SELF-HANDICAPPING LEADERSHIP
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The Nine Behaviors Holding Back Employees, Managers, and Companies, and How to Overcome Them

Phillip Decker
Jordan Mitchell
We dedicate this book to all who seek leadership excellence
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Most of us would like to believe our problems stem from too much to do in a workday or our poor bosses and ignore what we do to ourselves. But, the greatest limits on leadership are those that leaders place on themselves. Our focus is this self-handicapping because there is no current conversation about it in business—especially about overcoming it. When this conversation is started, leaders will see significant improvement in their organizations. This is why we wrote this book. It is the story of what we do to self-sabotage ourselves at work and what to do about it.

This is not a self-help book or the “10 Things You Do to Be a Better Leader” book you read on the airplane. It is a handbook to refer to when things are not going well. Whether individual contributor, middle manager, or senior executive, chances are you are shooting yourself in the foot somehow. Overcoming this self-handicapping will open doors to exceptional leadership. We want to start the conversation. The rest will come along. This book is your reference book for the journey.

Several years ago, we began studying the idea of self-handicapping in leadership. A lot of people have supported us in this journey. First, we both would like to thank our wives, Kay and Bethany. Beyond their support and patience, they spent many nights reading “in progress” chapters and added insight that shaped the book. Second, we truly appreciate the countless hours of proofing, researching, and editing from Neha Singh; we could not have written this book without her efforts. We are pleased to recognize all the major contributions from the many executives and managers we have encountered in over 30 years of consulting and management/leadership training.

This book would not exist without the confidence and support of the team at Pearson/Financial Times. We wish to sincerely thank those at Pearson who made this happen:

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The idea of self-handicapping and leadership would not have taken off without the help of the first two semesters of our new leadership course and we thank those enrolled Fall 2013 and Spring 2014 for their help.
developing these ideas. Most of all, we thank them for putting up with the fact that self-handicapping was the only thing in their professors’ brains throughout. The students attending our first pilot workshops at the University of Houston Clear Lake TMC campus offered invaluable advice.

We also had significant help along the way from many executives. In the formulation stage, we received valuable guidance about self-handicapping topics and training from Todd Caliva and Nancy Edgar. Craig Cordola believed in us from the beginning and allowed one of his organizations (Memorial Hermann Hospital) to be used as our laboratory. Ellen Bubak organized, recruited, and participated in the focus groups and beginning training programs where we ran our ideas in front of executives and directors. They are responsible for much of what you will see here. Finally, throughout this project, Julie Rabit-Torkie provided practical insight, organized people to help, and believed in this project even when it was just an idea on paper.

We received invaluable comments and suggestions from a number of leaders as the book chapters took form. Christy McCormack served as our guiding angel and put up with a thousand questions and ideas. Others included James Maynard, Craig Cordola, Dr. Timothy Doyle, Jason Decker, David Bernard, Suzzette Bagalman, Santosh Patel, Niki Decker, David Skinner, Raymond Khoury, W. Kenyon Chichowski, Jayne Johnston, Shannon Wright, Judy Hodges, Laurie Christensen, Chris Denman, Ben Benitez, Pam Potter, and Greta Cardenas. Finally, we would like to thank our colleagues and the administration at UHCL for their continued support and their many contributions to this project.

We use the term, “leader,” throughout because the book is offered to all who aspire to be better leaders. We tried to make it relevant for business students, early careerists, managers, and executives. Our aim was to hit in the middle but you might find we drift from student to executive at times. We believe each population will find wisdom in it and continue to come back to its pages as leadership situations arise.

Before we get started on this journey, let us apologize for using the pronoun “he” throughout as a convenience, but we men self-handicap slightly more than women. While the research is not clear, it also suggests that men set up more roadblocks while women use more excuses to self-handicap themselves. Women evaluate the use of handicaps by others more negatively than men. So, we thought the use of “he” was appropriate.
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Introduction to Self-Handicapping

Chapter Takeaways

▶ Understand the self-handicapping process
▶ Learn the relationship between excuses, self-defeating behavior, and poor leadership
▶ Define the different types of self-handicaps
▶ Understand how self-handicapping is triggered by situations
▶ Understand the ERO Spiral
▶ Understand the Box of Blame
▶ Learn about WHAT and HOW questions
▶ Understand the three steps to reversing the self-handicapping process

Employees witness self-sabotage daily from their leaders—not confronting errant employees, inconsistent leadership, hiring the wrong people, blaming everyone, acting like a control freak, self-centered decision making, or not keeping their word. These can cause employees to be apathetic, unmotivated, and lack ownership; so why do leaders do these things? Given the Internet, the hundreds of books, and the training programs available, it is probably not lack of education. Most leaders know what to do—make effective decisions, engage and motivate employees with a compelling mission and vision, build trust with full transparency and accountability, drive outcomes, and overcome resistance. Yet, Gallup research reveals that only about one in ten leaders consistently do all of those things. There is something else that gets in the way.¹

In reality, the problem stems from leaders being uncertain and relying on the success of their impression management actions.
Leaders let the excuses used in managing how others view them lead to reduced effort and learning. Because the excuses are successful, they do it again and again instead of finding a better way. This lack of effort and learning will ultimately lead to those poor leadership behaviors that cause all that bad employee reaction. Here is an example of how it starts and is reinforced. When a leader walks into a presentation and says, “Please be patient with me, I haven’t been trained on PowerPoint,” the audience immediately gives him a break and expects less. If he does present a poor slide deck, they don’t blame him, they blame the company for not training him. Conversely, if he presents a great slide deck, they think he is a hero for doing so well with no training. Either way, the excuse covered his actions—“great impression management.

