

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
School of Business and Governance

Kerdu Lenear

**SELF-HANDICAPPING INFLUENCE ON
LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGIES FOR PROFESSIONAL
SUCCESS**

Master's thesis

Programme Entrepreneurial Management, MBA

Supervisor: Kristjan Jasinski, MA

Tallinn 2024

I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors have been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading.

The document length is 12059 words from the introduction to the end of the conclusion.

Kerdu Lenear 03.01.2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
INTRODUCTION	5
1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	8
1.1. Impact of unconscious mind.....	8
1.2. Self-handicapping behaviours among leaders... ..	15
1.3. Importance of growth mindset.....	19
2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	22
2.1. Research method.....	22
2.2. Sampling procedure.....	23
2.3. Method and data analyses.....	24
3. RESULTS	26
3.1. Influence of unconscious fear in leaders	26
3.2. Discoveries of self-handicapping and common patterns in leadership	29
3.3. Key findings and further research	35
3.4. Improving leadership by addressing self-handicapping	36
CONCLUSION	39
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	42
APPENDICES	47
Appendix 1. Interview guide for professional athletes.....	47
Appendix 2. Interview guide for entrepreneurs.....	49
Appendix 3. Table of interviews	51
Appendix 4. Transcribed interviews.....	52
Appendix 5. Non-exclusive licence.....	53

ABSTRACT

In pursuit of high performance and success, leaders often come across with an unexpected obstacle – fear, particularly the fear of failure. Rooted in the unconscious mind, fear presents itself as self-doubt, self-sabotage and a reluctance to take risks, hindering individuals from unlocking their full potential. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has increased fear levels, emphasising the need to address its impact. This research aims to provide a practical strategy for leaders to uncover self-handicapping tendencies, with Carol Dweck's mindset theory suggesting that a growth mindset reduces self-handicapping behaviours.

The thesis addresses the lack of awareness of the self-handicapping influence on success and high performance in a professional career. Research questions focus on uncovering how unconscious thoughts, behaviours and beliefs hinder professional success, exploring fear's sources and impacts, also identifying strategies for managing self-handicapping for high-performing individuals. Consisting of a literature review, observational research methodology and analysis chapters, the thesis gathers understanding from semi-structured interviews with sixteen high-achieving professionals, including entrepreneurs and professional athletes.

Conclusions help to understand fear's impact on success and offer practical strategies for managing self-handicapping tendencies. Understanding the interaction between fear, self-handicapping and success is important for leaders aiming for high achievement. This research offers important insights into achieving professional success when dealing with fear.

Keywords: fear of failure, fear of success, self-handicapping, unconscious mind, imposter syndrome, fixed and growth mindset

INTRODUCTION

In leadership, achieving high performance and success is crucial in various sectors. In today's fast-paced and often demanding world, the drive to excel professionally is extremely important. However, individuals striving for personal and career success often face a difficult and unexpected obstacle – fear. Fear of failure has been studied in the context of achievement motivation and is rooted in an instinct to avoid failure, which is often uncontrollable (Kong *et al*, 2020). It can easily sabotage leaders, as it is considered the predominant fear in entrepreneurship and frequently occurs in athletic careers as well (Attia & Seoudi, 2022; Hillerin & Gherghisan, 2019). 98% of thoughts and actions originate from the subconscious and Freud's Iceberg model suggests that the unconscious mind, which is storing childhood memories, can influence the present mindset and shape future actions (Gurgu *et al*, 2020; Mcleod *et al*, 2023). This underscores the critical role of belief systems in affecting outcomes, as individuals may underperform despite possessing the necessary skills when they lack confidence in their ability to succeed (Weight *et al*, 2020).

The human brain's main function is to maintain safety, yet it often struggles to differentiate real from perceived threats, resulting in self-doubt, self-sabotage, anxiety and risk aversion (Wilbanks *et al*, 2021). Fear of failure is avoiding the shame associated with underperformance, often resulting in self-handicapping behaviours like quitting and procrastinating, in contrast to fear of success, which involves setting lower goals (Gray, 2023). Self-handicapping involves individuals strategically placing obstacles in their way and offering ready-made excuses for potential failure to protect their self-esteem (Török *et al*, 2022a). Research regarding self-handicapping in a business context found that leaders' self-sabotaging behaviours, such as making excuses and avoiding accountability, can have a harmful impact on the entire organisation (Mitchell & Decker, 2017). Similarly, perfectionistic concerns among leaders in sports, including elite athletes, have been found to have a detrimental effect on their professional experiences, highlighting the importance of addressing self-handicapping tendencies (Török *et al*, 2022b). It is worth noting that self-handicapping also comes with significant drawbacks, as it reduces one's chances of achieving success (Török, 2018).

These manifestations of fear can hinder a leader's ability to unlock their full potential and attain professional success. Individuals often struggle with fear, leading them to avoid pursuing goals without guaranteed success, with the fear of failure linked to uncertainty, risk aversion and procrastination (Kong *et al*, 2020). Influential contemporary scientist' Kay Tye has described fear as a negative internal state that prepares individuals for optimal performance in situations involving avoidance, escape or confrontation, temporarily overshadowing various brain processes, including cognition and fundamental functions such as breathing (Mobbs *et al*, 2019). Understanding and effectively managing fear is crucial for the success of any leader, as it is not only fear but also the lack of knowledge in dealing with it that can hinder one's journey toward desired achievements and results.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has increased levels of fear, anxiety, stress and depression, emphasising the need to address the impact of fear, particularly as organisations navigate with changes, uncertainty and high-pressure circumstances (Dabrowska, 2023). Professional leaders, whether they are elite athletes striving to exceed their performance limits or entrepreneurs exploring new opportunities, are actively searching for methods to improve their capabilities in pursuit of success. Therefore, in today's fast-paced and competitive environment, the ability to manage and overcome fear becomes a vital element that shapes both personal and professional development. Individuals' perceptions play a critical role in their abilities and therefore, Carol Dweck's mindset theory becomes relevant in understanding and addressing self-handicapping tendencies, suggesting that a growth mindset is a helpful strategy to reduce such behaviours (Török *et al*, 2022a).

The problem of the thesis is that leaders have lack of awareness of how self-handicapping influences high performance in a professional career and therefore, hinders their success. The aim of the thesis is to create a step-by-step strategy for leaders to discover self-handicapping behaviours to succeed professionally.

The research questions guiding this exploration are:

1. How do unconscious thoughts, behaviours and beliefs act as obstacles to professional success?

2. What are the sources and impacts of fear and its connection to the fear of failure within the professional domain?
3. What strategies can high-performing leaders apply to effectively manage self-handicapping for their benefit?

The opening chapter of the thesis provides a literature review and establishes the theoretical foundation for the study of fear and its subconscious impact on people with the focus on professional domains. The second chapter introduces the empirical research methodology and the principles governing sample selection. In the third chapter, an analysis of the findings obtained from the qualitative research is presented. The data has been gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with a group of 16 high-achieving leaders, consisting of 8 entrepreneurs and 8 professional athletes. The analysis involves the author's interpretation and the direct quotes from interviews. The research draws direct connections with relevant theory, leading to the conclusions of the thesis.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the high-performing leaders who generously participated in the interviews, sharing their valuable experiences for this master's thesis. Also, sincere gratitude goes to supervisor, Kristjan Jasinski, for the valuable support and guidance throughout this journey.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical background provides an overview of previous research on fear, particularly when it operates unconsciously and how it can significantly hinder professional progress. This section addresses the influence of the subconscious mind on leadership, focusing on the emotional impact of success and failure, the use of neuromarketing by major companies, the significance of subconscious processes in decision-making and the role of fear and self-handicapping in leadership. It draws on various studies and theories, such as Freud's Iceberg model and the concept of a growth mindset, to explore how underlying psychological factors affect leadership effectiveness and decision-making.

1.1. Impact of unconscious mind

In today's achievement-focused environment, individuals' performance profoundly influences their emotions, which is particularly relevant in the context of leadership. Success creates emotions, such as competence, pride, self-confidence and happiness, while failure leads to feelings of incompetence, grief, weakness, embarrassment and diminished self-esteem (Kamuk, 2022). One of the main reasons leaders stay stuck is because they are unaware of the power of the unconscious mind that is holding them back. Research explains that the subconscious mind operates beneath conscious awareness and significantly impacts habitual behaviours, often happening without intentional consideration of our action (Kamble, 2021). Indeed, due to its strong influence of unconscious behaviour, it has become one of the most effective marketing instruments, as explained below.

Recent years have witnessed a substantial increase in understanding the neurobiological processes that underlie decision-making (Vences *et al*, 2020). With the sudden rise of available knowledge of neuroscience, this is being used to predict human behaviour more accurately across different

fields. The concept of neuroculture, which is defined in Javor's study, has taken neuroscience in areas other than health care, such as marketing (Bočková *et al*, 2021). This initiated neuromarketing (NM), an interdisciplinary field that draws from neuroscience, psychology and marketing to explore the processes behind human decision-making, monitoring brain activity when consumers encounter marketing stimuli, such as ads, brands and sounds (Alsharif *et al*, 2021).

Many famous companies have incorporated neuromarketing into their strategies to better understand and influence consumer behaviour. Coca Cola, Nestle, Procter & Gamble, General Motors, Campbell, Frito-Lay, PayPal, Walmart, Home Depot, IKEA, Mercedes, BMW are just some of the brands who understand that without neuromarketing they cannot keep up with consumers (Gurgu *et al*, 2020). By using advanced techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG) to measure brain activity, the scientists are helping businesses understand the reasons behind consumers' decision-making processes and identify the specific brain regions driving those choices (Manot, 2020).

Because about 98% of thoughts and actions come from the subconscious, it is necessary for companies to measure people's reaction before their mind begins to rationalise the decision (Gurgu *et al*, 2020). This raises a question, if the field of marketing has discovered a way to use human's unconscious behaviour for their favour, then why are so many leaders still unaware of it? It begins with knowing the difference between conscious and unconscious mind. The easiest way to understand the influences of the unconscious mind is by research on Freud's Iceberg model, as seen in Figure 1. It involves conscious, preconscious and unconscious levels, where the visible tip signifies consciousness, the preconscious holds accessible thoughts and the profound unconscious influences ingrained behaviours (Mcleod *et al*, 2023).

