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## THE SEDUCTION OF THE LEADER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By **Patrick Sanaghan & Kimberly Eberbach**

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# FOREWORD

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This last year has seen a growing number of votes of “no confidence” in institutional leaders. Traditionally targeted at presidents, there are numerous examples of faculty who have taken such steps against provosts, general counsels, deans, and entire administrations (among others).

The increase in such votes is a troubling diagnostic of the state of leadership in higher education. A vote of no confidence doesn’t just happen. It usually results, over time, from poor communication and a lack of meaningful engagement or inclusion. A no-confidence vote is a sign of low trust and can derail a campus.

How do such toxic situations arise and what can be done to prevent them?

Leaders need to engage with their constituents directly and consistently seek feedback and input. Without access to unfiltered information—honest concerns, suggestions, and ideas—leaders risk being seduced into thinking that they are on the right path and that everyone is firmly behind them.

This highly practical and useful paper by Patrick Sanaghan and Kimberly Eberbach offers key insights into this dynamic and reviews **nine specific steps** that leaders can take to minimize this seduction.

Their recommendations, while easy to understand, are not necessarily easy to follow. These strategies require courageous leaders who want to hear the truth, even if that truth is difficult to digest. But if you follow their advice, we are confident you’ll gain new and important insights that will help you lead your institution forward.



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# THE SEDUCTION OF THE LEADER

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How often have you thought, “My people always tell me what’s *really* going on.” Hundreds of leaders have told us that their followers are open with them. These leaders believed that they were getting honest feedback and were being asked the tough questions. Unfortunately, this is rarely true. In fact, we’ve come to think of this common belief as a myth—a myth consistent with the concept of *seduction of the leader*, which was introduced to us more than twenty-five years ago by our colleague Dr. Rod Napier.

Many leaders are seduced by the notion that they’re receiving honest and thoughtful feedback about their ideas and effectiveness. Believing this leaves leaders isolated and uninformed.

Why are leaders not receiving honest information? Because most followers avoid “speaking truth to power.” They avoid it for a variety of reasons, reasons we’ll explore below. But whatever the reasons, the unfortunate consequence of this reluctance to speak frankly is that you, the leader, lack access to the vital information you need to make effective decisions, grow, and learn—even *when you have asked for it*.

Based upon our years of observation and work with leaders in higher education, corporations, and nonprofit institutions, we understand *seduction of the leader* as a pervasive syndrome that is always present in the lives of leaders. This is worth repeating, it is *always* present and that is why, as we will explain, it is so pernicious. Before you can employ strategies to counter this dynamic, you’ll need to become aware of its existence and of its powerful implications for your leadership.

# 1. WHAT DOES *SEDUCTION OF THE LEADER* LOOK LIKE?

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As we've asserted, leaders are always at risk of being seduced into believing they're on the right path and avoiding evidence to the contrary. The following three types of seduction—seduction by sycophants, seduction by great expectations, and seduction by ego—are the types we've seen most often.

## SEDUCTION BY SYCOPHANTS

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Several years ago, we met with a new university president and his informal “kitchen cabinet.” Although there was an official senior team in place as well, these three individuals helped the president develop ideas, shape policy, and make decisions. We'd been invited to explore with the president and his three top advisors how the university could implement a strategic plan. Since we'd been referred to the new president by his trusted mentor, who had worked with us previously, we believed that the table had been set nicely for us, so to speak, and we were eager to share our expertise.

During our two meetings with the president and his kitchen cabinet, however, we experienced the detrimental effects of seduction by sycophants. Although this new leader had never conducted a strategic-planning process, this didn't stop him from strongly stating his misinformed ideas. Nor did it stop his cabinet from readily praising and agreeing with everything he said. When we provided counter-advice or a different perspective, our contribution was quickly shot down by the cabinet. This was rather peculiar, given that we've designed and led over a hundred strategic-planning projects and have gained much expertise as a result. We've even written books on the subject.

The first meeting was particularly difficult. By the second meeting, we knew what to expect. We were more assertive with our advice, hoping to get it past the kitchen cabinet; we wanted the president to have as much accurate information as possible so that he could make informed decisions. Yet, when we shared our differing opinions and perspectives, the cabinet members dismissed them. They acted as if we didn't know what we were talking about. They attacked our rationales, questioned our understanding of the complexities of their organization, and were surprisingly rude.

Once again, they accepted whatever the president stated as the truth, bestowed it with glowing compliments, and ignored our contributions. The cabinet members were clearly intelligent and thoughtful people, but they were not serving their leader well that day. He may have been surrounded by people he trusted, but he was alone with his uninformed positions.

If you aren't getting feedback that is challenging, being asked tough questions, or hearing contrary opinions, you can bet that seduction by sycophants is alive and well. We'll share some proactive and practical advice on how to avoid this particular seduction dynamic later in this paper.

## SEDUCTION BY GREAT EXPECTATIONS

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We encountered a different sort of seduction of the leader when asked to advise an experienced university president with a track record of success. She inherited an institution that had been going downhill slowly for years. As its faculty members were aging, they were becoming less productive; student enrollment was declining; the institutional brand was vague and confusing; and the endowment was anemic.

This institution desperately needed vitality, clarity, and focus. Tough decisions were needed to turn this ship around. The board believed the new president was right for the job because she had vision, energy, and great ideas. She was known for being a decisive and compassionate leader who got things done.

Unfortunately, when she arrived, many campus stakeholders had a long list of demands and expectations for the new president. They wanted her to cure the pervasive complacency, rebuild the academic reputation and productivity of the faculty, create a powerful and clear brand, increase enrollment, and oh, by the way, raise fifty million dollars for the endowment.

