

Powerful Victims

Rajeev Peshawaria, LEC Founder & President

A decade ago while working at a large bank, John hit what he perceived at the time to be a low point in his career. He had just returned to New York after completing a four year expatriate assignment in Asia. His bosses had called him back to a so called “a bigger role” as a reward for his excellent leadership in Asia, but the truth was very different. Unlike in Asia where he was a big fish in a small pond and could get a lot done for his division, in the head office so many people needed to be consulted before anything could proceed, and internal politics was fierce. To make matters worse, he did not have many strong relationships in New York anymore because most of his compatriots had either left or were overseas. It became clear to him within six months that his career was going nowhere, and he decided to leave. It took him a few months to land a big job at a competitor bank, but to his surprise, when he put in his papers, his bosses began to pressurize him to stay.

Over the next few days his bosses asked him why he wanted to leave. He leveled with them and told them exactly how he felt. To the organization’s credit, they decided to “do whatever was necessary” to prevent a high performing employee from leaving, and offered him a big assignment based in London with responsibility spanning the entire Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region.

“But I relocated my family back from Asia only a year ago, and the kids are only just adjusting into their new school here,” he pleaded. However, he eventually agreed to stay (and go to London) because they promised him a big promotion within a year if he did a good job. Energized by the prospects, he wasted no time and began working with full energy and enthusiasm on his new mandate. The results were visible within months, and as year-end approached, he started looking forward to the big celebration that would follow soon after his promotion announcement. However,

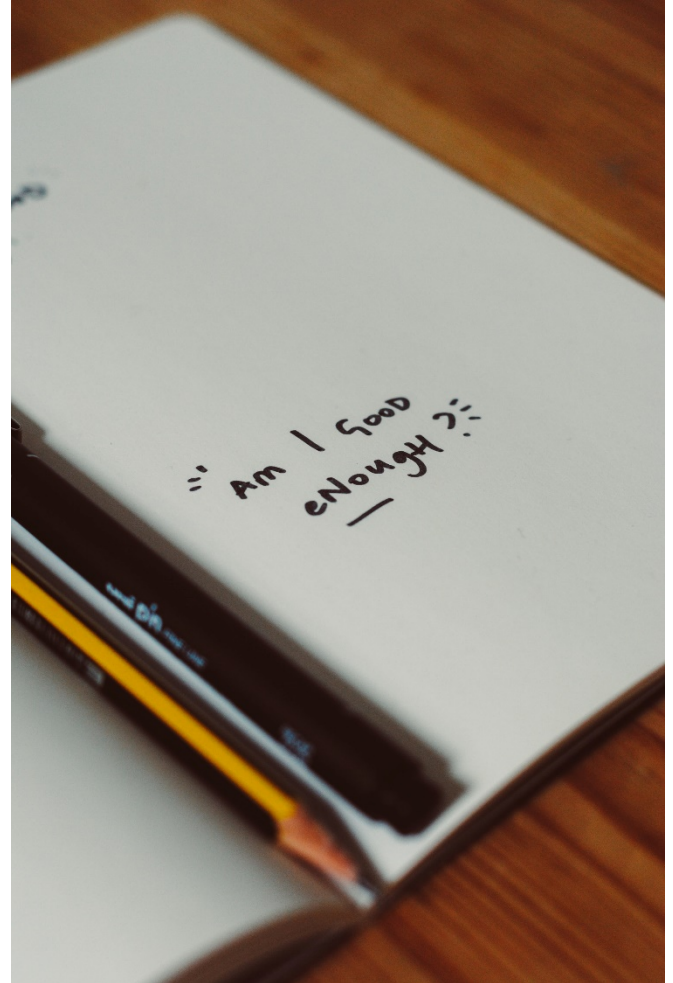


Image Credit @ Unsplash [Hello I'm Nik](#)

to his surprise, he did not make it – the promotion did not happen. His bosses told him that they had tried their best but were unable to push the promotion through because it had been a difficult year for the bank overall. They reassured him that he was considered a high-potential emerging leader and would definitely be promoted the following year.