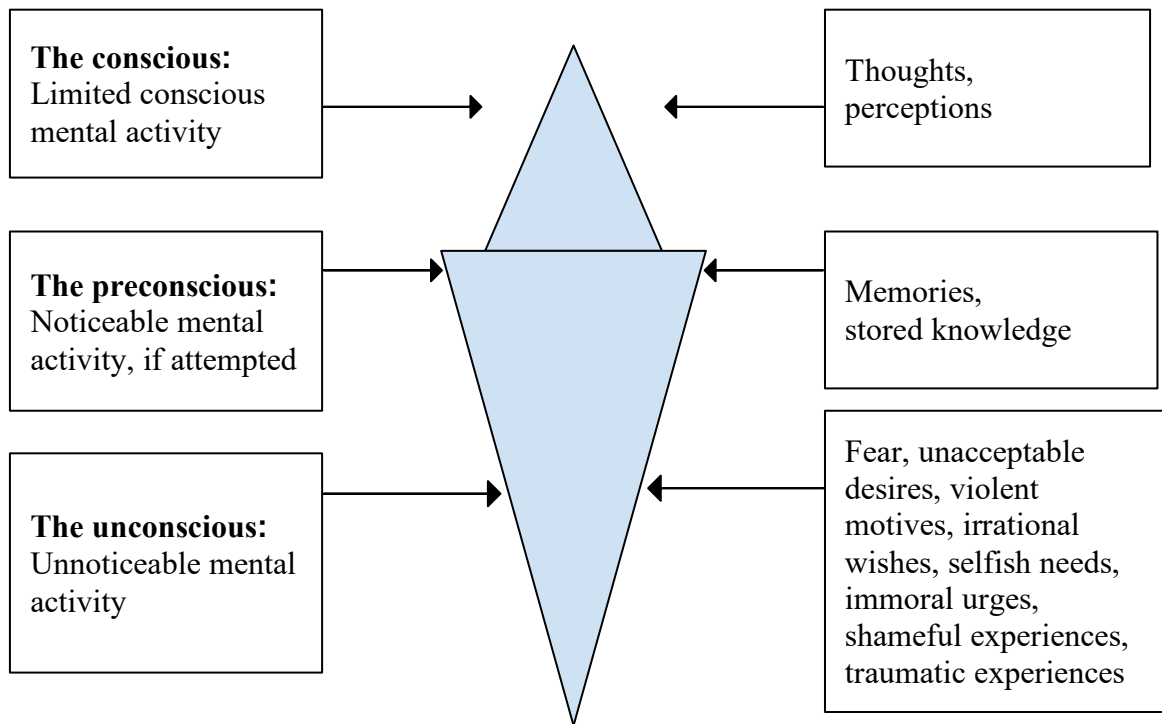


Figure 1. Freud's Iceberg Model
 Source: Compiled by the author based on McLeod *et al.* (2023)

In fact, the philosopher and psychologist William James believed that unconscious behaviour formed a huge proportion of the daily lives, with activity being 99% or possibly 99.9% automatic and habitual (Hollingworth & Barker, 2021). Those habits operate without the person's awareness or conscious intention that they are often triggered by events, people, situational settings and other external stimuli (McLeod *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, leaders often do not realise the influence of their unconscious mind, which leads them to perform actions automatically without consciously thinking about starting or continuing them, as they skip the brain's decision-making part (Hollingworth & Barker, 2021). Unconscious mind retains memories from childhood that can be triggered in adulthood, influencing the current state of mind and often unnoticed, shaping future actions (McLeod *et al.*, 2023). Gaining insights into the functioning of the mind is vital for leaders as it allows them to become aware of thoughts that may escape consciousness. A clear example of this is something called "amygdala hijacking", as during this time, the reactive amygdala seems to take control, giving the impression of temporarily hijacking the brain (Dabrowska, 2023). This means that when someone is stressed, a part of their brain called the amygdala takes over, making them react with strong emotions like fighting or running away and stopping them from thinking

calmly (Gepp & Holland, 2023). The amygdala is a critical part of the brain with many different parts and is involved in several critical aspects of cognition and systemic functions, which can override the logical aspects of the brain and lead to irrational behaviour (Joseph, 2021; Whittemore & Woods, 2021). This happens when the brain releases cortisol and adrenaline, leading an individual to experience feelings of embarrassment and regret (Gepp & Holland, 2023). High school students are more susceptible to amygdala hijacking due to ongoing prefrontal cortex development, but leaders should acknowledge and address amygdala responses in the workplace to prevent psychological unsafety in teams (Suryanto & Nugraha, 2022; Johnston, 2022).

Another key point for leaders to understand is how beliefs influence decision-making through the unconscious mind. Belief systems, serving as internal narratives, are fundamental to shaping individuals' perceptions and actions, as each person possesses a unique framework to interpret and make sense of their reality (Johnston, 2022). Additionally, universal fight-or-flight response is shared among species, including humans, to prepare individuals for reacting to potential threats (Sun *et al*, 2020). Self-efficacy, a predictor of success, shapes thoughts, emotions and behaviours, impacting the achievement of specific goals (Weight *et al*, 2020). High performers are especially affected by such beliefs. Leaders in sports encounter a variety of obstacles in high-pressure settings, including setbacks, criticism, injuries, fulfilling demands and eventual retirement, all of which can harm their mental and physical health if not adequately managed, which can challenge their full potential (Turner *et al*, 2022).

Vodă's (2022) research on global leaders' beliefs and AI-driven decision-making underscores the critical role of personal judgement and collaboration between humans and AI. The study reveals that leaders, particularly those with a strong sense of self-efficacy, actively integrate algorithms into business operations, anticipating transformative effects, thus achieving improved results compared to others. The study also highlights that individual decision-making involves a mix of experience, intuition, knowledge and self-awareness; machines excel at data processing without biases. However, the key challenge arises when leaders excessively rely on automated decision-making, assuming machine superiority and neglecting human oversight, which could affect decision-making process (Vodă, 2022).

Another research within the leaders in sports, identified beliefs, such as the fear of making mistakes, the desire to avoid negative judgement and an aversion to unfair treatment as stress-inducing factors hindering resilience and personal growth among athletes and affect performance improvement (Turner *et al*, 2022). Fear is another component that lies in the unconscious mind, as seen on Freud's Iceberg model in Figure 1 above (McLeod *et al*, 2023). What is fear and how does it hinder the success of leaders? The human brain's primary function is to ensure safety, yet it may struggle to distinguish between real and perceived threats (Wilbanks *et al*, 2021). Specific emotional states, like fear, can influence actions but responses may vary depending on the situation (Dabrowska, 2023). For instance, according to the Dabrowska's 2023 study, in a work setting, individuals may choose to avoid confronting anxiety for a successful presentation, while in a home environment, they may dwell on it. Typical responses to anxiety involve avoidance, freezing and withdrawal, with less frequent occurrences of hesitation, rumination, shouting or excessive worrying (Dabrowska, 2023). Fear, as explained by leading contemporary neuroscientists such as Ralph Adolphs, Michael Fanselow, Joseph LeDoux and Kerry Ressler is a complex concept (Mobbs *et al*, 2019). However, the primary objective of this thesis is to investigate the fears that affect high-achieving leaders in pursuing their professional aspirations, with an emphasis on the fear of failure.

Various studies have looked to understand the reasons behind startup failures, typically ranging from 80% to 90% within the first three years, with primary emphasis on economic factors, such as financial planning and business models, as well as demographic elements such as age, gender and education (Attia & Seoudi, 2021). However, according to the same study, there is a need to explore other psychological factors along economic and demographic ones that contribute to business failure. This research shows that fear of failure is seen as the most prominent type of fear in entrepreneurship (Attia & Seoudi, 2021). Cacciotti *et al*. (2020) describe that entrepreneurial fear of failure is a negative emotional response that stops from evaluating the chance of failure in the uncertain and unclear context of entrepreneurship. In the past, it was believed that the fear of failing was something that only stopped people from starting a business. However, Caciotti *et al*. (2020) found that even entrepreneurs, who are already running a business can feel the fear of failure at any point in their journey and this fear can influence beyond then just stopping them from entrepreneurial activities. They also pointed out in their research that failure is not just a total

win-or-lose situation but also little setbacks that happen when entrepreneurs face challenges, unclear responsibilities, various tasks and decisions that affect them, their business and the people involved. These small failures can serve as signals related to fears about the unknown, concerns about being rejected by others and, in the end, fears link to how they see themselves as entrepreneurs (Cacciotti *et al*, 2020).

It was discovered that on the source of the fear of failure, there were 7 dimensions that each have consequences for the survival of the business (Cacciotti *et al*, 2020):

- 1) losing income or savings;
- 2) inability to pursue, build and develop opportunities or business ideas;
- 3) lack of needed financial capital for the business;
- 4) doubt about the opportunity's true potential for the business;
- 5) worry about others' perception if the entrepreneur fails;
- 6) concerns about the team's ability to achieve success;
- 7) fears of losses and missed chances in an uncertain idea.

Fear of failure in entrepreneurship can be challenging because it is a complex concept with various perspectives for any leader (Hunter *et al*, 2020). According to Hunter *et al*. (2020), some researchers see it as a personal trait related to avoiding risks, fearing losses or feeling ashamed after failing, while others view it as a temporary mindset influenced by social factors when facing difficulties. This complexity is even greater because the fear of failure affects how entrepreneurs think, feel and act, ultimately shaping their decisions to start and run a business (Hunter *et al*, 2020). In situations where individuals experience the fear of failure, scholars have noticed that they engage in cognitive processes that significantly influence their decision-making strategies and choices (Attia & Seoudi, 2021). This aligns with the upper echelon theory, where personal factors influence executives' choices and in the case of entrepreneurs, these decisions have a significant impact on the direction and performance of their business (Attia & Seoudi, 2021).

It is also important for leaders to understand that in this prototypical fear scenario, which is particularly relevant in English-speaking societies, there are typically five stages, as seen on Figure 2 (Dabrowska, 2023). To summarise the scholar's findings, fear begins with a trigger, followed by

an attempt to manage the distressing emotion. When control is lost, unpredictable actions take place, such as freezing, avoiding, fighting or withdrawing, all of which leave individuals with a negative emotional experience. Unchecked fear frequently hinders rational decision-making and can result in individuals commonly resorting to unhealthy emotional expressions, such as avoidance and denial. Further research developed a metaphor that portrays fear as an illness of the brain, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. This metaphor characterises fear as a detrimental force that affects mental, physical and emotional states, ultimately shaping behaviour (Dabrowska, 2023).

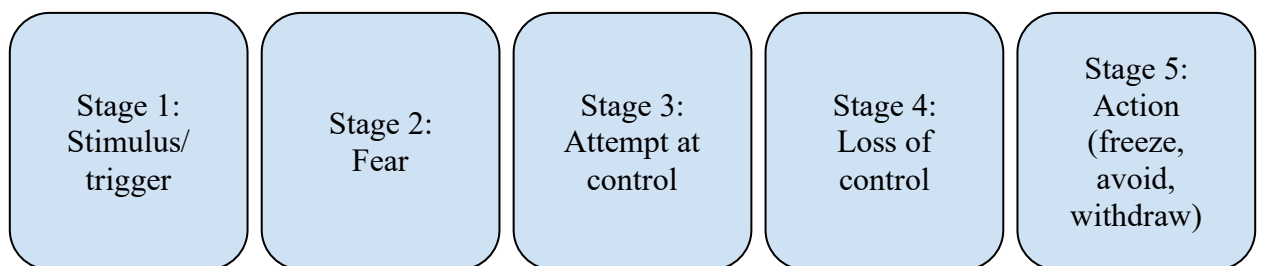


Figure 2. Classic fear scenario through insights from neuroscience and psychology
Source: Compiled by the author based on Anna Dabrowska (2023)

Understanding the distinction between the fear of failure and the fear of success is crucial for leaders because fear can lead individuals to avoid challenges, people or situations and some may even deny their fear altogether, thereby hindering them from reaching their full potential (Dabrowska, 2023). The fear of failure (FF) originates from a deeper fear of not being able to achieve meaningful personal goals or demonstrate competence in situations where performance is assessed against established standards, like education or sports (Henschel & Iffland, 2022). It involves thinking about the bad outcomes of failing, the emotions linked to these thoughts and actions to prevent these negative outcomes through strategies like self-handicapping, performance-avoidance or excessive effort (Hensche & Iffland, 2022). Some sceptics argue that the fear of success is just another name for the fear of failure. Therefore, scholars explored the details of the fear of success motive, drawing from Atkinson and McClelland's theory of motivation, which highlights the importance of what people expect will happen because of their actions (Ekler & Tilfarlioglu, 2020). At the same time, fear of success is described as a complex anxiety that emerges when individuals aim for success but also worry about the consequences of achieving it

(Tadoe *et al*, 2023). It is important for leaders to know that this complex interaction not only affects a person's thoughts and feelings but also has a big impact on how happy they are at work and how well they do their job (Tadoe *et al*, 2023).