So he does it again and again. Some leaders will have a tendency to keep giving the same excuse presentation after presentation rather than get the training or read a book on PowerPoint. It is easy and seems to keep everyone happy. It becomes a habit and is repeated without a conscious decision. Two things will eventually happen: (1) The audience (or his boss) will get tired of the excuses and finally attribute his lack of PowerPoint skills to laziness—“poor” impression management; they think he had ample time to get educated on PowerPoint. (2) Further down the road, the day will also come where the PowerPoint presentation was so bad he lost a client, angered his employees, or lost favor with his boss—then he has created a real obstacle to success. These actions go well beyond just poor impression management, they represent ineffective leadership and poor outcomes. This process is a slippery slope and it is called self-handicapping. Self-handicapping is the process where “people withdraw effort, create obstacles to success, or make excuses so they can maintain a public or self-image of competence.”

It provides an explanation for potential failure or sets the stage for an individual to receive more personal credit for success than might otherwise accrue (enhancement). Self-handicapping is a before-the-event strategy with two varieties: (1) Claimed; and (2) Behavioral self-handicapping. Claimed self-handicapping is coming up with an excuse for potential failure and behavioral self-handicapping is when a person creates an obstacle for themselves. Both can be internal or external to the person (Table 1.1) and excuses commonly lead to behavioral handicaps. Self-handicapping allows individuals to externalize failure and avoid the personal accountability for learning from it. It can be a very attractive strategy for any leader unsure of himself—a common occurrence in business.
Self-handicapping influences observers' impressions of a leader through two processes: (1) Before the task (lowering expectations); and (2) After it (changing attributions about the individual). Following performance, it may discount the blame ordinarily associated with failure. People tend to use self-handicapping when others are watching them (and presumably would have knowledge of their behavior/excuse).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Types of Handicaps</th>
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<td><strong>Behavior</strong></td>
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Claimed self-handicapping is common; leaders claim anxiety, lack of time, task difficulty, lack of authority, and lack of resources (whether or not these are actually true). Behavioral self-handicapping is used slightly less often (setting unrealistic goals, avoiding accountability, drug and alcohol use, and reducing effort). Internal handicaps (being unprepared, claiming an injury) are less likely to be used than external ones (the boss, workload, the organization) because leaders must appear competent and some internal handicaps like drug and alcohol use violate norms of organizational conduct. Yet, behavioral self-handicaps are more effective because they are less disputable and more tied to actual performance. Self-handicapping does not always undermine immediate performance because it reduces the stress of self-evaluation and that allows the person to focus on the immediate task and perform better. So there are positive short-term effects from self-handicapping, but it does inhibit long-term performance by creating obstacles to success. Frequent self-handicapping lowers observer impressions over time.

Let’s look at a more complex example—a team meeting with a dozen managers seated around a conference table and the senior leader at the
head of table. The leader is worried about poor customer satisfaction scores and his ability to influence them in his department. He says to the group, “I’m tired of all of the customer complaints. Stop second-guessing your employees’ decisions with customers and let them do their work.” By this point, everyone in that meeting is thinking the same thing, “Well, why do you think we’re doing that? If any employee makes the slightest mistake and it gets back to you, you will be down here yelling at us and making us look like fools.” Of course, no one says that aloud. The leader hasn’t really offered any meaningful solution or created any individual accountabilities to solve the poor customer satisfaction; he just dumps his demand on the group. None of the team offers up a meaningful solution that would really solve the customer satisfaction issues. Nor does anyone explicitly say, “Yes, I’ll do that, boss!” and take accountability. The discussion likely goes in circles with everyone nodding or saying, “We should do this” a lot (“We” meaning the boss), while no real action happens.

Even though the leader’s apprehensions may be the hottest topic of conversation when the leader is back in his office, why don’t these managers speak up in the meeting and try to get the real problem on the table? Why doesn’t the leader magically change his ways and assign accountabilities? Where is that brave employee who will speak up and lead the team out of the mess? Why doesn’t the entire group stop and brainstorm meaningful solutions together? We know the answers—they don’t want to get on the leader’s bad side or feel any other repercussions from speaking up, they don’t think anything they can do will really change the situation, and, ultimately, no one wants to look stupid or be embarrassed in front of their peers. Everyone is managing impressions rather than solving real problems. But the impression management becomes self-defeating behavior—something that once was useful but now causes problems. This process can’t be discussed openly; nor can the embarrassment and fear around it be discussed directly (an undiscussable). The result is a huge cover up for the boss’s poor leadership skills and for the group’s lack of action. This situation is self-handicapping for everyone involved and happens every day. Eventually, this poor leadership trickles down to even lower customer satisfaction.

