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SIGHTSHIFT® RESEARCH REPORT — C-SUITE EDITION

## Why 87% of C-Suite Leaders Hide Under Pressure

What insecurity actually looks like at the top, and why nobody sees it happening.

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**SAMPLE**

83 C-suite executives  
within 1,000+ IFQ® respondents

**PERIOD**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Why 87% of C-suite leaders hide under pressure

The stereotype of the aggressive, dominant CEO is wrong. Across 83 identified C-suite executives in the SightShift® IFQ® dataset, the dominant response to pressure at the top is hiding, not proving. Not one senior executive scored in the strongly proving range. The leaders running organizations are not blowing up. They are shutting down, in ways the surrounding team sees but rarely names.

- 1 87% of C-suite leaders are hiding-dominant under pressure**, compared to 67% for non-C-suite leaders. Hiding intensifies with seniority.
- 2 Zero C-suite leaders scored in the strongly proving range**, while 3.6% of non-C-suite leaders did. Overt insecurity at the top is punished, so it goes underground.
- 3 Three fears drive 64% of C-suite behavior under pressure:** Being a Bad Person (29%), Bad Outcomes (22%), and Being Replaceable (13%). They produce rigidity, control, and over-explanation, respectively.
- 4 The fear of being replaceable hits the C-suite hardest:** 13.3% for senior executives versus 9.1% for non-C-suite leaders — the largest upward shift by role level in the data.
- 5 61% of repeat-test leaders saw their primary fear change between assessments**, confirming that what the IFQ® measures is a changeable state, not a fixed trait.

**Recommended next step:** Boards and CEOs should treat identity-fear measurement as a strategic input, not a self-help exercise. Start with an IFQ® for the senior team and a Culture Risk Report™ at the organizational level.

## Why 87% of C-Suite Leaders Hide Under Pressure

*Data from 83 senior executives reveals what insecurity actually looks like at the top, and it's not what you think.*

The stereotype of the aggressive, dominant CEO is wrong. New data from SightShift's Identity Fear Quotient® (IFQ®) assessment, the only leadership tool that measures how insecurity drives behavior under pressure, reveals that 87% of C-suite leaders default to hiding, not proving, when the stakes are highest. Not one senior executive in the study scored in the "strongly proving" range. The leaders running your

organization aren't blowing up under pressure. They're shutting down. And nobody sees it happening because hiding looks like composure from the outside.

The findings come from IFQ<sup>®</sup> data collected from 83 C-suite executives at 36 U.S. organizations, drawn from a larger dataset of more than 1,000 first-time IFQ<sup>®</sup> respondents between 2024 and 2026, making it one of the most comprehensive studies of identity-driven leadership behavior under pressure ever conducted.

## **The Top 3 Fears Driving C-Suite Decisions**

More than half of C-suite leaders (51%) are operating from one of two fears:

### **#1: Fear of Being a Bad Person (29% of C-suite leaders)**

Under pressure, these executives lead like a high-horse critic. Their leadership mistake: making everything black and white. They see the world through a strict moral lens and want everything to adhere to their standard of right and wrong. The result is a team constrained by narrow thinking, unable to develop the creative solutions that the organization's biggest problems actually require.

This fear shows up as rigidity disguised as conviction. The CEO who shoots down unconventional ideas. The executive who frames every decision as a moral issue. The leader whose team has learned that there is one right answer. The leader's answer.

### **#2: Fear of Bad Outcomes (22% of C-suite leaders)**

These executives lead like a control freak. Their leadership mistake: trying to control every variable. They constantly anticipate worst-case scenarios, micromanage decisions, and enforce rigid structures to minimize risk. They believe their thoroughness prevents catastrophe, but their hyper-vigilance holds others back from growing and amplifies the stress already present across the team.

This is the leader who can't delegate, not because they don't trust their team's skill, but because uncertainty feels physically unsafe. Their teams learn to check every decision with them first, creating the very bottleneck the leader feared.

### **#3: Fear of Being Replaceable (13% of C-suite leaders)**

This fear hits C-suite leaders harder than anyone else in the organization. At 13.3% for senior executives versus 9.1% for non-C-suite leaders, it's the largest upward shift by role level in the data. These leaders lead like prima donnas. Their leadership mistake: giving more context in an effort to be understood and seen for their uniqueness. But they miss conciseness. They over-explain, provide excessive background, and cover every base because they're terrified of being seen as replaceable.

The result: meetings that run long, communications that bury the point, and teams that waste energy trying to decode what actually matters.