Moreover, this fear is linked to worries about others potentially undermining achievements, leading to behaviours like setting modest goals, favouring simpler tasks and ongoing concerns about relationships among highly successful individuals (Yılmaz, 2018). Distinguishing between the fear of success and the fear of failure, emphasises that the fear of failure is rooted in the wish to avoid the shame that comes with not meeting expectations in achievement situations (Gray, 2023). The scholar's research indicates that fear of failure activates when the possibility of task failure becomes apparent and may include self-handicapping measures, such as quitting or procrastinating, setting conservative goals to ensure success or intensifying efforts to secure the desired outcome (Gray, 2023).

1.2. Self-handicapping behaviours among leaders

It is crucial for leaders to be aware of self-handicapping behaviours within themselves and their teams. Self-handicapping is a strategic approach where individuals try to protect themselves from the chance of failing by using tactics, such as giving excuses, putting in less effort or intentionally creating barriers, whether through their actions or words (Kamuk, 2022). This phenomenon has important implications for leadership and the workplace, which will be discussed further in the upcoming sections. First, the author will dive into how self-handicapping started. Research on self-handicapping (SH) explained that it was introduced by Jones and Berglas in 1978 (Török *et al*, 2018). The scholars found that people who expected to fail in certain situations deliberately engaged in behaviours meant to provide external reasons or excuses for their potential failure, while also allowing them to take credit if they succeeded (Török *et al*, 2022a). Recognizing and addressing self-handicapping behaviours is crucial for effective leadership, as it can foster a culture of accountability and personal growth within a team or organisation, ultimately influencing overall success (Török *et al*, 2018). Another research reinforces that self-handicapping serve as a strategic defence mechanism, allowing individuals to protect their self-worth by creating pre-emptive excuses or obstacles to deflect blame from their abilities and maintain a positive image in the face

of potential criticism (Mitchell & Decker, 2017). It involves individuals intentionally hindering their chances of success in crucial performance situations (Török *et al*, 2018). Individuals engaging in self-handicapping behaviours intentionally create obstacles to their own performance, such as a student engaging in leisure activities before an exam or an athlete pretending illness before a competition (Török *et al*, 2018). A big part of research shows the impact of self-handicapping being critical on academic outcomes and processes, particularly motivation and performance (Török *et al*, 2022a). Because of academic competitive nature, where students are required to consistently demonstrate their competence under the examination of peers and instructors often intensifies the fear of failure (Török *et al*, 2022a). This is important for leaders to understand as well, in order to create suitable working environments to support growth within their teams.

Mitchell & Decker (2017) discovered that while self-handicapping has been extensively studied in psychology and education, then it is less researched in business leadership but can have detrimental consequences for an entire workplace. When leaders engage in self-sabotaging behaviours, such as making excuses or avoiding accountability, it can create a negative ripple effect throughout the organisation. Inconsistent leadership can have cascading effects on employee turnover, customer satisfaction and overall organisational profitability, originating from weakened trust, reduced service quality and lower employee motivation and engagement. The same research also highlights that effective leadership plays a crucial role in shaping organisational culture and performance, making it important for leaders to be aware of and address self-sabotaging tendencies to create a positive work environment and prevent negative outcomes. Such behaviours include neglecting underperforming employees, inconsistency, inadequate hiring practices, excessive micromanagement and a lack of accountability, which can undermine team cohesion, cause confusion, impede hiring quality, suppress creativity and foster a culture of blame-shifting (Mitchell & Decker, 2017).

Self-handicapping (SH) tends to arise when individuals face a threat to their self-concept and experience uncertainty about their abilities, serving as a defensive strategy to protect self-esteem and it is particularly relevant when competence is at risk (Török *et al*, 2022a). Therefore, recognizing and addressing self-sabotaging tendencies for leaders is crucial for creating a healthy workplace culture that promotes growth and collaboration, preventing negative impacts on

productivity (Mitchell & Decker, 2017). When SH backfires in professional settings, then it can create an ineffective impression management, which leaders may engage to protect their image (Dunlea, 2022; Mitchell & Decker, 2017).

Impression Management (IM) is about purposefully doing things to shape how a specific audience sees a leader, whether it's creating, maintaining, protecting or changing their perception (Collewaert *et al*, 2021). In cooperative work environments, the emphasis on preserving one's reputation often takes importance over innovative solutions, hindering teamwork dynamics as individuals prioritise maintaining a positive image and avoiding blame (Rajasekharan *et al*, 2020). In business settings, anxiety, time constraints, task complexity, limited authority or insufficient resources can lead to self-handicapping behaviours, including setting impractical goals, evading responsibility and reducing effort, which may involve avoiding necessary employee discussions or confrontations. Leaders may avoid acknowledging mistakes and remain unaware of self-handicapping behaviours to appear competent in image-conscious business settings, creating a cycle of difficulties. Therefore, it was suggested by the scholars that leaders' proactive questioning and resistance to self-sabotage are key in identifying and eliminating barriers to progress, underscoring the importance of thoroughly understanding how self-handicapping impacts individuals, managers and organisations (Mitchell & Decker, 2017).

In sports leadership, self-handicapping behaviours are common as well because of the competitive nature of athletics. The increase in research on self-handicapping in sports shows that people recognize how important this behaviour is in competitive sports careers (Moorer, 2020). Based on research, athletes' tendency to self-handicap can be traced to factors, such as a fear of failure related to past experiences of shame and embarrassment, as well as concerns about others losing interest or conditioned associations of failure with unpleasant consequences (Moorer, 2020). Another study proposed concerns over unrealistically high standards and a fear of failure that was tied to conditional approval within the top leaders in sports that negatively impacted elite athletes' experiences in their performances (Török *et al*, 2022b). The study involved 111 elite athletes, including Olympic medallists and world champions and underscored the significance of providing explanations for negative events in relation to self-handicapping tendencies among top-performing

athletes. These findings emphasise the importance of leaders recognizing and addressing self-handicapping behaviours to improve performance and well-being (Török *et al*, 2022b).

Thorough study by the author of this thesis on self-handicapping (SH) in different stressful situations, such as business, education and sports highlights how common this behaviour is and how it can affect high-achieving leaders. Along with self-handicapping another common behaviour was discovered, that nearly 70% of people who work in high stress environments experience, which is called imposter syndrome (Jensen & Deemer, 2020). Impostor syndrome also referred to as the impostor phenomenon (IP) is the fear-driven belief that individuals do not deserve their achievements, often attributing success to luck and harbouring concerns about being perceived as incompetent by others (Haar & Jong, 2022; Zanchetta *et al*, 2020). Individuals with impostor phenomenon may employ self-handicapping strategies to intentionally appear less capable, aiming to avoid being exposed as impostors, with potential consequences extending to the organisations they belong (Downing *et al*, 2020). Therefore, it is important for leaders to deal with both self-handicapping and the impostor phenomenon in workplace settings. It impacts employee attitudes, behaviour and organisational commitment and implies that self-defeating behaviours, such as setting overly ambitious goals, may result in burnout (Downing *et al*, 2020). Leaders can identify three types of individuals with IP experience: backward-looking beliefs, forward-looking beliefs and comparative beliefs (Slank, 2019). The impostor phenomenon (IP) can hinder leadership by disrupting a leader's alignment with the group, diminishing self-esteem and reducing their influence and effectiveness in collaborative goal achievement (Downing *et al*, 2020). There have been several studies done regarding the performance and behaviour of IP, which has pointed out how workplace support can play a big role in mitigating the effects of IP (Haar & Jong, 2022). Leaders must be aware of the importance of how people see their own abilities when self-handicapping behaviour is emphasised and this relates to Carol Dweck's mindset theory (Török *et al*, 2018). Therefore, it becomes relevant in understanding and addressing self-handicapping tendencies, suggesting that promoting a growth mindset could be a valuable approach to reducing self-handicapping behaviours (Török *et al*, 2018).

1.3. Importance of growth mindset

Many leaders are aware of the research about two kinds of mindsets, either fixed or growth. A fixed mindset, where abilities are seen as stable and a growth mindset, where abilities are considered changeable through effort and support (Török *et al*, 2022a). It has been shown that people with a growth mindset are more determined and passionate in achieving long-term goals versus fixed mindset makes people avoid challenges and setbacks are more easily attributed to low ability (Toding *et al*, 2023; Dweck and Yeager, 2019).

Török *et al*. (2022a) study highlights how leaders in education play a crucial role in influencing students' motivational characteristics, including achievement avoidance goals, which can contribute to self-sabotaging tendencies. Therefore, understanding the influence of a fixed mindset is crucial, as it significantly impacts the development of self-handicapping behaviours in future professional careers. Leaders should be aware that teachers who promote social comparison and competition may unintentionally lead to adopt performance avoidance goals, whereas environments that emphasise intrinsic motivation are more likely to reduce the occurrence of such goals and self-handicapping behaviours (Török *et al*, 2022a).

Following research provides essential insights for leaders in educational settings, demonstrating how fixed and growth mindsets influence students' reactions to challenges and their learning process. Dweck & Yeager (2019) started the goal achievement theory, showing that students' performance goals (validating ability) and learning goals (developing ability) lead to different reactions to setbacks. The learner-centred or achievement-oriented approach prioritises students' well-being and satisfaction of basic psychological needs to support their learning processes in classroom settings (Toding *et al*, 2023). Dweck's findings suggest that a growth mindset under favourable conditions, helps people engage in thoughts and actions that lead them closer to their goals (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). For example, research indicates that students who understand their ability to cultivate their mental capabilities by forming new and stronger neural connections when they challenge themselves to learn challenging subjects show increased motivation for learning, resulting in higher academic performance in both grades and achievement tests (Toding *et al*, 2023). By encouraging a growth mindset, leaders can inspire individuals to engage in actions and thoughts that bring them closer to their goals, fostering a culture of continuous development and

resilience. People with a fixed mindset do not believe that their ability can be improved and tend to focus more on demonstrating their incompetence to others than improving their competence (Cho *et al.*, 2021). Self-efficacy includes the belief in one's capacity to plan and execute steps required to achieve goals, significantly influencing the effort invested in tasks, persistence levels and responses to failures or challenges (Schüler *et al.*, 2023). People who have strong self-efficacy tend to establish more ambitious goals, invest greater effort, experience greater endurance and keep a close eye on their progress to guarantee their success (Cho *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it is important for leaders to note that self-efficacy is one of the strongest motivational predictors of future achievement and in sports is often associated with better performance and to athletes' competitive level (Schüler *et al.*, 2023).

Research in entrepreneurship suggests that entrepreneurs create business opportunities by perceiving them in their minds (Lyncha & Corbett, 2023). Therefore, a fixed mindset can discourage someone from seeing themselves as an entrepreneur because they think being an entrepreneur requires a unique way of thinking, acting and specific skills (Billingsley *et al.*, 2023). In contrast, people with a growth mindset approach this differently, believing that they can develop new skills and adapt, making entrepreneurship more accessible (Billingsley *et al.*, 2023). However, a growth mindset is much needed to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, which is a cognitive process that motivates individuals to take action in uncertain situations, learn from mistakes and apply that knowledge to accomplish specific entrepreneurial goals (Lyncha & Corbett, 2023).

Another key element for leaders in fostering a growth mindset is revealing a big gap in understanding how grit and growth mindset mutually influence each other's development (Park *et al.*, 2020). Grit, also referred as perseverance and determination, incorporates a combination of intense passion and enduring effort sustained over an extended duration, emphasising the relentless pursuit of significant goals despite challenges, which plays a significant role in goal achievements across various areas, such as career changes (Alberta *et al.*, 2019). If grit is the connection between a growth mindset and high performance, then the question is how can leaders develop it? Researchers have started to implement the Achievement Motivation Theory (AMT) as a framework to think about and investigate the development of grit (Alberta *et al.*, 2019). The scholars find it useful because AMT focuses on important aspects, such as individuals' personal

beliefs about their abilities, effort and how success is achieved (Alberta *et al*, 2019). Other scholars describe AMT as the way individuals interpret their achievements and setbacks in specific tasks and how these interpretations influence their motivation for future tasks that are comparable (Wigfield *et al*, 2021). Similarly, research involving educators from various academic fields has demonstrated the significance of teachers' mindsets in supporting the professional development of students (Toding *et al*, 2023).

