FLYING

WITHOUT

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Turn Fear of Change into Fuel for Success

THOMAS J. DeLONG

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Harvard Business Review Press
Boston, Massachusetts

To Mildred and Joseph DeLong, Mom and Dad

CONTENTS

Late one evening I sat on a bench in Grand Central Station in the early '90s trying to figure o
whether I had the energy or desire to jump on a Metro North Train for the ride home. I reflected o
whether I should have ever moved our family from the Rocky Mountains to New York to take on a jo
that felt bigger than any capabilities I imagined I had. I fretted about whether it was possible to mal
the changes that my boss wanted and the organization needed. I wondered whether I could facilita
the senior management team in a way where they would work together more effectively.

I also agonized over whether it was possible to open up the myriad offices we planned to establish
the coming months. I wrestled with whether it would ever be possible to get the traders an
investment bankers to support one another while they were in the same room or in the same buildin
And I had serious doubts about whether I could give the necessary feedback to the CEO so that I cou
help him improve on his already high level of performance.

When I looked at my watch and realized that it was 10:00 p.m. and that I had been sitting on th
bench for two hours, I knew something had to give. After I managed to lift myself off the bench, boar
the train and head home, I began thinking about anxieties and traps that plague *high-need-fo
achievement professionals*, a group in which I'm a card-carrying member. Ever since I finished n
doctoral studies in the winter of 1979, I have been contemplating this subject and how ambitiou
driven people often are their own worst enemies. As a Harvard Business School professor an
previously as an executive with Morgan Stanley, I have had countless opportunities to interact wi
and study high-need-for-achievement professionals.

High-need-for-achievement may be an unfamiliar term, but you know the type: driven, ambitiou
goal-oriented, myopically focused on succeeding, and so on. Throughout this book, I'm going to b
using this and other terms interchangeably to refer to the high-need-for-achievement type.

My interest in these professionals dovetailed with my consulting and writing related to th
transformation process. As I listened and learned and tried to apply principles of change theory t
situations involving achievement-craving professionals, I began to develop a change process for th
group—a process that helps them learn and grow rather than stagnate.

For thirty years I've wrestled with how to help those who are either stuck on the bench at Gran
Central Station or who perhaps should stop to consider life. This book is written with these individua
in mind. As you'll see, it's not a traditional "academic" book; it's not heavily footnoted or jamme
with case histories and references to other scholarly works. Instead, it's usable, provocative, and
hope) highly readable. As you might guess from the opening of this preface and in the personal stori
I relate in coming chapters, it's the book I wish I had possessed when I began my journey. Given th
times in which we live, I suspect it's a book that will be relevant to your concerns.

Today both individuals and organizations face threats from all sides. The volatile economy, th
impact of new technologies, the changing shape and cultures of corporations, the increasin
challenges facing families, the increased demands on our time and energy—all of these ratchet u
everyone's anxieties. High-need-for-achievement professionals, though, react especially strongly
these threats. We become convinced that we've fallen out of favor with the boss, that our business wi
fail, that we'll be passed over for a promotion, that we'll be downsized out of a job, that we'll becom
B players when we always thought of ourselves as A players.

Given our uncertain and unpredictable environment, even the brightest among us are anxious.
response, we hunker down, blocking ourselves from new challenges. We become locked into ou
routines, focusing on tasks that we know we do well and ignoring challenges and opportunities th

might stretch our capabilities. We know this response hurts us and our organizations. But we fea~~~~ ~~making ourselves even more vulnerable by committing mistakes while learning something new~~ testing a new approach.

Organizations are filled with smart, ambitious people who are less productive and satisfied than th~ should be. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, bankers, and business leaders and their manage~ find that they can't reach the goals they set or find the meaning they seek. Yet some of these high~ drive professionals overcome their fears, adopt new behaviors, and lead enormously successf~ fulfilled lives. Unfortunately, they are a minority.

What is going on? Why are the best and the brightest in all age groups and in all profession~ struggling like never before? Perhaps more significantly, what can you do about it if you're a high~ need-for-achievement professional? How do you escape this malaise and become more effectiv~ successful, and fulfilled?

You learn to fly without a net. In other words, you discover how to move through the anxieties th~ keep you from taking action; you begin to gradually trust your ability to learn, grow, and change ar~ you realize that this ability will help you in your chosen profession. Flying without a net doesn~ happen overnight. It's a process that begins with awareness of the forces that escalate your anxietie~ act as traps, and cause you to turn to unproductive behaviors for relief. The process also involv~ adopting counterintuitive practices that give you the courage to *do the right things poorly* before doi~ the right things well. And it's a process that requires you to be vulnerable, something that drive~ professionals don't like to be. To achieve more and gain greater satisfaction from your work, thoug~ you must be willing to open yourself up to new learning and experiences that may make you fe~ uncertain at best and incompetent at worst. These feelings are temporary and a prelude to a great~ depth and breadth in your professional and personal life.

Let me tell you a bit about what you can expect from this book. First, you'll find many stories ~ high-need-for-achievement professionals like yourself. Some describe people who are trapped by the~ anxieties, and some are about individuals who avoid and escape these traps and change in high~ productive ways. Second, you'll encounter a great deal of advice about what to do if you want to ~ less anxious and achieve more but are floundering—checklists, questions, and exercises. As a driv~ professional, one of your strengths is your task orientation, so these prescriptive elements should pl~ to the way you live. Third, you'll find a framework that places all the book's advice and concepts i~ compelling context. A few key graphics illustrate this framework and will provide guidance as yo~ discover how to transcend your anxieties and find the courage to try new behaviors and change.