This president was captured by the unrealistic expectations of her followers and became convinced that she could pull them all off by herself. She began to put in seventy-hour weeks. Her schedule was too full, and she was trying to do too much. But who was going to tell this respected, hardworking, and engaging leader to slow down? Things were beginning to move forward. Campus enthusiasm was palatable. Students just loved the new president, and donors were beginning to be generous again.

The board chair was smart enough to know that the president could not keep up this overwhelming pace. He communicated his concerns privately to the president on several occasions, asking her to slow down. Unfortunately, he was the only one telling her this, and his advice fell on deaf ears.

We were brought in to do a first-year assessment of the new president. After conducting interviews with faculty, staff, and senior team members, we determined several important things: the president needed to create a shared sense of ownership and responsibility

going forward, she needed to manage the expectations of multiple stakeholders in order to make them more realistic, and—as her board ally had told her repeatedly—she needed to slow down. We also learned that many people were concerned about the president’s health but were unwilling to say anything. They were afraid that if she slowed down, all of the things she was holding together would quickly unravel.

We delivered the news. The president thanked us warmly for our guidance, then ignored it completely. She had a mild heart attack several months later, which might have been avoided if more people had insisted that she needed to reduce her workload or, better yet, had helped her with it. But this fact is key: The president was given vital information by several key people that she chose to ignore. She decided instead that she alone could pull this campus out of its rut. Dazzled by the high expectations of her stakeholders and the illusion that she could meet them all, she didn’t listen to sound advice to the contrary. She was willing to be seduced by the adulation and appreciation of others.

If you find yourself working way too hard and too long and feeling exhausted, it's time to ask yourself some tough questions, starting with these:

- Why am I working so hard? What drives me to do all this hard work?
- Can I ask for help? Who can help me?
- What are the effects of my overwork on my family and on me?
- What do I need to change now?

Leaders often find being at the center of things very attractive. Being really important to everyone, serving as a hero, and being the only one who can pull things off can be very seductive. But you're not the only one who can pull things off. There are usually plenty of people around to help, but you must enlist their support, ask for help, and pace yourself to sustain your stamina. There is no study in the world that shows that working seventy-plus hours a week is productive and effective.

## SEDUCTION BY EGO

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A brilliant scientist became president of a research institute. He was well known in his field for his scientific accomplishments and had earned two PhDs. It was commonly acknowledged in his professional arena that he was very smart and talented. But he felt a need to assert his brilliance to an extent that worked against him. He sucked the air out of any room he entered by moving to the center of conversations and acting as if he was the only person with ideas. He came across as arrogant and self-centered. People didn't like him much.

The negative impact on the institute of this person's leadership emerged quickly. People became uninterested in what he had to say. They never asked questions in their meetings with him (almost always a bad sign), and they texted back and forth about what a blowhard he was. Attendance at the monthly research meetings was dwindling and grant funders began to stop taking his phone calls.

How does one tell this brilliant but arrogant leader that he needs to change his leadership style dramatically if he doesn't want to fail? And who will deliver this message?

Fortunately, leadership audits were a common tradition within the institution, one started by a wise provost several years before. We were called in as we had been every two years or so to conduct an audit. To our surprise, the brilliant scientist learned something.

We will discuss leadership audits in more detail below. But, in essence, we gathered anonymous data via multiple conversations with individuals in the scientist's sphere of influence. We learned a lot. He was respected but not at all liked. In fact, some of his peers were waiting—even hoping—for him to fail. We were able to translate what we learned into three strong recommendations.

We braced ourselves for the conversation, expecting him to refuse to deal with his impact on others. But we were delighted to be surprised. Not only did our brilliant scientist listen; he also acknowledged that he had received this kind of feedback previously and that his wife regularly poked fun at the size of his ego. Our client's ego did not shrink as a result of this feedback, but he was able

to put a plan in place that allowed him to identify nonverbal cues that signaled he was bulldozing others. He became able to recognize those cues—and to stop the bulldozing.

To get a sense of whether you are vulnerable to seduction by ego, consider the following questions:

- Am I aware of my impact on people in our meetings and conversations? If so, how do I see myself influencing their behavior? If not, how can I become more aware of my impact and how it affects others' behavior?
- Do I need to be center stage all the time? If so, how can I be more aware and actively invite others into the limelight?
- Do I share credit with others? If not, what mechanisms can I put in place that will trigger kudos for those around me?
- Am I a good listener? If not, how can I put signals in place to remind me to be more curious and appreciative of others' experience and point of view?
- Do I ask others for their advice and perspectives? If not, who can I call upon starting tomorrow to change this pattern?

## 2. HOW DOES THE *SEDUCTION OF THE LEADER* OCCUR?

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In virtually every organization we've observed over the years, those with less power and influence often have great difficulty communicating anything but positive or benign information to those with more power and influence. People lack the skill, courage, or both to ask tough questions, share difficult information, or offer contrary points of view to their leaders.

As a result, most of the senior leaders we have witnessed, including university presidents, chief executive officers, executive vice presidents, and board chairs, are not finding out about important matters such as these:

- ***Competing agendas.*** When the leader is unaware of the interests of an important stakeholder group that conflicts with their priorities and direction, there's trouble ahead. For example, a sales team might be in love with a traditional product that is easy to sell and might not be as enthused about a new product that will take a lot of effort to launch and that will change the compensation model. This will affect the new product's chances of success.
- ***Significant gaps in organizational capabilities.*** When an institution lacks the talent, expertise, or resources to do what it has committed to doing, people may know that they lack the bandwidth to take on a new challenge, but they won't say anything. They may go along to get along, hoping for the best and producing predictably mediocre results.
- ***Impending market changes.*** When there are financial, technological, or environmental forces on the horizon that will take the organization by surprise, some people in the organization may anticipate these dramatic changes and understand their implications. But that information may never make it to the right people, because those who are looking ahead lack access to key decision makers and strategists.

