



New Insights on an Old Issue

by Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

The Scene. A local restaurant at mid-day. I'm seated in a booth, awaiting a new CEO client who is passing through town. I arrived early so I settle in and mentally rehearse the agenda we should cover. These first face-to-face meetings elicit an energizing mixture of anticipation, curiosity, and hopefulness that the connection we had over the phone

translates into a strong working relationship. I check my watch.

A man fitting the client's description approaches the booth. "Debra?" he inquires. "Yes!" I answer as I quickly spring to my feet. We shake hands and then make ourselves comfortable in the booth. He orders coffee and the ice breaking commences.

We engage in small talk for a few minutes and then get to work. I ask him to describe the events that led to his recent ascension to the CEO position from a lower level role in the organization. He provides the history and then goes on to describe his transition plan as well as several major decisions he will soon be announcing. I'm impressed. The quality of his thinking demonstrates a maturity of perspective that will serve his organization well.

I offer a compliment: "You've used your time in the position well so far. What's it been - just three months?"

"Two months, actually," he responds.

And then one of those magical moments appears - one that will stay with me as I drive home later. One that will inspire me to write another article.

"Two lonely months, I have to say." He continues, "I have no peers anymore. And I don't get any feedback."

A Glimpse Behind the Curtain.

First, I need to share that I have this client's permission to tell this story. When I sought his permission, I explained that he captured in those few brief sentences a somewhat painful truth that I've run into with other clients.

It can be lonely at the top.

I've had similar conversations with other clients who hold a top job, whether it be CEO of a Fortune 500 company, Executive Director of a non-profit organization, or a Plant Manager. As they scale that pyramid, metaphorical sweat pouring off their faces,

many leaders are surprised to arrive at the peak, only to find they are standing there alone.

The World's Tiniest Violin.

Now, I'm not asking for sympathy for these folks. I doubt they want it. You don't typically earn a top job without having a strong backbone and plenty of self-confidence...and, if the selection process works right, exhibiting high degrees of character and competence along the way. Plus there are plenty of perks.

But I do wonder how many folks appreciate this humanizing truth when they interact periodically with their organization's senior leader. It's too easy for us to put our top leaders on a pedestal and imagine that they "have it all."

Perhaps most importantly, I wonder how many of these "top job leaders" acknowledge the sense of isolation to themselves and then take steps to remedy it. Why should they? Because if it emerges as a pattern over time, not only can the top job get even tougher, the quality of the leadership that is provided can suffer.

While I don't mean to suggest that occasional feelings of aloneness are a sign of things gone amiss, a persistent sense of loneliness can be an indicator that a leader isn't getting what he needs in his core. We are all inherently social animals. And loneliness can be like the low fuel light on your car dashboard. You can drive around that way for a while, but you ignore it at your peril.

Why Does It Happen?

Several common causal factors contribute to the likelihood of experiencing loneliness in a top job. While this list isn't meant to be exhaustive, it is descriptive of significant patterns that I've observed while coaching leaders at the top of their organizations.

1. There's No Crying in Leadership. Top job leaders shoulder oversized backpacks. There's no getting around the fact that significant aspects of other people's well-being are in their care. While many leaders savor being relied upon and demonstrate high degrees of resilience, the weight can still feel heavy at times. As a top job client said to me the other day, "Sometimes I am so stressed out, with so much on my mind, that my head feels like it can't hold it all. I run my hand over the top of my head and it just hurts."

Yet it's also part of the social contract we have with our leaders that they project an image of strength and having it all together. Despite [Brene Brown's wonderful exhortation](#) to all of us to dare to be more vulnerable with others, many leaders still feel they are expected to appear invincible, or even heroic. Consequently, the gap between a leader's internal experience and the external image she feels she must maintain can create a sense of acting "as if," driving a sense of separation from others.

2. More Complex Decisions, Lots of Players. The nature of the decisions with which many top leaders are tasked these days has never been more complex. Top

leaders are bombarded with a continuous stream of information through multiple channels, from direct reports texting several times a day to drop a "bug" in their ear on a hot topic to formal P&L reviews with 20 people in the room. And they are unlikely to be the expert in every domain within which they are expected to make decisions based on the information they are receiving.

A leader's ability to make good decisions, therefore, doesn't just require access to reliable information. He also needs to interact with those who can help him understand how to best use that information by getting into the "hows" and the "whys" behind it. But people have filters, agendas, their own spins that they put on things. A good leader learns to listen at two levels: what's being said and an individual's purpose for saying it. In other words, a certain level of vigilance, or even skepticism, is needed.