The book is divided into the following conceptual sections. In the first two chapters, I will establi~ the basic concepts for the book: chapter 1 defines high-need-for-achievement professionals and the~ particular traits and helps you determine where you fit within this category. Chapter 2 gives you t~ framework mentioned above and provides examples and information that will help you use it to yo~ advantage. This chapter also makes the point that the desire to achieve at all costs may help peop~ rise to a certain level in organizations, but will eventually place a ceiling on their achievement as we~ as their satisfaction.

Chapters 3 through 5 will make you aware of the basic anxieties that confront you and control yo~ behaviors in negative ways. They will demonstrate that when you don't confront your anxieties, it~ counterproductive on multiple levels. Each chapter deals with a particular cause of anxiety—lack ~ purpose, isolation, and feelings of insignificance—and how you can counteract their effects.

Chapters 6 through 9 outline the traps you may fall into as you respond to these different types ~ anxieties. Being busy, comparing, blaming others, and worrying are the ways we try to resolve ar~ reduce our anxieties, yet in reality these responses only cause us more distress. That is the irony ~

change. The more we attempt to resolve our internal anxieties, the more we reinforce and feed them through counterproductive efforts.

Finally, through 14 introduce a group of tools that assist you in dealing effectively with your anxieties and their related traps so that you can allow yourself to be vulnerable, grow, and change. From self-reflection to agenda setting to creating a support system, these tools help break the vicious cycles that hinder our change efforts. You will learn the ways to drop your defenses and reach out in courageous and productive ways.

Let me give you a sense of what I hope this book will accomplish by sharing the comments of one high-need-for-achievement professional after a speech I gave. I was addressing a group of high school principals, and after the talk, one of them approached and thanked me. Then he said, "Professor DeLong, I'm forty-three years old, and I find my job frustrating and not enjoyable at all. There's little that makes me want to get to work in the morning. But the good news is that I only have twelve years until retirement." I didn't know how to reply. But now I do, and this book is it. I want him to understand that if he is going to be an effective leader who inspires and guides his students during a critical time of life, he needs to get past his fears and frustrations, his routines and rituals. Rather than get bogged down in his worries about the school board and media criticism, he needs to be more bold rather than more conservative, more willing to experiment rather than preserve the status quo, more open to fresh ideas and new educational technologies rather than adhering to fear and failure as motivations.

If he were able to do these things, not only would he be a better principal for his students but he would no longer hate getting up in the morning before school; he would relish the challenges and have courage in tackling them.

I had a number of people in mind besides this principal when I decided to write this book. Here is a partial list of these individuals; see if you're among them:

- For those who are paralyzed by their fears to the extent that they refuse to learn or try anything new.

- For those who appear successful by all external measures but feel flat, feel unmotivated, and feel like they are just enduring each day.

- For those who have given up and are waiting for something to happen to them rather than creating an action that moves them closer to their dreams.

- For those who are verbally abused by others for trying to change.

- For those who get in their own way when they need to change, creating barriers that are totally in their own minds rather than in their environments.

- For myself, since I wanted a concrete reminder that fear can get the best of me at times when I least expect it.

The old model for high-need-for-achievement personalities was invulnerability—being opaque, emotionally detached, risk averse, and coldly analytical. This book will make the case for a new vulnerable model and offer direction for professionals who no longer know which way to turn.

And this book is for those who are stuck. If you feel as though you're falling behind and need a hand, this book will provide that hand. If you feel like you are not using your talents in significant ways, this book will give you options for doing meaningful work. If you find yourself disconnected from your field, your organization, your team, your significant other, or yourself, this book will

suggest paths toward reconnecting.

If you're like many high-need-for-achievement professionals I know, you feel like it's been too lon since you've had control over and freedom in your work life. You doubt whether your addictions t work and achievement could be managed.

I'm here to tell you that they can be managed, and that this book provides the informatio inspiration, and process for doing so. I realize that at this point you have to take this statement o faith. But as one of the people interviewed for this book told me, "There are simply times when yo have to have faith in yourself and others."

I'm asking you to have faith not just in your need to achieve but your ability to change.

With that thought in mind, let me introduce the next chapter . . . and you to yourself: the high-nee for-achievement professional.

WHY WE
FEAR
CHANGE

The Achilles Heel of the Driven, Ambitious Professional

DON THOMPSON COULD DO NO WRONG. When he joined a high-powered consulting firm right aft[er] receiving his MBA from a top school, he quickly demonstrated the qualities that would allow hi[m] to make partner in record time. Charming, smart, with business savvy, he not only was good wi[th] clients but was skilled at the work—he was especially adept at helping client companies reformula[te] their strategies. Within seven years he had earned a reputation that drew organizations to the fir[m] seeking out Don's expertise. For twelve years, Don flourished. Then he hit a wall.

It wasn't that he suddenly became less charming or skilled than he had always been. He continued [to] do excellent work. But subtle signs began to appear that he was no longer the brightest star in th[e] firmament. He was bypassed for membership on some committees that were charged with shaping th[e] future of the firm. When the firm began courting a major prospective client, Don wasn't included [in] the process. The senior partners didn't invite him to lunch at their clubs as often as they once had.

