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# The Executive Covering Audit

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EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP DIAGNOSTIC & FIELD GUIDE • THE Q SUITE

# THE EXECUTIVE COVERING AUDIT

## *How High-Performing Leaders Reclaim the Bandwidth Lost to Managing Perception*

By Ken Kundis, Executive Coach (ACC) • Former Fortune 500 CMO • Co-Host, The Q Suite (theq-suite.com)

## The Point of View — The Hidden Tax at the Top

## 1. The Promotion Paradox

Every ambitious leader expects the hardest part of an executive career to be getting into the room. You spend twenty years building domain mastery, delivering results under pressure, and earning the scope. Then you get the title—VP, SVP, Chief Marketing Officer, Managing Partner—and discover an unexpected tax. The higher you climb, the narrower the unwritten rules of executive presence become.

> *Suddenly, a meaningful share of your cognitive energy is no longer going toward strategy, market shifts, or leading your team. It is going toward self-monitoring: editing how you sound, filtering what you share about your life, softening your instincts to match the dominant room, and calculating the social cost of candor before you speak.*

In organizational research, this is called covering—downplaying a known aspect of your identity, background, or perspective to blend into the mainstream of an institution. For LGBTQ+ executives, women, first-generation leaders, and anyone who does not match the legacy template of the C-suite, covering is not an isolated event. It is a background operating system running 50 hours a week.

## 2. Why Covering Is a Business Performance Problem—Not Just a Personal One

Early in your career, covering can feel like a smart survival tool that reduces friction and keeps the focus on your output. At the executive level, that equation flips. What protected you at Director becomes an anchor at VP and C-suite:

**Cognitive Bandwidth Leakage:** You cannot run two operating systems simultaneously without paying a performance penalty. When 20% to 30% of your working memory is scanning the room for perception risk, you have less sharpness for rapid strategic synthesis and high-stakes negotiation.

**The "Safe" Leadership Trap:** Leaders busy managing how they are perceived default to consensus seeking and overly polished communication. Boards and CEOs do not hire senior executives to blend in —they hire them for pattern recognition, decisive conviction, and non-obvious perspective.

**Delayed Trust & Executive Isolation:** Teams sense when a leader is guarded, even when they cannot name why. When you hold back your real point of view or keep your personal reality behind glass, your direct reports keep theirs behind glass too. Candor stalls and you carry the weight of the seat alone.

**Burnout Disguised as "Imposter Syndrome":** Many senior leaders mistake covering exhaustion for imposter syndrome. You are not doubting your capability—you are depleted from the daily labor of translating yourself to fit a room that was not built with you in mind.

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## 3. From "Resetting in Place" to Leading Unedited

Across conversations with sitting C-suite leaders, university presidents, and Fortune 500 executives on The Q Suite—and in private coaching engagements with senior leaders navigating major transitions—one pattern stands out: the inflection point happens when a leader stops asking "How do I fit this room?" and starts asking "What does this room actually need from my full voice?"

You do not solve covering by abandoning judgment or turning every boardroom into a confessional. Executive discretion is a skill; covering is a tax. The difference comes down to intention versus reflex: **Executive Discretion** is a conscious strategic choice made in service of an outcome, whereas **Covering** is an automatic protective reflex driven by fear of losing standing.

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# The 12-Point Executive Covering Audit

**Instructions:** Rate each statement honestly based on your last 30 days at work using a 1 to 4 scale: 1 = Rarely / Never (costs no energy) | 2 = Occasionally (only in specific high-stakes rooms) | 3 = Frequently (regular part of my week) | 4 = Almost Always (my default mode).

