
SIGHTSHIFT® RESEARCH REPORT

The #1 Mistake Leaders Make Under Pressure Isn't What You Think

What more than 1,000 leaders revealed about insecurity, and the leadership behaviors that quietly cost organizations their best work.

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SAMPLE

1,000+ leaders
36 U.S. organizations

PERIOD

July 2024 – April 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What more than 1,000 leaders revealed about insecurity under pressure

The #1 leadership mistake under pressure is not aggression, micromanagement, or burnout. It is rigidity: collapsing complex problems into binary moral choices and shutting down the creative thinking teams most need. The data also overturns a second common assumption: most leaders do not power up under pressure. They withdraw. The Identity Fear Quotient[®] (IFQ[®]) names what is actually happening, names the specific fear driving it, and names the leadership mistake it produces.

- 1 32.0% of leaders are driven by the fear of being a bad person**, the single most common identity fear in the dataset. It produces rigid, black-and-white decision-making that constrains creativity.
- 2 53% of leaders** operate from one of two fears (Being a Bad Person at 32.0% or Bad Outcomes at 21.1%), producing rigidity and control as the dominant pressure responses.
- 3 Hiding is roughly three times more common than proving** across the full sample. The average leader scores 58% hiding, 42% proving. The pattern is invisible because it looks like composure.
- 4 Insecurity is measurable and changeable.** Among repeat-test leaders, 61% saw their primary fear shift between assessments, indicating that awareness and coaching change the pattern.
- 5 The cost compounds at the organizational level.** Rigid leaders, controlling leaders, and hiding leaders together produce cultures that quietly suppress innovation, candor, and adaptation.

Recommended next step: Measure the pattern in your own leadership team using the IFQ[®], and surface the team-level signal using the Culture Risk Report[™].

New Research: The #1 Mistake Leaders Make Under Pressure Isn't What You Think

The largest study of identity-driven leadership behavior ever conducted. Data from the Identity Fear Quotient® (IFQ®) across more than 1,000 leaders at 36 U.S. organizations.

The #1 leadership mistake under pressure isn't aggression. It isn't micromanagement. It isn't burnout. According to new research from SightShift®, based on IFQ® assessment data across more than 1,000 leaders at 36 U.S. organizations, the most common leadership failure under pressure is rigidity: making everything black and white, collapsing complex problems into binary choices, and shutting down the creative thinking your team needs most. Nearly one in three leaders does it. And most of them don't realize what it's costing their team.

The second finding is just as unexpected. The majority of leaders don't blow up under pressure. They shut down. They withdraw, stay quiet, avoid the hard conversation, and present a version of themselves that feels safe rather than authentic. The data calls this "hiding," and it's roughly three times more common than "proving" (powering up, over-performing, seeking validation). The leaders around you aren't cracking under pressure in ways you can see. They're cracking in ways nobody notices until the damage is done.

Two Findings That Challenge Everything We Assume About Leadership

Finding 1: The Most Common Fear Is Not What You'd Expect

Ask most people what leaders fear most, and they'll say failure, or looking weak, or losing control. The data says something different.

32.0% of leaders are driven by the fear of being a bad person. Not the fear of failing. Not the fear of losing power. But the fear of getting it wrong.

They fear that they are fundamentally defective, that their mistakes are fatal flaws, and that they don't deserve what they've built. Under pressure, this fear produces what SightShift® calls the "High-Horse Critic": a leader who makes everything black and white, limits creativity, and forces every decision through a narrow moral lens so they can be seen as good.

This is the most common fear across the entire dataset, and it's the hardest to spot. From the outside, it doesn't look like insecurity. It looks like conviction. It looks like high standards. It looks like discipline. But the team knows the difference: they've learned there is one right answer, and it's the leader's answer.

21.1% are driven by the fear of bad outcomes. These leaders become the "Control Freak," trying to control every variable to prevent catastrophe. Together, these two fears account for **53% of all leaders**. One produces rigidity. The other produces micromanagement. Combined, they create leadership cultures where new ideas struggle to survive and teams wait for permission instead of taking initiative.

Finding 2: Most Leaders Hide Under Pressure

The IFQ[®] measures two insecurity responses: **proving** (powering up, performing, seeking validation) and **hiding** (withdrawing, diminishing, avoiding conflict). Every leader leans one direction under pressure. The dataset reveals a clear pattern: hiding dominates.

