

Understanding the leader's 'identity mindtrap': Personal growth for the C-suite

If you're shackled to who you are now, you can't recognize—or reach for—who you might become next.

by Jennifer Garvey Berger and Zafer Gedeon Achi

Millions of years of evolution have shaped our brains, with nature selecting for many adaptive and energy-saving, if imperfect, shortcuts. Some are easy to spot—for example, how we systematically fall for optical illusions and how our loss-aversion reflex biases our choices. Other ancient shortcuts trip us up in subtler, more personal ways.

A CEO named Hans experienced this firsthand as he debriefed his executive team on what he'd learned at his leadership retreat. Hans gestured to a printout—a feedback report drawn from a combination of psychometric tests and 360-degree feedback. He told the team that the report found him intelligent, passionate, and purpose led. However, he added, he was also seen as too controlling, prone to quick judgments, and mostly certain of the rightness of his own opinions.

Hans jammed the papers back into his folder. "So you can see," he noted with a somewhat rueful smile, "these assessments have shown me the ways I am difficult to work with. I have become aware of the reasons behind some of these challenges, and I want you to know that I am grateful to you for putting up with them." He paused momentarily before adding, "I am delighted to say that with this new information, it will be easier for all of us as you are able to stretch your styles to work within my complications for the good of the work we all care so deeply about." Hans smiled graciously at the team and moved to the next agenda item.

If Hans's reaction strikes you as defensive, or perhaps just unthinking, then you'd be partly right. As we will see, it was a deeply *human* reaction. From our work with Hans, we know him to be a respected, intelligent, and generally well-liked CEO. In that moment, however, he was unconsciously protecting his ego and identity, as all of us do when we feel them come under threat. Hans held a view of himself as a tough, confident, and decisive—if rough-around-the-edges—leader. He knew what it took to get things done. He also didn't believe that changing himself was possible. Instead of wasting time trying, he wanted to get back to business.

As Hans would come to learn, however, this fixed projection of his identity and his visceral defense of it were unconscious shortcuts that can point leaders in exactly the wrong direction when we face ambiguity. We call it the “identity mindtrap” and have seen it trip up executives all by itself or in combination with other shortcuts. In this article, we describe how the identity mindtrap can blind us to valuable personal-growth opportunities and how a more expansive view, grounded in the principles of adult development, can help us recognize our potential and improve the odds of seizing it. The results not only are personally beneficial—helping us lead with more ease and empathy and improving our ability to deal with complexity—but can also help our teams and organizations thrive in an uncertain, rapidly changing world.

Caught in the identity mindtrap

Research shows that most of us tend to believe that we have changed a lot up to now but won't change much in the years ahead. Yet we tend to express this belief at *any point in our lives* when we're asked about it.¹ Like Hans, we assume that our identity is settled and that the real challenge is how to stay relevant in a fast-moving world. We may look outward for new information that helps increase our expertise, but we tend to avoid looking inward at how we make sense of what we know. We draw a line between the growing, evolving person we were and the evolved person we are now.

Unfortunately, we're mistaken. Because we don't think of ourselves as changing in the future, we focus our energy on projecting—and protecting—the person we have become, not on growing into the person we might become next. We are caught in the identity mindtrap.

Much of this happens instinctively, hidden from our awareness, and it happens constantly. Like Hans, we might think we're “doing what it takes” or we're “standing up for ourselves” or any other self-justification technique we might choose to explain our behavior as we subconsciously seek to manage the impressions that others have of us. So powerful is this impulse that it often acts as a master switch, activating other mindtraps to serve it: for instance, instinctively arguing that we are right, holding onto simple stories where we feature as heroes and others as villains, tribal—or polarizing—behavior, and inflating our sense of personal agency while deflecting responsibility (for more, see sidebar, “Mindtraps: A fearsome foursome”).²

¹Research consistently finds that people don't believe they will change as much in the coming decade as they have in the previous one. Authors Quoidbach, Gilbert, and Wilson conclude, “Both teenagers and grandparents seem to believe that the pace of personal change has slowed to a crawl and that they have recently become the people they will remain. History, it seems, is always ending today.” For more, see Jordi Quoidbach, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Timothy D. Wilson, “The end of history illusion,” *Science*, January 2013, Volume 339, Number 6115, pp. 96–8.

²See also Jennifer Garvey Berger, *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps: How to Thrive in Complexity*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019.

Mindtraps: A fearsome foursome

The identity mindtrap highlights a uniquely human conundrum: we are trapped by our own egos. We constantly seek to manage the impression others have of us—this person that we see ourselves to be—while subconsciously defending that person from harm. In service of the struggle, our brains reach out subconsciously for justification and help, often in the form of four additional mindtraps.

