

The Paradox of Excellence

Why is it that so many smart, ambitious professionals are less productive and satisfied than they should or could be? Why do so many of them find their upward trajectories flattening into a plateau?

In our experience—Tom's as a business school professor and consultant and Sara's as a psychiatrist—high achievers often let anxiety about their performance compromise their progress.

Because they're used to having things come easily to them, they tend to shy away from assignments that will truly test them and require them to learn new skills. They have successful images to preserve, so instead of embracing risk, they hunker down and lock themselves into routines—at the expense of personal growth.

We've seen this time and again with the executives and managers we've counseled—between us, some 600 professionals over a combined 35 years. Many high performers would rather do the wrong thing well than do the right thing poorly. And when they do find themselves in over their head, they're often unwilling to admit it, even to themselves, and refuse to ask for the help they need.

Consider Ted, a highly successful sales executive at a major enterprise software firm. He excelled at the huge deals that were the revenue engine for the company. He knew the product inside and out, understood the pain points of his customers, and could unerringly sniff out and connect with the real decision maker in a deal. After years of praise and enormous commission checks, Ted began to sense that something was off. The company had expanded in a new direction, shifting to a software-as-a-service business model. Though the majority of revenue was still coming from the legacy products, all the innovation and energy were focused on the subscription offerings.

At first, Ted was contemptuous—selling software as a service was all about small transactions and high volume. “Just get some telemarketers for that nickel-and-dime stuff,” he'd say. “I'll handle the big boys.” Soon, though, he began to see the writing on the wall: He was becoming increasingly marginalized in the company—and in the industry. But he was paralyzed by fear and self-doubt. His professional identity and self-esteem were wrapped up in his success as a salesman.

Consider, too, Kurt, a lawyer known for his trial skills and intellectual heft; he was a natural in the courtroom and a skilled writer with a keen sense of nuance. When he was assigned a case that required combing through thousands of technical documents, he believed it would just be a matter of rolling up his sleeves and getting to work. But early on, he realized he didn't have enough content expertise and couldn't make sense of the casework his associates delivered. He began to find himself alone in his office, late at night and on weekends, wading through and deciphering the facts. It wasn't until almost the eve of a trial that Kurt finally asked for help—which didn't endear him to colleagues who suddenly found themselves joining him in the office after hours.

Of course, leaders within organizations bear some of the blame for this mind-set. They don't always want to hear that somebody's struggling, nor do they necessarily reward new ways of doing things, despite the lip service they might pay to innovation and prudent risk taking. As one executive we worked with pointed out, "My boss wants innovation as long as it's done perfectly the first time." Another confided, "We tell our people over and over again that we will support their professional development, but if a new project doesn't work out immediately, we basically push them over the cliff."

However, it's possible to break this cycle and make the next move toward professional growth. First, you have to take a hard look at yourself and identify the forces that escalate your anxieties and cause you to turn to unproductive behaviors for relief. (See the sidebar, "The Curse of Being a High Achiever.") Then you must adopt counterintuitive practices that give you the courage to step out of your comfort zone. This won't happen overnight. It requires acknowledging vulnerability, something that driven professionals don't like to do and that runs counter to their obsession with managing their image at all costs.

To achieve continued success, you must open yourself up to new learning experiences that may make you feel uncertain at best and incompetent at worst. Remember that those feelings are temporary and a prelude to greater professional ability.