- **Hiding-dominant leaders** withdraw under pressure. They stay quiet in meetings, avoid difficult conversations, over-accommodate, and present a version of themselves that feels safe rather than authentic.
- **Proving-dominant leaders** power up under pressure. They overwork, over-perform, seek approval, and try to outrun the insecurity through achievement.

The average leader scores 58% on hiding and 42% on proving. Nearly a third score 65% or higher on hiding, deeply entrenched in the pattern.

Why this matters: Hiding looks like composure. Nobody pulls a leader aside for being "too quiet" or "too careful." But hiding under pressure means hard conversations don't happen, problems grow unchecked, and the leader's true perspective never reaches the team. The cost is invisible until it isn't.

At the Top, Hiding Gets Worse

When the data is segmented by role level, the pattern intensifies. Among the 83 identified C-suite executives in the sample:

- **87% default to hiding** (compared to 67% for non-C-suite leaders)
- **Zero C-suite leaders scored in the "strongly proving" range**
- Average hiding score: 61.7% (vs. 57.4% for non-C-suite leaders)

The higher you climb in leadership, the more you hide. This makes sense: overt insecurity at the top is punished by boards, investors, and the market. So the insecurity goes underground. It looks like caution. It looks like discipline. But it's quietly crushing creativity, preventing honest conversation, and exhausting the people closest to the leader.

The fear of being replaceable also hits harder at the top: 13.3% among C-suite leaders versus 9.1% among non-C-suite leaders. Senior leaders who are terrified of being dispensable over-explain, over-contextualize, and bury the point. The more responsibility they carry, the more damage the pattern does.

*For the full C-suite analysis, see the companion paper: **Why 87% of C-Suite Leaders Hide Under Pressure.***

What's at Stake: The Compounding Cost of Rigidity, Control, and Silence

The three dominant patterns in this data don't just coexist. They compound.

When a leader's fear of being a bad person makes them rigid, and the next leader's fear of bad outcomes makes them controlling, and both of them default to hiding, the organization gets a leadership culture that looks stable on the surface but is quietly calcifying from the inside.

Innovation dies first. Rigid leaders collapse complex problems into binary choices. Controlling leaders reject anything that introduces uncertainty. And because both are hiding, nobody on their team feels safe enough to push back, propose alternatives, or name what isn't working. The organization stops generating new ideas, not because the people lack creativity, but because the leadership climate punishes it. In a market that demands adaptation, this is a slow-motion crisis.

Then honest conversation disappears. When leaders hide under pressure, the conversations that matter most never happen. The hard feedback doesn't get delivered. The strategic concern doesn't get raised. The team meeting becomes a performance of alignment rather than a place where real problems get solved. Over time, people learn to match the leader's style: keep it surface-level, don't rock the boat, and bring solutions that fit the leader's existing framework rather than challenge it.

Then the best people leave. Not because of money or opportunity, but because they stop believing the culture will ever let them do their best work. Gallup's research shows 42% of employee turnover is preventable. The IFQ[®] data suggests a significant portion of that turnover traces back to leadership insecurity operating at the top, invisible to the leader but obvious to the team.

Finally, the organization loses its ability to change. Rigidity resists new approaches. Control resists delegation. Hiding resists transparency. When the market shifts, when a competitor innovates, when a crisis demands creative response, the organization's leadership is structurally unable to meet the moment. Not because the leaders lack intelligence or experience, but because their insecurity has been shaping every decision, every hire, and every strategy, unchecked, for years.

This is the real cost the data reveals. It's not that leaders have fears. Everyone does. It's that 53% of leaders are operating from fears that produce rigidity and control, the majority are hiding those fears from the people around them, and the combination creates an organizational immune response against the very adaptation the future requires.

The question for any CEO reading this is not whether insecurity exists in your leadership team. The data says it does, in 100% of the leaders measured. The question is whether you're measuring it, or whether it's measuring you.