Simple stories. Our desire for simple stories blinds us to real ones. Human beings are wired for narrative. We love to tell and hear stories—around the campfire or the coffee machine. Simple and easy-to-understand stories are powerful, helping societies, religions, and cultures to form. This is great, except when things get complex enough to stop fitting into our default templates. A simple story makes us feel we know who the heroes and villains are, as well as what will happen next. But we don't really know these things, and our desire for simple stories often leads to unhappy endings in an ambiguous and uncertain world.

Rightness. Neuroscientists have shown that the feeling of certainty is actually an emotion, such as love or anger. And like those other emotional states, certainty attaches to a belief in the absence of formal reasoning. When we believe we are right, we stop listening well to others and ignore data that prove us wrong. This is not deliberate obstinacy; it is the way our brains work. Just because something feels right doesn't mean it is.

Agreement. We crave agreement and hate conflict, having evolved to orient ourselves to the opinions and desires of others as a means of survival. And when we disagree with one another, we experience a social distress that is neurologically indistinguishable from physical pain. This leads teams to fall into agreement too easily and to forego valuable options when dealing with complex challenges. In other words, seeking to get along literally robs us of good ideas.

Of course, this mindtrap also has its flipside: when we decide that we are not in the same tribe as another person, we are likely to polarize and amplify our differences—an equally unhelpful response.

Control. Our desire for control is deeply connected to our sense of happiness. A sense of control even makes us live longer, healthier lives. Yet we crave the sort of direct control over outcomes that is not possible in an unpredictable world. Our compulsion to have control leads us down the path to simplistic and ineffective solutions, often based on unilateral power.

While we can never fully escape our mindtraps, spotting them sooner in ourselves—in part by asking questions about our own reactions—can help us better recognize the ancient instincts that serve us so poorly in a complex and unpredictable world.

Forms of mind

Happily, theories of adult development offer us a map of the terrain where our growth potential plays out. These theories tell us that our time on the planet doesn't just change us physically; it also changes our emotional and mental shape—in other words, our “forms of mind.” Just as a baby becomes more able to handle life's challenges when she learns to walk and talk, and a young child becomes more able to handle the difficulties of his life when he learns to read, our evolving forms of mind shape our ability to handle life's complexities.

Unlike our earliest changes, however, development in our adult lives doesn't tend to show up physically or even in terms of what we know. Instead, we can see it most easily in *how people make sense* of what they know. Academic research highlights four such stages—or forms of mind—of potential development.³ We move from one to another sequentially, growing new forms of mind much as a tree grows new rings. And like tree rings, our older ways of making sense of the world do not vanish but remain within us, where they may, occasionally and unbidden, shape our behavior.

Nonetheless, it turns out that ongoing development is not inevitable: we may grow to a certain point and then stop. Going further means building capacity, and that requires time, self-awareness, and the willingness to discover and examine the hidden beliefs that govern our identity. It also requires humility. While it might be tempting to judge others (or ourselves) on the development level we've accomplished (or haven't), it's far better to view the four forms of mind as an invitation to growth—not an indictment. From that vantage point, we can better see where we start our development journey and, importantly, how we might continue it.

The self-sovereign mind

Holding the deeply critical 360-degree feedback form in her hands, Brenda looked angrily at her executive coach. “I knew that the people who reported to me are morons,” she began, her voice rising, “but what I didn't know until today was how useless coaching was. You said you'd turn this around, but this review is even worse than the last one!”

Brenda's response might remind you of your teenager on a bad day. Indeed, the self-sovereign mind is seen in adolescents, as well as in some adults; this is when our developmental drive stops propelling us automatically and we start moving (or not moving) at our own pace. That can make adult development confusing for us because while we have mostly reached our adult physical form by our late teens, we have the rest of our lives to develop our forms of mind.

The self-sovereign mind is a massive achievement over the childhood mind that preceded it: capable of logic and reasoning, this form of mind is not lost in a magical

³ For example, see Jennifer Garvey Berger, *Changing on the Job: Developing Leaders for a Complex World*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012; and Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

world. But with its orientation to blame and its black-and-white distinctions, it's not well suited for a complex world—or organizational life. With little or no ability to hold the perspectives of others or to understand the abstractions of larger principles (such as loyalty or generosity), this form of mind sees only its own needs and views.

Although studies show that about 10 percent of the adult population sees the world in this way,⁴ we find that few people reach the leadership ranks with this as their predominant form of mind. Yet stress can bring out this (or any other) previous form of mind in anyone. It's therefore helpful to know that it exists, so you can look out for it during tough times.

What signs would indicate that you, or others around you, are operating in this form of mind? Breakdowns in your capacity to empathize are one giveaway. So is an unwillingness to wonder about the gray areas in a situation. Ultimately, a formal assessment is the best way to determine anyone's predominant form of mind, but it's a safe bet that if you're asking yourself whether the self-sovereign mind might be *your* predominant one, it almost certainly is not. We only develop a sense of introspection and the ability to wonder about our own or others' sense-making as we move to the socialized mind and bring the perspectives of others inside us.