In the theoretical part of the study, unconscious behaviours are being examined, particularly related to fear that influence careers. The aim is to uncover these hidden influences and provide insights for future research. These insights form the basis for the qualitative research discussed in the following chapters, where the author of this thesis delves into research methods and interview findings. This exploration of fear's impact on careers has implications for leadership because understanding how fear influences careers can provide valuable insights and knowledge for effective leadership, helping leaders better support themselves and guide their team members in overcoming obstacles and achieving success in their professional life.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology applied to explore the research problem: the lack of awareness among leaders regarding self-handicapping, which is hindering success in their professional careers. The study utilises a qualitative approach, incorporating in-depth interviews with a total of 16 participants, evenly divided between 2 groups of leaders, professional athletes and entrepreneurs.

2.1. Research method

In this study, Saunders' Research Onion was applied to investigate unknown fears among leaders. The application of Saunders' Research Onion provides a structured and simplified framework for social sciences research methodology, ensuring clarity and coherence in the research process (Haydam & Steenkamp, 2020). The research philosophy was based on interpretivism because it emphasises human behaviour and experiences within their natural social settings, with a particular emphasis on individuals' viewpoints and perspectives (Saunders & Tosey, 2013). Therefore, the case-study was the choice of the strategy because it helps to investigate current topic by using diverse evidence sources and data collection methods to address essential questions (Kulatunga *et al*, 2007). Using qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and narrative analysis aligns with the research's interpretive philosophy, which aims to understand the subject deeply instead of predicting outcomes (Saunders & Tosey, 2013).

The following figure (see Figure 3) presents the Methodological process of the thesis compiled by the author.

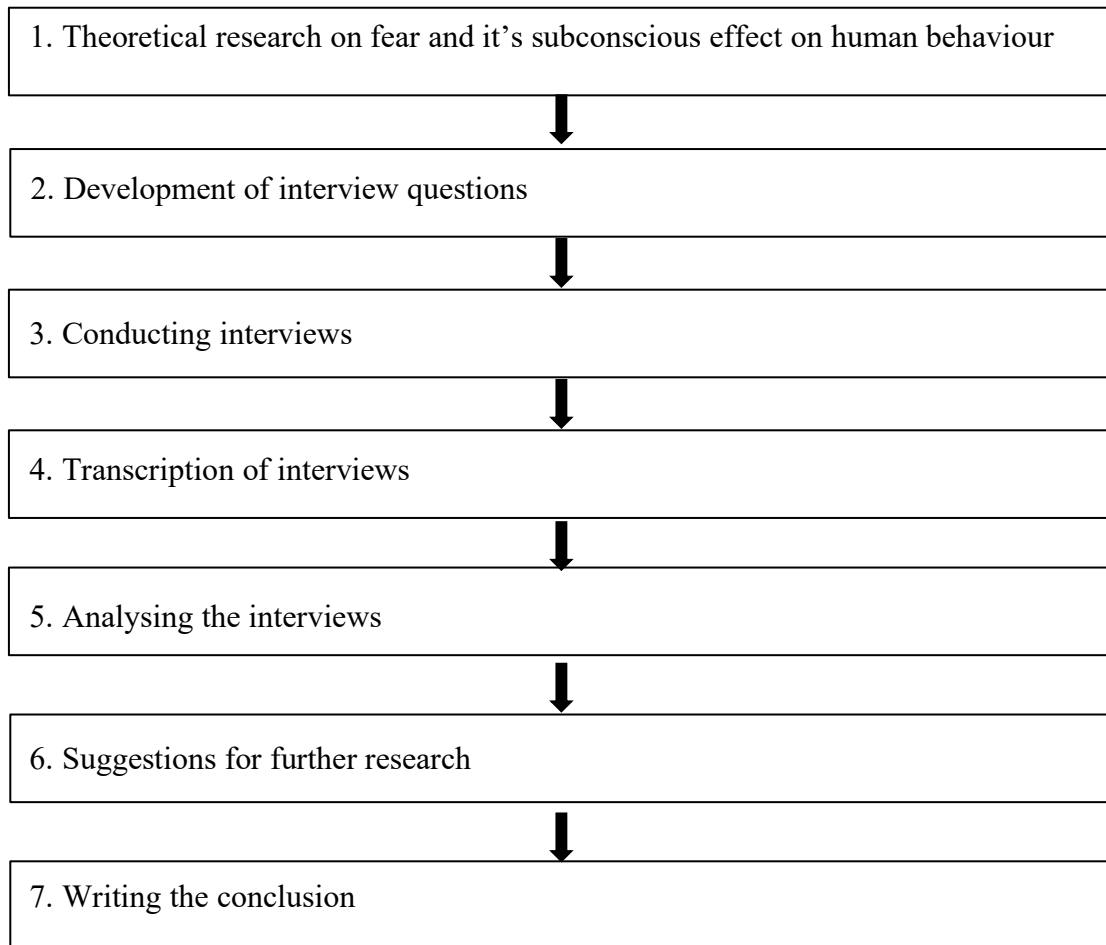


Figure 3. Methodological process of the thesis
Source: Compiled by the author

Author used thematic analysis to thoroughly explore complex experiences and perspectives, such as how participants felt about fear and its influence on their professional success, by looking for patterns in qualitative data (Clarke & Brown, 2016).

2.2 Sampling procedure

The study involved a goal-oriented sampling strategy to ensure a diverse representation of high achieving leaders. A total of 16 participants were selected, comprising 8 professional athletes and 8 entrepreneurs from Estonia. This intentional selection aimed to capture varied insights from ambitious leaders in different professional domains. These categories were selected not only due

to the author's personal background as a former professional athlete but also because previous research had indicated that self-handicapping received more extensive attention in the fields of psychology, education and sports, while being comparatively less explored in business contexts. This choice also allowed the author to provide valuable insights into the high-level leadership skills observed in the world of professional sports.

Participants were chosen based on their profession, proven track record of high achievement and leadership in their respective fields. Therefore, they contributed valuable perspectives to the study. Each entrepreneur is the founder of their companies, while the professional athletes are recognized elite sporting figures in Estonia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich, in-depth data. The interviews consisted of 19-20 questions that were divided into 7 categories: high performers goals, subconscious mind, fears, beliefs, self-handicapping, imposter phenomenon, fixed and growth mindset. The questions were designed to explore participants' experiences with fear, their awareness (or lack thereof) of its impact on their success and any strategies they employed to navigate challenges related to fear. To guide the interviews, a set of open-ended questions were formulated that provided flexibility while ensuring consistent coverage of key aspects related to the research problem among all participants. ChatGPT was used to get ideas for creative interview questions in order to explore research topics thoroughly and gather the most relevant perspectives for a complete analysis.

2.3. Method and data analyses

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes and insights from the interview data. This method allowed for the exploration of commonalities and differences in the experiences of high achievers in relation to fear and success. According to research, thematic analysis, a flexible and increasingly popular method for qualitative data analysis, involves identifying patterns and structuring raw data into meaningful themes, applicable to both inductive and deductive research designs (Thompson, 2022).

The interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and stored in MS Word format on Google Docs. The link to access the interview transcriptions can be found in

Appendix 4. Necessary corrections were made to the transcriptions by relistening to the recordings. The insights from the interviews with direct quotes were systematically arranged in an Excel table in Appendix 4. During the analysing process the results from the interviews were organised in segments of entrepreneurs and professional athletes. Those segments were divided into blocks of the seven categories mentioned above.

The research follows ethical guidelines, ensuring confidentiality, informed consent and respect for the participants' autonomy. This study acknowledges potential limitations, such as the subjective nature of qualitative research and the specific focus on two distinct groups (athletes and entrepreneurs) from one country. The findings may not be universally generalizable but will contribute valuable insights within the scope of the research problem.

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the methodology adopted to investigate the research problem. The next chapter will present and analyse the findings. As well as the experiences and perspectives of high achievers regarding self-handicapping and its impact on their professional success.

3. RESULTS

In this chapter, the author explored what was learned from the conversations with professional leaders. The connections between these insights and the theories discussed in Chapter 1 will be pointed out. As a result, the author has created a practical five-step strategy to help to uncover self-handicapping. This guide is for leaders, who want to find and overcome obstacles to be more successful in their careers. Due to limited research on self-handicapping in entrepreneurship compared to sports, the author interviewed 16 high-performing leaders, including 8 entrepreneurs and 8 professional athletes from Estonia. The analysis explored unconscious behaviour, such as fear, beliefs, self-handicapping, imposter phenomenon and Carol Dweck's mindset theory in both domains.

3.1. Influence of unconscious fear in leaders

In initial interviews, participants discussed professional goals and challenges. Both groups reflected on research findings on the impact of self-belief on performance, which resonate with the theory that emphasises the importance of self-efficacy (Weight *et al*, 2020; Cho *et al*, 2021). Leaders with strong self-belief are more likely to set higher goals, take on challenging tasks and persist in the face of adversity. (INT13): “My goal was to play in top football leagues in Italy, Spain or Germany but that I have already reached. Now I want to enjoy the game to the fullest and reach as far as my potential allows.” The athletes' passion for their sport and the entrepreneurs' desire for freedom and growth highlight intrinsic motivation as a key driver in leadership. (INT6): “I became an entrepreneur so that I can achieve financial independence and freedom of location.” Leaders who are intrinsically motivated are more effective, as they are driven by internal rewards rather than external factors. (INT15): “The desire for self-improvement, curiosity about opportunities beyond Estonia and the thrill of competition motivated me to pursue a career in professional sports.” The challenges faced by both groups, such as health issues, external

judgments, personal obstacles and cultural shifts are similar to the challenges leaders face in various settings (Turner *et al*, 2022). (INT2): “The obstacle lately has been health. The first keyword I feel needed is to stay healthy.” Effective leadership involves navigating these obstacles, adapting to changing environments and making decisions under pressure. (INT8): “With the experience gained this year, I now know how to improve. Now it's just a matter of putting in the work to make things better.”

The common theme of fear, whether of failure, judgement or not being good enough is crucial in understanding leadership dynamics and aligning with findings on irrational beliefs tied to self-criticism (Turner *et al*, 2022). (INT14): “I'm afraid that if things go wrong, it means I'm not good enough.” (INT11): “Fear slows me down. I'm pondering what happens when clients disappear and the current ones do not come back. Then, I'll start thinking about the worst-case scenario.” This resonated with previous research regarding the brain not being able to distinguish between real or perceived threats (Wilbanks *et al*, 2021). They also tend to avoid taking action when they experience fear, which resonates with the various responses individuals exhibit in reaction to anxiety (Dabrowska, 2023). (INT5): “The biggest obstacle of making my goals come true might be myself at times because there are moments when I know I need to do certain things but somehow it just fades away briefly. I know I need to do something that I've been procrastinating.” (INT3): “When I feel less competent I tend to avoid making decisions or taking actions, fearing potential negative outcomes. This avoidance becomes more apparent during games, where I unconsciously try to hide and make decisions that allow me to stay within my comfort zone and avoid situations where I might struggle.”

