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Last year, I worked with a senior executive — let’s call him Steve — who had received feedback from his boss that he was wearing the power of his new title in an off-putting way. Steve’s boss told him that he had developed a subtle way of being right in meetings that sucked all the oxygen out of the room. No one wanted to offer ideas once Steve had declared the right answer. Since his promotion, Steve had become less of a team player and more of a superior who knew better than others. In short, he had lost his empathy.

Why does this sort of shift in behavior happen to so many people when they’re promoted to the ranks of management? Research shows that personal power actually interferes with our ability to

empathize. [Dacher Keltner](#), an author and social psychologist at University of California, Berkeley, has conducted empirical studies showing that people who have power suffer deficits in empathy, the ability to read emotions, and the ability to adapt behaviors to other people. In fact, power can actually change how the brain functions, according to [research](#) from Sukhvinder Obhi, a neuroscientist at [Wilfrid Laurier University](#) in Ontario, Canada.

The most common leadership failures don't involve fraud, the embezzlement of funds, or even sex scandals. It's more common to see leaders fail in the area of every day self-management — and the use power in a way that is motivated by ego and self-interest.

How does it happen? Slowly, and then suddenly. It happens with bad mini-choices, made perhaps on an unconscious level. It might show up as the subtle act of throwing one's weight around. Demands for special treatment; isolated decision-making; and getting one's way. Leaders who are pulled over by the police for speeding or driving drunk become indignant and rail, "Do you know who I am?!" Suddenly the story hits social media and we change our minds about the once-revered personality.

The recent story about NBC's disgraced [Brian Williams](#) points to a bigger story about power and fame. How do people start out in pursuit of a dream and wind up aggrandizing themselves instead? They reach a choke point, where they cross over from being generous with their power to using their power for their own benefit.

Take the case of former Charlotte, North Carolina, mayor [Patrick Cannon](#). Cannon came from nothing. He overcame poverty and the violent loss of his father at the age of 5. He earned a degree from North Carolina A&T State University and entered public service at the age of 26 — becoming the youngest council member in Charlotte history. He was known for being completely committed to serving the public, and generous with the time he spent as a role model for young people.

But last year, Cannon, 47, [pleaded guilty](#) to accepting \$50,000 in bribes while in office. As he entered the city's federal courthouse last June, [he tripped and fell](#). The media was there to capture the fall, which was symbolic of the much bigger fall of an elected leader and small business owner who once embodied the very essence of personal achievement against staggering odds. Cannon now has the distinction of being the first mayor in the city's history to be [sent to prison](#). Insiders say he was a good man, but all too human, and seemed vulnerable as he became isolated in his decision-making. And while a local minister argued that Cannon's one lapse in judgment should not define the man and his career of exceptional public service, he is now judged only by his weakness — his dramatic move from humility and generosity to corruption. And that image of Cannon tripping on his way into court is now the image that people associate with him.

What can leaders do if they fear that they might be toeing the line where power turns to abuse of power? First, you must invite other people in. You must be willing to risk vulnerability and ask for feedback. A good executive coach can help you return to a state of empathy and value-driven

decisions. However, be sure to ask for feedback from a wide variety of people. Dispense with the softball questions (How am I doing?) and ask the tough ones (How does my style and focus affect my employees?).

Preventive maintenance begins with self-awareness and a daring self-inventory:

1. Do you have a support network of friends, family, colleagues who care about you without the title and can help you stay down to earth?
2. Do you have an executive coach, mentor, or confidant?
3. What feedback have you gotten about not walking the talk?
4. Do you demand privileges?
5. Are you keeping the small, inconvenient promises that fall outside of the spotlight?
6. Do you invite others into the spotlight?
7. Do you isolate yourself in the decision-making process? Do the decisions you're making reflect what you truly value?
8. Do you admit your mistakes?
9. Are you the same person at work, at home and in the spotlight?
10. Do you tell yourself there are exceptions or different rules for people like you?

If a leader earns our trust, we hold them to non-negotiable standards. Nothing will blow up so much as a failure in walking the talk, or the selfish abuse of power. We all want our leaders to be highly competent, visionary, take-charge people. However, empathy, authenticity and generosity are what distinguish competence and greatness. The most self-aware leaders recognize the signals of abuse of power and correct course before it's too late.

Lou Solomon is CEO of [Interact](#), a communications consultancy that helps Fortune 500 CEOs, business leaders, managers, entrepreneurs and their teams to develop authenticity, make connections, earn trust and build influence. She's the author of "[Say Something Real](#)", and an adjunct faculty member at the McColl School of Business at Queens University of Charlotte. Connect with her on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).
