

“Achievement results from work realizing ambition.”

Adam Ant

Executive Wisdom - The 8 Traps of High Achievers

In many organizations, there are smart, ambitious professionals who aren't as productive or satisfied as they could be.

Throughout their careers, they've been told they're high potentials, so they should be flourishing. Often, however, they let anxiety about their performance compromise their ability to learn and grow.

High performers exhibit eight typical behaviors, write Thomas J. and Sara DeLong in “The Paradox of Excellence” (*Harvard Business Review*, June 2011):

- 1. Driven to achieve results:** Achievers don't let anything get in the way of goal completion – including colleagues. The ‘task’ rules – at the expense of transparency and helping others.
- 2. Doers:** Because nobody can do it as well or as quickly as they can, they drift into poor delegation or micromanagement.
- 3. Highly motivated:** Achievers take their work seriously, but they fail to see the difference between the urgent and the merely important—a potential path to burnout.
- 4. Addicted to positive feedback:** Achievers care how others perceive them and their work, but they tend to ignore positive feedback and obsess over criticism.
- 5. Competitive:** Achievers go overboard in their competitive drive; they obsessively compare themselves to others. This leads to a chronic sense of insufficiency, false calibrations and career missteps.

- 6. Achievers of successful work but are subject to crippling lows.** They tend to devote more attention to what's lacking (the negative), rather than what's right (the positive).
- 7. Safe risk takers:** Because they are so passionate about success, they won't stray far from their comfort zone.
- 8. Guilt-ridden:** No matter how much they accomplish, achievers believe it's never enough.

“If you were born without wings, do nothing to prevent them from growing.”

Coco Chanel

When they *do* complete a milestone, they never take the time to savor the moment. They expect to be successful, so they deny themselves the chance to fully appreciate the joy of achievement.

Breaking Out of Traps

Identify any of the eight traps into which you've fallen. Which traps escalate your anxieties and cause you to engage in unproductive behaviors?

Next, adopt new practices that give you the courage to step out of your comfort zone. This isn't easy, and it won't happen overnight. Many leaders require help from a trusted peer, mentor or coach.

If you're smart and ambitious, you likely have a coach or have experience with one at some point in your career.

Work on the following six steps to free yourself from these traps:

1. **Forget the past.** How much are you basing your career decisions on past experiences, either good or bad? Stop it. Use what you have learned – keep an open mind – and move on, already.
2. **Develop and use your support network.** When you pride yourself on being an independent self-starter, it's difficult to ask for help – do it anyway.
3. **You fear feedback** because you don't want to hear your work isn't up to par. Instead, challenge yourself to ask respected individuals for regular feedback, even if it's painful at first. Having a structured feedback plan makes it easier. Find a mentor who's familiar with your work, and tell him you'd like to run something by him. Ask these three questions:
 - What should I stop doing?
 - What should I continue doing?
 - What do I need to start doing?

“The greatest accomplishment is not in never falling, but in rising again after you fall.”

Vince Lombardi

4. **Become approachable** in a high-achiever way: Learn to ask questions. Let people know you're trying to explore different perspectives and that you'd like to learn their opinions or thoughts.

Share small mistakes with others. When you practice acknowledging uncertainty or confessing to mistakes, you're showing your human side.
5. **Focus on the long term**, but concentrate on next steps: Long-term success requires a willingness to take short-term risks. Fear of failure or of looking inept, however, can stop you from taking chances.
6. **Adopt a positive mindset.** Recent studies reveal that a positive mindset is a prerequisite for success – not its byproduct. Try framing an assignment as a challenge instead of a problem, and you'll be better able to think calmly and creatively.

“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.”

Harry S. Truman

Embrace humility, practice and patience: Doing the right thing poorly is painful at first but well worth the effort. Sure, it's more satisfying to do something well, but think about the best use of your time. Routines and easy success can set you up for stagnation.

It's a hard truth, but the talent and skills that got you “here” won't take you “there.” As intelligent as you may be, you simply cannot know what you don't know.

Keep learning. Keep strengthening your strengths.

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