In relation to the theory, fear related to the unknown was found in the case of minor setbacks or when facing challenges, affecting leaders' decision-making and their overall self-perception (Cacciotti *et al*, 2020). (INT1): “I believe I have failed both personally and as a leader and that has been a challenge for me. As I reflect on managing risks in my business, I initially felt motivated and clear about my goals. However, as the business runs smoothly, I'm questioning if the success is aligned with my personality and whether it's an achievable part of who I am. This realisation brings about a new set of challenges.” (INT3): “The fear tends to intensify, impacting my confidence on the court. It can lead to a reluctance to take shots or assert myself confidently during

the games, as the lack of self-assurance becomes more prominent. Essentially, fear affects my performance and decision-making in professional settings.” The exercise of participants visualising their lives after achieving their goals reflects the importance of envisioning a future state for leaders to motivate and guide themselves and their teams towards accomplishing bigger visions. (INT16): “The idea is that I might be on a sailing trip around the world and the company operates independently without me.”

Previous research shows that belief systems, as internal narratives, play an important role in shaping individuals' perceptions and actions, with each person having a unique framework to make sense of their reality (Johnston, 2022). The identification of limiting beliefs, such as "I am not good enough", underscores the role of subconscious thoughts in shaping leadership behaviour. (INT5): “I often feel smaller than others, like I might not measure up. It's a recurring concern for me—whether I can handle things and if I'm truly enough. That feeling is something I often struggle with.” (INT6): “I still sense that I'm not good enough, not competent enough. There's a constant fear or uncertainty within me.” It affects leaders' decision-making, causing self-doubt and reluctance to fully embrace their potential, often leading to similar fears and self-doubts that influence their willingness to take risks, which can lead to lower performance.

This also resonated with prior research on entrepreneurship, indicating that entrepreneurs may experience fear of failure at any stage (Caciotti *et al.* 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for leaders in business to discover their limiting beliefs, otherwise they will continue to keep telling themselves stories that will hinder their success. (INT6): “You start telling yourself stories. For example, I want to have six cleaning staff in Estonia and team leaders but thinking how I am going to manage. When in reality, I manage twelve people in Finland, right?” Fear of failure has been identified as the most prominent type of entrepreneurship-related fear in the research (Attia & Seoudi, 2021). Moreover, this fear was found to be the most common among both groups in current study. (INT1): “The fear of failure is a recurring pattern for me. It stems from a sense of incompetence and the worry that the solution won't be perfect. Afterward, if things are not ideal, I feel like I have failed. This fear affects my self-management. Although I know I should organise my weeks better, I often avoid doing so.” (INT10): “In one aspect, there's the fear of making mistakes, on the other hand, there's also the fear of being too good. I believe this has hindered me in various aspects, not just

in sport but also in areas outside of sports. I don't want to appear better than others and I tend to avoid conflicts.”

In relation to previous research, it was found that the fear of failure significantly impacts how entrepreneurs think, feel and act, ultimately influencing their decisions to initiate and manage a business (Hunter *et al*, 2020). (INT8): “I had this idea of making beer crates. I wanted to negotiate with all craft beer producers, show them this product, the packaging style and offer it to them. What stopped me was a fear of taking those steps, wondering if everything will sustain when it finally happens and becomes a reality.” However, the study showed that it can also influence leaders from other domains besides business. (INT15): “Fear for me, revolves around the worry that others might form a negative opinion of me or that I may not be sufficient in the eyes of others. This fear is closely linked to the concern of not meeting the expectations or approval of others.”

However, the fear of success, leading to self-handicapping behaviours, points out an important aspect of leadership where success itself can be intimidating. In these situations, people tended to set small goals and choose easier tasks (Yilmaz, 2018). (INT7): “As much as I fear failure, I also fear success. I'm afraid of overshadowing or upsetting someone.” (INT11): “The biggest obstacle is still the limited time resource because it's still progressing slowly. So, the vast majority of time goes into the trap of regular employment. On the one hand, I know that if I invest more, things would move faster. At the same time, there's still fear. So, I prefer to take smaller steps to have some fallback or security. Maybe that's what keeps me from doing it faster.” This aligns with theory on the fear of success, where individuals fear that achieving success may lead to negative outcomes, causing them to avoid it despite their desire for success (Gray, 2023). Understanding and addressing the fear of failure and fear of success is crucial for leaders because it can impact decision-making and team dynamics, ultimately affecting the overall productivity and success of themselves and their teams.

3.2. Discoveries of self-handicapping and common patterns in leadership

Consistent with research on behaviours associated with the fear of failure and self-handicapping, the author observed actions such as quitting, procrastinating, setting easily attainable goals or

intensifying efforts to attain the desired result (Gray, 2023). (INT7): “I feel incompetent quite often but feel like overcoming this is an ongoing journey in life. I also start questioning, if people really needed our products, especially when things got quiet. Despite positive feedback, low sales made me wonder if there was an issue with the products.” Understanding the connection between the fear of failure, perfectionism and self-sabotaging behaviours is crucial for leaders. As the fear of failure (FF), is closely linked to perfectionism, which is driven by a deep fear of not meeting personal goals or demonstrating competence in evaluative situations, ultimately leading to self-sabotaging actions like self-handicapping (Henschel & Iffland, 2022). (INT16): “To achieve the fulfilment of the big goal, I would need to replace the CEO role. Someone who works with employees on a daily basis, who is on-site and that person should not be me. The obstacle is that maybe they won't be able to handle it or maybe the company isn't in good enough condition yet to hand it over to the CEO.”

There were several common self-handicapping behaviours found in both groups. Such as, the hesitation to take significant steps or make decisions, often due to a fear of failure or unknown consequences. (INT10): “I hesitated to make a decision, such as changing my agency, out of fear. When I finally changed my agent, I've played in several different places in the last couple of years, whereas before I was more within a certain circle.” Leadership involves making tough decisions and sometimes taking risks. Effective leaders recognize the importance of moving beyond comfort zones to achieve growth and innovation. Also, procrastination and setting modest goals was found in both entrepreneurs and athletes. (INT2): “When I had a knee injury, I had the opportunity to participate in the international tournament during the summer, right before the start of the season. At that time, I felt somewhat hesitant, sensing that I wasn't fully prepared for the tournament. There was a fear lingering in me that I wouldn't perform well or there might be a recurrence of the injury I had just recovered from. That fear ultimately led me to decide not to participate in the tournament.” (INT7): “I unintentionally slowed down the business's growth, fearing it might not handle a sudden surge in orders efficiently. For instance, I avoided an appearance in a TV show due to dissatisfaction with the store's appearance and a lingering fear of appearing on TV.” Leaders, however, need to set high but achievable goals and take timely actions to guide themselves and their teams towards these objectives.

Some entrepreneurs and athletes attribute their success to luck or external factors, rather than their own abilities and experience feelings of being an imposter. (INT16): “In terms of incompetence, I've definitely felt the most as a leader that there are areas where I'm not a good enough manager.” (INT3): “To finally reach where one desires, I think luck must also be present in this process.” However, leadership involves recognizing and owning one's achievements and competencies, fostering self-confidence and encouraging the same in others. Entrepreneurs often find it hard to let go control or delegate tasks, while both groups showed a reluctance for self-promotion. (INT16): “I agreed with the consultant that we would take certain steps and I gave permission to communicate with our various service providers to put them to the test. I gave that permission and then said that it doesn't matter what he says, ultimately, I decide.” (INT6): “Posting on social media is my biggest fear.” (INT4): “I sort of hid behind the excuse that I didn't have an agent, even though I tried reaching out to one. The agent didn't answer calls and I just gave up.” Effective leadership requires the ability to delegate appropriately to manage workload and to promote oneself and one's achievements, when necessary, as this can inspire confidence in their leadership among others.

Another common pattern was a tendency to avoid risks. (INT12): “I'm afraid to show my work, as if they might look at me and think I have no clue what I'm doing. It's a terrible fear for me. I'm afraid that maybe some small mistake will come out somewhere.” (INT4): “Fear for me, was more like anxiety. For instance, due to a knee surgery at a young age I was afraid my knees would not be able to handle the intense training in the USA and that is why I never tried college basketball.” Leadership often requires taking calculated risks to seize opportunities and drive progress. However, they were found to rely on external validation and tendency to undermine their achievements. (INT15): “I believe that my self-worth is tied to a limiting belief, which expects constant validation through achievements and me feeling not good enough.” (INT7): “There was a store in Tallinn selling a product that was quite popular. I decided to bring this product to my store. However, I only put them in my physical store, not online because I was worried about upsetting competitors.” Leaders should develop an internal sense of validation and acknowledge their achievements to build and maintain self-efficacy and resilience. Nevertheless, when they prefer familiarity over growth, then it can limit potential. (INT4): “To some extent, I think it's just that I didn't make extra efforts to get somewhere. I didn't really work on myself or make certain

things better.” (INT16): “I should be dealing a lot with the company, but instead, I end up doing a lot of work.” Leaders should encourage exploring new challenges and continuous personal and professional development.

These patterns show that leadership is not just about directing others but also about self-awareness, personal development and risk-taking. These findings support observations about individuals introducing obstacles and making excuses to protect self-esteem (Török *et al*, 2018). Research on self-handicapping, associating failure with unpleasant consequences was also supported in interviews (Moorer, 2020). Interesting discovery was that the theory was related to the athletes but it also held true with entrepreneurs. (INT1): “The first blow to me was when an attempt was made to take over the contract. That was where I had the first moment of uncertainty. I realised my weakness, that I don't know how to sell collaboratively.” (INT12): “I lost half a million crowns in a previous business. For seven years, I hesitated to engage in business again.” Understanding and addressing these self-handicapping behaviours can significantly enhance leadership effectiveness in both business and sports environments.

The theory that leaders who engage in self-handicapping start employing Impression Management techniques and consequently become hesitant to take innovative actions was observed and discovered among the participants from both groups as well (Collewaert *et al*, 2021; Rajasekharan *et al*, 2020). (INT6): “I struggle with sharing about my business due to concerns about reputation damage. It's an internal battle—preparing for posts and then facing an empty space. I struggle with the decision-making process and the potential harm it might cause to my company's image.” (INT7): “When it comes to presenting myself personally, I struggle because I don't want to showcase my personality in this way. It's a challenge I face and even though I can create beautiful things. This creates a fear for me, questioning if it's engaging for the viewers.” Leaders should be attentive to impression management as it can affect their credibility, influencing their ability to build trust and connections within their team but also grow their business.

Discussion on how self-handicapping is related to the imposter phenomenon showed the connections that revealed leaders with imposter often believe they do not truly deserve their accomplishments, thinking luck played a role and they worry about others seeing them as

incompetent (Slank, 2023; Haar & Jong, 2022; Zanchetta *et al*, 2020). (INT5): “The thing that holds me back might be that I hesitate to take care of non-cleaning tasks myself. I ponder if what I'm doing is sufficient, considering there are industry standards. It takes me more time and then I wonder if I'm charging too much. I question my worth. Despite putting in a lot of effort and ensuring the service I provide is of high quality, I still have these fears.” The imposter phenomenon is evident in leadership concerns, reflecting a pervasive fear of being exposed as not truly competent in certain aspects. (INT11): “I have a hard time when someone calls me a marketing expert because I feel like I don't know enough. Even though I have 20 years of experience.” Leaders should become aware of the imposter phenomenon because it can impact their own self-esteem and leadership effectiveness, as shown in this study. Addressing it can create better team dynamics and performance.