The socialized mind

Oscar, a newly promoted executive in a large government agency, had no trouble wondering about the thinking of others. His struggle was the opposite: pleasing everyone around him. His boss, for example, wanted him to be clearer and more decisive. But while Oscar had the skills to lead in this way, he didn't use them when faced with colleagues he admired or found higher in status. He also grappled with this challenge in his personal life, veering from one side of a set of choices to the other depending on the authority figure (his father, mother, or wife) involved. The way Oscar was approaching the issues would have to change if he was to better navigate the complexities of his life.

Like a little over one-third of adults, Oscar was relying on external perspectives to tell him how he was doing, what was valuable, and what success looked like. This outside perspective can come from our relationships (family, friends, or colleagues), our inherited values (faith or political affiliation), or our professional expertise. In each case, the truth we perceive about ourselves comes from outside, from our social surround—hence, *the socialized mind*.

In this form of mind, we mostly protect and project the identity that others give us. When others feel good about us, we feel good about ourselves. For Oscar, a big part of his identity was being the expert who pleased others by solving their problems.

⁴The population data we cite in this article for the four forms of mind come from Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press 2016. See also Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*.

The socialized mind has been a great help to humanity throughout history. It creates the glue in societies and helps us learn from one another and follow common rules, not because we are forced to but because we internalize them as the right way to act.⁵ In an earlier era, with clear and powerful guides to delineate right and wrong and with work staying fairly constant across a lifetime, there were fewer reasons to grow beyond this form of mind. Even today, many people stay in—and at times struggle with—the socialized form of mind through most of their lives.

You can recognize some of the hallmarks of the socialized mind in yourself and others when the act of thinking through what you believe about a topic naturally leads you to what authorities believe, or when you find yourself taking either all of the responsibility for a given situation or none. A rigid adherence to expertise, role, or hierarchy is also typical of this form of mind.

The self-authored mind

Over time, Oscar teased out and kindled an inner authority that helped him arbitrate between the conflicting external voices that had overwhelmed him. Gradually, in other words, his form of mind became more *self-authored*. In this state (shared by slightly fewer than half of us), we seek to pick up the pen and write our own stories—not to be written by external circumstances. For direction, we draw on an internal operating system of values, beliefs, and a sense of purpose that we've created, often over a long period of time. We still care about others' opinions, but when they clash with our own views, we face a tricky set of decisions to negotiate, not a crisis of self.

Problems arise should we become more oriented to the worth of our own judgments than to the ideas and perspectives of others. When this happens, our ego-protection instinct can tip us into righteous certainty. Similarly, as we try to accommodate more perspectives—for example, when assuming a bigger leadership role—we may attribute difficulties to the need to further polish and perfect our operating system. At the extreme, we fall prey to ever-increasing complexity and the relentless pursuit of a perfect self.

Consider the case of Eman. A gifted student, she had raced through a stint in strategy consulting before joining a multinational consumer-goods company and rising meteorically. What set Eman apart was her remarkable capacity to digest information, spot the essential pieces, and make good, clear decisions. She led her teams with grace and patience, empowering and supporting her people to arrive at decisions and actions on their own. She was the model of a self-authored leader: purpose led and always working to be the best possible version of herself, with her core values—excellence, honesty, and kindness—as her guiding light.

Eman's self-authored definition of excellence came under strain when she was promoted to the executive team. She could no longer, for example, know all the important factors in all decisions—there were too many of both. In response, she sent

⁵ People can also be socialized into alternative (or even harmful) social surroundings that reject the rules of the dominant group, but these people nonetheless have an external guide that helps them know what to do.

her direct reports into overdrive to keep up with her need to understand her bigger remit. After all, how could she be excellent if she didn't even understand what was going on?

Further, Eman found her values of honesty and kindness challenged by the more public nature of her new role. She was the subject of several unflattering press articles in which her words, which had seemed quite honest to her during the interviews, now seemed naive to her board. This was stressful—Eman's identity was tied tightly to values that seemed to be cracking under pressure. Who would she be if she were not excellent, honest, and kind? Finally, Eman struggled to take an enterprise-wide view, particularly if it meant sacrificing resources that she felt her division needed. She was caught by her ego's need to get credit for her achievements.

You can catch glimpses of the self-authored mind in someone who is strongly guided by a purpose she sets for herself, who takes responsibility for her own actions and emotions and holds you responsible for yours, and who can name and reflect on (as well as edit and redefine) the values that shape her actions. You might also see that she is blind to her adherence to those same values or that, like Eman, she pursues her purpose at the expense of other important possibilities.

