

What You Don't See About Yourself **DRIVES YOUR DECISIONS MORE THAN STRATEGY**

Personal development often emphasizes improvement: being calmer, more disciplined, more authentic. But this is exactly where the blind spot begins.

The more precisely we define who we want to be, the more we push away everything that doesn't fit that image. And those rejected parts don't disappear — they start to drive us. In decisions, in relationships, and in leadership.

This includes everything we've learned not to show, feel, or admit because it doesn't align with who we believe we should be. It's not just anger, envy, or the need for control. It also includes strength, directness, ambition, and the ability to say no.

What we suppress doesn't go away. It moves outside our awareness — and starts operating indirectly.



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Ann has been coaching leaders in organizations and the business world for over 25 years. She holds a master's degree from INSEAD (named Europe's top business school by the Financial Times in 2024 and 2025), where in 2021 she explored an intriguing psychological phenomenon among top executives. Her master's thesis laid the foundation for a new method of leadership development, honey-ghost-trap®. The method combines a psychodynamic approach to change with ancient knowledge about being human — and Carl Jung's ideas that we all have a shadow side.

HOW THE SHADOW FORMS

The shadow doesn't appear overnight. It forms gradually, shaped by what we learn is acceptable.

From childhood, we receive signals about who we need to be to be accepted. Kind. Capable. Strong. Easy to be around. These traits become part of our identity. Everything else gets pushed aside.

A person who wants to be seen as kind will struggle to admit anger. Someone who defines themselves through competence won't tolerate their own uncertainty or chaos. And someone who is "there for others" will suppress their own boundaries.

The tighter we hold onto our self-image, the more energy it takes to maintain it — and the stronger its opposite becomes.

SHADOW IS NOT WEAKNESS

The shadow often contains qualities we actually need.

Directness. Strength. Ambition. The ability to be visible.

These are not negative. They simply don't fit the way we want to see ourselves.

That's why working with the shadow is practical, not just psychological. It's not about admitting flaws — it's about expanding capacity.

When a leader accepts their directness, they no longer need to be overly diplomatic. When they accept their capacity for conflict, they stop avoiding it. When they accept that they're not always in control, they stop micromanaging.

This is not a personality change. It's an expansion of range.

*What we don't
want to know about
ourselves often drives
us the most. And until
we name it, we will
keep encountering it
— mainly in others.*

HOW TO RECOGNIZE YOUR SHADOW

The shadow doesn't show up directly. It shows up in reactions.

Especially the disproportionate ones.

Strong irritation, excessive resistance, the urge to "fix" someone — these are not just responses to others. They are signals.

What triggers us most in others is often a reflection of something within ourselves.

This doesn't mean the other person isn't doing something wrong. It means our reaction is not only about them.

And that's where the real work begins.

WHEN THE ORGANIZATION HAS A SHADOW

The shadow is not only individual. It is systemic.

It exists in the gap between what an organization declares and what it actually tolerates.

A company may talk about openness but punish disagreement. It may promote trust but operate through control. It may present itself as human-centered while creating pressure and silence.

The bigger this gap, the stronger the shadow.

It doesn't show up loudly. It shows up as cynicism, burnout, and quiet resistance. In the things that are "simply not talked about."

This is not just a cultural issue. It is an unacknowledged shadow.

SELF-AWARENESS THAT HURTS — AND WORKS

Self-awareness is not comfortable. Because it disrupts the image we have of ourselves.

It shows that we are not only strong, but also weak. Not only competent, but also uncertain. Not only fair, but sometimes harsh.

Paradoxically, the moment we stop resisting a trait, it loses its grip on us.

Not because it disappears — but because we see it.

What once felt like a weakness becomes a source of choice.

Maturity is not about eliminating contradictions. It's about being able to hold them — and work with them consciously.

In Jungian terms, the shadow is everything we've learned not to show, feel, or admit. The more we try to be only the "right version" of ourselves, the more power our rejected parts gain — in relationships, in work, and in leadership.

Q&A

WHERE DOES THE SHADOW MOST AFFECT CEO DECISION-MAKING?

In moments where status, control, or self-image are at stake.

For example, when a leader keeps someone who clearly isn't performing — not because they don't see it, but because they don't want to be “the tough one.” Or the opposite: firing too quickly because they can't tolerate their own uncertainty.

Shadow doesn't show up in easy decisions. It shows up in the ones where something personal is at risk.

HOW DO I KNOW I'M REACTING FROM SHADOW RATHER THAN REALITY?

When being right matters more than solving the problem.

At that point, it's no longer about performance — it's about protecting identity.

You see it in discussions that suddenly escalate. The topic shifts from content to control. And that's always shadow.