The next phase of the study revealed a significant connection between leadership and mindset theory. Interviewees described situations where they observed authority figures, who had been exposed to a fixed mindset resonating with previous theory, which can create an environment where people are afraid to fail (Török *et al*, 2022a). (INT3): “In school, there were a couple of things I didn't feel confident about and I tried to avoid them. Particularly, I didn't want to answer questions incorrectly, not just because of the teacher's pressure but also the peer pressure. I avoided situations where I wasn't sure but if I was confident about a topic, I was quite assertive.” (INT8): “In primary school, I had more of a fixed mindset. Most teachers stuck to the textbook and did not encourage questions or exploration.” (INT15): “I've felt a sense of injustice growing up and developed the belief 'I am not enough,' influenced by family dynamics and experiences of not being adequately recognized.” These are examples of how the fear of failure often originates in early childhood. The author found that these patterns continued triggering self-handicapping in adulthood by providing common behaviours in the section above. This observation points out a crucial need that is aligned with the theories about an achievement-oriented approach focusing on students' well-being and in order to meet their basic psychological needs that can help them learn effectively (Toding *et al*, 2023; Dweck & Yeager, 2019). However, a fixed mindset can have a detrimental effect on leadership because it can cause leaders to be deeply affected by setbacks, injuries and unmet expectations, which in turn shape their approach to future challenges. (INT6): “One thing that stands out from my childhood is that my mom was skilled with her hands, turning

wool, crocheting, sewing and such. When it came to school projects involving sewing or knitting socks, she used to say to leave it to her because probably I cannot do that anyway. (INT2): “I faced a series of injuries, tears and setbacks. Looking back, it feels like I didn't fully grasp the situation. Towards the end of the season, despite some promising performances upon my return, I got injured again and my season came to an end. Somehow, that season left a lasting impression on me.”

These findings are connected to previous research, as individuals with a fixed mindset often anchor their self-efficacy to external validation, resulting in low self-confidence in their abilities when experiencing failure (Cho *et al*, 2021). The same theory was supported by a clear example, showing that a leader with a growth mindset can motivate others to make extra efforts for improvement. (INT4): “At the age of 25, my mindset changed. I believe it was my coach's straightforward statement that triggered it. Essentially, in front of others, he told me that instead of complaining about missed shots, I needed to start working on it. In summary, this somehow motivated me to gradually start addressing the issue. Until then, I had thought I was good enough, sailing smoothly. But then, perhaps, I realised that to improve, I needed to take extra steps.”

Interesting discovery of the study was that most participants now have a growth mindset, which aligns with cognitive processes guiding actions in uncertain situations, involving learning from mistakes to achieve specific goals (Lynch *et al*, 2023). (INT16): “I believe skills and abilities can be developed.” (INT8): “When faced with something difficult, I believe in trying it even if I feel unsure. It's about taking action before deciding you can't do it. This approach has been part of my life since I was younger, although I can't recall specific examples right now. The key is not letting the fear of inadequacy hold you back and taking risks even when you feel uncertain about your capabilities.” This observation aligns with Carol Dweck's mindset theory, which suggests that individuals can possess either a fixed or growth mindset, which makes a crucial impact on their unconscious behaviour (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). In the context of leadership, these findings are important because they emphasise the potential benefits of promoting a growth mindset in leadership practices related to self-handicapping (Török *et al*, 2018). Therefore, the participants were experiencing self-handicapping behaviour without their own awareness, even though having a growth mindset. Which should be another reason for leaders to discover their unconscious habits and adopt a growth mindset in order to reduce self-handicapping behaviours. This shift toward a

growth-oriented approach not only create a more supportive and innovative work environment but also encourages individuals to welcome challenges and see failures as chances for learning and improvement, which enables them to achieve significantly better results as a leader.

3.3. Key findings and further research

One of the main key findings found by the author was the fear of failure to be the main fear for both groups in this study, unlike the previous research, which showed it to be the most prominent type of fear in entrepreneurship (Cacciotti *et al*, 2020). However, fear of success was also discovered on a few occasions, in both groups. This highlights the importance of leaders being self-aware and addressing potential obstacles to their success. Freud's Iceberg model of the unconscious mind and research suggesting that unconscious behaviour tends to be 99% habitual were also aligned, as the participants were initially unaware of their self-handicapping behaviour until they gained insight through discussions (McLeod *et al.*, 2023; Hollingworth & Barker, 2021). This emphasises that leadership is shaped by underlying cognitive processes, including problem-solving and decision-making. While earlier research initially tailored theories to specific professional domains, the author found them to be universally applicable and for the most part relevant to both groups. Another key finding regarding the theory about fear of failure was aligned and often found to be started in early childhood due to an authority figure with a fixed mindset and being triggered by self-handicapping behaviour (Dweck & Yeager, 2019; Török *et al*, 2018). It emphasizes the critical role of discovering early experiences and patterns in shaping leaders' attitudes toward success and failure. Lastly, the author found that both groups have mostly developed a growth mindset, which helps to face the challenges and setbacks (Cacciotti *et al*, 2020). It can be a powerful asset in leadership, enabling individuals to embrace challenges as opportunities for growth and improvement.

Further academic research in field of leadership and self-handicapping, especially within small business owners and elite athletes, could be beneficial in several key areas. Firstly, conducting longitudinal studies to observe how self-handicapping behaviours change as leaders gain experience and learn tools to face different challenges. Secondly, exploring how cultural factors affect leadership styles and the occurrence of self-handicapping in leaders from various cultures.

Thirdly, assessing the effectiveness of leadership training programs in reducing self-handicapping tendencies, which can help to improve leadership development efforts. This research can provide a deeper understanding of leadership and self-handicapping dynamics.

3.4. Improving leadership by addressing self-handicapping

The aim of the thesis was to provide a practical step-by-step strategy to help leaders to discover self-handicapping behaviour that could be hindering their success. Therefore, the author is providing the five-step practical strategy and the self-awareness process. This strategy, as seen in Figure 4, aims to enhance leadership skills and professional growth by addressing self-handicapping tendencies, developing self-awareness and supporting positive changes in behaviour.

The author formulated a five-step strategy based on interview findings. This strategy helped participants become aware of their previously unrecognised behaviours. In summary, setting goals gives leaders clear direction, identifying obstacles reveals limiting beliefs, understanding fear and its origins exposes recurring patterns and recognizing excuses made when feeling incompetent prior to taking action increases awareness of self-handicapping. It is crucial for leaders to become aware of this strategy as it empowers them to address and overcome limiting beliefs and unknown behavioural patterns, enabling more effective decision-making.

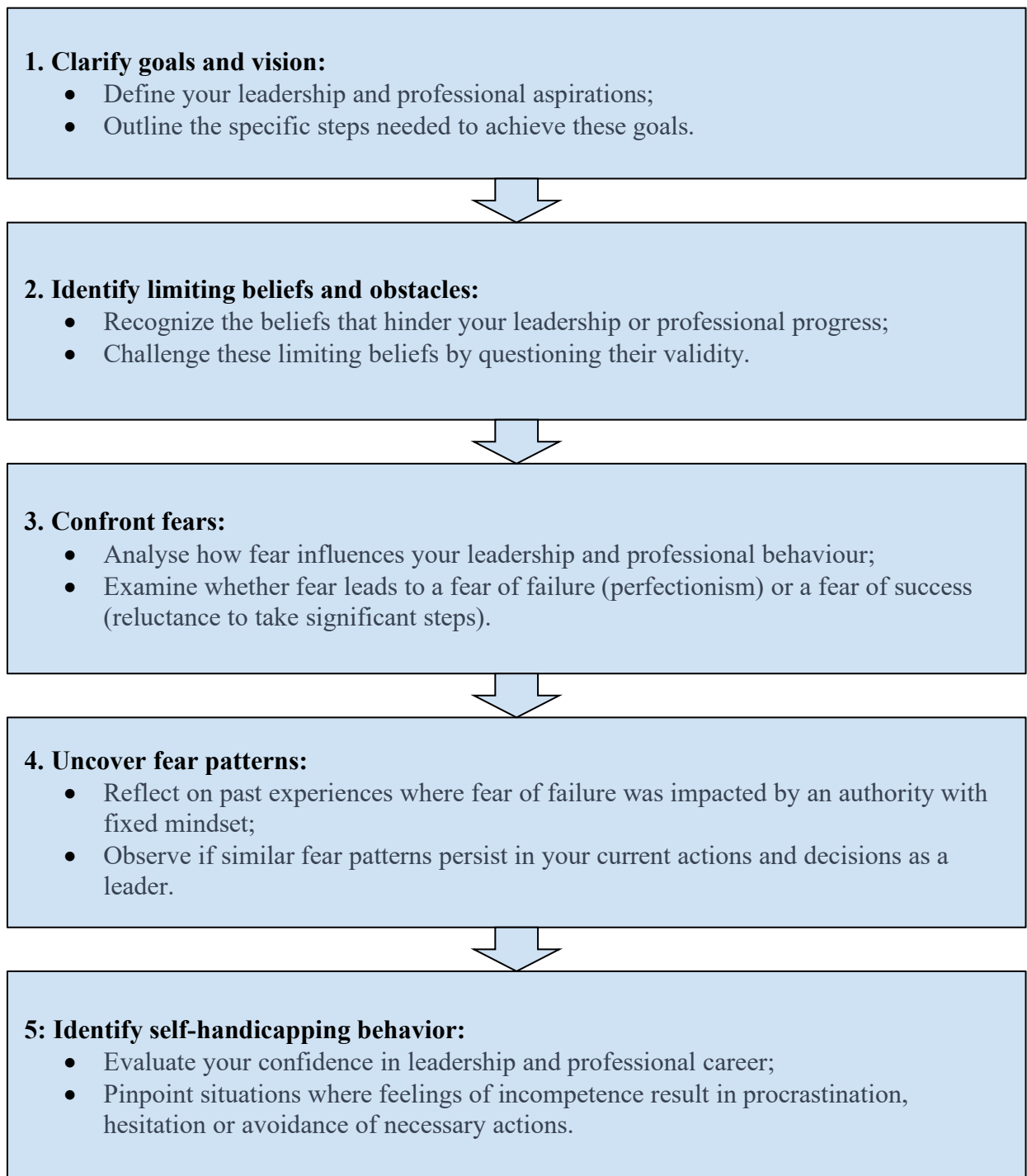


Figure 4. Five-step strategy to discover self-handicapping
Source: Based on the interviews, constructed by the author

Fear can be a significant but hidden obstacle for leaders. To overcome it, self-awareness is essential. Self-awareness means recognizing and dealing with these hidden fears, helping leaders

make better decisions. Self-aware leaders can handle challenges effectively and promote open communication within their teams. As seen on Figure 5, self-awareness is the key that helps leaders turn hidden fears, such as fear of failure, into opportunities for growth, leading to better leadership.

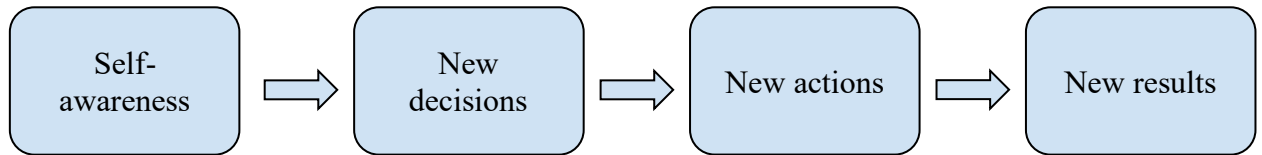


Figure 5. Illustrative process of self-awareness

Source: self-awareness process model developed by the author

In the context of leadership, it is crucial to understand the impact of our unconscious mind, as explained by Freud's Iceberg model (McLeod *et al*, 2023). This model highlights those unconscious thoughts, such as fear, are hidden factors that shape actions. When information transitions from the unconscious to the preconscious state, it becomes accessible. Self-awareness empowers leaders to make conscious decisions in their behaviour, resulting in new outcomes and progress toward their professional goals.