John was crushed. He could not understand why his bosses had not honored their commitment. He felt particularly cheated because he had already declined the big offer from the competitor bank a year ago in New York, and had put his family and himself through yet another relocation. It was clear to him that this was the end of the road for him with his present employer, and began a job search for the second time in just eighteen months.

As he waited impatiently for an offer to come along, John spent probably the worst months of his professional life in London. His anger and resentment towards his bosses - and the organization as a whole - grew by the day. He just couldn't stand it anymore and wanted to teach them a lesson by quitting as soon as possible. He also felt humiliated facing his colleagues, all of who knew about the promise that wasn't kept. This time he would not fall for any more false promises, he concluded.

His lucky break came exactly three months after the bad news, and he left to take on a senior leadership position with an impressive title at another company back in the US. From this point onwards, John went from strength to strength in his career, eventually founding his own company of which he is now President. At a recent interview for a business magazine, he reflected upon his career moves, successes and failures. One of the questions the interviewer posed to him was to describe how he felt when he landed the C-Suite job and became a senior leader for the first time. Here's what he said, "I did not become a leader when I landed that big job. I did not become a leader when I was promoted to an even bigger one. I did not even become a leader when I became President. My promotions and progressions have nothing

To do with whether or not I am a leader. I became a leader a year after leaving my job in London. As I reflected, I realized that since my return from Asia, and particularly after being denied a promotion, I had allowed myself to become (and think/ behave like) a victim. Instead of re-building my relationships in New York, and instead of driving results through collaboration, I was spending more time brooding about my 'unhelpful' colleagues. Even though I was in a senior role, I began to think that nothing was going right, and saw myself as helpless..... it wasn't fair, it wasn't my fault if only my colleagues would see reason"

He then went on to explain how after a few months of leaving he finally saw his own self-defeating behavior, and promised himself that he would never allow himself to regress into a victim mindset again. Instead, in all future difficult situations, he would consider setbacks as learning steps rather than failures, and dig deeper to find innovative solutions. "I decided I would never run away again, no matter how hard it gets that was the day I became a leader and it was from that point onwards that I started succeeding," he asserted.