- ***Failing projects with unachievable goals.*** When a project is in the red and beyond saving, who will warn the leader about this upcoming failure? A great deal of money may have already been invested, and there's no Plan B. Some people saw the problems emerging a long time ago, but no one said anything. Now the project has become a money pit.
- ***Blind spots or unwarranted loyalties.*** When a leader is enamored with someone, the leader may have unrealistic expectations of that person's abilities. Everyone may know the person just doesn't have the talent, but they won't share this knowledge with the leader. The "golden" child fails, and people murmur, "I told you so."
- ***The impact of behavior on key constituents.*** When a leader's own behavior blocks information from coming through, the leader needs to be told. For example, a leader's creative and entrepreneurial spirit might be undermining an institution's ability to get necessary blocking and tackling done. If that leader tells others, "Don't bother me with the details," people will become reluctant to point out that the "details" are preventing the leader from being successful.

- ***Serious incompetence on the senior team.*** When there are people on the leader's team who don't have the requisite expertise to pull their own weight, the leader needs to know. Perhaps team members are nice—incompetent, but nice. People may be reluctant to alert the leader, both because this would hurt people's feelings and because it might injure the group's collegial climate.

Although our examples of the impacts of seduction are at the senior level, *anyone* in a leadership position—a manager, a director, an associate vice president, and so on—can fall victim to the seduction dynamic. *Anyone*. The seduction of the leader is always present and always has the potential to be destructive.

Sometimes, it's not your behavior but the intentions of others that confound your efforts. More often than our ideals would like us to admit, we have seen leaders being intentionally undermined. But the *seduction of the leader* dynamic is not fueled by malice. Individuals who fail to bring critical information to you are often loyal and dedicated. While the outcome may be the same, their reluctance isn't driven by a desire to deceive, misinform, or undermine your effectiveness or ultimate success.

We have worked with leaders who've had the discipline and courage to build teams and cultures in which respectful disagreement and "rough and tumble" dialogue were encouraged and rewarded. But they are the exception. What happens much more frequently is that leaders receive only watered-down versions of the truth, versions designed to lighten the negative impact of necessary information.

In a campus environment, for example, we've witnessed crucial information being weakened with phrases like "faculty always complain" or "I can assure you that other campuses have more serious problems than this." Although there may be truth in these statements, they mask important messages in order to make them more palatable for the leader.

Several years ago, we attended a meeting at which the mayor of a large city made a speech about his vision for the future to a hundred or so senior-level administrators. The mayor was excited about the possibilities he saw for his city, and he spoke with passion and enthusiasm. After an hour or so, he was finally done. Almost as an afterthought, as he was heading out of the room, he asked attendees if they had any questions. He was met with silence.

He then left, believing that he had hit a home run. Unfortunately, he didn't hear the dissent that ensued when he left the room. People mumbled to each other, sharing doubts and reservations, wondering how they were ever going to accomplish even half of what his vision entailed. They milled around for over an hour, grumbling, complaining, and discussing their reactions to and reservations about the mayor's "vision."

Unfortunately, the mayor never heard their thoughts. He believed that his people got it and were ready to move forward. They didn't, and they weren't. He was clueless about how his people really felt. How successful do you think he has been in implementing his vision?

This scenario happens throughout many organizations every day. We have witnessed it countless times ourselves. The setting doesn't have to be an important speech; it can play out in small meetings and forums, too, in which line managers, superintendents, and directors share their ideas, weakly ask for reactions, and rarely get anything meaningful in return.

If the mayor really wanted input and feedback, he could have utilized a simple device to encourage conversation. This is a device that you can use with your people. It will have a powerful impact, *if* you want a real conversation. You can say some version of the following: “I know I’ve covered a lot of territory here and shared a lot of big ideas. I really want your questions and reactions. Please turn to the person next to you and have a conversation for a couple of minutes about your responses. Please come up with one question together that you’d like to ask.” After people have the chance to talk, you can then say, “Please share your thinking with me.”

A word of caution here. Be sure you have left at least 30 minutes for questions. It will not be productive for you to cut these off. If you believe time will be limited, hand out index cards and ask each pair to write their question down. This will allow you to take questions for 30 minutes *and* not lose valuable data. If you go this route, you must create an opportunity to reply to the unanswered questions within a reasonable period of time, say one week. This response could take place at another face-to-face meeting or through a written reply.

This device sounds simple, but it is powerful, and it will almost always create a rich conversation. People *a/ways* have reactions to what is being said. Your task is to find out how to get them to have a real conversation, so you can benefit from their input.

# 3. WHAT ARE THE UNDERLYING DYNAMICS OF *SEDUCTION OF THE LEADER*?

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For years we've been investigating the origins of the seduction dilemma. By figuring out the underlying dynamics, we can support leaders better, giving them signs to look out for and intentional strategies to use to counter its influence. We've identified four primary dynamics that are usually in play.

## **DYNAMIC 1: THE LEADER'S RESPONSE TO INFORMATION**

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First and foremost, as a leader, your own response to information can invoke reticence in others. If people experience a negative reaction (anger, denying, arguing) when they deliver unpleasant or contrary news to you, you can bet that they'll be reluctant to share such news with you in the future. And there will be a ripple effect; how you react to negative or contrary news and perspectives will become well known among your people. If you have a reputation for being reactive, you will be seduced by sycophants instead of receiving honest information or feedback.