These things that managers do to sabotage their own leadership is our focus. This self-handicapping is the explanation why many leaders and organizations stay good and never reach exceptional. Excuses used in impression management often lead to self-defeating behavior that causes significant obstacles to leading effectively. Here is how it works—the excuse, “I am not good at PowerPoint,” leads to reduced effort to learn PowerPoint (self-defeating behavior) which then leads to a poor
presentation in a key meeting (obstacle) and that creates dissatisfied or lost customers (poor outcomes). Because of the focus on what leaders do to self-sabotage themselves, this book will profoundly alter how you think about leadership. These leadership missteps rarely lead to failure; the work still gets done. Self-handicapping simply inhibits—keeps leaders and their teams from growing, innovating, and working at their fullest; they get bogged down with excuses and self-sabotaging behavior. The group went back to work and achieved something; they probably didn’t improve customer satisfaction, but work got done and the enterprise went on. As the customer satisfaction gets worse, the leader may be replaced. But as we all know, that will bring a host of new leadership problems to be managed. This is why the process is called self-handicapping—not suicidal behavior. Eliminating self-handicapping is the key to exceptional leadership.

The Self-Handicaps

Here are the most common behavioral handicaps leaders do to themselves. Each leads to many obstacles for leading employees or creating change in organizations.

1. Avoiding Accountability—Avoiding conflict and confrontation; making excuses or blaming others; playing “devil’s advocate” constantly; poor presentation of self in public, or social media; and not holding others accountable.

2. Tunnel Vision—Focusing on the small picture (ie, continuously developing “tools” to solve problems in order to avoid big picture thinking); attending to people only until you get your way; being linear (tackling only one problem at a time); and not effectively prioritizing or juggling projects.

3. Lack of Awareness—Little or no self-assessment of one’s traits, strengths, or leader behaviors; little or no consistent direction or vision for oneself or others; not understanding one’s personal impact—what is left in your wake, and not burning bridges.

4. Poor Analysis and Decision Making—Not asking the right questions; frame blindness in decision making; not knowing what you don’t know; not questioning yourself or your organization; and making decisions for instant gratification, impulse, selfishness, or to please others.

5. Poor Communication Culture—An inability to create transparency and trust; not being consistent and open; lacking listening
skills; being defensive or unable to take constructive feedback; not allowing vulnerability or expression of doubt in meetings; and ignoring the wisdom of the crowd.

6. **Poor Engagement**—Viewing everything as a transaction, rather than as a partnership; not adding value to relationships; poor networking; talking about others behind their back; and aligning with only a few individuals (pack mentality).

7. **Poor Talent Development**—Hiring the wrong people; not being on the lookout for talent that can be grown in your organization; avoiding coaching, mentoring, and sponsoring deserving employees; not paying attention to the fit of people in the team; and allowing coaching and mentoring from bad leaders.

8. **Micromanaging**—Leading through fear, coercion, and intimidation; constantly looking for fault and who to punish; being unable to cope with uncertainty or the unexpected; choosing situations where no unexpected challenge or event will take place; and not understanding interpersonal boundaries.

9. **Not Driving for Results**—Anything that keeps one from focusing on outcomes (confusing effort with results or confusing internal results for customer outcomes); avoiding challenge and risk; spending time thinking about how things should be instead of taking action; and not using baby steps.
These categories are not completely distinct or a simple list of handicaps. One category can easily blend into one or more of the others. They are not in any particular order, but there does seem to be certain progressions from one to another. Like all things in life, a little self-handicapping is manageable, and can be coped with; but habitual use keeps leaders from performing well and learning. There are simple reasons leaders do this things; we will analyze each and find solutions.

The Slippery Slope
Most business leaders feel uncertainty with new or complex tasks; this is common in business. Self-handicapping comes from this uncertainty and can help create a comfort zone in those situations. The early excuses can quickly become habitual because self-handicapping is extremely effective. It helps peers or bosses think the self-handicapper's problems are caused by some external agent, keeps them from blaming him personally, reduces any sanctions for failure they may impose for failure, and may enhance their attributions of him. It is much easier to self-handicap than expend all the energy needed to determine competencies and then attain them; or to put up the determined fight to solve problems and overcome challenges. In other words, self-handicapping in impression management is easier than learning, growing, and overcoming challenges. We all do it.
But *those excuses are the start of a vicious cycle leading to failure of leadership*. A leader who routinely self-handicaps does not typically improve the impressions of his boss or peers over time. Even more devastating is that *self-handicapping directly leads to poor leadership*. First comes the excuse, “I can't spend all this time to engage my employees; I am too busy.” This may save time, but the reduced effort that follows means the leader is avoiding learning better ways to interact with his employees or fighting through the feelings keeping him from relating to employees on a one-on-one level. His behavior leads to a huge obstacle—disengaged employees. His employees neither own their own work nor the goals of the organization. Customers suffer.