CONCLUSION

The thesis focuses on how fear, especially the fear of failure, can hold back leaders from achieving high performance and success in their careers. This fear leads to self-handicapping and a reluctance to take risks, preventing individuals from reaching their full potential. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has made fear even more significant, emphasising the need to address its impact on leadership and professional success. The problem is that leaders have a lack of awareness of how self-handicapping influences high performance in a professional career and therefore, hinders their success. Discovering this unconscious behaviour will help leaders from different professional domains become aware of their self-sabotaging ways and then consciously start making other choices in order to achieve their desired goals. The aim of the thesis was to create a step-by-step strategy for leaders to discover self-handicapping behaviours in order to succeed professionally.

The research questions were:

1. How do unconscious thoughts, behaviours and beliefs act as obstacles to professional success?
2. What are the sources and impacts of fear and its connection to the fear of failure within the professional domain?
3. What strategies can high-performing leaders apply to effectively manage self-handicapping for their benefit?

In the first part of the thesis, the literature review was carried out on the latest research available about fear of failure and self-handicapping influence on leaders from different professional domains. The theoretical background influenced the empirical research that help to identify the main challenges by integrating theory with real-world observations. These findings then informed the preparation of the qualitative research. The author aimed to gather comprehensive insights into the subject and conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 leaders from Estonia from 2 different professional fields: entrepreneurs and professional athletes. These categories were selected not only due to the author's personal background as a former professional athlete but also because

previous research had indicated that self-handicapping received more extensive attention in the fields of psychology, education and sports, while being comparatively less explored in business contexts. This choice also allowed the author to provide valuable insights into the high-level leadership skills observed in the world of professional sports. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and stored in MS Word format on Google Docs, during a period of 16th of Oct to 15th of Nov 2023. Interviews lasted on average 60 minutes. The author conducted a qualitative content analysis of the collected responses.

Scientific articles and the author's investigation both confirmed that limited awareness of self-handicapping among leaders can hinder their professional success. This thesis thoroughly explores the complex interaction between unconscious thoughts, behaviours, beliefs and their impact on leadership and self-handicapping in a professional context. A key focus of this study was how the unconscious mind influences leadership and career paths. The research highlights those unconscious beliefs and behaviours, often formed early in life and reinforced over time, can create significant obstacles to career progress. An important discovery is that leaders often are not aware of these subconscious influences, which can lead them to engage in automatic actions that hinder their intended goals. This is especially noticeable in fear-driven behaviours and situations where emotions take over rational decision-making, particularly in stressful contexts.

The thesis highlights fear, especially the fear of failure, as a significant barrier to professional success. This fear, deeply rooted in the mind, leads to actions such as avoiding tasks and self-sabotage. Additionally, the research shows that fear is not just about avoiding bad outcomes but also about being cautious of success because of possible negative consequences. The biggest discovery was that the fear of failure can lead to self-sabotaging actions like self-handicapping, which hinders leaders in various ways. It causes hesitation, delays progress and limits innovation. Additionally, it leads to self-doubt, procrastination and setting modest goals, which can weaken self-confidence. Leaders who self-handicap may struggle with delegation and self-promotion, become risk-averse and rely on external validation. Recognizing and addressing these behaviours is crucial for better leadership and personal growth. Encouraging a growth mindset that believes

in skill development can help leaders overcome self-handicapping and foster a supportive, innovative environment among their teams.

Self-awareness is vital for leaders to overcome hidden fears, such as the fear of failure or fear of success and enhance their leadership skills. The author has provided a five-step process for leaders to discover their unconscious behaviours and self-handicapping tendencies. These steps involve setting clear goals and vision, identifying obstacles and limiting beliefs, recognizing fear-driven behaviours, understanding where the fear of failure originates and uncovering self-handicapping actions. By practising self-awareness and following these steps, leaders can make better decisions and therefore take different actions that will create different results toward their desired goals. The findings from this study are crucial for leaders to identify self-handicapping tendencies, both in themselves and in their teams. It helps to shape leadership training, personal growth plans and organisational strategies to foster growth, resilience and enhanced performance.

For further research, this study suggests developing tools to help professionals overcome hidden barriers, which can boost their leadership skills and careers. It is important to research how these tools affect long-term professional growth and leadership effectiveness. Additionally, looking into how different cultures impact leadership styles and professional challenges can give a global perspective on the role of the unconscious behaviours in professional success, such as self-handicapping.

In conclusion, this thesis offers a detailed and insightful examination of the unconscious dynamics in professional success and leadership. It bridges the gap between theoretical concepts and real-world applications, providing valuable insights for professionals seeking to realise their full potential and for organisations aiming to develop effective leaders. The research into self-handicapping and fear within the professional context opens new opportunities for understanding and enhancing leadership capabilities, laying the groundwork for ongoing research and development in this crucial area.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Alberta, E., Petrie, T.A., Whitney, E., & Moore, G. (2019). The relationship of motivational climates, mindsets and goal orientations to grit in male adolescent soccer players. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 19(2), 266-269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2019.1655775>
- Alsharif, A.H., Salleh, N.Z.M., & Baharun, R. (2021). Neuromarketing: The popularity of brain-imaging and physiological tools. *Neuroscience Research Notes*, 3(5). <https://doi.org/10.31117/neuroscirn.v3i5.80>
- Attia, M., & Seoudi, I. (2021). The Effect of Entrepreneur's Fear of Failure on Firm's Entrepreneurial Orientation. In P. Skilas, N. Apostolopoulos (Eds.) *Proceedings of the 17th European Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Pafos, Cyprus, 15-16 September, 2021, (pp. 684-686). <https://doi.org/10.34190/ecie.17.1.769>
- Billingsley, J., Lipsey, N.P., Burnette, J.L., & Pollack, J.M. (2021). Growth mindsets: defining, assessing and exploring effects on motivation for entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs. *Current Psychology*, 42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02149-w>
- Bočková, K., Škrabánková, J., & Hanák, H. (2021). Theory and Practice of Neuromarketing: Analyzing Human Behavior in Relation to Markets. *Emerging Science Journal*, 5(1), 44-45. <https://doi.org/10.28991/esj-2021-01256>
- Cacciotti, G., Hayton, J.C., Mitchell, J.R., & Allen, D.G. (2020). Entrepreneurial fear of failure: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 35(5), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2020.106041>
- Cho, E., Kim, E.H., Ju, U., & Lee, G.A. (2021). Motivational predictors of reading comprehension in middle school: Role of self-efficacy and growth mindsets. *Reading and Writing*, 34, 2338-2339. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-021-10146-5>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2016). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Collewaert, V., Vanacker, T., Anseel, F., & Bourgois, D. (2021). The sandwich game: Founder-CEOs and forecasting as impression management. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 36(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2020.106075>

- Dabrowska, A. (2023). Fear is an illness of the brain. A cognitive account of a novel constructive scenario of fear. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lpp-2023-0004>
- Downing, M.S., Arthur-Mensah, N., & Zimmerman, J. (2020). Impostor phenomenon: considerations for leadership practice. *International Journal of Organization Theory & Behavior*, 23(2). <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOTB-05-2019-0065>
- Dunlea, N., (2022). A Discrete Choice Experiment to Identify Preferences for Different Levels of Workplace Attributes, in the context of “Self-Handicapping”. University of Kent, Bachelor’s thesis in School of Economics.
- Dweck, C., & Yeager, D.S. (2019). Mindsets: A View From Two Eras. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618804166>
- Ekler, T., & Tilfarlioglu F.Y. (2020). A Study on the Possible Effects of the Fear of Success and Rejection Sensitivity on Academic Success. *KMU Journal of Social and Economic Research*, 22(38), 165.
- Gepp, K., & Holland, K. (2023). Amygdala Hijack: When Emotion Takes Over. *Healthline*.
- Gray, B. E. (2023). Avoiding success: How does fear of success impact today’s workforce? The City University of New York, Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
- Gurgu, E., Gurgu, I.A., & Bucea-Mane-Tonis, R. (2020). Neuromarketing for a better understanding of consumer needs and emotions. *Independent Journal of Management & Production*, 11(1), 211-225. <https://doi.org/10.14807/ijmp.v11i1.993>
- Haar, J., & de Jong, K. (2022). Imposter phenomenon and employee mental health: what role do organizations play? *Personnel Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-01-2022-0030>
- Haydam, N. E., Steenkamp, P. (2020). A Methodological Blueprint for Social Sciences Research – The Social Sciences Research Methodology Framework. In *Proceedings of the 15th Edition of the International Conference European Integration Realities and Perspectives*, Danubius University of Galati, Romania, 15-16 May, 2020, (pp. 304).
- Henschel, C., & Iffland, B. (2022). Measuring Fear of Failure. *Psychological Test Adaption and Development*, 2(1), 136-139. <https://doi.org/10.1027/2698-1866/a000018>
- Hillierin, I., & Gherghisan, A. (2019). Two Approaches To Fear Of Failure And Success. In V. Grigore, M. Stănescu, M. Stoicescu, & L. Popescu (Eds.), *Education and Sports Science in the 21st Century*, 55. *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*. Future Academy. <https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2019.02.74>
- Hollingworth, C., & Barker, L. (2020). The Behavioural Science Guide to Making and Breaking Habits. *The Behavioral Architects*, 4-13.

- Hunter, E., Jenkins, A., & Mark-Herbert, C. (2020). When fear of failure leads to intentions to act entrepreneurially: Insights from threat appraisals and coping efficacy. *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, 39(5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242620967006>
- Jensen, L.E., & Deemer, E.D. (2020). Attachment style and self-handicapping: the mediating role of the imposter phenomenon. *Social Psychology of Education*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-020-09580-0>
- Johnston, E. (2022), Building Trust and Psychological Safety in Teams. *Unit Effect*.
- Joseph, JT (2021). The Amygdala in Neurodegeneration. *Canadian Journal of Neurological Sciences*, 48(1). <https://doi.org/10.1017/cjn.2021.97>
- Kamble, P. (2021). What is the Subconscious Mind? How Does it Impact Our Behavior? *SSRN*, 10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3806525>
- Kamuk, Y.U. (2022). Self-Handicapping and Its Value in Sports. *Turkish Journal and Sport Exercise*, 24(2), 209-214. DOI: 10.15314/tsed.934732
- Kong, F., Zhao L., & Tsai C. (2020). The Relationship Between Entrepreneurial Intention and Action: The Effects of Fear of Failure and Role Model. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00229>
- Kulatunga, K. J., Amaratunga, Dilanthi & Haigh, Richard (2007). Researching construction client and innovation: methodological perspective. In: *7th International Postgraduate Conference in the Built and Human Environment*, 28-29 March, 2007, Salford Quays, UK.
- Lyncha, M.P. & Corbett, A.C. (2023). Entrepreneurial mindset shift and the role of cycles of learning. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 61(1), 80-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2021.1924381>
- Manot, M. (2020). Impact on neuromarketing on consumer behavior. Delhi Technological University, Project Report is submitted as part of 4th Semester in MBA.
- Mcleod, M. (2023). Freud And The Unconscious Mind (Iceberg Theory). *Simple Psychology*.
- Mitchell, J., & Decker, P. (2017). Self-handicapping in leadership: a call for research. *Global Journal of Business Disciplines*, 1(1), 56-67.
- Mobbs, D., Adolphs, R., Fanelow, M.S., Barrett, L.F., LeDoux, J.E., Ressler, K., & Tye, K.M. (2019). Viewpoints: Approaches to defining and investigating fear. *Nature Neuroscience*. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41593-019-0456-6>
- Moorer, B. (2020). Examining the Role of Goal Orientations and Self-Handicapping Behavior on Enjoyment and Anxiety in High School Basketball. Graduate College of Bowling Green State University, Master' Thesis project.