Fixing this may sound simple, but it isn't. People are always watching your reactions and responses *very* carefully. When you hold a leadership role, think of your behavior as being magnified. You need to be very aware of how you react to unpleasant news and information and to practice responding in a welcoming way, because even a subtle negative reaction can send a potent message to your people that will be hard to change.

## DYNAMIC 2: THE LEADER'S RESPONSE TO HONEST FEEDBACK

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People's desire to be included, to have influence, to keep their seat at the table can be powerful reasons not to tell it like it is. If people perceive that being honest can be a career-limiting move, you can bet that truth will not be told. When forthright folks are disinvited to important meetings or conversations or find themselves out of the information loop, the message is clear: bad news is a professional liability. This news will move like quicksilver throughout the organization, and its damage will be very difficult to undo.

It's easier to start out on the right footing than to undo such damage. The effort you'll have to expend to demonstrate that it's okay to speak up after an episode showing the contrary will be enormous, and not everyone will believe you. Even just one or two examples of the negative consequences of speaking up will become a permanent part of the organization's legend and lore.

We witnessed a situation in which a new school superintendent had several meetings with his school principals over the summer to plan for the upcoming year. Several times during the three days of meetings, a well-respected, experienced, assertive elementary-school principal pushed back on some of the ideas that the new superintendent proposed and asked him some tough questions. This behavior was not well received.

Soon afterward, the superintendent transferred the outspoken principal to the toughest high school in the city under the guise that he was putting his best people in the most challenging situations. The powerful message this conveyed to all the principals and administrators in the district was that those who spoke truth to power would be punished severely. The superintendent's punitive behavior sent shock waves throughout the district.

Because of this, the superintendent never received contrary or honest information or feedback about his leadership effectiveness and actions. He was gone in less than two years, leaving behind a mess—a bucketful of mistrust and a group of principals who were very worried about what the next superintendent would be like.

## DYNAMIC 3: THE WEIGHT OF TRADITION

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An institution's history and traditions can create barriers instead of acting as bridges to openness, feedback, and honest exchange. To make matters worse, followers typically perceive an executive leader as representing the institution itself, with all its power, politics, and history. This perception can make them reluctant to push back on the leader's ideas for fear of seeming disrespectful to the leader's role or to the institution. This occurs commonly at large institutions, including universities, hospitals, and sizeable nonprofits.

While a strong sense of community often exists in such settings, this collegial atmosphere doesn't make truth-telling easy. As a leader, you need to consider the potential impact of your organization's traditions, values, and history on your people. They may find the weight and authority of the institution so heavy that speaking honestly may seem unwise, even impossible.

So what can you do? In your work, you can model not only respect for the institution but also flexibility and openness. This can send the message that it's okay to change. You can also speak about the strengths of your organization's history and traditions and about the importance of not allowing these to inhibit growth and the possibilities the future holds.

## DYNAMIC 4: GATEKEEPERS

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Those with authority are often shielded from critical information because well-meaning gatekeepers block access, intending to protect their leaders' time. These gatekeepers believe that it is their role, even their duty, to keep the onslaught of information and demands at bay.

One of our colleagues had a loyal executive assistant who could be quite intimidating when people stopped by without an appointment. She knew how packed the calendar was, and she strove mightily to ensure that our colleague was "protected." People had to get past this executive assistant to get through to our colleague, which was a daunting challenge.

What this loyal person didn't realize was that she was undermining the leader's open-door policy and creating the perception that anyone seeking an unscheduled interaction had to traverse a moat filled with alligators. Upon realizing what was happening, our colleague took her assistant aside and assured her that engaging with others frequently and being available were significant aspects of her job.

# 4. WHAT ARE THE STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF *SEDUCTION OF THE LEADER*?

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It is essential for leaders to be aware of how the structure of an organization—the lines and boxes—can play a powerful role in bringing on seduction. The structure of the office of the president, of a senior cabinet, or of an executive operating committee determines how information flows, whether optimally or not.

Having an efficient and effective office and a solid senior-team structure is essential to the functioning of a president or a CEO. But within that structure, two roles—those of chief of staff and executive vice president—frequently play a powerful role in fostering *seduction of the leader*.

## CHIEFS OF STAFF

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Many presidents and CEO's are fortunate enough to have a chief of staff. This person can help them manage the pace and complexity of a dynamic organization. A chief of staff who consistently shields a senior leader from challenging or time-consuming individuals, however, may be inviting peril. If this person controls information too thoroughly—whether by breaking it into manageable chunks, translating conversations and synthesizing data inaccurately, or providing summaries or headlines instead of stories—much vital data may be lost.

One of us was sought out by a new president to assist her in establishing a first 90-day plan that would lead into a three-year strategic plan. Her chief of staff, having a long history with the university, was to play a critical role in crafting the plan. It was clear from the start that the chief of staff believed that it was his job to protect the president from the clutter and static of the campus so that the president could adapt to her new role. Although the consultant strongly discouraged the chief of staff from taking this approach, he persisted in “protecting” the president during the president’s first year.

But the president didn’t need protection; she needed connection. In that first year, she should have built the relational capital necessary for her to lead. You can only do that by meeting with people, getting to know them, and—most importantly—listening to them. This means that you *have* to be visible and accessible to your people.

Unfortunately, the president quickly became isolated from campus stakeholders, especially faculty, and problems began to emerge. People mumbled about the lack of communication and accessibility. She earned the dubious moniker “Casper,”

as in the friendly ghost. Problems grew, but the president was unaware of their intensity, complexity, and nuance. She hadn’t been told of the real situation by her chief of staff. So when a complex tangle of issues came to a head, the president was unprepared and overwhelmed. It seemed that problems were emerging from everywhere. Thus, she was ill served by a well-intentioned but ineffective chief of staff.