Here is an example of a behavioral handicap. When faced with motivating an employee with the rationale behind a request versus with a demand, leaders often use the demand. It is quick, it works, *and it maintains the image of the leader as a tough guy*; the problem gets solved, the work gets done, and the leader moves on. The success of his demanding can make those actions habitual over time. But this choice to save effort and reduce interpersonal engagement on the short-term creates an obstacle to effective leadership because the employee is resentful, becomes disengaged, and the issue shows up later in poor work or even sabotage. You can see the pattern—uncertainty, excuses and expedient choices of leadership behavior, positive short-term outcomes from self-handicapping, reduced effort to learn and gain greater competence, obstacles to effective leadership with employees and customers, and ultimately, a bogged down career. We call this the Excuses-Reduced Effort-Obstacles Spiral (EROS Spiral). The ERO Spiral is the hidden slippery slope to poor leadership for many of us. *Great leaders stay off this slope. We will tell you how.*

For the leader, it is more difficult to face up to and eliminate behavioral than claimed self-handicaps. We have found that leaders immediately see their excuses and confess to them when they understand the self-handicapping process. But admitting to the impact of the self-defeating behavior that results from using the excuses is much more difficult. There are three reasons for this: (1) It is embarrassing to admit to one's own self-defeating behaviors affecting employees; (2) It is a habit, and we don't know we are doing it; or (3) It is suppressed and we deny doing it even if confronted with the evidence. When it is pure habit or suppressed, many leaders fail to recognize or admit to its impact on them and others.

We have found that the key for leaders to reverse self-handicapping is to recognize what they do, admit to its impact on others, and then
adjust—find and practice alternative behaviors to break these ingrained habitual tendencies. This requires self-reflection and practice. When leaders see the ERO Spiral and how “innocent” excuses lead down a road to disengaged employees and dissatisfied customers, they are often ready to find better ways. The way out is to find what is triggering this behavior; every habit has a trigger. Training and coaching, of course, can have a significant effect, but we think a conversation in the workforce about the process of self-handicapping will accelerate this effect greatly. Our aim is to start this conversation.

Now for the truly hard part—if self-handicapping is done over years to the point where a leader’s style only creates obstacles, it can cause the leader to withdraw into a shell and blame everyone else for his problems and the bad outcomes. If not short-circuited at the excuse or self-defeating behavior level, this “Box of Blame,” as we call it, will be the end result. This is the worst place to try to intervene. By that stage, the leader is using blame consistently as his self-handicap of choice and will resist self-reflection or learning new behaviors. In their book Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting Out of the Box, the Arbinger Institute explores how managers can treat others as objects to help accomplish goals (termed being “in the Box”) as opposed to viewing others as people, with their own hopes and dreams (being “out of the Box”). We have extended this concept into the self-handicapping process. When excuses are exhausted and what the leader does is mostly self-defeating, it becomes overwhelming to take total personal accountability and find a way out. There comes a point when it is easiest to throw all blame outward—to the employees, the boss, peers, the company—to avoid the devastating thoughts that you may have failed in your profession. This is when a leader is in the Box of Blame. Great leaders never go there and will not let their employees go there either.

Every leader can choose to honor what is right or betray it—act contrary to what they feel they should do. As an example, take us—we are teachers. We get up every day knowing that our job is to help students learn. When we face a difficult situation where a given student or group of students is not learning, we can choose between thinking “What am I doing wrong here?” (honoring our commitment) or, “These students must be stupid” (dishonoring our commitment). When we choose the “stupid” route, we become the victim because the administration gave us students who are stupid and don’t want to learn, we have to work extra hard because we have stupid students, it is unfair because we have to put up with their uncaring behavior, we become smarter because we contrast ourselves with these “stupid” individuals, and more honorable.
because we keep at it despite these hardships. We think of ourselves as pretty heroic and blame the students and administration for our failure to teach. We blame our colleagues for not thinking as we do. Once this cycle begins, it grows because the students’ and administration’s response to our blame is to create their own Box of Blame and blame us back. Constructive feedback ceases on both sides. But if you step back and look, we put ourselves into the Box of Blame. We chose this route—to inflate others’ faults, our virtue, and blame others because of continued self-handicapping. This is the ultimate self-handicap—the Box of Blame—and even it can be stopped although it is very difficult to do so.

Gerald Piaget tells a story about a man sitting on his roof tearing up newspaper and throwing it off. When his neighbor asked him why he was doing such a messy (useless) task, the man on the roof replied that he was keeping the wolves away. Exasperated with the mess, the neighbor exclaimed, “But, there aren’t any wolves around here!” The man on the roof said, “See!” implying that “tearing up the newspaper is working!” The neighbor just walked away shaking his head in disbelief. As far as the man on the roof is concerned, he is doing what he knows
brings success—no wolves—and he is keeping all of his neighbors safe. The message in his head is that things are working and there is no need for change. He does not know that the wolf problem was solved a century ago and he could now be doing more productive things with his time. As far as he is concerned tearing up newspaper is not a waste. It is a necessary task. His neighbor thinks he is causing a mess and wasting time but takes the issue no further. He feels sorry for him, walks away, says no more, and avoids him in the future. Employees witness self-handicapping like this daily from their leaders—and often think it is this crazy—not confronting bad employees or playing the blame game. They wish for the day their leader would be “rational.”