- Park, D., Tsukayama, E., Yu, A., & Duckworth, A.L. (2020). The development of grit and growth mindset during adolescence. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2020.104889>
- Rajasekharan, B., & Rajasekharan, K.G. (2020). Impression management - reviewing its impact on work performance and instrument validation. *Gedrag & Organisatie Review*, 33(2), 852-856.
- Schüler, J., Stahler, J., & Wolff, W. (2023). Mind-over-body beliefs in sport and exercise: A driving force for training volume and performance, but with risks for exercise addiction. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2023.102462>
- Saunders, M., & Tosey, P. (2013). The layers of research design. *Rapport*.
- Slank, S. (2019). Rethinking the Imposter Phenomenon. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-019-09984-8>
- Sun, Y., Gooch, H., & Sah, P., (2020). Fear conditioning and the basolateral amygdala version 1; peer review: 3 approved). *F1000 Faculty Rev*, 53. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.21201.1>
- Suryanto, Y.I., & Nugraha, L.N. (2022). Mindfulness Community Education for High School Students and Guidance and Counseling Teachers. *Journal of Innovation and Community Engagement*, 3(4), 217.
- Tadoc, S.M., Keraf M.K.B.A., & Pello, S.C. (2023). Fear of Success with Job Satisfaction on Bank Employees. *Journal of Health and Behavioral Science*, 5(1), 94-96.
- Thompson, J. (2022). A Guide To Abductive Thematic Analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(5). <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5340>
- Toding, M., Madamürk, K., Venesaar, U., & Malleus, E. (2023). Teachers' mindset and attitudes towards learners and learning environment to support students' entrepreneurial attitudes in universities. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2023.100769>
- Turner, M.J., Chadha, N.J., Davis, H., Deen, M.S., Gilmore, H., Jones, J.K., Goldman, S., & Terjesen, M. (2022). Practitioner Perspectives on Applying Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) in High Performance Sport. *Journal of Rational - Emotive & Cognitive - Behavior Therapy*, 41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10942-022-00461-3>
- Török, L., Szabó, Z.P., & Orosz, G. (2022a). Beliefs And The Situated Nature of Self-Handicapping: Promoting Growth Intelligence Mindset Beliefs Reduces Behavioral Self-Handicapping. *Research Square*. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1307044/v1>

- Török, L., & Szabó Z. P. (2018). The theory of self-handicapping: forms, influencing factors and measurement. *Czechoslovak Psychology*, 62(2), 173-183.
- Török, L., Szabo, Z. P., & Orosz, G. (2022b). Elite Athletes' Perfectionistic Striving vs. Concerns as Opposing Predictors of Self-Handicapping With the Mediating Role of Attributional Style. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.862122>
- Vences, N., A., Diaz-Campo, J., & Rosales, D., F., G. (2020). Neuromarketing as an Emotional Connection Tool Between Organizations and Audiences in Social Networks. A Theoretical Review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01787>
- Vodă, R.A. (2022). When artificial intelligence is part of the process: global leaders' beliefs and algorithmic decision-making. Tiffin University, PhD degree.
- Weight, E.A., Lewis, M., & Harry, M. (2020). Self-Efficacy Belief and the Influential Coach: An Examination of Collegiate Athletes. *Journal of Athlete Development and Experience*, 2(3), 198-203. <https://doi.org/10.25035/jade.02.03.04>
- Whittemore, T.J., & Woods, S. (2021). Analysis on the Negative Emotional, Physiological, and Cognitive Responses Elicited from the Activation of a Stall Alarm. *The Journal of Aviation/Aerospace Education & Research*, 30(1), 108-109. <https://doi.org/10.15394/jaaer.2021.1881>
- Wigfield, A., Muenks, K., & Eccles, J.S. (2021). Achievement Motivation: What We Know and Where We Are Going. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-devpsych-050720-103500>
- Wilbanks, D., Moon, J.W., Stewart, B., Gray, K., & Varnum, M.E.W. (2020). Not Just a Hijack: Imaginary Worlds Can Enhance Individual and Group-Level Fitness.
- Yilmaz, H. (2018). Fear of Success and Life Satisfaction in terms of Self-efficacy. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 6(6), 1278-1279. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2018.060619>
- Zanchetta, M., Junker, S., Wolf, A.M., & Traut-Mattausch, E. (2020). Overcoming the Fear That Haunts Your Success” – The Effectiveness of Interventions for Reducing the Impostor Phenomenon. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00405>

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview guide for professional athletes

Introduction:

Introduction of myself, the aim of the interview, asking permission to record the interview and reminder of duration 60 minutes.

General questions:

1. What motivated you to aspire to be a professional athlete?
2. Could you share your goals?
3. How far are you currently in achieving these goals?

Subconscious:

4. If you woke up tomorrow and had achieved your most important goal, what would your life and career look like?
5. What specific actions and resources are needed to make your biggest goal a reality?
6. Describe the challenges or obstacles you see in achieving your goals.
7. How well are you aware of the influence of the subconscious mind your career?

Fear:

8. What fear means to you and how do you behave when experiencing it in professional life?
9. What activities you haven't dared to do because encountered a fear of failure?

Beliefs:

10. How well are you aware of beliefs and limiting beliefs?
11. In your opinion, what limiting beliefs might hinder your progress?

Appendix 1 continued

Self-handicapping:

12. Have ever felt a fear of incompetence in your professional career and how has this fear affected your behaviour and decisions?

13. What self-sabotaging behaviour patterns, if they exist, might hinder your professional goals?

Imposter phenomenon:

14. Could you share a time when you felt that you didn't deserve your professional achievements or worried that others might discover your lack of competence?

15. How do these feelings affect your self-confidence and actions in your professional life?

16. Can you provide an example of a situation where you consciously made yourself appear less capable to avoid a certain outcome or expectation? How did that decision affect your overall experience or the people around you?

17. What are the following statements, if any, that you have ever said or thought to yourself:

- Sometimes I feel that my success has come due to some luck and I think I got to my current position or achieved my current success because I was in the right place at the right time or knew the right people;
- I often fear that I might fail in a new task, despite generally being successful in what I undertake;
- I fear that people important to me may discover that I am not as capable as they think.

Fixed and growth mindset:

18. What is your opinion on whether skills and abilities are fixed and relatively stable traits or can be developed through effort, support from others and a good strategy?

19. Can you recount a past situation where an authority figure's fixed mindset may have instilled a fear of failure in you?

Appendix 2. Interview guide for entrepreneurs

Introduction:

Introduction of myself, the aim of the interview, asking permission to record the interview and reminder of duration 60 minutes.

General questions:

1. What motivated you to pursue entrepreneurship?
2. Could you share your business goals?
3. How far are you in achieving these goals?

Subconscious:

4. If you woke up tomorrow and had achieved your most important goal, what would your life and career look like?
5. What specific actions and resources are needed to make your biggest goal a reality?
6. Describe the challenges or obstacles you see in achieving your goals.
7. How well are you aware of the influence of the subconscious mind your career?

Fear:

8. What fear means and how do you act when you experience it in your professional life?
9. What activities you haven't dared to do because encountered a fear of failure?
10. What thoughts have you had on your entrepreneurial journey, such as
 - the fear of losing a source of income or savings;
 - feelings of inadequacy in pursuing your business idea and development;
 - uncertainty about the potential of your business idea;
 - concerns about how others may perceive you when making a mistake or experiencing complete failure;
 - fears related to the capabilities of your business team or organisation to complete tasks successfully.

Appendix 2 continued

Beliefs:

11. How well are you aware of beliefs and limiting beliefs?
12. In your opinion, what limiting beliefs might hinder your progress?

Self-handicapping:

13. If you have ever felt a fear of incompetence as an entrepreneur or leader, how has this fear affected your behaviour and decisions?
14. What self-sabotaging behaviour patterns, if they exist, might hinder your business goals?
15. Could you share experiences where you have used Impression management strategies in situations where you felt less self-confident and prioritised maintaining a positive image over taking risks?

Imposter phenomenon:

16. Can you describe situations where you have felt that you don't deserve the professional success you've achieved or that others may discover that you're not truly competent?
17. Can you provide examples of when you consciously refrained from using your true abilities to avoid certain situations or outcomes?
18. What are the following statements, if any, that you have ever said or thought to yourself:
 - Sometimes I feel that my success has come due to some luck and I think I got to my current position or achieved my current success because I was in the right place at the right time or knew the right people;
 - I often fear that I might fail in a new task, despite generally being successful in what I undertake;
 - I fear that people important to me may discover that I am not as capable as they think.

Fixed and growth mindset:

19. What is your opinion on whether skills and abilities are fixed and relatively stable traits or can be developed through effort, support from others and a good strategy?
20. Can you recount a past situation where an authority figure's fixed mindset may have instilled a fear of failure in you?

Appendix 3. Table of interviews

No	Gender	Profession	Field	Duration of the profession	Interview type	Duration (min)	Date
INT 01	Male	Entrepreneur	Medical	9 years	Online	102	16.10.2023
INT 02	Male	Professional athlete	Volleyball	11 years	Online	71	16.10.2023
INT 03	Male	Professional athlete	Basketball	4 years	Online	53	17.10.2023
INT 04	male	Professional athlete	Basketball	20 years	Online	52	18.10.2023
INT 05	Female	Entrepreneur	Cleaning	3 years	Online	50	20.10.2023
INT 06	Female	Entrepreneur	Cleaning and retail	11 years	Online	55	20.10.2023
INT 07	Female	Entrepreneur	Retail	7 years	Online	81	20.10.2023
INT 08	Male	Entrepreneur	Entertainment	2 years	Online	57	20.10.2023
INT 09	Male	Professional athlete	Soccer	5 years	Online	62	25.10.2023
INT 10	Female	Professional athlete	Basketball	12 years	Online	48	28.10.2023
INT 11	Female	Entrepreneur	Marketing	1 year	Online	93	29.10.2023
INT 12	Male	Entrepreneur	IT and insurance	10 years	Online	73	30.10.2023
INT 13	Female	Professional athlete	Soccer	6 years	Online	45	1.11.2023
INT 14	Male	Professional athlete	Basketball	2 years	Online	48	3.11.2023
INT 15	Female	Professional athlete	Biathlete	12 years	online	75	8.11.2023
INT 16	Male	Entrepreneur	Accounting	16 years	online	60	15.11.2023

Appendix 4. Transcribed interviews

Link to the folder with transcribed interviews and coding table:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/17KlboukmlMxeFGtsvL68Zs8Y33SRXcbG?u sp=sharing>

Appendix 5. Non-exclusive licence

A non-exclusive licence for reproduction and publication of a graduation thesis¹

I, Kerdu Lenear

1. Grant Tallinn University of Technology free licence (non-exclusive licence) for my thesis “Self-handicapping influence on leadership and strategies for professional success”, supervised by Kristjan Jasinski,

1.1 to be reproduced for the purposes of preservation and electronic publication of the graduation thesis, incl. to be entered in the digital collection of the library of Tallinn University of Technology until expiry of the term of copyright;

1.2 to be published via the web of Tallinn University of Technology, incl. to be entered in the digital collection of the library of Tallinn University of Technology until expiry of the term of copyright.

2. I am aware that the author also retains the rights specified in clause 1 of the non-exclusive licence.

3. I confirm that granting the non-exclusive licence does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights, the rights arising from the Personal Data Protection Act or rights arising from other legislation.

03.01.2024

¹ *The non-exclusive licence is not valid during the validity of access restriction indicated in the student's application for restriction on access to the graduation thesis that has been signed by the school's dean, except in case of the university's right to reproduce the thesis for preservation purposes only. If a graduation thesis is based on the joint creative activity of two or more persons and the co-author(s) has/have not granted, by the set deadline, the student defending his/her graduation thesis consent to reproduce and publish the graduation thesis in compliance with clauses 1.1 and 1.2 of the non-exclusive licence, the non-exclusive license shall not be valid for the period*