Do you have structural barriers in your organization? Can your people gain access to you regularly? Is it hard or easy to talk with you? Do you have well meaning “protectors” around you? If so, it’s time to make those structures more permeable.

## EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENTS

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Large, complex organizations often have an executive vice president. This person’s main responsibilities include managing the CEO’s or president’s workload, keeping the senior team functioning, crafting the organizational agenda, paying attention to the politics of the place, and moving the big stuff forward. This is an important and challenging job. When done well, it offers substantial benefits to the senior leader.

The most successful executive vice presidents are great listeners and tremendous facilitators who help steer their organizations with intelligence and integrity. However, many executive vice presidents employ a practice at their leader's behest that promotes seduction: they hold private meetings with senior team members. At these meetings, the executive vice president is briefed on the status of projects, key talent, budgetary items, and other important issues. This not only prevents information from getting through to the top leader, but it also gives executive vice presidents a high degree of decision-making authority. This can influence the strategic agenda in powerful ways, potentially steering it away from the senior leader's agenda.

The practice of having executive vice presidents hold one-to-one status meetings can also cause problems for the senior team members. Not having the input of the top leader can set them in the wrong direction or make aspects of their work fail to meet the leader's expectations. In addition, because they aren't meeting with the entire senior team at once, members will lack the advantages of a more holistic

organizational view and may fail to see how their actions impact others on the team. Instead, they may operate from within their own towers and may view events through a single lens, such as finance, technology, marketing, or clinical research. This will limit the quality of decision-making, inhibit camaraderie, and stifle mutual support and opportunities for cross-boundary innovation. A sense of ownership for an entire institution and therefore shared accountability will be missing.

This can be addressed partly through periodic meetings of the whole senior team with the executive vice president and the president. Ideally, robust and open conversations about the organization's challenges and opportunities will occur, information will be shared more broadly, and everyone will be more informed. This can only help the top leader and minimize the seduction dynamic.

# 5. PROVEN STRATEGIES TO COUNTER *SEDUCTION OF THE LEADER*

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As you can see, strong currents are working against you gaining access to vital information. The seduction of the leader dynamic is always present. But these destructive currents aren't unchangeable; they can be reversed when you build new channels through which communication and feedback can flow. You can promote a culture of candor within your organization. We counsel you to use a range of strategies that foster new behavioral norms.

This is a given: if you have power and influence, you will be working against a tide of reticence when it comes to gaining access to information that sheds a negative light on you, those around you, or your institution. We often tell leaders, "If you're not getting information or feedback on a regular basis that is uncomfortable for you, go seek it out." This requires going beyond the collegial, "How are things going?" or "Let me know if there's anything I need to do."

We cannot stress enough that you have to be *proactive* in encouraging and rewarding behavior that fosters a climate of candor and transparency. If others around you are not pushing back on your ideas, sharing different perspectives, and asking the tough questions, it's very likely that you are being seduced. To counter this, we advise you to enact strategies that create permeable boundaries—permeable enough to allow information and feedback to readily get through. Here are nine powerful strategies that we recommend.

# STRATEGY 1: USE A 360-DEGREE FEEDBACK PROCESS

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The 360-degree process is a performance-feedback approach that has been around for decades. When conducted well, it is one of the most powerful and insightful learning experiences a leader can undertake. In this well-organized process, you'll solicit anonymous feedback about your strengths and the areas in which you need development from multiple stakeholders (such as peers, direct reports, and customers). The process takes real courage, but we have found it well worth the risk.

That said, the process is somewhat complicated, so it's important to do your homework before you undertake this learning process. We suggest the following two resources, which offer helpful guidance: *What Is 360 Degree Feedback?* by Mark Miller (Kindle edition, 2012), and *The Art and Science of 360 Degree Feedback* by Richard Lepsinger and Anntoinette D. Lucia (print and Kindle editions, 2009).

We recommend that you apply the 360-degree process to yourself and to others—not to yourself alone. Doing it only for yourself might convey an unintended message that you are in trouble. The process is optimal when it's done yearly, as a built-in component of a team's standard operating procedure. In addition to generating information about how others see you as a leader, feedback processes communicate to others that you value others' opinions, are open to learning, and are committed to increasing your self-awareness. These are all powerful messages to convey.

Most human resources (HR) departments can support and coordinate a 360-degree feedback process to ensure quality and anonymity. It is essential that the people providing feedback do so anonymously. This ensures honesty. If you don't have a well-run HR department or the organizational capacity to conduct a 360-degree process, our next strategy will be helpful to you.

## STRATEGY 2: OBTAIN FEEDBACK WITH A LEADERSHIP AUDIT

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A 360-degree process is a sophisticated procedure, while a leadership audit is simpler. It, too, can be an effective way of obtaining anonymous feedback about how others perceive you. To begin the process, you'll create a set of four to five questions that are of interest to you and distribute them to selected people who know you well. You might want to include questions such as these:

1. What are three things I do well as a leader?
2. What is one thing I could improve upon as a leader?
3. What is one thing I can do to ensure that we continue to improve as a team?
4. What is one piece of advice you can give me that would further enhance my effectiveness?
5. What information might I not already know that is important for me to know and that would improve my effectiveness as a leader?

Keep the list of questions short and sweet. Do not overcomplicate the process. Following these further tips will help you choose your participants and manage feedback wisely:

1. Make sure you solicit answers from at least ten people. If your group is smaller, you won't gain enough data.
2. Seek a balanced perspective by asking a diverse range of people for feedback; don't pick only people who are big fans of yours or only folks with whom you have difficulty.
3. Ensure anonymity for participants. Otherwise you won't get honest feedback.
4. Make sure that the survey results go to a trusted third party; do not have people send their answers to you. If you can't do this, don't undertake the process.
5. Have the third party compile the results, then meet with her or him to discuss them (this may be the same trusted person who receives the results).