This was driven home when a position opened up to head a major group. Traditionally, this positio[n] was a stepping-stone to senior partner status. Yet even though Don lobbied for the job, it went t[o] Samir, who was two years Don's junior and had been at the firm for only eight years. Don had eye[d] and angled for this slot, and it was gone so quickly. The more he thought about it, the more he blame[d] not only Samir but also blamed his bosses, who had given him signals a few years back that he wou[ld] get the promotion. Early on, he had heard many times that he was the perfect fit for the job. Perhap[s] they were telling him what they thought he wanted to hear.

Don reached down into the lower drawer of his office desk, where he kept his résumé. But it wasn['t] his own résumé that he was looking for, it was Samir's—he had managed to get his hands on it whe[n] he learned that he and Samir were both candidates for the position. He studied Samir's work reco[rd] and compared it with his own, trying to discern why Samir was considered better qualified than [he] was. As he did so, he realized how he might look to an outside observer—like someone who was s[o] desperately competitive that he had actually purloined his colleague's résumé. And like someone wh[o] was so angry and resentful that he continued to stare at Samir's résumé as if it might hold the answe[r] to why his own career had stalled.

Don was apoplectic when he returned home that night. He vowed to his wife that he would qu[it] rather than subject himself to further humiliation. "They just take me for granted," Don told her. [I] deserved that job. I paid my dues."

The next day, Don confronted his boss about the situation. His boss didn't want to deal with Don['s] anger but he also didn't want to lose him, so he brought in an outside coach to work with him. Do[n] reluctantly agreed to talk to the coach but still was hurt and resentful, and began exploring other j[ob] options. The coach, however, was good and had talked to a number of Don's colleagues prior to the[ir] first meeting. He had discovered that Don had turned down a number of opportunities offered to hi[m] by the firm. On two occasions, he'd declined to attend global leadership development programs—th[e] firm was doing an increasing amount of overseas work and wanted to increase its global expertis[e.] Don had also been reluctant to work with the firm's growing number of hightech clients, claiming th[at] he wasn't on the same wavelength as those "Silicon Valley guys" and suggesting that younger, mor[e] tech-savvy members of the firm should have these assignments. Finally, Don had demonstrated litt[le] interest in developing his own people. Despite the firm's emphasis on nurturing inside talent, Do[n] rarely took the time to teach and facilitate his associates' self- awareness of their strengths an[d]

weaknesses—he expected them to learn these things on their own.

When the coach talked to Don about these issues, Don was initially defensive. He rationalized h[is] unwillingness to take on these responsibilities, insisting that he should be doing what he did best an[d] not wasting the firm's money in areas outside of his expertise.

It took a long time and a lot of work with the coach before he finally recognized what the re[al] problem was: Don didn't want to do anything that might make him look bad. As he said, "I was [a] straight A student all my life. I was always on the fast track at this firm, and my work was alway[s] superior. I was afraid that if I tried something new I would look dumb in front of those Silicon Valle[y] clients. And I was nervous about having those open and honest conversations with my own people— I've never been good at touchy-feely stuff."

In short, Don was a *high-need-for-achievement professional* who also had a high need to prote[ct] himself. He wanted to stick with his strengths and never expose his weaknesses. As a result, he ha[d] created his own career wall and subsequently hit it hard, as fast-trackers tend to do.

Are you, like Don, a high-need-for-achievement individual who has found yourself in a simil[ar] position? Or, if you haven't suffered his fate yet, do you see it as a possibility in the future?

Let me assure you that if you are like Don, this condition isn't fatal to your career. Even better, n[o] matter how driven you are, you can avoid the traps that your drive creates and achieve care[er] satisfaction. To avoid these traps and achieve this success, however, you need to be aware of two ke[y] issues:

- How your high-need-for-achievement personality can cause you to sabotage your career without even knowing it.

- How a dynamic process exists that can help you understand why you sabotage yourself and how you can rise above it to find the achievement and fulfillment you seek.

The chapter is divided into two sections that correspond to these issues. Let's begin by introduci[ng] the eleven traits of high-need-for-achievement types so you can see if any (or all) resonate with you.

Why Your Drive Can Cause You to Stall

Mark, a well-known CEO, told me of the time he visited his brother in a drug treatment center. Th[is] was the third time Mark's brother, a highly successful physician, had attempted to break his addicti[on] to prescription drugs. Mark said that he would always remember the experience of being confronte[d] by his brother during a family group session. As they sat in the circle his brother said to him, "Mar[k,] there really isn't much difference between us. We are both addicts but of a different kind. M[y] addiction ruined my first family and my career, and I'm still trying to salvage it after thirty years [of] struggle. And your addiction to achieve and succeed has made you famous. But just realize that th[e] difference between us is minimal."