One reason a leader may not appear rational in the employees’ eyes, is that his perception follows the same logic as the guy on the roof, and the self-handicapping is facilitated by the fact that the employees or peers watching are unlikely to deliver anything but ambiguous, mildly negative feedback at worst. Employees rarely confront their boss with his self-defeating behavior or the obstacles this causes. Employees don’t see the ERO Spiral that got the manager to that stage; they just see the poor leadership today. The self-handicapping leader, therefore, is likely to perceive that the costs of his behavior are much less than they actually are. Employees know they cannot solve his problems and peers don’t want to be seen as the bad guy confronting him and suffer the repercussions. So, the leader is comfortable, as he goes nowhere. Meanwhile, the employees and the team are not comfortable. The obstacles emanating from a stifled, disengaged workforce have far more impact and importance than a leader saving face or avoiding accountability.

There are solutions. We believe that leaders can stop the excuses (when the self-handicapping conversation is started) and change their behavior to alternatives that are successful—not obstacles—with some self-reflection and effort. When leaders stop placing handicaps on themselves and reduce the negative consequences of that on employees and customers, they have time to move forward, to be humble, and to think about mastering the job of leadership. Exceptional leadership comes from eliminating self-handicapping. That is the focus of the following chapters. Self-handicapping does not have to inevitably lead down the road to failure. We want you to see this book as a reference for when you are uncomfortable—when things aren’t working. It is not the short read on the plane about the ten things that will make you exceptional. This book is about how to do things differently to be an exceptional leader.
John Miller, in his book *QBQ: The Question behind the Question*, proposes a very easy formula that we use to think about reversing self-handicapping and moving to a quest for mastery of leadership skill. Instead of asking “Why me?” or “Why don’t other people do their jobs right?” and using the answers for excuses, one should only ask “What can I do?” and “How can I solve that?” These questions cannot be used as excuses and are the keys to a mastery goal-orientation in leadership. Notice that these questions do not include “Why,” “When,” or “Who.” “Why” questions are about being the victim and avoiding accountability. “Who” questions are about finding a scapegoat. “When” questions are about waiting and procrastination. “What” and “How” questions lead to solutions, add value for the customer, and produce action. *They are the questions of a person seeking to reverse self-handicapping and be an exceptional leader.* Of course, those words must be coupled with “I,” not “you,” or “we.”

Eliminating self-handicapping is not about changing others; it is about changing you and these questions are where to start. “What?”
and “How?” questions are the effective solution to starting to reverse self-handicapping. Even so, leaders must find new ways of operating, practice them, and keep from falling back into old habits. This requires understanding what triggers one’s self-handicapping, acknowledging and admitting to what you do, and asking “What?” and “How?” It may sound elementary, but try it for a day or two and see how hard it is to get out of your habitual impression management behaviors.

Picture trying to get the paper-tearing guy down off his roof. He must first recognize the things he does are self-handicapping and have become self-defeating. Then, he will need to admit the impact of his behavior. It is wasted effort and creates a mess for others. This won’t be easy as he has been in a state of self-deception about it for some time. He will then have to adjust—find the things that trigger his habits and learn new behaviors to replace the newspaper tearing. Of course, he will want to make sure that they work before he gives up what he knows. Leaders can’t just stop being pessimistic, they have to learn how to be optimistic, and then be reinforced for optimism (and yes, optimism can be learned). Paying attention to the triggers for self-handicapping and the impact of one’s leadership style are a big part of jolting individuals out of their comfort zone and reversing the negative effects of self-handicapping.

Here is an example—many leaders are late to meetings because somewhere along the line, they learned that 12 minutes late is not really late—just like the airlines. If someone says to the leader, “You are always late (even jokingly),” the leader can honor his position and choose to say, “Yes, I am,” and ask himself “What am I really doing?” and “How can I change it?” If these steps occur, he has recognized and acknowledged his self-handicapping. Part of the “what” question here is what is triggering this behavior. He can ask himself “Why did it become habit?” Is it because he is disorganized in arranging his schedule or is it disrespect for the team? If he says, “No, I’m not,” we likely have a case of self-denial (the “Box”) with no acknowledgment, recognition, or admission. It may take lots of people very directly saying, “You are always late” (instead of giving the usual ambiguous, indirect feedback) to get this leader to move toward acknowledging or admitting his behavior.
When the leader admits to the impact his lateness has on himself and others (the disrespect team members feel for their time and retaliation of coming late next time—or not coming), he has started to reverse the self-handicapping. He can then adjust by changing the context that is triggering the habit (morning meetings, meetings directly after lunch, crammed schedule) or finding better ways of operating (plan more time to get to the meeting, schedule them at different times, or let others know that he is running late). He then needs to practice these new ways until they are the new habits. He could even apologize for his past lateness.