6. Review the results with more than one person so that you'll benefit from different perspectives on your data. For example, in addition to the person that compiles the data for you, you may share the results with a trusted peer, a mentor, or an external consultant.

### **STRATEGIC NOTE**

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You will see that we recommend ensuring people's anonymity. This is essential. Don't assume that people will be open and honest with you because they are nice and ethical. The seduction dynamic is very powerful and pervasive, so anonymous processes give you the best chance of getting the honest information you need.

The answers to a set of thoughtful questions will give you critical and practical information of the sort that leaders rarely receive. Once again, these processes will take real courage on your part, but the benefits can be powerful.

And the benefits will go beyond what you absorb from the feedback when you communicate something back to the people who have taken part. This is a critical component because it demonstrates that you appreciate the time and attention people have invested in the process. You can communicate back in a small meeting with the folks who answered the survey or in one-to-one conversations. Keep the conversation brief (no longer than fifteen minutes), and share what you learned from the feedback in broad strokes to let people know what you gained. Here are some examples of things we've seen people learn through the process and communicate in follow-up meetings:

- I learned that it would be useful for me to be more visible.
- People would like to have quarterly town hall meetings to build a greater sense of community.

- The weekly blog I started to use this year seems to be working well.
- Many people see me as hardworking, fair, and trustworthy.
- I could be more open about the rationale behind the decisions I make.
- I need to improve my listening skills.

But the process doesn't end with taking in the feedback and sharing what you've learned. Your next crucial step is to follow up on what you've learned—to do something visibly meaningful with the information. You may not be able to respond to everyone's advice, but you can certainly respond to one or two key themes that emerged (such as a need for better listening skills). If people believe that their feedback is truly informing your thinking and actions, they will continue to provide it. If they don't see evidence that you've been affected, you can bet that they won't be so forthcoming next time.

## STRATEGY 3: CREATE FORUMS FOR DIALOGUE

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Leaders determine who gets listened to. Never forget this. You must be disciplined and proactive in your efforts to hear perspectives from multiple layers within your organization. People may not be inclined to come to you, especially if you are high up in the hierarchy; *you must go to them*. You must be intentional about being visible and available to your people. Staying trapped in your office or spending large periods away from the office will stifle the voices you need to hear.

Many of the most effective senior leaders with whom we've worked walk around their company's facilities or their campus regularly. They have lunch in the cafeteria frequently, ride the elevators, exercise in the corporate fitness center, or drop in at various departments or office locations—to chat, not to observe. This is a very smart way to function as a leader. If people know that you have lunch in the cafeteria every Friday, they will begin to show up and talk with you. Folks rarely approach strangers, so we encourage you not to be one.

By becoming a familiar presence, you will have access to people's concerns, questions, and aspirations, which helps reduce the seduction dynamic.

Being accessible does not require high levels of orchestration. The most effective leaders we've seen simply meet with people. They host breakfasts or lunches with five to eight employees or faculty members at a time to discuss corporate or institutional issues, faculty concerns, organizational culture, and the "word on the street." They are strategic in ensuring that different departments and different levels of the organization are represented at these get-togethers. Even contractors and adjunct faculty are invited periodically because their perspectives are different and often very helpful.

Simple framing devices such as these will typically suffice for such discussions:

1. What are we doing well as a company or an institution?
2. What are we doing as a company or an institution that needs improvement and needs my attention as a leader?

These forums provide leaders with feedback about organizational and employee life. We recommend that you include someone who is known as a curmudgeon in your conversations. In our experience, these individuals are often quite gifted at speaking truth to power. We caution against inviting deep cynics (individuals who are angry and hopeless), as they can be adept at taking what could be a productive dialogue down a rat hole quickly.

Remember during such conversations to approach them with curiosity and stay curious. Your goal is to understand what people are thinking and feeling, not to get caught in a debate. Statements like "Tell me more about that," "Help me understand your thinking," and "This is what I'm hearing, am I on track?" encourage participation and dialogue and show respect to the participants.

## STRATEGY 4: HOLD ONE-ON-ONE TOUCH-POINT MEETINGS

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Many senior leaders are externally focused. They engage in global travel, lobbying efforts, closing sales meetings, and so on and can easily get disconnected from their organization and senior team. Given that their external responsibilities will not change, how can they still maintain vital connections and get access to strategic information?

We have helped create one-on-one touch-point meetings for several senior leaders who are almost always on the road. We suggest that these one-on-one meetings be conducted quarterly, if possible, so that they will maintain meaning and currency.

Here is the process for a one-on-one touch-point meeting. The senior leader distributes a small set of focus questions prior to meeting individually with team members. This ensures that team members can come prepared with thoughtful answers. It's most critical that the senior leader clearly communicates that these meetings are intentional opportunities for sharing the good, the

bad, and the ugly. If team members believe that a leader wants to hear the real deal and there is no need to fear retribution, they will provide a gold mine of information.

Here are suggested questions with which to frame one-on-one touch-point meetings:

1. What accomplishments are you most proud of?
2. What challenges are you currently facing and how can I help?
3. What is happening in your part of the organization that is important for me to know about?
4. Are there things you see happening across the organization that I might not be aware of?
5. What is one piece of advice you have for me that would help me in my role as a leader?

As you can see, the inquiries don't need to be complicated. The right handful of questions can provide much of the critical information you need to get a sense of the organization's climate, its pressing issues, and ways you might adjust your

manner of leading to achieve greater impact. The frequent physical distance of an externally focused leader can add mightily to the seduction dynamic, but by being proactive with this process, you can minimize the damage.