When teaching various groups of executives, I relate the story of Mark and his brother. Each grou[p] responds similarly. They relate to these two professionally successful men and see that they liv[e] largely on the edge of their own insatiable need to keep achieving at all costs. They realize that the[y] often shoot themselves in the foot because of their need to cross achievement markers off their lists— activities, assignments, and projects. And they also realize that their lists of things to do keep gettin[g] longer and longer the more they achieve. One newly minted doctor named Sara who was in the proce[ss] of setting up her practice said, "I should have realized sooner that the more I cross o[ff] accomplishments and activities on the top of the page the more I add things to the bottom. My wor[k]

is whether or not this is going to be the pattern for my life. If I keep this up, all I will be at the end my ~~life is tired.~~" Paul, a professor friend, once took me into his office and pointed out a pile notepads that had accumulated over his thirty-year career. He had kept all his "to-do" lists, and eac list was filled with crossed-out items signifying that they had been accomplished. Paul said, "Mayl at my funeral I should have these notepads stacked next to my casket as a way of showing what n life was all about."

This need to achieve is one of the central psychosocial needs that psychologists have been studyir for years. Such needs or social motives are very different from physiological needs as defined l Abraham Maslow. Maslow suggests that our physiological needs can be extinguished temporaril through obvious and simple interventions. If we are thirsty we can drink water, and the need extinguished for the time being. The same holds true for sleep, eating, sex, and so forth. Psychologic theorist David McClelland, however, describes our psychosocial needs as producing the exact opposi effect. In other words, as we strive to meet our needs to achieve, the need becomes greater ar greater.[1] It fact, it becomes insatiable, so that the more we achieve, the more we want to achieve. also makes it difficult to do anything else other than think about or do work.

Some professionals live with the false assumption that once they achieve a certain amount of statu financial security, titles, or homes they will be satisfied to throttle back the drive to achieve. But th research says otherwise. This need to accomplish will persist forever. One of my clients, Sam, told n that he had the goal of achieving a certain net worth (a very big number) before he was sixty. Once l achieved it at age fifty-seven, however, he simply recalibrated his number upward and continue driving for the adjusted number. Kavita Wentworth, a leading Wall Street analyst, reported a simila experience when she built her second home in a resort town. Once it was completed she becan frustrated with her older "full-time" home and began redecorating it from top to bottom. The last tin we spoke she was considering buying another house so she would have places both in a warm-weath and cold-weather port.

I don't write this to insult you—as you no doubt realize, I'm a driven professional myself—but state a truth that has escaped a lot of high-need-for-achievement people I know. In fact, the positiv aspects of this personality type make your success possible. If you didn't have an insatiable desire f achievement and weren't so task focused, you would not have done as well as you have. But ambitic can be blinding, and when you're so obsessed with completing tasks effectively and maintaining yo stature within the organization, you may miss some critical aspects that define you—and that can kee you from achieving the success you seek.

Therefore, let's examine eleven traits common to driven professionals that often cause the problems in terms of career success and satisfaction:

• Being driven to achieve the task

• Failing to differentiate "urgent" from merely "important"

• Having difficulty with delegating

• Struggling with producer-to-supervisor transition

• Obsessing about getting the job done at all costs

• Avoiding difficult conversations

• Craving feedback

- Swinging from one mood extreme to another

- Comparing

- Taking only safe risks

- Feeling guilty

Being Driven to Achieve the Task

Individuals with a high need for achievement are motivated by superior performance. They want to do a job as well as it's ever been done, if not better. The most fundamental motivator is the need for task challenge. They hunger for jobs that push them, where they have tough problems that they must solve. They relish helping their bosses or clients through task accomplishment. In general, if the work is tedious or repetitive, they become unmotivated, start blaming others for their predicament, or get depressed because they feel like they are falling behind others. Even worse, they become absolutely convinced that their friends and colleagues are doing a much better job than they are of leveraging their talents and growing by leaps and bounds while they are stagnating. In short, they become caught up in their tasks and fight against anything—transparency, empathy, etc.—that doesn't help them directly with the superior accomplishment of the task.

Failing to Differentiate "Urgent" from Merely "Important"

Problems with differentiating between what is important and what is urgent is another characteristic these driven professionals share. Nancy, an accountant, said that she became nervous whenever she reviewed all the tasks she listed on her to-do list; all of them seemed equally urgent and important. The notion of downgrading any of the items to a less urgent category struck her as unbearable. When Nancy arrived at work in the morning, everything on her list seemed equally important: watering the plants, giving a performance evaluation to a subordinate, and creating a final presentation for an important meeting in the afternoon. Even when she managed to cross an item off her list, she felt compelled to add other items to replace them. In a frenzied state where even relatively minor responsibilities loomed large, Nancy couldn't take a step back to reflect. Perhaps even more important, she was unable to have an honest and in-depth conversation with her colleagues; she lacked the time and focus to think about and respond to what was important to someone else.

Having Difficulty with Delegating

High achievers get such a thrill from accomplishing the task at hand that they find it difficult to delegate. Taking the time to teach others slows down their own process of achievement. They are also one step removed from the specific task at hand if someone else accomplishes it instead. And at a deeper, more psychological level, people who relish crossing items off the list worry that if they delegate tasks, their subordinates won't be able to accomplish the task as well as they would have. One professional admitted, "I hate to state out loud that I think I can do something better than anyone else, but I really think at some fundamental level I believe it. I know it can't be true, but the way I hold on to tasks make me wonder whether I really trust anyone else to do it better than I." Obviously, delegating requires a certain degree of vulnerability, since you have to extend trust that others will meet your high standards. The other challenge of delegating centers on the time it will take to sit down and teach someone else how to do a particular project. If the boss slows down his productivity in order to teach, he can become frustrated because he's accomplishing less, at least in the short term.