**Together, these three fears drive 64% of all C-suite leadership behavior under pressure.**

## The Hiding Paradox: Senior Leaders Withdraw More, Not Less

The most striking finding in the data isn't which fears drive C-suite leaders. It's how those fears show up.

The IFQ<sup>®</sup> measures two responses to insecurity: **hiding** (withdrawing, diminishing, avoiding conflict) and **proving** (powering up, performing, seeking validation). Every leader leans one direction. Here's what the data shows by role level:

Metric	C-Suite (n=83)	All Others (n=905)
Average Hiding score	61.7%	57.4%
Average Proving score	38.3%	42.6%
Hiding-dominant	<b>87%</b>	67%
Strongly Hiding (65%+)	39%	30%
Strongly Proving (65%+)	<b>0%</b>	3.6%

The higher you climb in leadership, the more you hide.

This makes sense when you consider what's at stake. A team member who is insecure might over-perform to prove their value. A CEO who is insecure has learned that overt insecurity at the top is punished. By boards. By investors. By the market. So the insecurity goes underground. It shows up as avoidance, over-control, rigidity, and silence in the moments that matter most.

The danger isn't that these leaders are incompetent. Most are highly capable. The danger is that their insecurity operates invisibly. Nobody confronts a CEO for being "too careful" or "too principled." But that caution and that rigidity are quietly crushing creativity, preventing honest conversation, and exhausting the people around them.

## What Changes When Leaders Are Measured Twice

Among leaders who took the IFQ<sup>®</sup> more than once, 61% saw their primary fear change between the first and second assessment. This is significant: it suggests that awareness, simply knowing which fear drives

your behavior under pressure, begins to shift the pattern.

The IFQ<sup>®</sup> isn't a personality test that assigns a permanent label. It captures what's happening under current pressure. As leaders gain awareness of their patterns, and especially as they engage in guided coaching (SightShift's FTSO<sup>™</sup> program), the fear that once dominated their decision-making loses its grip.

The implication for organizations is direct: insecurity under pressure is not a fixed trait. It's a measurable, changeable condition. And the first step to changing it is measuring it.

## **How the IFQ<sup>®</sup> Differs from Other Leadership Assessments**

Most leadership assessments, such as DiSC<sup>™</sup>, CliftonStrengths<sup>™</sup>, Enneagram, and Predictive Index<sup>™</sup>, measure traits, styles, or strengths. They tell leaders *what* they do. The IFQ<sup>®</sup> measures something none of them can: *why* leadership behavior changes under pressure. It identifies the specific identity fear that distorts a leader's strengths when the stakes are highest.

A leader might know they're a "high D" on DiSC<sup>™</sup> or that their top strength is Strategic. But neither assessment explains why that same leader becomes rigid, avoidant, or micromanaging when the pressure increases. The IFQ<sup>®</sup> does.

## **The 9 Identity Fears: Complete Ranking Across More Than 1,000 Leaders**

The IFQ<sup>®</sup> identifies nine identity fears, each producing a specific leadership mistake under pressure. Here is how they rank across the full dataset of more than 1,000 first-time respondents:

Rank	Fear	% of Leaders	Leadership Mistake
1	Being a Bad Person	32.0%	Making everything black and white
2	Bad Outcomes	21.1%	Trying to control every variable
3	Not Being Needed	11.9%	Not asking for what they need
4	Poor Performance	9.5%	Treating people like objects to reach the goal
5	Being Replaceable	9.4%	Giving more context, missing conciseness
6	Being Vulnerable	5.5%	Missing what needs to be shared and affirmed
7	Inadequacy	4.6%	Discounting what is felt over what seems logical
8	Not Being Cared For	4.6%	Rushing past problems
9	Not Belonging	1.5%	Sweeping problems under the rug

Across the full sample of more than 1,000 leaders, the top two fears alone, Being a Bad Person (32.0%) and Bad Outcomes (21.1%), account for 53% of all respondents. One produces rigidity. The other produces control. Together, they create leadership cultures where new ideas struggle to survive and teams wait for permission instead of taking initiative. (At the C-suite level specifically, those same two fears account for 51% of senior executives, as detailed earlier.)

## Study Methodology

**Sample:** More than 1,000 first-time respondents, including 83 identified C-suite executives, across 36 U.S. organizations.

**Assessment:** The Identity Fear Quotient<sup>®</sup> (IFQ<sup>®</sup>), a proprietary SightShift<sup>®</sup> assessment measuring identity-driven behavior under pressure across nine fear dimensions. Each respondent receives scores across all nine fears, a primary fear identification (highest-scoring dimension), and a hiding/proving orientation score.