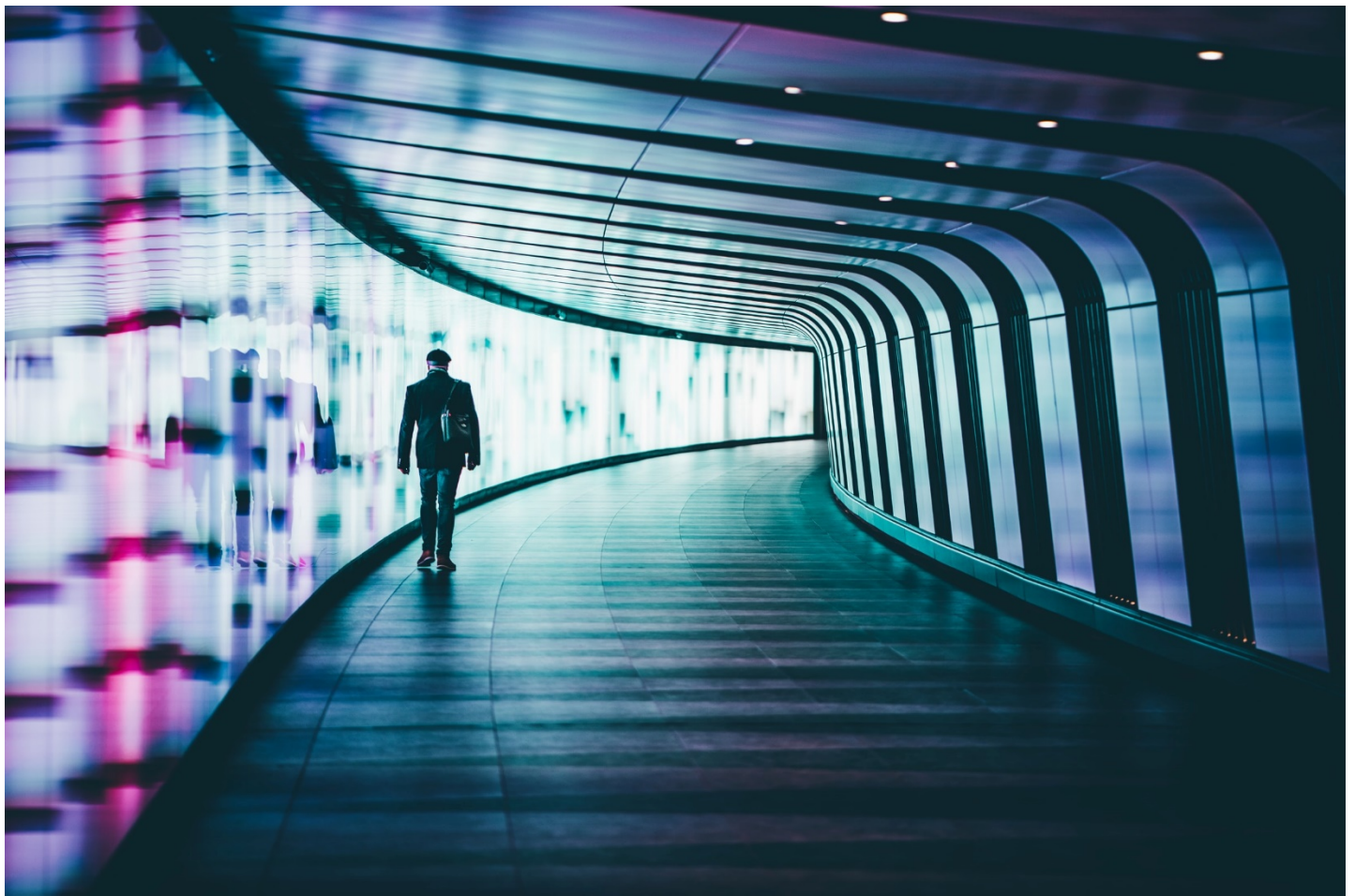


Image Credit @ Unsplash [Graeme Worsfold](#)

John is not his real name, but as a student of leadership and as a coach, I meet people like John all the time. No matter how senior they become, many big bosses acquire a negative and cynical mindset the moment they face resistance, and blame everyone but themselves for their lack of leadership impact. This is primarily because they spend more time complaining about their environment than on proactively finding solutions amidst resistance, hostility and other challenges. Such big bosses are what we call *powerful victims*. Even while they occupy positions of immense power, they prefer to blame the world rather than try harder. As humans, it is easy to fall into this trap. To paraphrase a colloquial line, when the going gets tough, only real leaders get going. All others give up, run and/or blame the environment. Why? Because it is the easier route to take. To stay put and keep toiling towards a better future – which happens to be the core work of great leadership – is a lot harder than blaming and complaining. In fact, if we can blame our lack of progress on other things and other people, we become free of guilt, and free from the burden of having to confront problems and work even harder.

I have no issue if someone decides not to work hard or decides to give up. Leadership is a choice, not an obligation. Everyone is entitled to make their own choices in a free world. I won't even try to judge which choice is right or wrong. The only thing I question is this – when you give up on addressing the most pressing problems facing you or your organization while still occupying a powerful position, should you still be called a leader? Perhaps an even more important question is, have you fallen into the powerful victim trap without realizing it? Reflect on the following questions to find out:

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- 1. What are the most pressing challenges facing your organization today?*
 - 2. What are the biggest obstacles preventing you from achieving your purpose?*
 - 3. Why do those challenges and obstacles exist? Who and what is causing them?*
 - 4. Have you given up on addressing the challenges and obstacles because the resistance is too hard and/or the problem is caused by people way above your authority level?*
 - 5. Put yourself in the shoes of your direct reports. What might they be thinking about you as their boss? How would you feel if your boss behaved like a powerful victim*
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