High achievers also worry that if they give up their technical functional work or expertise for a mo[re] supervisory position, they may lose their ability to do the work. Dalton and Thompson's resear[ch] identified the challenge that individual contributors had in moving to the next stage of a care[er]. Moving from stage 2 (technical functional competence) to mentor becomes a huge psychologic[al] hurdle; people's self-concept is wrapped up in being great at doing something thoroughly and well[.] The thought of giving up this technical superiority in exchange for managing others is scary. Th[e] assumption is that these individuals, who are technically competent, will be good at managing becau[se] they have illustrated that they are good at producing. This assumption, however, doesn't reflect man[y] new managers' realities; they often find that learning to manage is like learning to speak a differe[nt] language. As a result, some of them micromanage while others continue to be individual contributo[rs] despite their managerial titles; both behaviors irritate their direct reports and prevent them fro[m] learning and growing in a new role.

The other reality is that managing and mentoring others is harder to measure than performing [a] specific task. How do you know if your feedback to a direct report is doing any good? How do yo[u] measure the "softer" skills of being a manager that have longer-term implications and fewer shor[t-] term outcomes? High-need-for-achievement personalities struggle with these managerial facts of lif[e,] and their struggle prevents them from focusing on long-term goals, which drives them a bit batty.

Driven professionals possess tunnel vision when it comes to getting jobs done with all due speed a[nd] effectiveness. They're very impatient with any obstacle or anyone who gets in the way of reaching th[e] desired outcome. One doctor admitted that he became frustrated with those who got in the way of h[is] crossing things off his list—who prevented him from finishing a task when he wanted to do it [or] assembling the resources necessary to purchase state-of-the-art medical technology. This was also tru[e] when he was home and his young children didn't achieve what he felt they should achieve, such [as] getting certain grades at school—it got in the way of his crossing things off his list as a paren[t.] Getting things done is difficult when there are interruptions, like the need to coach or mentor [a] younger doctor, for example, or taking a few minutes to give feedback to another person. When you'[re] task driven like this doctor, you want to finish the examination and procedure quickly and expertl[y.] Getting these tasks done well and efficiently is what is motivating and energizing short term.

I know about avoiding difficult conversations from hard experience. Years ago, Steve, a younge[r] associate, and I had made a presentation to a client, and we didn't get the business. Though this w[as] disappointing, it wasn't as disappointing as my lack of courage and urgency in giving feedback [to] Steve immediately. We had flown to Chicago for the presentation, and I thought Steve was clear abo[ut] what he would present. During the meeting, though, he departed from our prearranged agenda an[d] addressed a topic we had not planned to include in the presentation. I could tell that he was goi[ng] down a path that might be counterproductive, and I should have stopped him. But I didn't.

Even worse, on the trip back home, I failed to explain to Steve the mistake he had made. As I lo[ok] back now, I can rationalize why I didn't speak up. I had phone calls to make. I needed to text a doze[n] people before we got to the plane. I was worried about the weather. I needed to return to Boston for [a] family activity. The list went on. But by delaying a simple but honest conversation I set the stage for [a] future encounter that proved more unsettling than the botched meeting and subsequent failure to [be]

honest with Steve and truly manage him.

Nearly eight months later, in December, it was time for performance reviews. When Steve came to my office, I asked him if he remembered the trip to Chicago, and he said, "Of course." I then began to tell him what he had done wrong during the presentation: "Steve, when we met with the private equity firm in Chicago last April you skipped the most important part of the presentation and went on to something that really wasn't helpful." Steve just stared at me. Before he replied I could see that his face was turning red. He responded in a hurt tone, explaining why he had made the presentation the way he had. After what seemed like an hour (and was probably no more than ten seconds), I offered a defensive response to his response—I told him how busy I was that day and that the conversation just got pushed to the side.

Though I said this in a matter-of-fact manner, I felt embarrassed and exposed. I felt that I had been caught in a lie or at least a deception. My voice might have been steady, but the rest of me was not. My face felt hot. My hands began to sweat. Steve, who had always trusted me, was literally pulling away from me, edging his chair back. I thought I knew exactly what he was thinking. The words that should have been coming out of his mouth were, "Why didn't you tell me then? I thought we had a close relationship. I trusted you explicitly and this is what I get." In just a few minutes, I had changed the nature of a relationship from one that was based on high engagement and great commitment to one that was perfunctory and contractual in nature. Or at least that is how Steve began to think and act. What made it worse is that I tried to cover myself. Instead of leveling with him and having an honest and open conversation, I was defensive. I was again afraid of being vulnerable.

In the past when a boss had let me down, I had made assumptions about the boss's behavior. I could imagine Steve reflecting: "Now I know why Tom took another colleague with him on those two other trips to meet clients. Now I know why he spent less time with me in the last few months. Now I know why Tom had dinner with two other colleagues and I wasn't invited." These were all fiction, but in Steve's mind they all seemed like facts. They were logical conclusions based on how I acted during and after our presentation in Chicago and the performance review eight months later.