**Sectors represented:** Financial services, technology, manufacturing, legal, healthcare, education, food and hospitality, churches and ministry organizations, coaching and consulting firms.

**Limitations:** The C-suite subsample (n=83) is sufficient for identifying directional patterns but should be interpreted with appropriate caution regarding generalizability. Role-level classification is based on

organizational records and self-report. The full dataset includes organizational cohorts, which may introduce clustering effects. SightShift® is currently expanding role-level tagging across the dataset to support more granular analysis.

## What Leaders Can Do Next

The IFQ® is a 4-question assessment that takes approximately 15 minutes. Leaders receive a personalized report identifying their primary fear, their proving/hiding orientation, and the specific leadership mistake they make under pressure. The report also maps a path from their current pattern toward what SightShift® calls "impact leadership," which means leading from secured identity rather than insecurity.

**For individual leaders:** Take the IFQ® at [sightshift.com/ifq](https://sightshift.com/ifq).

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**For organizations:** The Culture Risk Report™ extends the IFQ® to the team level, measuring nine culture risk factors that trace directly back to leadership insecurity patterns. Request a Culture Risk Report™ at [sightshift.com/culture-risk-report](https://sightshift.com/culture-risk-report).

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**For a free starting point:** The Validation Check™ is a 3-minute self-assessment that measures whether culture drift is costing your organization more than you think. Take it at [sightshift.com/validationcheck](https://sightshift.com/validationcheck).

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is the IFQ®?

The Identity Fear Quotient® (IFQ®) is a leadership assessment developed by SightShift® that measures how identity-driven insecurity shows up under pressure. Unlike personality assessments that measure traits or strengths, the IFQ® identifies the specific fear that distorts leadership behavior when the stakes are highest. It has been taken by more than 1,000 leaders across 36 U.S. organizations.

### What does "hiding" mean in leadership?

Hiding is one of two insecurity responses measured by the IFQ®. Leaders who default to hiding under pressure withdraw, diminish themselves, avoid conflict, and stay guarded. From the outside, hiding often looks like composure, caution, or professionalism, which is why it goes undetected in senior leaders. The data shows 87% of C-suite executives are hiding-dominant, compared to 67% of other leaders.

### Is the fear of being a bad person the same as imposter syndrome?

They are related but distinct. Imposter syndrome is generally described as feeling like a fraud despite evidence of competence. The fear of being a bad person, as measured by the IFQ®, is more specific: it's the fear that you are fundamentally defective, that your mistakes are fatal flaws, and that you don't deserve

better. Under pressure, this fear produces rigid, black-and-white thinking, a measurable leadership mistake that affects teams. The IFQ<sup>®</sup> provides a more precise diagnosis than the broad category of "imposter syndrome."

### **Can a leader's primary fear change?**

Yes. Among leaders who took the IFQ<sup>®</sup> more than once, 61% saw their primary fear change. The IFQ<sup>®</sup> captures what's happening under current pressure, not a permanent personality trait. Awareness, coaching, and intentional development, particularly through SightShift's FTSO<sup>™</sup> (Figure That Shift Out<sup>™</sup>) coaching program, are associated with measurable shifts in fear-driven behavior.

### **How is this different from DiSC<sup>™</sup> or CliftonStrengths<sup>™</sup> ?**

DiSC<sup>™</sup> measures communication style. CliftonStrengths<sup>™</sup> measures innate talents. Neither measures what happens to those styles or strengths under pressure. The IFQ<sup>®</sup> is the only assessment that identifies the specific identity fear that distorts leadership behavior when it matters most, and maps a path to shifting it.

### **How large was the study?**

The data represents more than 1,000 first-time respondents, including 83 identified C-suite executives, across 36 U.S. organizations.

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By Chris McAlister, Founder & CEO of SightShift<sup>®</sup>. Over 15 years developing leaders at organizations including Universal Studios, Chase, and Nationwide. Author of *Make Culture Your Edge*, *Lead for Impact*, and *Figure That Shift Out*.

#### **ABOUT SIGHTSHIFT<sup>®</sup>**

SightShift<sup>®</sup> develops leaders who develop leaders. Founded by Chris McAlister, SightShift<sup>®</sup> is the only leadership development company that measures how insecurity drives leadership failure. The Identity Fear Quotient<sup>®</sup> (IFQ<sup>®</sup>) assessment, Culture Risk Report<sup>™</sup>, and Figure That Shift Out<sup>™</sup> (FTSO<sup>™</sup>) coaching program have been used by more than 1,000 leaders across 36 U.S. organizations. Learn more at [sightshift.com](https://sightshift.com).

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