5 Mistakes Top Executives Make Managing Their Weaknesses — and What Actually Works Instead

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Key Takeaways

- Viewing weaknesses as opportunities for strategic upgrades can transform leadership effectiveness.
- Sustainable management of leadership weaknesses requires a methodical and root-cause focused approach, rather than quick fixes.
- Leveraging the support of executive coaches and peer networks is critical for senior leaders to navigate career challenges successfully.

Navigating your weaknesses as a leader is tricky. As an executive, you're likely hard-working and results-driven, so you naturally want to apply this same approach to overcoming your weak spots. While this sounds good in theory, it tends to backfire.

So how do you actually manage your weaknesses as a leader? As an executive coach, I've found that leaders tend to make the same handful of mistakes when it comes to navigating their weak spots.

1. They treat weaknesses like flaws

Leaders often feel like a weakness defines them. Weaknesses aren’t personal failures. This sounds simple in concept, but is much more challenging to embody.

Because many of the leaders I work with are in tech, I encourage them to think of a weakness as being like outdated hardware. There’s nothing inherently wrong with you; you just need an upgrade to run more efficiently. Consider thinking of weaknesses as being like a signal that reveals where you can leverage your strengths more strategically.

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2. They try to fix it quickly

Executives are often successful because they can quickly identify problems and act swiftly to solve them. While this trait helps them deal with business challenges or difficult stakeholders, it’s not always the best approach when working with a weakness. In fact, trying to quickly fix a weakness can lead to short-term solutions that don’t stick or that just create new stress points.

I often encourage leaders to approach weaknesses as if they were a critical error message in a complex system. Yes, you can technically fix the error quickly, but doing so can backfire and cause more issues down the line. You’re much more successful in addressing a persistent weakness if you’re methodical and take extra time to ensure you understand the root cause and build a sustainable strategy around it.

3. They try to overcome weaknesses instead of understanding them

Slowing down allows you to identify what's causing the weak spot in the first place. You can't understand your struggle — and what might be causing it — if you're in a rush to fix it. You want to understand whether it's because of your work environment, a stressor or personal habits that have gone unnoticed. Without this knowledge, your weakness is likely to persist until you get to the root cause.

I recall a leader who was struggling with missing deadlines. He asked how he could get better at time management. While the request makes sense on the surface, as we zoomed out and looked at the larger situation, it wasn't a time management concern; it was that he had too much on his plate. Instead, he needed to set realistic expectations, delegate and learn to say no. Any time management techniques I taught him would have been a Band-Aid for a much larger cultural issue.

4. They try to turn weaknesses into superpowers

Many leaders want to excel at everything, but this isn't possible at the executive level. When taking a strengths-based approach, you don't try to turn weaknesses into superpowers. Instead, you bring in a complementary strength to manage or mitigate the weakness.

I recall a leader who said one of his greatest weaknesses was small talk. He was fine in one-on-one conversations, but he didn't enjoy networking events. Rather than forcing him to become a networking expert, we doubled down on his skill at building deep one-to-one relationships, and he brought this with him to company meetings, conferences and other professional settings, which allowed him to create new

relationships without exhausting himself.

5. They try to do it alone

Executives assume that because they have a multi-decade career, they should have it “all figured out.” This can lead them to avoid seeking guidance when they feel stuck in their careers. Yet the support of executive peers and coaches becomes increasingly valuable as you climb the corporate ladder, since your decisions impact larger teams, budgets, and organizations.

It’s worth noting that mentors can be harder to come by when you reach the highest levels of leadership, since you might be one of the most senior people at your level in the industry. Many of my executive clients turn to networks like Young Presidents Organization (YPO), Chief and TroopHR to receive support, since these organizations allow them to confidentially connect with senior leaders in similar situations. Instead of looking to someone who was in your shoes years ago, you can learn from others who are currently navigating the same challenges as you are.

Final thoughts

Weaknesses aren’t personality flaws, and they don’t have to define you. You also don’t need to turn them into superpowers. Slow down, try to get to the root cause of your weak spots and see where you might manage them by leveraging one of your strengths. Lean into the support of coaches and community rather than going at it alone. You’ve got this!

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