Mentally look at your interactions with people. Do you know someone who does not admit to themselves or others that they understand the implications of their actions? Do they neglect to say, “I am sorry?” (or even better, “I am sorry and I won’t do it again.”) Are they in complete self-deception about it all? Or are they trying to find new ways of behaving? As you read this book, you may be like a reformed smoker and not be able to tolerate “the smokers” as you work on self-handicapping. The more you rid yourself of the tendency to shoot yourself in the foot, acknowledge the self-sabotage, and adjust to better ways of dealing with situations, the more you will be able to identify and acknowledge these behaviors in others and see the negative impacts. But remember, if you want to change the world, you have to change yourself first. Telling others what to do rarely is effective. They may not appreciate your advice to stop their “bad” behavior and need to discover this themselves. Forget labeling others, talking behind their backs, or telling them how to change. Become a role model and change them by showing them your exceptional leadership and offering stories about self-handicapping and how you reversed yours. Help us start the conversation.

Why Leaders Are Not Talking About Self-Handicapping?

Self-handicapping is almost always hidden, subtle, and hard to nail down—often denied by the individual and undiscussable by the crowd (an undiscussable is something no one can discuss in front of the boss but is the main topic of discussion without the boss present). There is virtually no research about self-handicapping in business. Think about your situation at work. Deep down, the employees know something is not going right. They know what exceptional leadership is supposed to look like, but they never see or feel it. With a little exposure to what self-handicapping is all about, managers and employees can start to see the layer of excuses and the impression management going on. Saying
something like, “I didn’t get a good night’s sleep last night,” just seems to roll off the tongue in an unconscious effort when you are uncertain about your ability to get something done or do it well. Leaders doing this may not “see” themselves doing it or be able to admit to the impact they have. That is because the behaviors have become “natural tendencies” over time—habits. It leads down the ERO Spiral quickly.

Simply put, there is no conversation about self-handicapping in business—especially about overcoming it. When this conversation is started, leaders can begin to reverse their self-handicapping behaviors, find more time to master their job, remove the obstacles they place on the workers and themselves, and see significant improvement in their area of responsibility. Their confidence will improve; they will be more humble. They will reverse the ERO Spiral. That is the road to exceptional leadership.

In emergencies, people have a way of cutting through all the bureaucracy and red tape. They just get the work done and the objectives met. They organize; they have two-way conversations; and they divide work without complaint. They express their fears and needs. They work harder. So, why in everyday organizational life do we evolve into this mess of avoidance, impression management, and self-handicapping? Part of it is that we avoid talking about it. Picture someone in a meeting keeping some project out of his budgetary responsibility because he thinks it may fail. He is avoiding accountability because he knows 70-90 percent of all projects fail, so having nothing to do with it is best. And then no one brings that up as an issue! That is avoiding talking about self-handicapping. Self-handicapping is bad enough; making it undiscussable is worse. This is why we want to give you a vocabulary and start a conversation about self-handicapping. Picture it—we are all in a big swamp bogged down and no one wants to say anything about it. When we can see self-handicapping clearly, laugh at ourselves for doing it, and role model so others reverse it, we free ourselves to solve real problems and add true value for customers. We may then find those actually “fun” times when we were free to try anything to solve the emergency and were heroes when we did.

Another reason for no discussion is that leaders are often uncomfortable dealing with or talking about human issues. This has always been a problem in team building, crucial conversations, performance management, and coaching. They don’t like to judge people or deal with “psychological” issues. So, leaders often avoid the very things that are likely their core problems in not achieving the mission—people problems—specifically self-imposed people problems. But ignoring self-handicapping
will not make it magically go away. We want it out in the open. The principle of developing a common language among members of any community to facilitate effective change is well-established.\textsuperscript{16} Right now, there is no common vocabulary for talking about self-handicapping in business. We find it fascinating how many leaders identify these issues in their employees but have no tools to deal with them. They often see it as trait-based—a personality defect—and too difficult to tackle head-on. It is also interesting how many of those very leaders do not see their own self-handicapping.

Furthermore, there is currently no cute, nonthreatening way of pointing out these problems at work such as the monkey being on your shoulder when you delegate accountability poorly. None of us yet have a picture in our heads of the “self-handicapping rabbit” running down the rabbit hole of poor leadership because of his tunnel vision, avoidance of accountability, or poor talent management. Managers often talk about leaders falling down the proverbial “rabbit hole” when they are “burned out” and leading poorly. We think self-handicapping is a severe case of “running down the rabbit hole” so we offer up the rabbit who self-handicaps by hiding in the hole. The rabbit hole is his “comfort zone” where he goes to find the easy way out. We encourage our readers to use the “self-handicapping rabbit” as part of the new conversation about self-handicapping at work.