To a degree, this set of forces presents an opportunity for great leadership to be enacted; namely, the best leaders learn how to orchestrate decision making like they are standing on a podium, gracefully conducting a full set of diverse instrumentalists (the domain experts) through a complicated piece of music. Yet in reality, decision making at the top is rarely that smooth running. Instead, multiple interests are

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usually vying for a top leader's attention, access to resources, and sponsorship. The instruments become discordant.

All of which can, once again, heighten a top leader's sense of holding a heavy pack, being somewhat uncertain of the most reliable information and the best decision...and standing there alone.

3. You Can't Take It (Them) With You. My mother used to sing: "make new friends but keep the old, one is silver, and other is gold." Unfortunately, following that aphorism is a tricky proposition for top leaders.

It's tough, and potentially unwise, for leaders to take their internal work friendships with them as they climb to the top - particularly if some of those people stay on their direct report team. As a top job client

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recently remarked, "As much as I wanted to maintain the close friendships I'd made, it just didn't work right with my new role. I have to look to other areas of my life, outside work, to re-balance that."

Sure, every leader has variability in the strength of individual work relationships. But

those variances mean more when you're in the top job. If you maintain some closer friendships within your team, it is almost guaranteed that your decisions involving a friend and her organization will be put under a microscope and routinely dissected by others for signs of unfair advantage. And despite your best efforts, your attachments may sometimes cloud your judgment.

If you pay attention to the feedback you will inevitably get from others about perceived favoritism, you'll find yourself backing away from those friendships. Or perhaps you thoughtfully began putting some distance into those friendships some time before ascending into that top job. Either way, the sense of aloneness can be heightened as those interpersonal connections diminish.

4. Being Onstage 100% of the Time. Once you are in a top job, your employees' eyes will follow most every move. While that might be exhilarating for the narcissists among us, this fact can be exhausting for everyone else. As a former mentor of mine was fond of telling new leaders, "Congratulations. You are now the S.O.B. that your employees go home and complain about at the dinner table every night." People were typically falling-out-of-their chair laughing after he said that, recognizing the truth behind it.

In addition, being a top leader is pretty much an around-the-clock commitment. Many top leaders work long days...and then go home only to be tied to their mobile device like it's an oxygen feed. Consequently, the very relationships outside of work that can provide balance deteriorate,

or at least are given less opportunity to replenish a sense of connection.

If you're in a top job, these are the realities you must accept. You **are** in a big job. People **do** look to you for clear direction and decision-making, some of which no one but you can provide. Many people **will** treat you differently than they did before. And it likely **is** harder to sneak out of the office early on a Friday afternoon without inciting some gossip. But, as the saying goes, "that's why you get paid the big bucks."

There are a natural set of interpersonal, power, and social system dynamics at play that can create separation between you and others in ways that weren't true in lower level roles. With all that said, however, if the size of that separation is feeling like a chasm instead of a small-ish gully or you are proactively seeking to improve on your baseline sense of connection with others, read on. What follows are some practical steps you can take.

What Can You Do? Several remedies to counteract "top job" loneliness exist. Many of these practices have value no matter what level job you hold. If you aspire to higher levels of responsibility, consider putting them into practice now.

1. Broaden Your Base. Consciously reorient your interpersonal network by adding some new relationships to it. Join an external roundtable of other top executives or leaders of similar organizations. Set up a

mentoring relationship with someone who used to hold a top job like yours so you continue to develop your insight and perspective. Find a charitable or non-profit organization that could benefit from your talents, perhaps at the Board level.

Internally, nurture some new relationships several levels down into your organization.

If you have a top job within your business unit or functional group and

have peers in other business units/functional groups, focus on strengthening those lateral relationships. Both of these practices will help to increase your access to information and subject matter expertise, as well.

Those walk-arounds your HR person keeps nudging you to do? Do them. But keep the activity manageable among your other commitments. Make a goal of 10% more activity of this sort over the next 6 months and then gauge your progress.

Don't go into the hallway and desktop conversations with big expectations. This is about casual interaction that benefits you and the employees. Have a few stock openers such as "what's new and different for you this week?" or "what'd you think of last month's town hall?" Apply a light touch and move on. The biggest watch-out here is to avoid getting trapped into an impromptu attempt to solve a business issue that belongs to someone else down in your organization.