## STRATEGY 5: CONDUCT SKIP-LEVEL MEETINGS

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One of the best ways for you to learn what's happening in your organization is to meet with the people who report to your direct reports. There is some risk attached to this, because your direct reports might feel that you are stepping into their territory. But you can allay any potential for anxiety by communicating honestly with them about your reasons, saying that these conversations are not about their effectiveness but about you remaining connected to the organization.

These skip-level meetings are intended to make people working in the next layer down feel comfortable providing you with information that will make you smarter about what's going on

throughout the organization. If you're able to create a fair amount of trust and thus to help people feel safe, these meetings will be great information sources for you. If you're in a low-trust environment, however, this practice might not work, because people might be fearful and thus won't share openly.

Here are some suggestions to make your skip-level meetings successful:

1. Let people know ahead of time that you want to meet with them and why.
2. Send them a short list of questions you would like them to think about ahead of the meetings. For example:
  - How would you describe communication in your area of responsibility?
  - What challenges are you currently facing? What's working well?
  - Do you have a piece of advice for me that would help me in my leadership role?
  - What's one thing we need to change in order to thrive in the future?

3. Let them know that your conversations will be confidential.
4. Keep the conversations casual, and meet people where they work; do not summon them to your office.
5. Let folks know that you have about thirty minutes to have a conversation. This creates an expected start and finish to the meeting.
6. After all of the meetings are completed communicate back a few of the themes that arose. For example:
  - I learned that we need to share more information about the strategic plan going forward.
  - People want to engage in more cross-boundary information-sharing. Folks want me to be more visible and available.
7. Be sure to share these themes with your direct reports first. This will show your respect for them and will prevent any uncomfortable surprises.

If you can do this process several times throughout the year, skip-level meetings will become a normal practice and be less threatening for everyone, including you. Over time, we've seen leaders share

their own leadership challenges in these meetings, and we've seen others share their perspectives and advice openly with leaders. Leaders have almost always been surprised and grateful about the quality of ideas shared.

## STRATEGY 6: EVALUATE YOUR MEETING FORUMS

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Millions of meetings are conducted daily throughout the world's organizations, but the majority are poorly run and predictably mediocre. If you lead, facilitate, or conduct meetings in your organization, one of the most useful things you can do is to ask attendees to periodically evaluate the effectiveness of your meetings in an anonymous format. This will give you the information you need to improve the quality of your meetings going forward. It will also help encourage a climate of candor as people experience the efficacy of this process.

This simple idea is powerful. It communicates once again that you are interested in the opinions of others, that soliciting and giving feedback are normal things to do, and that you are open

to learning and improving. Everyone has opinions about the meetings they participate in; you need only to create the opportunity and the vehicle for sharing those opinions in a safe way.

Keep this simple by asking the following five questions after your meetings. Have participants answer them on a survey sheet without identifying themselves. This takes only two to three minutes after a meeting and will be well worth the time.

1. Given the purposes of this meeting how effective was it? (On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 = not effective, 5 = average, and 10 = very effective).
2. How involved did you feel in the meeting? (On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 = not valued, 5 = average, and 10 = very valued)
3. What did you like most about the meeting?
4. What did you like least about the meeting?
5. What other comments, suggestions, or advice do you have that might make our meetings even better?

Share the answers to the survey questions for those who attended the meeting as soon as possible—via email or another method that suits your environment—and listen to and act on the ideas that people have shared. Stay away from the practice of going around the room and openly soliciting advice on how to improve your meetings; people will usually not tell you the truth, especially if your meetings are bad.

## STRATEGY 7: INVITE DISCOMFORT

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In the classic movie *The Godfather*, the mafia leader Don Corleone stresses to his inner circle of advisers the importance of delivering bad news expeditiously. In essence, he's inviting discomfort. He explains that if he gets the bad news quickly, he has more options for dealing with it. It's essential for you, too, to encourage those around you to share difficult information and emerging problems quickly.

In order to ensure that this will happen, you must recognize and reward the courageous individuals who deliver the difficult news. Doing this will promote a culture of candor and forthrightness. This culture becomes a strategic asset when your people come to you quickly once a problem or challenge begins to emerge.

There are other ways, too, to invite discomfort. Seeking out others who may make you uncomfortable will help you to minimize the potential for comfortable cloning. Leaders often surround themselves with people who are very similar to them. This similarity might be based on gender, race, thinking style (e.g., linear thinkers or more creative thinkers), religious background, educational attainment, or career path (e.g., business-school graduates, those from a development background, or academics).

Such similar individuals are comfortable to us. But beware of surrounding yourself with comfortable people. Invite the dissenters into your dialogues and discussions. You need people at the table who will offer divergent views and experiences. Seek out diversity, not sameness, if you want to create a stronger organization and become a better leader.

## STRATEGY 8: INVOLVE OTHERS IN YOUR SENSE-MAKING AND DECISION-MAKING

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We have found that leaders are best served by involving others into their sense-making and decision-making processes. Surprisingly, many leaders are uncomfortable doing this. They assume that just sharing the facts or their final decision is enough. It usually isn't. We encourage leaders to involve others proactively by soliciting their ideas and feedback before making a decision or arriving at a final understanding of a situation. We suggest that you go beyond the perfunctory "Are there any questions?" by declaring that you expect honest feedback—and that you go so far as to invite disagreement and discussion.