The 9 Leadership Mistakes Made Under Pressure: Complete Ranking

The IFQ[®] identifies nine identity fears. Each produces a specific leadership mistake, not a personality trait, but a measurable default behavior that emerges under stress. Here is how they rank across more than 1,000 first-time respondents:

#	Fear	% of Leaders	Leadership Mistake	Culture Risk
1	Being a Bad Person	32.0%	Making everything black and white	Narrow Thinking
2	Bad Outcomes	21.1%	Trying to control every variable	Amplified Stress
3	Not Being Needed	11.9%	Not asking for what they need	Damaged Relationships
4	Poor Performance	9.5%	Treating people like objects to reach the goal	Burnout
5	Being Replaceable	9.4%	Giving more context, missing conciseness	Wasted Energy
6	Being Vulnerable	5.5%	Missing what needs to be shared and affirmed	Hidden Agendas
7	Inadequacy	4.6%	Discounting what is felt over what seems logical	Broken Trust
8	Not Being Cared For	4.6%	Rushing past problems	Low Engagement
9	Not Belonging	1.5%	Sweeping problems under the rug	Problems Fester

The Top 3 in Detail

#1: Fear of Being a Bad Person (32.0%) — this fear says: I am fundamentally defective. My mistakes are fatal flaws. I don't deserve success. Under pressure, these leaders become rigid. They see every decision as a moral issue and force the world into either/or categories. Their teams learn there is one right answer, and creativity gets crushed in the process. The leadership mistake is making everything black and white, and it's the most common pattern in the data.

#2: Fear of Bad Outcomes (21.1%) — this fear says: something will go catastrophically wrong. Under pressure, these leaders micromanage, enforce rigid structures, and obsess over perfection. They believe their thoroughness prevents disaster, but their hyper-vigilance amplifies stress and holds teams back from growing. People stop taking risks because the cost of a mistake feels higher than the reward of initiative.

#3: Fear of Not Being Needed (11.9%) — this fear says: if I am not needed, I am not loved. Under pressure, these leaders become the organizational bottleneck, inserting themselves into every workflow, over-helping without being asked, and ignoring their own needs while meeting everyone else's. They model an unhealthy belief that self-sacrifice equals leadership. Over time, relationships erode because needs are ignored or met indirectly.

Fears 4 Through 9

Fear of Poor Performance (9.5%): Treating people like objects to reach the goal. These leaders drive people relentlessly toward outcomes. Pressure without purpose crushes teams and leads to burnout.

Fear of Being Replaceable (9.4%): Giving more context, missing conciseness. These leaders over-explain because they're terrified of being seen as dispensable. The result is confusion, wasted energy, and meetings that run long.

Fear of Being Vulnerable (5.5%): Missing what needs to be shared and affirmed. These leaders keep everyone at arm's length. Without connection, people pursue their own agendas instead of committing to the leader's direction.

Fear of Inadequacy (4.6%): Discounting what is felt over what seems logical. These leaders retreat to data and dismiss emotions, breaking the trust that only forms through shared emotional experience.

Fear of Not Being Cared For (4.6%): Rushing past problems. These leaders chase future momentum to avoid present discomfort, creating a disconnect between vision and reality that causes teams to disengage.

Fear of Not Belonging (1.5%): Sweeping problems under the rug. These leaders avoid conflict at all costs. Unaddressed problems fester until they become crises, creating the very upheaval the leader was trying to avoid.

What Happens When Leaders Are Measured Twice

Among leaders who completed the IFQ[®] more than once, **61% saw their primary fear change** between assessments. The fear that dominated their first assessment was no longer their primary driver by the second.

This finding is critical. It means:

1. **The IFQ[®] measures state, not trait.** Unlike personality tests that assign a permanent label, the IFQ[®] captures what's active under current pressure. Change the pressure, gain awareness, or engage in coaching, and the pattern shifts.
2. **Awareness itself is an intervention.** Simply seeing the data, knowing which fear drives your behavior, begins to loosen its grip. Leaders report recognizing their patterns in real time after receiving their IFQ[®] results.
3. **Coaching accelerates the shift.** Leaders who engage in SightShift's FTSO[™] (Figure That Shift Out[™]) coaching program, a guided process addressing identity at the root, report measurable changes in how they respond under pressure.

The practical implication for organizations: insecurity is not a permanent condition. It's a measurable, changeable pattern. And the cost of leaving it unmeasured is a leadership culture shaped by invisible fears that no one is talking about.

What Other Assessments Miss

The leadership assessment market is crowded. DiSC[™], CliftonStrengths[™], Enneagram, Predictive Index[™], Myers-Briggs. Each measures something useful. None measures what the IFQ[®] measures.

