to be perceived as scary, such as when they are in a contested negotiation or facing down behavior that's unacceptable. But most of the time managers need to be approachable. If employees are afraid to speak up, engagement suffers, learning moments go unrecognized, misconduct goes unquestioned, and innovations go unrealized.

The risks of silence or unquestioned compliance can also be more dire: Consider Boeing and the safety failures of the 737 Max, and Goldman Sachs and the 1MDB corruption scandal. In both cases it's possible that there were employees who could have raised questions or observations that could have averted these crises.

It's important, then, that we not underestimate our scariness — that we're aware of it and know how to dial it down.

Know Your Labels

Start by understanding what it is that makes you scary to others. It's often hard for managers to see how intimidating they are because scariness is a *relational* experience, rather than a personal attribute. Being scary is subjective (it depends on the person perceiving you), contextual (it depends on the situation), and, often, outside your control. Like the bank COO, you can be friendly and well-meaning, but certain labels you carry with you can override those characteristics and define that relationship for others.

Those labels might be job titles, such as "boss," "head of HR," or "CEO." They can also be attributes such as "tall," "confident," or "high-potential," which often convey a relatively high level of status and authority. Even as organizations pride themselves on being nonhierarchical, these social strata persist. The higher the status of your labels, the more others worry about what you think of them and try to avoid upsetting you. Your scariness, as others see it, acts as a deterrent, making others hesitate before speaking up.

What's more, because your labels means that you are in a relatively privileged position, you probably find it easier to speak up. Due to "advantage blindness" — a bias in which those of us in privileged positions assume others experience a situation as we do — we can't imagine that others might find it difficult. According to our recent survey research, as managers become more senior, they find it easier to speak up because they expect positive consequences. At the same time, their experience of personal confidence means they often forget what it is like to be in a more junior role, where the downsides of speaking up are more apparent.

Consider the labels that apply to you. What intimidation factor comes with your professional title? What attributes do you have — like height or confidence — that confer relative perceived power,

even if it doesn't come with your job description? Who might find them intimidating?

Failing to consider these questions means you are likely to keep interacting with others in the same way. Becoming aware of the consequences of perceived status and authority differences allows you to choose to relate to others differently. The steps below offer some suggestions.

Watch Your Face

As mammals, we are wired to make meaning from the gestures of others, and without knowing it, managers often send nonverbal "shut up" signals rather than "speak up" ones. Take the case of a high-potential leader we know who is in his thirties. Rapidly promoted, he felt out of his depth in his new role. He did his best to hide his vulnerability and his emotions, working to keep his face serene even when he was nervous. He was shocked when he found out that his colleagues interpreted his blank stare as threatening. He had assumed *he* was the one feeling intimidated!

Understand what your facial tics and expressions are communicating from moment to moment. Nancy Kline, the author of *Time to Think*, calls this "knowing your face." When you're thinking deeply you might tend to frown — but that is readily interpreted as disapproval through the eyes of others, especially those who are more junior than you. You might have a smile that appears to others as more of a smirk. Perhaps you suffer from "angry resting face."

Becoming aware of these unintentional expressions requires you to be present and focused in your interactions. Minimize distractions when you speak with others so that you can consider what message you're really sending. Set an intention to encourage, support, and learn from the other person.

However, it's tough to change your gesture habits all at once, especially under pressure, so manage others' expectations. A leader we met at a recent workshop explained that he had become aware of his tendency to frown deeply when thinking. He told his team: "I know I do this — but know that it doesn't mean I disagree with you!"

Moderate Your Responses

How did you respond the last time someone challenged you? (If you can't remember that far back, then consider yourself properly scary!)

If you are in a powerful role, others will examine your responses closely. Reacting negatively to being challenged — with overt anger, dismissal, or disinterest — means that you'll be challenged less often in the future. Insisting that people must come to you with solutions rather than problems will mean that some may stay silent when the problem they've noticed is particularly complex or unusual. And automatically asking someone to lead the project around any new idea they bring to you will mean that others will think twice before suggesting a creative innovation.

One of us (Megan) recently worked with a leadership team that had been through a restructuring experience with multiple layoffs. Though the CEO wanted the team to move on and turn to the future, it quickly became clear that team members still felt betrayed and traumatized by their experience of the layoffs. But when one team member expressed their negative feeling connected with the experience, the CEO dismissed them angrily. In a subsequent conversation with the team, it became clear that his reaction made it less likely that they would freely express their thoughts and ideas in the future.

Instead, create a culture of psychological safety where employees can be honest about bad news. Consider how you usually respond to bad news or a differing opinion. Could that response be

deterring others from speaking up?

Don't Just Ask for "Feedback"

Some managers think that people will open up to them if they just say that their "door is always open" or that they welcome feedback and challenge. The irony is that the scarier you seem to others, the less likely anyone will be to say so or to challenge you. Wise leaders understand that and recognize that they need to be more direct in inviting feedback and challenge.

This means asking more specific questions, such as, "What would be one key thing I could change in order to become even more approachable?" One manager we worked with asked his team, "What do you all know that I will never get to know, but really need to know?"

Many leaders do not realize the shadow that they cast through their titles and the labels others put on them. By better understanding how you create a sense of distance and hierarchy in your workplace relationships — and moderating your unspoken gestures, spoken reactions, and the way you ask people to speak their minds — you'll be better equipped to encourage people to overcome that distance, and become the open (and well-informed!) leader you may already think you are.

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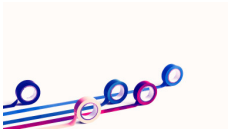

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