| # | Diagnostic Statement (Last 30 Days) | Your Score |
|---|---|---|
| **Pillar A: Appearance & Presence (How You Show Up)** | | |
| 01 | Self-Editing Before Entering the Room: I consciously adjust my tone, vocal cadence, wardrobe, or body language before key leadership meetings to appear more "traditional" or less noticeable. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| 02 | Pre-Meeting Rehearsal Tax: I spend disproportionate time rehearsing how to deliver a point so it will not be misread as "too intense," "too emotional," or "off brand" for the culture. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| 03 | Code-Switching Exhaustion: I feel noticeably more drained after external board, investor, or cross-functional executive meetings than after working with my immediate team—even when the workload is identical. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| **Pillar B: Affiliation & Personal Reality (What You Share)** | | |
| 04 | The Pronoun / Weekend Dodge: In casual small talk with peers, clients, or senior stakeholders, I edit out details about my partner, family, or personal life— or keep conversation strictly transactional to avoid awkwardness. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| 05 | Selective Visibility: I am fully out or unedited with my direct team or ERG, yet noticeably more guarded with the CEO, board members, or key commercial clients. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| 06 | Boundary Distance: I keep professional relationships polite but arms-length because letting peers get too close feels like it could complicate my authority. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| **Pillar C: Advocacy & Voice (What You Challenge)** | | |
| # | Diagnostic Statement (Last 30 Days) | Your Score |
| | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 07 | The "Only One in the Room" Silence: When a blind spot around talent, customer demographics, or workplace culture comes up in a senior meeting, I hesitate to speak up so I am not pigeonholed as "the advocate" rather than a commercial operator. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| 08 | Softening Dissent: When I disagree with a consensus direction, I hedge my language so heavily to protect political capital that my actual objection gets lost. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| 09 | Over-Credentialing: I feel compelled to over-prepare data, decks, or proof points far beyond my peers just to earn the same baseline assumption of competence. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| **Pillar D: Association & Sponsorship (Who You Align With)** | | |
| 10 | Mentorship Hesitation: I think twice before visibly sponsoring or championing rising LGBTQ+, women, or underrepresented talent out of concern that it might look like "favoritism" or narrow my executive brand. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| 11 | Isolation at the Top: I lack a confidential sounding board of peers or an executive coach outside my company where I can speak completely unfiltered about the politics and pressures of my seat. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |
| 12 | Deferred Authenticity ("When I Get to X"): I tell myself I will lead more openly and take bolder stances once I hit the next promotion, close the next deal, or reach a safer milestone. | [ 1 \| 2 \| 3 \| 4 ] |

**TOTAL COVERING AUDIT SCORE (12 – 48 POINTS): _____ / 48**

## Scoring & Your Next 30 Days

| Score Range | Diagnostic Profile | What It Means for Your Executive Bandwidth |
|---|---|---|
| **12 – 20 Points** | **High Alignment (Low Covering Tax)** | You are operating largely unedited. Your energy is focused on commercial execution and leadership impact, and where you hold back, it is by deliberate strategic choice rather than habit. |
| **21 – 34 Points** | **Moderate Bandwidth Leak (Selective Armor)** | You have earned strong credibility, but you are paying an invisible tax in specific rooms—most likely with senior stakeholders, boards, or new peer groups. Reclaiming even half of that bandwidth will sharpen your presence and stamina. |
| **35 – 48 Points** | **High Covering Load (Urgent Reset Needed)** | You are carrying two full-time jobs: executing your role and maintaining an exhausting perception shield. Left unaddressed, this leads directly to executive burnout, stalled visibility, or walking away from a role you could transform. |

## Three Immediate Shifts to Test This Week

1. **Pick One "Unedited" Truth per Meeting:** Identify one commercial or strategic observation you would normally soften, and state it plainly in the first ten minutes of the meeting without hedging.

1. **Eliminate One Personal Edit:** Share one normal, unvarnished detail about your life, partner, or weekend in an executive check-in this week—and notice how quickly the room relaxes when you stop signaling caution.

1. **Audit Your Energy Leaks with an Outside Sounding Board:** You cannot see your own blind spots from inside the frame. Test your assumptions with a trusted peer or executive coach who has no stake in internal politics.

# About Ken Kundis & Next Steps

Ken Kundis, Executive Coach (ACC) works 1-on-1 with senior executives, newly appointed VPs/CXOs, and high-potential leaders navigating major scope transitions, visibility inflection points, and unedited leadership. A former Fortune 500 financial services CMO (Capgemini, TCS, CEI), ICF Associate Certified Coach (ACC), and Co-Host of The Q Suite, Ken brings both boardroom operating experience and rigorous diagnostic coaching to leaders who are ready to stop managing perception and start leading at full capacity.

# Ready to Reclaim Your Leadership Bandwidth?

- **Book a Complimentary 20-Minute Diagnostic Conversation:** Visit theq-suite.com to schedule a private 1:1 session with Ken Kundis.

- **Watch The Q Suite Debrief:** See real executive coaching breakdowns on imposter syndrome, resetting in place, and leading out loud at theq-suite.com.

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