HOW DOES SHADOW INFLUENCE HIRING AND TEAM COMPOSITION?

More than most leaders are willing to admit.

Leaders either hire people who reinforce their self-image — or avoid those who might challenge it.

For instance, a leader who defines themselves through competence may unconsciously suppress high performers who could outshine them. Or surround themselves with people who are “safe.”

That's not strategy. That's shadow.



WHY DO LEADERS OFTEN DELAY DIFFICULT PEOPLE DECISIONS?

Because it would force them to face something about themselves.

Maybe that they made a wrong hire. Or that they avoided the issue for too long.

So instead of acting, they wait. And the cost of waiting is always higher than the decision itself.

HOW DOES SHADOW DISTORT COMPANY CULTURE?

Indirectly — but consistently.

What a leader cannot accept in themselves becomes unacceptable in the system.

If a leader avoids conflict, the organization becomes “nice.” But beneath that, frustration builds, decisions slow down, and real issues remain unspoken.

It doesn't look like a problem — until performance drops.

WHY CAN STRONG VALUES BECOME A PROBLEM?

Because they create pressure to maintain an image.

The stronger the declared identity — “we are open,” “we are human,” “we are transparent” — the less space there is for the opposite.

But the opposite doesn’t disappear. It goes underground. And from there, it starts shaping reality without being acknowledged.

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A STRONG LEADER AND A LEADER WHO JUST LOOKS STRONG?

A strong leader can tolerate not looking strong.

A shadow-driven leader needs to be seen a certain way — competent, fair, decisive, human.

And that need becomes a limitation.

Because every identity breaks under certain conditions.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST ILLUSION EXPERIENCED LEADERS HAVE?

That they know themselves.

Experience increases capability — but not necessarily self-awareness.

In fact, the longer you operate in a role, the stronger your identity becomes. And the less you see what doesn’t fit it.

WHAT CHANGES WHEN A LEADER STARTS WORKING WITH THEIR SHADOW?

Decision-making becomes simpler.

Not because situations are easier — but because they are no longer distorted by ego defense.

You can make unpopular decisions without over-explaining. You can change your mind without feeling weak.

That’s a significant shift.

WHAT IS THE FIRST PRACTICAL STEP?

Notice what destabilizes you.

Not what is “wrong out there,” but where you lose clarity, calm, or flexibility.

That’s not where the problem starts.

That’s where the shadow begins.

What this means for **LEADERS**

- ✦ What you don’t see about yourself will shape your decisions more than an strategy.
- ✦ Shadow is not weakness. It is unused power.
- ✦ Every strength you rely on has a cost and an opposite you avoid.
- ✦ The stronger the image, the greater the blind spot.
- ✦ Maturity is not about becoming better. It’s about becoming whole.

WHEN YOU CHOOSE YOUR CEO, You're Also Choosing How You Think

CEO hiring rarely fails because of lack of data. It fails because of how decisions are made.

1 WE REACT TO PROBLEMS INSTEAD OF SEEKING BALANCE

When a company struggles, boards tend to “fix it” by choosing the opposite type of leader.

If we feel the organization is slow in the decision making, we look for speed, if there is chaos we look for control.

It feels logical.

In reality, it just shifts the problem to the other side.

2 WE MISTAKE COMFORT FOR THE RIGHT DECISION

The candidate who “feels right” often just confirms how we already think.

They don’t challenge us.

They don’t create tension.

That’s why the decision feels easy — but not necessarily right.

3 WE SEE STRENGTHS, BUT NOT THEIR COST

Every strength comes with a trade-off.

Decisiveness can shut down discussion. Empathy can delay hard decisions.

Vision can ignore reality.

The question is not what the candidate is good at.

The question is: what risk comes with it?

4 WE ELIMINATE DISCOMFORT FROM THE PROCESS

The right candidate should create some level of discomfort.

They bring a different perspective.

They introduce tension.

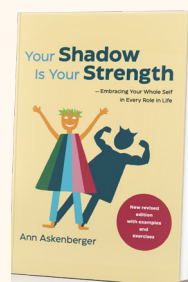
Without that, you’re just reinforcing the status quo.

5 WE DON’T SEE OUR OWN ROLE IN THE DECISION

CEO selection is not just about who you choose. It’s about how you choose.

Companies rarely hire the leader they need. They hire the leader who confirms they are right. ■

“Your Shadow is your Strength”
Embracing Your Whole Self in Every Role in Life
by Ann Askenberger



This book explores the powerful and often overlooked concept of the Shadow—the hidden sides of ourselves that contain both what we fear and what we can harness as strengths.

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