I never was able to establish a trusting relationship with Steve again. This hurt Steve, it hurt the company, and it hurt me. Steve left the firm a few months later. And I believe to this day that it happened because I was myopically focused on accomplishing short-term tasks at the expense of longer-term relationships. I wanted to get my short-term tasks done come hell or high water. And—yes—I feared having an honest conversation. As a result, I wasn't open and honest with Steve. I didn't want to deal with the messy, nontask issues involved in an awkward, uncomfortable conversation. I didn't want to be vulnerable and admit that I had made a mistake.

Craving Feedback

High-need-for-achievement personalities crave feedback more than the general population as a whole. They want to perform as well as possible, which in turn means getting feedback on what they are not doing well and what they could do to improve. Though these individuals want feedback, they don't always respond well to it, especially when it's negative. That's partly because they so rarely hear bad things about their performance. Negative feedback hurts them deeply because they feel like they are not meeting expectations or perceived expectations. They are hardwired to try and exceed expectations at all costs. They want to please everyone all the time and when that doesn't happen, they manipulate their environment so they hear what they want to hear at the time they want to hear it from the person they want to hear it from. In other words, though they want feedback, they are unwilling to make themselves sufficiently vulnerable to take it in objectively and deeply; they fail to display the resilience to learn from the feedback and improve how they handle similar situations the next time.

One reflective leader told me, "When I'm discouraged I know exactly who to go to who will tell m̶e̶ ~~how great I am so that I quit feeling sorry for myself. I've never sat down consciously and figured o̶u̶t~~ how I construct my environment to reinforce all my tendencies, but I'm sure it wouldn't take me lo̶n̶g̶ to do it."

Swinging from One Extreme Mood to Another

Why don't high achievers want critical feedback? If they're smart and have achieved a certain amou̶n̶t̶ of success, why can't they just deal with the truth? Two reasons: self-loathing and self-criticism. Th̶i̶s̶ is one end of their mood spectrum, and they often swing to this end with surprising speed, as we w̶i̶l̶l̶ see.

Figure 1-1 illustrates how a normal distribution of the population deals with accomplishing task̶s̶,̶ being responsible, and taking in feedback. At one tail of the distribution are individuals who a̶r̶e̶ hyper-self-critical when it comes to following through and accomplishing tasks. At the other end o̶f̶ the distribution is a subgroup defined as hyperresponsible.

FIGURE 1-1

The anxiety curve

When high-need-for-achievement personalities trip and perceive that they have been less than successful, they move quickly fr̶o̶m̶ seeing themselves as responsible to seeing themselves as failures. They move from an 8 or 10 to 1 or 2 in their own minds.
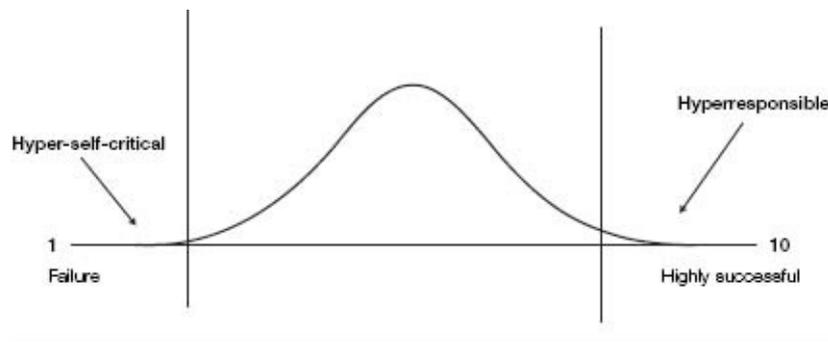
John J. Gabarro, a former colleague, describes hyperresponsible individuals as having a need t̶o̶ please anyone and everyone. They want to accomplish everything that is assigned to them. They wa̶n̶t̶ to exceed expectations on every project. The better they meet and exceed expectations, the more the̶y̶ are asked to do and—to a large extent—the more they thrive. However, when these individuals beg̶i̶n̶ to stumble even a little bit, rather than shrugging off the stumble they begin to believe they a̶r̶e̶ failures. If they see themselves as highly competent and confident, when they perceive that they hav̶e̶ violated the expectations of someone or let someone down, they see themselves as failures. They ca̶n̶ question their overall performance, their career choice, their network, their support system.[3] On̶e̶ friend said, "When I'm down on myself and question my abilities, I find myself criticizing every pa̶r̶t̶ of my life. Thank goodness my children are handsome because I could even imagine myself beginni̶n̶g̶ to see my kids as ugly. It gets that pathetic when I'm hypercritical of myself. Everything is bleak."

Such driven individuals then respond by trying to do anything to receive positive feedback or to b̶e̶ told that they are really competent. They receive positive reinforcement by manipulating thei̶r̶ environment; they jump up the positive self-regard scale to a point where they can continu̶e̶ accomplishing tasks. In short order, they rebound from negative feedback or a setback with alacrit̶y̶,̶ and to observers they appear remarkably resilient and confident.

This particular mood-swing trait is readily identifiable, especially by people who live with thes̶e̶ highly ambitious individuals. Driven professionals can be very difficult to live with because th̶e̶y̶

significant people in their lives never know what kind of mood they will be in when they return fro work. But they come to know they will get an extreme. Someone will walk in the door feeling on to of the world and able to handle anything in life or someone will burst in being hyper-critical, tens easily irritated, highly opinionated, and communicating "Beware." One close friend admitted that h moods were so obvious that his children knew by the way he closed the car door whether he w approachable. When interviewed, his kids said, "If dad closed the door softly then we headed for o rooms because he would be looking for trouble. If he closed the door firmly we knew we could run embrace him and tease him and begin asking for attention or things or simply time."