A leader who self-handicaps also reinforces a workforce to self-handicap such as the team not speaking up. That is why every leader needs to make an effort to overcome all claimed handicaps and then take the high road to eliminating the behavioral handicaps he may be using. We believe self-handicapping also contributes to organizational change initiative failure. Employees overvalue their old habits and what
they currently gain from them—status and comfort zone—while leadership overvalues the new strategy and potential long-term results without helping the employees navigate the road to the new. Great leaders overcome their self-handicapping and find ways to protect the employees' status and provide new rewards/status to replace those lost in the transition. There is a focus on “overcoming resistance to change” in business but those very words are self-handicapping. They imply that the leader must do something to employees, but this creates an obstacle—more resistance. A leader who says, “What rewards can I offer employees to make the change willingly?” and “How can I help my employees retain their status in this change?” (WHAT and HOW) removes obstacles and allows the employees to want to move toward the change.

Let’s look at another example. One leader that comes to mind was very bright, but young in the role. This leader overpowered in meetings, spoke loudly, and was somewhat a bully (creating an obstacle). He felt and acted like he knew everything. This was a coping mechanism for his insecurity in his new role and resulted in him always trying to be the “expert.” While his insecurity was covered up in the short term by this self-handicapping behavior, the long-term obstacle to success was a stifled work group, with little engagement and motivation to speak up or contribute. In situations like this, the leader’s bosses eventually see the impact of this behavior on employees, customers, and his “numbers.” Many of his employees assume he is a “know-it-all,” “control freak” and stay out of the way. Some see right through his behavior to the real problem—insecurity—but say nothing.

The trouble is that management will react eventually. If the young leader is lucky, he will have a boss who recognizes the real problem and coaches him about his behavior and impact—overcome the insecurity, tone down the “need to be an expert” mentality, and he eliminates the self-handicapping obstacles to his leadership. His negative impact on employees can be reversed and he is ultimately successful and moves up in his career. The downside is that his superiors are only attending to the numbers and make the conclusion that he “just does not have what it takes.” and is replaced. What are the odds of either occurrence? Well, the knowledgeable, caring boss is rare. It is more likely that this would be a ruined career and a stifled employee. Without help to overcome self-handicapping, these situations can destroy any chances for advancement at work. And no one will tell him the “real” reason why. We want the conversation about self-handicapping and the ERO Spiral out in the open so bosses and managers in these situations can talk and grow rather than create further obstacles for employees and ruin careers.
Most business fads offer lots of prescription and little description. They say things like, “motivate your employees” or “drive for results” but unless managers know precisely what to do and why they don’t (in a way they understand clearly), they may not be successful. For example, if a leader tries motivating employees with the rewards that he values—more challenge or solving work problems—we can almost guarantee he will not be successful in increasing the effort level of his employees. They don’t value those rewards. The leader sets out to do the “right” thing, but handicapped himself with poor techniques. It is one thing to understand self-handicapping, it is another to be able to remove the things causing it and to develop and master new effective techniques. We offer details on “What” and “How” in every chapter.

Why We Self-Handicap?

Self-handicapping is often a habitual, knee-jerk reaction to uncertainty and apprehension. We know it is done to avoid accountability and externalize blame. It can be very effective as an impression management tool, and therefore, continued use is reinforced, but in using it, the leader also avoids consideration of any long-term consequences and often slides down the ERO Spiral. You might think one of the major keys to reversing self-handicapping is the motivation behind the action. Yet we all know changing minds is not easy and does not necessarily mean changing behavior. Look at all the public health campaigns to get us to stop doing something bad—they don’t work very well. Think about the last time you tried to lose weight. Unless we find new ways of doing things, the old eating habits have a magical way of coming back. The reason for this is that habits are not guided by goals, but by situations and are triggered. Failure to change habits does not necessarily indicate poor willpower or weak goals, but instead, the power of situations to trigger responses—we all choose the expedient response under pressure, avoid irritating situations and things we fear, etc. Time is always an issue in business and creates many situations that trigger self-handicapping. Habitual triggers often keep us doing what we have always done, despite our best intentions to act otherwise. Reversing self-handicapping is a search for triggers, not a search of one’s personality for bad motivation or lack of clear goals.

Self-handicapping is usually triggered by three things—expedience (saving time/effort), avoidance, or apprehension. It also emanates from self-deception but that is easier thought of as a result of long-term
The leader is on automatic and doesn't see or acknowledge the behavior or the impact. He:

- Doesn't have the time so he chooses what is easy
- Isn't interested so he delegates inappropriately or does what requires less time
- Is on automatic and his mind is elsewhere
- Is truly doing the only thing he knows but it isn't the best way

**Avoidance**

The leader sees and acknowledges the behavior, but is avoiding the impact. He:

- Is doing habitual behavior and doesn't see a need to change
- Is avoiding admitting his lack of competence—low self-efficacy
- Is using ineffective trait-based (eg, introverted or pessimistic) behaviors
- Doesn't know what to do, so he is consciously faking to avoid embarrassment
- Is consciously trying to not look bad—managing up
- Is consciously doing things to protect his self-esteem—bragging, exaggerating
Apprehension
The leader sees it, may or may not acknowledge the behavior, but fears the impact. He:

- Has a legitimate fear of his dysfunctional leaders
- Is driven by the culture of his team or organization
- Is doing things that work satisfactorily and fears risking trying something different
- Is driven by fear of failure—making mistakes
- Believes he lacks competence—shame

