

Managing the 'Measure Up Monster'

Leadership in the balance

by Debra R. Sullivan

Last Thanksgiving, I had 20 family members over for dinner. I roasted a 24-pound turkey, and it was a big hit. A really big hit.

"That was the best turkey I've ever tasted in my life!"

"I've never had a turkey that juicy and tender — never!"

"Can I come over for dinner again tomorrow?"

"I can almost taste those turkey sandwiches to come right now."

Well, there were no turkey sandwiches to come. They picked that turkey clean right down to the bone. This sounds like a good thing, right? So what's my point? My point is that Thanksgiving is coming up again and guess who's in charge of roasting the turkey? Suddenly, the

'Measure Up Monster' rears its ugly head. The pressure, the sweating, the heart palpitations, the shaky hands, the high expectations. Will the next turkey be as good? Will I be able to pull it off again? Will I be able to measure up?

The 'Measure Up Monster' usually comes to visit wearing one of two disguises. Its favorite disguise is *Flattery*. Some say flattery will get you everything, but sometimes flattery only gets you frightened. Most times when people flatter you, it's to make you feel good. But when the 'Measure Up Monster' shows up disguised as Flattery it can feel like a set up for failure. That's because sometimes people go overboard with the flattery; and, sometimes, you may feel that the flattery is not quite genuine.

Another disguise the 'Measure Up Monster' likes to wear is *Quashing*. This usually happens when you are trying to accomplish some important goal or objective and someone doubts either the importance of what you are trying to do or your ability to do it. Twenty-five years ago when my husband and I were first married, I told a colleague that I was going to have both my family and my husband's family over for Christmas dinner — no small feat, because that would be about 30 people. His response

was, "Well, that's ambitious." For just a moment, I had a twinge of doubt. I was in the presence of the 'Measure Up Monster.' Who was I to think I could prepare a meal for 30 people — half of whom were my newly acquired in-laws? Fortunately, I confronted the 'Measure Up Monster' head-on that time. I'm a great cook, my in-laws love me, my family loves my husband, and my dining room was large enough to fit everyone. And besides, what's wrong with having ambition?

By now, besides wanting to eat, you may be wondering how leadership ties into all of this. The 'Measure Up Monster' can wreak havoc on leadership, because whether it's disguised as Flattery or Quashing, it can poke at your sense of confidence and cause you to focus on expectations. Are you as good as you think you are? Are you as good as *they* think you are? What if you ignore the 'Measure Up Monster?' What if you have so much confidence that when the 'Measure Up Monster' shows up as Flattery, you acknowledge the compliments and then add your own? What if you have so much confidence that when the 'Measure Up Monster' shows up as Quashing, you listen to the other person's doubt and then counter with examples and explanations of your most excellent skill and ability? Paying attention to the



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'Measure Up Monster' undermines the confidence you need to do what you do well. Ignoring the 'Measure Up Monster' is not much better, because it undermines the humility you need to understand that you can always do better.

Good leadership requires you to manage the 'Measure Up Monster' by balancing confidence and humility. Good leaders must have the confidence to do what they do well, but they must also have the humility to know they can always do better.

An important point to remember is that you must seek to *manage* the 'Measure Up Monster,' not master it or give in to it. Once you decide you can always measure up, you've lost humility. Once you decide you can never measure up, you've lost confidence. In either instance, leadership is compromised.

There are, however, some strategies for 'Measure Up Monster' Management:

- Accept the fact that you cannot be perfect all the time and you may not be successful all the time, but you can strive to do better all the time. Effective leaders know that failure is just another step toward success. Learn from your failures and imperfections and use that information to do better next time.
- Don't be afraid of high expectations — yours or theirs. Just remember that 'high' is a relative term. Expectations should be high enough to encourage motivation and perseverance, but not so high that success is perceived as unachievable. Effective leaders know that mediocrity is not an option.
- Which brings me to my next strategy — ambitiously trying to achieve the impossible. There was a time when we believed it was impossible for us to fly — like a bird, but we kept ambitiously trying to achieve the impossible until

we learned how to fly — in a plane. Effective leaders strike a balance between setting realistically high expectations and trying to achieve the impossible.

- Regularly engage in self-reflection. Think about where you've been, where you are, and where you want to go. Ask yourself critical questions. Have I made progress? Have I improved? What is it that I don't know yet? What more can I do? What have I not considered? Use your answers to these questions to inform your professional and personal development and learning.
- Assess every situation. Is there a reason to doubt your confidence? Is there a need to be more humble? If there is no reason to doubt your skill and ability in that moment — don't. Do what you do well with the assurance that you are good at what you do. Be the teacher who has something of importance to impart or accomplish. If there is a need to be more humble — do. Acknowledge that you are also capable of improvement. Be the student who knows there is much to learn and many from whom you can learn.
- Refresh! Renew! Research! Refocus! Anything can become stale with time. Effective leaders know that even the greatest vision requires updating. Take time to take a fresh look, add a new twist, tie in a different perspective, hear a different voice. You don't have to wait for failure. Quality improvement, updating, and advancement can take place at any time.
- Stay resilient and flexible. Whether you think of it as 'bouncing back' or 'getting back up on the horse' or 'picking yourself up and dusting yourself off' — just be sure to try again — no matter what. When the 'Measure Up Monster' seems to be winning, remember that this is just another opportunity to examine another path, another approach.

Effective leaders know that resiliency is the perfect tool for balancing confidence and humility.

- Stay grounded in who you are, especially when the 'Measure Up Monster' shows up as Quashing. There will always be those people wishing you'd give up and quit trying to achieve your ambitious goal. If you do measure up, it means others have to measure up as well, so they want you to fail — even when they want you to measure up! Effective leaders stay true to themselves and focused on their goal. They know that ambition is a good thing and that even if you don't reach the star for which you were aiming, getting as far as the moon is still a great achievement.
- Finally, remember to breathe! When the 'Measure Up Monster' rears its ugly head, do what my daughter always reminds me to do: Smell the roses. Blow out the candles.

So this Thanksgiving, I'm going to make the best turkey I possibly can. It may be as wonderful as the one I made last year. Or, maybe I won't be able to measure up to last Thanksgiving and the turkey will turn out only so-so. However, there's also a pretty good chance that if I . . .

- accept the fact that I can't be successful all the time;
- balance high expectations with ambitiously trying to achieve the impossible;
- ask myself what more can I do without finding a reason to doubt my confidence;
- refresh, renew, research, refocus; and
- remember to breathe . . .

If I engage all these strategies to manage the 'Measure Up Monster,' then there really is a pretty good chance that I'll achieve the impossible and roast a turkey that outshines the last one by a long shot. I'll keep you posted.