Comparing

This trait is a central theme of the book, and later I will discuss in detail the process of comparison social relativity. For our purposes here, however, recognize that calibrating accomplishments in th context of how others do is a trap; it prevents people from changing behavior and becomin vulnerable. People compare their performance with others according to career stage, age, ar generation. Their ability to calibrate themselves accurately is closely related to the quality of th feedback they receive and how much they manipulate their environments to hear what they want hear. Many high achievers will seek other opportunities if they can't calibrate their comparativ performance/achievement factors rather easily. They may request a job transfer, leave an organizatio or even seek work in another industry if they struggle to know how they're doing relative to other They also may arrive at a false calibration because they frequently allow their biases or blind spots color their comparisons, whether consciously or not.

Taking Only Safe Risks

Taking only safe risks is paradoxical, since high achievers relish seizing opportunistic risks to g ahead, yet they are also risk averse to the extent that they are fearful of taking a risk and failing. Hig achiever types manage this paradox by being both perceptive about risk and selective about risks the take. More specifically, they are calculated risk takers. They can figure out the odds of a risk payir off, and if the odds seem favorable, they'll take a gamble (though it's not really much of a gambl since they've made sure the odds are in their favor). Ask any lawyer in a top-tier law firm wheth attorneys are risk takers. The same holds true for accountants. Or financial services professionals. C consultants. Their source of motivation is related to their need for task challenge, but they a motivated only by challenges that are realistic and achievable.

One lawyer in a top London-based law firm said, "Tom, you need to realize that the last thing smart lawyer wants to be seen as is incompetent or stupid. Embarrassment is devastating. We lawye will do anything to make sure that we save face, that we manage our environment so that we don look foolish." When challenges and assignments don't seem achievable, driven professionals bal Balking translates into wondering if they can accomplish the task, becoming anxious and tense abo the outcome, and handling a stretch assignment without sufficient confidence. High-need-fo achievement professionals are loath to experience the negative feelings that come with blowing important but risky project. When this happens, their self-talk verges on the abusive; they be themselves up mercilessly. While they might provide negative feedback to a subordinate who takes bad risk, their feedback to themselves is much worse. Therefore, high achievers make sure that the can achieve the tasks that they set out to do. As long as they only take calculated risks, they can avo feeling vulnerable.

Feeling Guilty

Achievement-driven personalities are inherently ambitious, and as a result, they take on ma~~ny~~ assignments. ~~The more tasks they put on their list, the more likely they'll experience what Ja~~ck Gabarro describes as role overload and inter-role conflict. *Role overload* means recognizing that yo~~u~~ have more roles and responsibilities than are achievable, and you start choosing one role over anoth~~er.~~ *Inter-role* conflict means that when one role is chosen over another, other responsibilities are ignore~~d.~~ When this happens, these driven professionals begin to experience ongoing guilt because all the~~ir~~ tasks cannot be accomplished. So these individuals live lives where each day begins with the chron~~ic~~ feeling that they should be doing something else and that no matter what they do they won't hav~~e~~ enough time.[4]

It is difficult for these people to enjoy their work and their careers when they feel guilty all the tim~~e.~~ It is also difficult to be transparent and admit feeling guilty since there's the fear that people will s~~ee~~ them as lazy or unable to handle the job. Thus, despite this roiling sense of inadequacy on the insid~~e,~~ these individuals present a brave, false front to the outside world.

Assessing the Eleven Traits

As you read through the descriptions of each of the eleven traits, you may have thought to yourself, ~~"I~~ do that."

Just because these traits are common, however, doesn't mean that they have to derail your career. ~~In~~ fact, just becoming aware of them will go a long way toward preventing them from doing damag~~e.~~ Once you become more conscious of these tendencies, you'll be able to change your behaviors to mo~~re~~ productive ones. To that end, I've compiled a group of questions that you should ask yourself to asse~~ss~~ which traits are impeding your career progress and job satisfaction:

- Being driven to achieve the task

  - Do you find yourself dissatisfied with your performance if you only do a satisfactory job? Even when you do a good job, do you often beat yourself up because you believe you could have done better?

  - Do you regularly cast an envious eye on the careers of your friends? Do you believe that they're doing better than you, no matter how well you're doing?

  - Are you constantly looking for roles and responsibilities that challenge you? Do you feel you need to prove yourself by tackling assignments with high degrees of difficulty?

- Failing to differentiate urgency from merely important

  - Do you find it difficult to prioritize your to-do list? Does it seem impossible to designate whether one item on it is less important than others?

  - Is it likely that you find yourself trying to do everything at once? Do you spread yourself thin attempting to get multiple tasks done simultaneously because you can't figure out which task demands your full attention?

- Having difficulty with delegating

  - How often do you take over a task that you initially assigned to someone else? Do you do so because you don't believe the direct report can handle the task or because you become anxious that he can't do it as well as you can?

– When you do manage to delegate an assignment, do you constantly check up on that person and micromanage her work?

– Are you reluctant to delegate because you don't like wasting the time necessary to teach someone else to do something?