Self-Deception
The leader does not see or acknowledge the behavior or the impact—He has suppressed it. He:

- Is unconsciously doing things to protect his self-esteem
- Fears losing control
- Is in a cycle of blame
- Is doing things because of some unknown fear—possibly from childhood

What is critical in looking through this list is that, in attempting to influence how others view us or how we view ourselves, we can do bad things to ourselves. These situations have very little to do with solving problems, helping others, or furthering the mission of the team or organization. Self-handicapping—whether excuses or self-defeating behavior—is not solution building; it is to protect the individual by managing impressions. Each of these examples is about a leader solving an immediate personal problem—not providing leadership. As we explore each self-handicap category in the following chapters, we examine each of these triggers so that you can reflect on what situations may drive your self-handicapping.

What Is It Costing You?
Robert Sutton suggested organizations would be convinced to take his advice if they estimated the total cost of the actions of the type of employees he discusses. So, from his example, we provide an informal estimate of one’s Total Cost of Self-Handicapping (TCSH). Calculating exactly how many hours are lost, nerves shattered, dollars spent, health problems started, employees disengaged, or customers/friends forced away
## Table 1.2  Total Cost of Self-Handicapping Calculation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of awareness</th>
<th>Tunnel vision</th>
<th>Avoiding accountability</th>
<th>Poor talent development</th>
<th>Poor communication</th>
<th>Micromanaging and lack of boundaries</th>
<th>Poor analysis and decision making</th>
<th>Not driving for results</th>
<th>Poor engagement</th>
<th>Sub-total cost per function</th>
<th>Time spent with your boss</th>
<th>Sub-total cost per SH area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of the hours you spend in coaching/discipline</td>
<td>Costs associated with what you take home</td>
<td>Cost of blame, conflict, and retaliation</td>
<td>Cost of lost sales, productivity or innovation</td>
<td>Health problems and emotional costs to you</td>
<td>GRAND TOTAL COST:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
by self-handicapping is probably impossible; however, even with crude
measurement, going through this quick exercise to calculate your TCSH
Score is illustrative of what this problem is costing you. Try it. Consider
all of the self-handicap categories to begin to calculate (see Table 1.2).
You don't have to spend an inordinate amount of time on this exercise
to realize self-handicapping costs individuals far more than they realize.
Self-handicapping is learned; and therefore, can be unlearned, reduced
and overcome. It may not be easy—those behaviors have served since
childhood and early career.

Where to Go from Here?
Today, most companies spend extensive effort addressing employee
motivation, engagement, and performance. The results are generally
underwhelming. New approaches come along weekly that are designed
to open up dialogue, increase trust, engage people, and put customer
outcomes first. Of course, most leaders understand this; they just can't
get there. We think they have neither calculated the costs of folks shoot-
ing themselves in the foot nor tried to open a conversation to reverse
self-handicapping in their organizations.

Final Personal Takeaways

Baby Steps
In every chapter, we provide a list of baby steps—the things to do
tomorrow or this week that can be a foundation for everything else to
come. Sometimes we don't even take the first step because it seems
too overwhelming and intimidating. Don't give up before you even
start—success in baby steps reinforces success in subsequent larger steps
and builds confidence.
The baby steps for this chapter are as follows:

- Take one situation that is not working well for you at work. Use
  Table 1.3 and think through the ERO Spiral for this situation.
- Reveal one self-handicapping excuse and one self-defeating
  behavior and analyze its triggers and what to do to reverse each.
  Here is the action plan (Table 1.4) for analyzing the triggers for
  your self-handicapping and finding solutions.
- Keep a log and track where you used blame to avoid account-
  ability for an entire day. Ask yourself how much blame you heap
  out each day and its impact on you and your employees/peers.
Table 1.3  Examining the ERO Spiral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The situation</th>
<th>The excuses you are using for it</th>
<th>How it has or will build to self-defeating behavior</th>
<th>The obstacles you are creating for employees</th>
<th>The obstacles you have created for yourself</th>
<th>The outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</table>

Table 1.4  Analyzing Self-Handicap Triggers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excuse or self-defeating behaviors</th>
<th>What is the situation?</th>
<th>Trigger</th>
<th>Impact on others</th>
<th>What to do/when</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td></td>
<td>__Expedient &lt;br&gt; __Avoiding &lt;br&gt; __Apprehension &lt;br&gt; __Self-deception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-defeating behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td>__Expedient &lt;br&gt; __Avoiding &lt;br&gt; __Apprehension &lt;br&gt; __Self-deception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Follow-Up Questions

1. Which chapter on self-defeating behavior will I learn the most? Need the most? Why?
2. What do you think your employees and peers are thinking and saying about you regarding self-handicapping?
3. Can you see your excuses used in self-handicapping? Can you see your self-defeating behaviors creating obstacles for your employees? If not, what is your plan of action?
4. Are you humble? Do you always strive for mastery of what you are doing—to know more and be better? How do these affect your self-handicapping?

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