

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.

A Message from Nancy...

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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The Hay research suggests that, as executives rise within an organization, the less likely they are to see themselves as others perceive them. They often lose touch with those they lead – not surprising, given their increased isolation and the executive suite’s “rarified” atmosphere. As they reach the pinnacle of their profession, they have fewer peers and greater power.

Honest feedback and open dialogue often become rare commodities. This poses a serious problem, as researchers have found a direct correlation between high performance and accurate self-awareness.

You can learn to spot leadership blind spots by:

- Establishing 360-degree feedback processes (even in the executive suite)
- Providing executive coaching
- Fostering a culture that values open feedback and dialogue (particularly at the top)

Two Minds: Fast and Slow

“Blind spots are the product of an overactive automatic mind and an underactive reflective mind.” ~ Snyder

The brain has two systems for thinking, explains Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*:

- System 1 for fast thinking
- System 2 for slower thinking

The fast, or automatic, mind reaches judgments and conclusions quickly, but often prematurely. Intuitive and aware, it makes associations with already-stored and easily accessible information. It is eager to achieve order and understanding, and therefore subject to making errors.

System 2, also known as the reflective mind, is slower and more methodical. It is capable of rational thought and even *metathought*: the ability to consciously observe one’s thinking processes from a distance. It challenges assumptions and generates alternatives, objectively evaluating and analyzing them.

System 2 helps us take conscious and intentional actions – but it’s also slow and requires lots of energy. It therefore often cedes control to the automatic mind, which conserves energy resources.

Great leaders learn to train Systems 1 and 2 to work synergistically. They nurture their reflective mind to be more proactive and sagacious, while training their automatic mind to increase its associative powers.

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.

The experience blind spot comes into play when you move into a new role or change jobs. It also surfaces when you’re entrenched in a job and neglect to pay attention to shifting priorities and environmental changes.

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.

Each personality type has strengths and weaknesses. But when carried to the extreme or inflamed by stressful situations, even our core strengths can become career-damaging weaknesses.

For example, if you're naturally optimistic, your thinking is biased toward the positive. This is usually good if you're charged with inspiring others. But there are times when optimism backfires and leaves you blindsided by negative realities – something you miss until it's too late.

Similarly, an affable personality usually benefits from strong interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, he may also avoid necessary conflict. For every strength, there's a related blind spot.

Personality blind spots are often hard to discover because we value our strengths so highly. We often fail to see the downside of what works so well for us. But with increased awareness, you can train yourself to detect emerging blind spots.

Ask yourself:

- Am I playing to the downside of my strengths?
- How will I know when my strengths blind me to my inherent weaknesses?
- Who can be a sounding board as I work toward increasing self-awareness?

Blind spots restrict our options. Soliciting diverse perspectives helps expand our awareness.

The Values Blind Spot

When your attitude and emotions are out of sync with your values, you become uncomfortable and unbalanced – a state psychologists call “cognitive dissonance.” In short, what we say and do is incongruent with what we believe and who we are.

Values blind spots can occur on a personal or group level. They are particularly insidious when you're somewhat aware of them, but fail to take appropriate corrective action.

In business situations, a values blind spot can affect large groups. Can you think of a time when an implicit incentive to maintain the status quo conflicted with a change initiative? That's a typical values blind spot in action.

Strategy Blind Spots

Organizations often reward conformity and punish critical or questioning voices.

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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