• Struggling with producer-to-supervisor transition

– Do you find your managerial role uncomfortable and confusing, especially contrasted with your individual contributor role?

– When you try to manage others, do you struggle to know how well you're doing? Does the lack of clear measures bother you?

– Are you surprised that while you thought you would be a good manager, you either don't like to manage or you realize you may not be as good at it as you thought you would be?

• Obsessing about getting the job done at all costs

– Do you lie awake nights wondering about how you're going to be able to meet deadlines?

– Are you always trying to figure out ways to get things done faster (even when your current pace is fine)?

– Are you willing to push both yourself and your people to the limit to accomplish a task?

• Avoiding difficult conversations

– When you know you have to tell someone something that will make one or both of you uncomfortable, do you postpone it for as long as you can? Do you sometimes manage to avoid this conversation entirely?

– Do you sugar-coat performance reviews to avoid arguments and defensive reactions?

– Are you often willing to accept a less-than-favorable outcome rather than engage in a dialogue that might produce a better outcome?

• Craving feedback

– Are you constantly looking for people to tell you how you did? Do you manipulate your environment so you receive just the feedback you want?

– Are you fearful of negative feedback? Do you try to avoid conversations with those who might say something about your performance that will upset you?

– Do you have a group of people or one particular individual who you seek out for feedback because you know you will be given a positive response?

• Swinging from one mood extreme to another

– Do you tend to be either very high or very low, and spend very little time in the emotional range in between?

– Are you likely to overreact to mild criticism from a boss and think you'll be fired the next day? Are you likely to exaggerate mild praise from a boss and believe you'll receive the next big promotion?

- Comparing

  – Do you find yourself thinking about your achievements and career only in relative terms? Do they only mean something to you in relation to how others in your position have done?

  – When you find it difficult to measure your performance, do you reflexively look for another job or another position in the company where measures are more apparent?

- Taking only safe risks

  – Do you feel that you stack the deck in your favor when you take on what others perceive to be a challenging assignment? Are you reasonably sure that you can complete an assignment effectively before you take it on?

  – Do you do everything possible to avoid risks if you might end up with egg on your face? Do you stay away from certain assignments because you know that they're tough and you may not look good while working on them?

- Feeling guilty

  – Even if you're working hard and getting a lot accomplished, do you feel as if you aren't doing enough and that you could handle more responsibility, despite appearances to the contrary?

  – Does every break from the action cause you to feel lazy or slow? Do you feel you don't want to take a vacation because you will get behind? Does a long lunch make you feel like you're slacking off?

  – When you work an eight- instead of a twelve-hour day, do you remonstrate with yourself because you've "taken it easy"? Do you believe that you're letting down the company, your team, and yourself?

The Challenge of Doing the Right Thing Poorly

A S YOU ANSWERED THE QUESTIONS that closed chapter 1, you might have found yourself wondering about the significance of your answers. In other words, what can you do with the knowledge that you struggle with delegating and that you crave feedback? Aren't you always going to operate with a high-need-for-achievement motor?

Of course, but you don't always have to allow this need to back you into a corner or wear you down. Many ambitious professionals overcome the obstacles they place in their paths by fitting their behaviors into a manageable context. By that I mean that they learn to see the pattern of their behaviors and how to adjust that pattern so it's productive rather than counterproductive.

The traits you exhibit as a driven professional form a dynamic—a predictable pattern of behavior that can lead you in positive or negative directions. This dynamic will be illustrated through three charts in this section, but before showing them to you I want to describe this dynamic in words.

The Anxiety Pit

Let's start out by reflecting on your responses to the previous questions. If you're like most high-need-for-achievement professionals, just thinking about your answers made you anxious. They prompted you to consider what you might do differently. They raised the possibility that you might have to change in order to be more successful and more satisfied in your work. That's scary, because change means we cannot look or feel as if we're in total control. Better to wallow in anxiety rather than subject ourselves to honest self-examination; at least this way we can maintain control. Though we may present a strong image to the outside world, inside, questions are roiling about our purpose, our significance, our feelings of loneliness.

As high-need-for-achievement individuals, we become enmeshed in our anxieties. In other words, we get in our own way. Change provides a path through the mire, and even those in positions of power and influence need to find this path.

Unfortunately, everyone—from top business executives to big law firm partners to investment gurus to individual business owners to full-time day-care providers—tends to become stuck in personal anxieties rather than move through them. Ministering to these anxieties may provide some short-term comfort, but eventually such subservience catches up with us. When we're deeply and consistently anxious, we can't face the truth; we hear just what we want to hear. One former leader opined, "I waited too long to hear what I needed to hear. I figured out a way fairly early in life to seek situations and people who would reinforce the messages I wanted to hear. I was forty years old before I realized that I could break this pathetic cycle and learn what I needed to learn. I became so fearful of what I might be told that I basically froze up internally."

An HR leader from the field of organizational behavior provided me with an insightful explanation about how anxiety stymies many bright professionals. He suggested a dichotomy between the worries professionals talk about and focus on—their salaries, their perks, their companies overall—and the worries that are more personal in nature. These latter can include relationships with a boss and colleagues, concerns about their own learning and development, and their sense of meaning and fulfillment. When leaders don't address these concerns—when they focus on satisfying the close-to-the-surface worries about salary and titles—their people become fixated on their personal anxieties

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