Assessment	What It Measures	What It Misses
DiSC [™]	Communication style	Why that style breaks down under pressure
CliftonStrengths [™]	Innate talents	What distorts those talents when stakes are highest
Enneagram	Personality type	What fear does to that type under threat
Predictive Index [™]	Workplace behavior	Why behavior changes when pressure increases
IFQ[®]	Identity fear under pressure	The root cause the others can't reach

A leader who knows their DiSC[™] type, their top five strengths, and their Enneagram number still doesn't know why they become a different person in a board meeting, a conflict, or a crisis. The IFQ[®] answers that question.

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[®] (IFQ[®]), a proprietary SightShift[®] assessment measuring identity-driven behavior under pressure across nine fear dimensions. Each respondent receives scores across all nine fears, a primary fear identification, and a proving/hiding orientation score.

Data collection period: July 2024 through April 2026.

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

Repeat assessment data: 83 leaders completed the IFQ[®] more than once, enabling longitudinal analysis of fear pattern changes.

Limitations: Role-level classification (C-suite vs. non-C-suite) is available for a subset of respondents. The dataset includes organizational cohorts, which may introduce clustering effects. SightShift[®] is expanding role-level tagging and plans to publish updated findings as the sample grows. This study reports descriptive statistics; causal claims regarding coaching effectiveness require controlled designs.

Take the Next Step

Take the IFQ[®]. Four questions. Fifteen minutes. A personalized report showing your primary fear, your proving/hiding orientation, and the specific leadership mistake you make under pressure. sightshift.com/ifq

Measure your team. The Culture Risk Report[™] extends the IFQ[®] to the team level, measuring nine culture risk factors that trace directly back to leadership insecurity. sightshift.com/culture-risk-report

Start free. The Validation Check[™] takes 3 minutes and measures whether culture drift is costing your organization more than you think. sightshift.com/validationcheck

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the 9 identity fears in leadership?

The IFQ[®] identifies nine fears that drive leadership behavior under pressure: Being a Bad Person (32.0%), Bad Outcomes (21.1%), Not Being Needed (11.9%), Poor Performance (9.5%), Being Replaceable (9.4%), Being Vulnerable (5.5%), Inadequacy (4.6%), Not Being Cared For (4.6%), and Not Belonging (1.5%). Each fear produces a specific, measurable leadership mistake.

What is the most common leadership fear?

The fear of being a bad person. Nearly one in three leaders (32.0%) is driven by this fear, which produces rigid, black-and-white thinking under pressure. Combined with the fear of bad outcomes (21.1%), these two fears account for 53% of all leadership insecurity patterns.

Do leaders prove or hide under pressure?

Hiding dominates. Across the full sample, the average leader scores 58% hiding and 42% proving. This pattern intensifies at the C-suite level, where 87% of executives are hiding-dominant and zero score as strongly proving.

Can insecurity be measured?

Yes. The Identity Fear Quotient[®] (IFQ[®]) is a 4-question assessment that identifies the specific identity fear driving a leader's behavior under pressure. It has been taken by more than 1,000 leaders across 36 U.S. organizations. Unlike personality assessments that measure traits or strengths, the IFQ[®] measures the root cause of leadership behavior change under stress.

Can a leader's fear change?

Yes. Among leaders who took the IFQ[®] more than once, 61% saw their primary fear change. The IFQ[®] measures current state under pressure, not a permanent trait. Awareness and coaching, particularly SightShift's FTSO[™] (Figure That Shift Out[™]) program, are associated with measurable shifts.

How is this different from imposter syndrome research?

Imposter syndrome is a broad category describing the feeling of being a fraud. The IFQ[®] provides a more precise diagnosis: it identifies which of nine specific fears is driving behavior under pressure, what leadership mistake that fear produces, and whether the leader's response is proving or hiding. This specificity enables targeted intervention rather than general advice.

How was the study conducted?

More than 1,000 leaders across 36 U.S. organizations completed the IFQ[®] between July 2024 and April 2026. The dataset includes 83 identified C-suite executives and spans financial services, technology, manufacturing, legal, healthcare, education, and other sectors.

By Chris McAlister, Founder & CEO of SightShift[®]. 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®

SightShift® develops leaders who develop leaders. Founded by Chris McAlister, SightShift® is the only leadership development company that measures how insecurity drives leadership failure. The Identity Fear Quotient® (IFQ®) has been taken by more than 1,000 leaders across 36 U.S. organizations. Learn more at sightshift.com.

Suggested citation: McAlister, C. (2026). *The #1 Mistake Leaders Make Under Pressure Isn't What You Think* (SightShift Research Report SS-RR-2026-01). SightShift®.