The self-transforming mind

Eman had experienced firsthand how the world's complexity can become too much for the self-authored mind to handle. Indeed, she came to recognize that the effort she spent protecting her beliefs and values was, paradoxically, preventing her from learning and holding multiple perspectives about the issues her organization faced. Eman's values and beliefs remained important to her, but by leading with her truth she was missing out on the truths of others.

Fewer than 10 percent of adults come to see that they aren't the sole authors of their lives but are instead both the writer and the written. They have some—but not total—control and recognize that life's circumstances shape them as much as they shape it. They are jazz musicians riffing along with others rather than believing that life can be rehearsed and perfected. This form of mind is called *self-transforming* because when we embody it, we're searching for—and relishing—the next thing that might challenge our deeply held belief systems. We seek to spend less time creating and defending a particular version of ourselves and more time letting life transform us.

For Eman, growing into this form of mind involved the realization that she needed to stop reaching for more and more achievement by way of excellence—the treadmill she'd been on. Instead, she would have to be open to a much larger purpose, one well beyond herself and her accolades. Rather than focusing on improving her division or even her organization, Eman took a bigger view and began focusing on the health of the whole sector, a landscape that included competing organizations, as well as regulators, communities, and players in the supply chain.

Gradually, Eman's new perspective about her desire to control things helped her to be more clear eyed about which decisions could be researched and which were simply

unpredictable. She stopped requiring vast amounts of information for every decision, became more trusting of her team's recommendations, and focused her energy on a smaller number of truly tough choices. This change speeded up her decision making, made her more experimental and open to new ideas, and hugely benefited her team—empowering it to prioritize and freeing up the throngs of researchers and presentation preparers who had been gathering and presenting more and more information in a futile quest to make unpredictable choices appear predictable.

Less fixated on her own success, Eman took risks that she would have shied away from before and crossed boundaries that were new for her—and the organization. For example, she persuaded the company to buy a series of small boutique competitors with particularly strong social and environmental values—acquisitions that stretched her division's product line and approach to the world. Then, in another departure, Eman gave the boutiques more autonomy than previous acquisitions had received; this contributed to a smoother transition and a burst of innovation that benefited the division—and the company—as a whole. Moreover, Eman's new approach benefited the communities the boutiques had come from, creating rather than removing local jobs.

Over time, the environmental and social agendas of the acquired companies began to move into the larger organization, creating more social capital. By opening up her own form of mind, Eman was creating new possibilities for people, far beyond what would have been possible in her previous chapter.

Three questions to help you grow

Interviews, written assessments, and other instruments can help orient us on the map of our development. Self-awareness is the torchlight for walking through this terrain. Over years or decades, we can see and understand the patterns and large shifts described in this article, but we live them in a series of tiny moves. In these moments, things we were once blind to become assumptions we can see and make decisions about. We can help prompt this form of developmental self-awareness by asking ourselves three vital questions:

1. *Why do I believe what I believe?* We often confuse our beliefs with the truth and rarely question how we came to hold them. To break this pattern, stop looking for evidence to support your beliefs and instead try looking for their sources. Did a belief come from an external authority in a socialized way? Did you write it yourself, basing it on your principles or values? As you examine your system of beliefs, you can begin to shift your attachment to your current form of mind. For example, you might find that your belief that “loyalty is paramount” was inherited from your father in a socialized way because loyalty mattered most to him.

2. *How could I be wrong?* This question isn't meant to help you make your beliefs bulletproof but rather to open them up so that you recognize other ways of seeing the world that might be helpful to you—and might be as true as your own vision. For example, if you question your socialized view of loyalty, you might see how loyalty to an outside cause can blind you or others and generate mistakes that eventually hurt

the cause. The discomfort you feel at this process (“I can’t be wrong!”) means you’re on the right track. Keep going; this practice creates psychological flexibility and opens us up to new possibilities. When used in the right way, this question is a high-energy packet of developmental goodness.

3. *Who do I want to be next?* This question is a beacon in the distance for all of us. We often consider what we want to do next or what we want our next career move to be, but we rarely consider who we will *be* next. Will we be less reactive? Will we have a bigger view? Will we be less oriented to our achievements? If we have a sense of this new person we are growing into, it will be easier to spot—and avoid—the identity mindtrap and continue to walk through our development path with grace.

Our world is changing faster than our biology can adapt. Mindtraps that once helped minimize distractions from ancient challenges are unhelpful in addressing modern ones. Fortunately, our minds can evolve faster than our genomes and can be intentionally developed through practice. Our reflex to protect our egos never leaves us, but as we ask ourselves different questions, we can discover—and follow—a development path that enriches us as human beings and ultimately benefits our teams, organizations, and even the world.

And not a moment too soon. Some of the organizational, environmental, and geopolitical issues before us represent the biggest and most complex challenges human beings have ever faced. By avoiding the mindtraps, and participating more fully in our own evolution, we can generate the collaboration and new ideas needed to solve these challenges. Q

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