

Glass Walls: How hidden assumptions may be keeping you out of the C-Suite



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Carl (not his real name) is a high-potential leader. He is smart, good looking, and was born with a cheerful personality that draws people to him. He is well thought of in his organization. Some observers think he has it all together.

I know better. I've spent forty years working with highly successful people. I hear about their successes, but I also hear about where they get stuck. And they **all get stuck at some point**, including Carl. What gets in their way? Paradoxically, it is usually the very thing that has made them so successful.

Here's how it works: If you have ever even *held* an introductory book on psychology, you know that behaviors that help you get what you want get repeated. With enough success and repetition, these behaviors become habits.

When a behavior becomes habitual, it falls out of our awareness. We do it automatically, without thinking about whether we should or not. We **assume** it is the right thing to do. For example, most people assume that in order to become successful, they need to work hard.

Assumptions have a purpose. They bring order out of chaos, allowing us to narrow down the countless choices available to us every time we act, without forcing us to examine each of the possibilities individually every time. They bring predictability and efficiency to our lives. Questioning our assumptions every time we make a choice about how to act would defeat their purpose.

But as the circumstances that led to the development of our assumptions change, the assumptions we hold may no longer be valid. What happens then?

Usually? Nothing.

Our outdated assumptions continue to guide our behavior. But now they may be guiding us off course, functionally barring us from getting where we want to go. Unseen yet powerful, they have literally become glass walls.

Carl's glass walls: Though Carl seemed to have everything going for him, he was actually struggling. In spite of working overtime to succeed, he had a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that he wasn't measuring up. In our work together, we discovered two glass walls.

First, Carl is a hard worker. Over the course of a series of promotions, he had accumulated increasingly important responsibilities that exceeded what any one person could do. His drive to work hard blinded him to the need to develop his staff. Once he identified his assumption (that the solution to any problem was to work harder) he could readily see that to handle his current demands he needed to develop the talent that reported to him. Carl asked a promising direct to take over some of his duties. And it paid off! The man stepped up to the plate with enthusiasm and effectiveness, delighted with the trust that Carl placed in him.

Carl's second glass wall was another one of his great strengths, his cheerfulness. Because cheerfulness had brought him so much success, he worried when he wasn't cheerful, and tried to deny those feelings. This strategy created problems in situations where he **shouldn't** feel cheerful.

For example, cheerfulness may not be a useful emotion when a direct report is under-performing. In that case, Carl needed to notice his feelings of displeasure so that he could take appropriate developmental action, hopefully while the situation was still salvageable. When lost in his cheerfulness, Carl sometimes let poor performance go too long.

Also, Carl's job required him to deal with some tough personalities. Sometimes his cheerfulness diffused the situation, and was useful. At other times, Carl needed to be tough himself. In those situations, resolve, with perhaps a splash of annoyance, would be much more useful emotions. But Carl hated to feel annoyed. Because of his old assumptions, feeling annoyed created a sense of failure. Breaking through this glass wall involved learning to give himself permission to recognize that annoyance and even anger could promote needed outcomes, such as not letting a bully intimidate him or others.

What about you? What are your glass walls? Everybody has some. You can let them control your behavior or you can take control, changing those assumptions that were once valid, but are no longer serving you as well.

Identifying assumptions that create glass walls isn't easy. They're invisible, after all – outside your awareness. Nor is it for the faint of heart.

Talking with an executive coach or other trusted advisor is one approach you can take. Carl's organization provided leadership skill development opportunities (including an executive coach) that gave him the chance to learn about his glass walls. Once he learned about them, he was empowered to make a choice about how to handle them. Then he could begin building skills that he hadn't needed when he was relying on hard work and cheerfulness alone. Breaking down his glass walls gave him access to more of his performance potential.

If you don't have the option of a seasoned executive coach, try the following steps:

First, ask yourself some questions. What do I admire most in others? Who are my heroes? When have I been proudest of myself? The answers will tell you something about your espoused beliefs and values. These are the conscious thoughts you have that you would like to believe guide your behavior. ("I'm a no-nonsense guy. I tell it like it is. You always know where you stand with me.")

Next, consider your behavior over the past seven days or so. Take a hard look at discrepancies between your stated beliefs and your behavior. For example, maybe you value courage, but found yourself avoiding a necessary conflict. Maybe you found yourself complimenting someone you should have been bringing to task.

The times that you did not behave in alignment with your stated values signal the presence of hidden assumptions (glass walls) that are channeling your behavior in unintended directions, blocking you from reaching the results you're seeking. These hidden assumptions, not your stated values, are guiding your behavior. (Maybe you really think that people aren't strong enough to take what you have to say. Ask yourself what might be making you believe that. Or you may worry that someone might not like you if you told them what you really think, and believe that being liked at all times is crucial to success.) Asking yourself what might be compelling you to act as you do when a behavior conflicts with your espoused values can bring your hidden assumptions to light. These are your glass walls.

Taking a close look at yourself won't be easy. It will be important to give yourself permission to be imperfect. Accepting your imperfections will free you up to work on them.

Yesterday's success doesn't guarantee success today or tomorrow. As you move through your life, you will confront new situations that require changed responses. The hardest part of change is identifying limiting assumptions, or glass walls. Once that is accomplished, learning new skills and responses becomes much more manageable. As you do so you will find yourself breaking through to a brighter future. Maybe with a key to the executive wash room.

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Action: Discover your hidden assumptions. Then challenge them!