Overcoming Leadership Blind Spots

"Leadership is a struggle by flawed human beings to make some important human values real and effective in the world as it is." - Steven Snyder, Leadership and the Art of Struggle

There’s no escaping it: Everyone has blind spots. No matter how hard we try to be self-aware, everyone—including the best leader—has unproductive behaviors that are invisible to us but glaring to everyone else.

Our behavioral blind spots create unintended consequences: They distort judgment, corrupt decision-making, reduce our awareness, create enemies and silos, destroy careers and sabotage business results.

Leaders are particularly vulnerable. They often buy into the overpowering belief that they should have all the answers and easily handle challenges great and small. They exploit their powers of self-confidence at the expense of introspection and self-questioning. For many, the need to be right trumps their mandate to be effective.

These leaders fail to see that their behaviors can be destructive to themselves and others, even when their intentions are positive. They forget that others judge them on their behaviors and results—not by intentions.

Research Revelations

A blind spot is a performance-hindering mindset or behavior of which you’re unaware or have chosen to overlook. A recent Business Week article cites some important research:

- A Hay Group study shows that an organization’s senior leaders are more likely to overrate themselves and develop blind spots that can hinder their effectiveness.
- A study by Development Dimensions International, Inc., found that 89 percent of front-line leaders have at least one skills-related blind spot.

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?

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They are ultimately rewarded with more creative ideas for the reflective mind to consider.

**Five Common Blind Spots**

An Internet search for “blind spots” produces a virtually endless list of disastrous leadership decisions, based on common cognitive biases that led to faulty thinking.

We can group the most common blind spots into five key categories:

1. Experience
2. Personality
3. Values
4. Strategy
5. Conflict

**The Experience Blind Spot**

“Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can’t lose.” - Microsoft Founder Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead*

Success boosts confidence — and while it can feel especially good, it leads to errors in thinking. We rarely examine or analyze what led to a successful outcome, including luck’s role in the process. We automatically assume we were right on the money. Our automatic mind consequently encodes the strategies and tactics we used, along with the confidence we gained.

When we encounter a new situation, we spontaneously draw on our memories of success, without questioning whether prior strategies fit the current circumstances. Thus, a long history of accolades and achievements can potentially produce troublesome blind spots. There is danger in assuming that past results will guarantee future successes. Intuition takes over, shutting down the need for proper investigation and analysis.

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**The Personality Blind Spot**

Personality-based blind spots are epidemic. You cannot avoid them unless you have a high degree of self-awareness, monitor your thoughts and make frequent course corrections.
When a collective worldview becomes self-reinforcing around a set of practices, assumptions or beliefs, there is potential for **groupthink**. Creativity and agility suffer because conformance is valued above change, and risk is discouraged.

Strategy blind spots can occur in any organizational area. They’re not restricted to values. Unfortunately, they are often spotted in hindsight, after an important opportunity is missed.

Leaders who prize openness and transparency have the best chance of spotting strategy blind spots. They encourage input at all levels, fostering a culture of trust where ideas are honestly debated.

**The Conflict Blind Spot**

Conflict can be healthy in relationships and organizations where trust has been established. Diverse perspectives challenge tunnel vision and the status quo, while promoting learning and innovation. When issues are constructively debated, new solutions emerge.

But it’s human nature to want to defend and win an argument. Conflict becomes destructive when positive energy turns negative and erodes trust. Empathy and insight are tossed aside when we filter incoming information through the lens of what we believe and want. We categorize others as the enemy, who must be wrong.

Instead of debate, conflict becomes a power struggle that prevents you from seeing any solution (other than winning your point). The automatic mind is in full force, fueled by strong emotions, and the reflective mind is ignored.

You must reactivate your higher intelligence to find your way out of a conflict blind spot. Slow the discussion; perhaps even take a break. Breathe deeply and re-center yourself. When you return to discussions, acknowledge common ground instead of focusing on gaps. What problem do you both want to solve? What goals and values do you share?

**Overcoming Blind Spots**

“Only in acknowledging our own flaws and vulnerabilities can we become authentic leaders who empower people to perform to the best of their abilities.” – Snyder

A blind spot’s effects may not show up right away. Without paying careful attention, you may miss the warning signs. It’s therefore critical for you to proactively work toward discovering them, before you feel the effects.
Overcoming Blind Spots...continued

Consider working with a professional coach who can help you collect data from your boss, colleagues and coworkers. Your coach can administer a personality test and then show you how to evaluate and interpret input.

Also take a look at past or current struggles to determine whether blind spots have hindered your performance. What can you learn from your mistakes? What would you do differently in the future? Reframe situations from others' perspectives.

When you have a vague awareness of a blind spot, fight against the normal psychological inclination to remain anchored in safe, established patterns. Change occurs only when you engage others in the process.

Above all, don’t blame others for your blind spots or comfortably coast along in unproductive patterns.

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