2. Establish New Feedback Gathering Channels. Not only do you need information, you need feedback. For

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example, that leader I described at the beginning of this article? I'll be conducting feedback interviews for him at various levels of his organization as well as observing him in leadership team and town hall meetings.

If you're looking for something less labor intensive, there are some terrific feedback tools available. A new tool I'm really excited by these days is the [Tilt365](#) - an online 360 tool that leaders can use to gather "microbursts" of feedback throughout the year, rather than waiting to conduct an annual 360 process through an intermediary. The beauty of this kind of tool is that it allows leaders to reach for feedback in a much

leaders must perform, since they can't do it all, is to help their organizations make sense of experience, to develop shared frameworks through which collective understanding is built. A leader can do this by being dogged about advancing the pursuit of multiple sources (and types) of information, being thoughtfully inclusive in inviting others into making sense of the information, and then asking great questions in high engagement scenarios - all with an underlying intention of helping his people form an accurate but nuanced understanding of the core elements at play.

What are some practical ways to do this?

Feedback gathering is a practice that gets easier with repetition. You can't be successful without it.

more dynamic way, tied to their day-to-day leadership context.

And, of course, there are more traditional feedback-gathering vehicles like holding skip-level meetings, lunches with small groups of employees, listening tours, etc. The bottom line here is to do what you can to put multiple channels of feedback in place. Be patient with any awkwardness you feel or that you sense in others as you institute some of these measures. Feedback gathering is a practice that gets easier with repetition.

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3. Become a Sense Maker. Sensemaking is a wonderful concept that I first encountered while reading a [Harvard Business Review article](#). The authors propose that one of several fundamental functions

Put a high value on collecting input from multiple sources (employees, customers, competitors, etc.) but don't let your organization stop there. Engage others in the process of making *meaning* out of that input, of consciously forming a shared narrative. Model [reflection-in-action and double loop learning](#) with your questioning - get behind the patterns of thinking and assumptions that show up again and again in your organization and potentially block progress.

Think of sensemaking as helping your organization to form the framework of meaning through which good decisions are made. In the process of doing so, you foster a sense of connection with your people that returns deep value to the business. And to you.

4. Breathe In. Breathe Out. Repeat. The remedy here is to connect more with your internal experience, the base from which all relationship with others is ultimately made, but also where a richness all its own resides. Once I get past the typical eye roll or glazed over look when I first introduce the concept of mindfulness-type exercises, quite a few clients benefit from learning simple relaxation and mindfulness techniques as a way to strengthen a sense of connection to their inner experience.

Remember that "my head just hurts" client I spoke of earlier? He has learned to counteract his stress level by consciously engaging in cleansing breaths, combined with imagery. A couple of useful resources in this area are the free meditation primers and other tools available on the [Headspace](#) and [HeartMath](#) websites.

5. Honor the People Who Got You There. Nurture your close relationships outside of work. They are safer places to pour your relational needs than those tricky work friendships.

To do so, you may need some help separating from the "onstage" experience you live all day at work. If it helps, visualize transitioning through a decompression chamber of sorts when you get home at night (akin to an astronaut coming in from a spacewalk). Find some small rituals to help you disconnect from work so you can then re-connect at home: head out the door to take the dog for a walk, put your briefcase in a closet and shut it as a symbolic act of leaving the workplace behind, develop a special handshake with your kids to signal that you're home and fully present.

Take your vacations. I repeat, *take your vacations*.

Declare some hours of the day or weekend "off limits" to scanning your work emails and texts. If you can't rationalize completely disconnecting, a workable solution is to devote a couple of set hours in the weekend to catch-up or planning activity and that's it - nothing outside of it (unless an emergency arises, of course).

One last note on the friendships you've had in the workplace: if they include some of the people who helped you get where you are, the deep loyalty you feel is understandable. You needn't abandon those friendships entirely. But you do need to be vigilant - both about how those attachments could adversely color your own decision-making AND how those outside of that circle may be disenfranchised by it. You may have to go to extra efforts to counterbalance those forces.

The Big "So What?"

I realize I've ended up writing an article that may sound as if it is pitched to only those who hold or aspire to top jobs. Here's why the rest of us have a stake in this, too: we need our leaders to take action to both stay balanced and nurture their sense of connection to us. Not only is it better for them and their wellbeing, it's also better for us.

It's our leaders who get to the top, sense the loneliness, and ignore it, that can become dangerously out of touch. And then we all suffer the consequences.



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