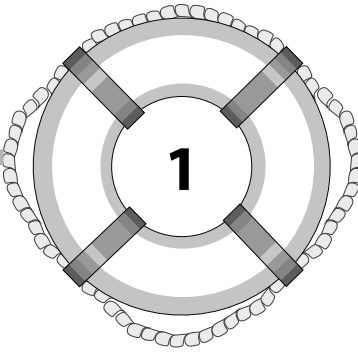

Three ways to cope with leader's anxiety:

1. **Give yourself time to sort things out.** Of course you're in a whirl the first day. Don't expect to behave like Yoda when you feel more like Luke Skywalker.
2. **Self-talk.** Answer back when you berate yourself. No, maybe you're not a Harvard MBA, but you've been around the block a few times. Don't puff yourself up unrealistically, but don't deflate yourself, either. Remind yourself, "This isn't about *me*. It's about the *mission*, and all I have to do is move people toward it."
3. **Point yourself toward success.** Envision a positive future, then take the appropriate steps to get you there.



Coming to Terms with Responsibility

I couldn't believe how I acted," said Beverly, who was promoted from clerk to third shift supervisor at a Denver check clearinghouse. "I got the news. I went home. I scarfed down a half-gallon of butter pecan ice cream."

Or Joshua, tagged to become assistant manager at a Bangor, Maine, convenience store: "I freaked. I'm still a student. I like having a job where I can just go through the motions. As soon as they told me, my mind started flashing the word *failure*."

Bev and Josh flipped out when they got the call to become leaders. To them it immediately represented frightening change. It's like their personalities rebelled against the notion of leadership:

- "I've never led anything in my life."
- "Great, now everyone will know how incompetent I am."
- "What funny papers have these people been reading?"

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Is panic useful or good in any way? **Not in this situation.** When we lived in caves and a saber-toothed tiger wandered in the door, it was useful to experience an adrenaline rush. It shut down other systems—thinking, for instance—and narrowed our options to two, each highly demanding of our bodies, fleeing or fighting.

Adrenaline helps us run fast, and it helps us summon the courage to hurl ourselves at a physical assailant. But it is of zero use to us in the workplace. There is nothing a leader can do with it. Indeed, “nerves” are something every new leader gets, and must learn to overcome.

What can you do when you experience the adrenaline rush?

First, **have an emotional strategy.** Make up your mind that you will show only those emotions that advance your cause, or that don’t torpedo it. You don’t want to giggle at a funeral or show kindness to a bear cub in the wild. Neither can you show fear in the workplace.

Sure, terror is what you are feeling, in the pit of your stomach. But gnashing your teeth or wailing with closed eyes won’t win people to your side.

When in doubt, smile. At least people will know you’re trying to reassure them, which in turn makes it possible for them to reassure you. And it has the side benefit of reassuring you. If you’re tough enough to put up a strong public face, you’re probably tough enough to handle the new responsibility.

Take it up with your significant other. That’s what mates and close friends are for—to tell your most horrible thoughts to, so no one else ever finds out about them.

Jesse, a retired professional athlete in Champlin, Minnesota, ran for statewide office as a lark, hoping to boost his public image and get a few things off his chest. To his astonishment (and chagrin), he was elected in a “perfect storm” of strange electoral conditions.

“I walked around in a daze for two weeks,” he told a TV interviewer a year later. “I didn’t know how to head a government. All I knew was how to growl at people and be a meatball.”

Luckily, he said, “I had good people around me to help me sort it out. Best of all, my wife, Terri, was with me. I poured my heart out that night to her. How was I going to do this without making the world’s biggest ass of myself?”

“This is what she said to me: ‘Jesse, I believe in you.’ A simple thing, but it made a world of difference. But even if she’d said nothing, she was still invaluable, because I told my worst thoughts to her, not to my associates.”

Head for the hills. Not right away. It doesn’t look good to take a vacation as soon as you get promoted. It looks as if you’re avoiding the challenge.

Instead, use a vacation as a way to ease your sense of crisis. Make a deal with yourself right now that, six months hence, you’ll be going to Aruba. Make that your goal: six months of success, then a straw in a coconut.

Maybe you’re not freaked. That’s cool—truly cool. Not everyone responds to the call with panic. A healthy alternative is “Yippee!”

Jim, who was an orphan, worked humbly for a suburban Nashville construction firm for six months as a house painter. But his supervisors saw that he was intelligent and serious-minded, and they named him to head up an entire crew. Within a year he became head of training for the company citywide. Jim never flipped, never freaked. He expected good things to happen, because that was his nature. He did not regard advancement as a punishment from the gods.

Jim kept his cool, and that allowed his transition to leader to go smoothly.

Keep your powder dry. Here's a story showing what happens when you lose it in front of people.