Here are some examples of ways you can communicate that will encourage disagreement and other forms of open discussion:

- This is my perspective on the solution and how I arrived at it. *(In our experience, leaders tend not to show others how they arrived at a certain place in their thinking. Almost always, others will appreciate understanding the intellectual journey that you took to get where you are currently.)*
- What am I missing? *(This communicates that you are aware that you may have blind spots and that you want their help to figure out what they might be.)*
- What are some of your ideas that are counter to my current thinking? *(When done authentically, you'll find that people will provide you with differing ideas.)*
- What advice or perspective can you provide to help shape or reshape my thinking? *(This invites people to add value to your ideas. It communicates that you are open to the influence of others.)*
- What have I not accounted for? *(This also communicates that you might have some blind spots and that you are not perfect.)*
- What argument would those who disagree with me make? *(This is a strategic question in many ways. It asks people to think about the flaws in your thinking, helps anticipate possible resistance to the proposed ideas, and makes them think about how others might see it.)*
- What biases of mine might be influencing my perspective? *(This acknowledges that you have biases. If the people know you, they can share where you might be going wrong or might have a blind spot. For example, you might have a strong tendency to see things in financial terms, but the decision you want to make will have a negative impact on company morale.)*
- Why might my proposal not be a good solution? *(This is similar to some questions above but puts out there that you really want to hear why it won't work.)*
- Are there other solutions that would accommodate more agendas and be equally effective? *(By asking this question, you're communicating that you are open to better solutions and ideas.)*

The purpose of these questions is to invite counter views. Why do you need to invite them? Because they won't happen by chance. Active solicitation will prove less fruitful in low-trust environments, but you can build a sense of trust and openness over time if you persist in seeking disagreement and if you then act on what you've heard.

As noted earlier, you can create opportunities to experience discomfort by seeking out divergent thinkers, especially those with a negative bent. One of the most successful leaders we've seen often said, "Bring me my critics." Organizational critics are often ignored because of their predictable negativity and their prickly personalities. For them, the glass isn't just half empty; they don't even see that a glass exists! Yet, their ability to look only at what's not working and being tenacious in communicating this to anyone makes them invaluable to leaders.

Why are they invaluable? Because they are often right. Their insights can be informative, even accurate—but their negative reputation derails the credibility of their messages. You may find that they are the only people willing to speak truth to you. Since—as we noted earlier—

those surrounding a leader may not give critics an audience with the leader, we highly recommend that you seek them out.

### **STRATEGIC NOTE**

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None of the strategies outlined here should be one-shot deals. Whichever ones you choose to employ, employ them regularly, and make sure you attend carefully to the process and follow through. Sloppiness, inconsistency, or a failure to follow through damages your credibility and invites seduction.

## **STRATEGY 9: MAKE REFLECTION A HABIT**

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Regular reflection is one of the disciplines of highly effective leaders. Self-awareness gained through personal reflection in the privacy of your own head is a powerful remedy for seduction. Some of the very best leaders we've worked with have kept journals for years, viewing them as strategic assets and key elements in their journeys. We

strongly suggest that you, too, find a way to capture what you are experiencing, learning, curious about, or upset with as you travel your path as a leader.

Below are several questions that have been helpful to the best leaders with whom we've worked. We suggest them as starting points—initial guides to capture your thinking.

To make use of this method, schedule a fifteen-minute meeting with yourself every day, and hold it sacred. Take this time to choose three or four questions that feel most relevant and to answer them. Whenever you're able, review your answers over time, examining them carefully for recurring themes, clues to what lay behind successes or failures, and blind spots.

Achieving this distance from your own reflections and figuring out ways to put what you learn into action can be difficult. A mentor, confidant, or trusted colleague can help you to see what your self-reflection reveals and to apply what you're learning in your day-to-day leadership practice. If you don't have such a person in your professional life, find one.

Here are some questions you can choose from when engaging in self-reflection.

1. What issues or challenges might I be avoiding? Have I invited anyone to challenge me?
2. What am I worried, confused, or anxious about? Have I jumped at solutions today to reduce my anxiety?
3. What assumptions are contributing to the key decisions I've made this week? Are those assumptions helping me make good decisions? What are my biases, and how are they informing my assumptions?
4. Who have I shown appreciation to or recognized in some way recently? Are there others I've overlooked who deserve such recognition?
5. Who around me may be shielding me from information that I need? How might I invite them to talk with me?
6. What stories am I paying attention to, and which am I ignoring?
7. Who is getting on my nerves or making me uncomfortable? What might I need from that individual?

Choose the questions that you feel comfortable with and that make you reflect more deeply. Setting aside time for this sort of self-reflection isn't easy; all of us can get caught up in the enduring rapids of our lives and find a dozen reasons to blow off this exercise. If you can be disciplined about doing this self-reflection, however, you'll develop more self-awareness, which can help neutralize the seduction dynamic.

# CLOSING THOUGHTS

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One of the toughest jobs you may ever have as a leader is the job of gaining access to a full range of perspectives. This full range is necessary to optimize how you run your business. In our many years of experience, we have come to understand that most people just don't naturally share bad news. The seduction of the leader is always present. But you need to hear all kinds of news. You can deal with what you know about. Discovering what you don't know about should be your constant pursuit.

In writing this work, our first objective was to describe the seduction of the leader—what it looks like, how prevalent it is, and the main interpersonal and structural dynamics that drive it. Our second objective was to share proven strategies for neutralizing or overturning it. We've provided you with nine such strategies, and they all have these qualities in common:

1. They invite information.
2. They demand listening.
3. They require a thoughtful response.
4. They call for consistent application.
5. They involve courage on your part.

All of these five qualities are challenging. In our experience, the most effective leaders understand deeply the challenges associated with tapping into their people's full range of experience, knowledge, and views; effective leaders tap these resources anyway. We've had the privilege of working with a handful of them to test and refine the set of approaches we've shared here. These approaches will prove useful to you—if you aspire to have those around you tell you what's *really* going on.