Hank, an American history teacher at a high school in northern Ohio, was elevated to principal in an adjoining district in mid-year. Hank was a great admirer of Robert Kennedy, and when he was unsure of himself, tended to lapse into a bit of imitation. The night before he was to be introduced to the school assembly, he went over and over his speech, punching the air with two fingers to make his points. Unfortunately, when the assembly began, the kids didn't think it was as important an event as Hank did, and they were doing the usual—paper airplanes, spitballs, de-pantsing. Hank struggled through his remarks, then melted down in front of eight hundred students when he said:

"This constant fooling has got to stop around!"

You could have heard a pin drop. Then all eight hundred kids erupted in howls of derision. A simple matter of inverting the word order was enough to undo his career plan. Next

semester, Hank was back at his former school, discussing the War of 1812.

Cheer up. After all, getting to be the leader is, for most people, not like being asked to walk the plank in a pirate movie. It's actually a pretty wonderful thing. It's a tremendous compliment. It means people know you've been doing a good job. It means higher status, higher pay, and greater satisfaction.

Many people, like Jim, are ready for this elevation, even if they have not consciously pined for a promotion. Some are "oldest children," so they are trained to have a sense of responsibility. Jim was not adopted until he was nine. That seminal experience taught him the value of patience and steady performance.

Xiaoping, a claims adjuster for a large Seattle financial services firm, was not surprised to be asked to lead a reengineering team charged with improving the claims processes. She had never set out to lead anything, but her colleagues knew she was sharp and that she cared about doing things right. She was a natural choice to lead this group, and she eagerly accepted.

The difference between Jim and Xiaoping and Josh and Bev is that leadership did not conflict with Jim's or Xiaoping's sense of themselves, their identities. Rather, it fulfilled them. Whereas, for Josh and Bev, promotion meant a major identity clash. Bev dove headfirst into a barrel of Haagen-Dazs. Josh seriously considered packing his duffel and leaving town for sunny Newfoundland.

How badly can the identity thing go? Consider the real-life story of Donald, hardware store owner in Winona, Minnesota. Donald was happy running a Coast to Coast hardware store, managing the cash register himself. But the company suggested he open a second store, and his wife, Sheila, insisted he accept the challenge.

So what did Donald do? He hired a man to murder Sheila. His sense of himself was that he shouldn't be a hardware tycoon with a raft of stores. He saw himself as being more the kind of fellow who greets customers and rings up purchases—a non-leader. Rather than go up against his sense of his own identity, he had his spouse murdered. If that sounds like the plot of the movie *Fargo*, it's because the movie was based on that story.

Now, few of us are going to reject the call to leadership as violently as Donald. But it underscores the power of how we think about ourselves, and how we let that power hold us back.

We've described two kinds of people—those who fear leadership like Bev and Josh (and Donald) and those like Jim and Xiaoping who enthusiastically embrace leadership.

But there's a third way to react, and it's actually the way most people react—it's a combination of self-doubt and delight. In all likelihood, it's the way you reacted when you first heard of your promotion to leader: pleased to be picked, but worried about succeeding.

Why are we making a big fuss about identity? Not because it is the most important issue you will face as a leader. It isn't. Issues of managerial competence, communication skills, turf

warfare, and group process will all dwarf concerns about your identity.

But the identity issue is the first crisis you are likely to face as a new leader, because it hits you right away like a banana cream pie to the proboscis. For many, it can be paralyzing. For the great majority, it keeps coming back at intervals—usually in the middle of a crisis—and haunting us:

- “Am I cut out for this leadership deal?”
- “When will they find out what an imposter I am?”

It is a supremely irrational moment, and nothing we can say rationally will soothe your panicking nervous system down, guaranteed. You are having a case of the sweats, and you may just have to sweat it out.

But here’s one idea: **Slow down.** No one can sustain panic for more than a few hours. The endocrine system runs out of adrenaline, and then you relax. So give yourself time to respond to this challenge. With the passage of a few days, what originally seemed unthinkable will look right up your power alley.

Here’s something else you can do until the adrenaline pump runs dry.

- Make a list of your proudest accomplishments.
- Tape the list next to your monitor or phone.
- From time to time, look at the list and remember—you’re pretty good at what you do.

Finally, when in doubt, remember this truth. **People aren’t idiots**, no matter what you read in “Dilbert.” You were picked

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for this challenge because someone who is not an idiot not only thought that you could handle it but that you were the best person for it.

Now is the moment to take a few deep breaths and balance the bad news with the good. No, you don't know everything you need to know to be successful with this new challenge. No new leader ever does.

But people who may know more about this than you do think you are able to learn the skills and attitudes that will ensure success.

We agree, and the following chapters will bring you closer to that success.

