

Avoiding Leadership Blind Spots

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With fewer peers and more power, it's easy for leaders to lose touch with those they lead.

A study by Hay Group's McClelland Center finds that senior leaders in an organization often gain power at the expense of self-knowledge, and are more likely to overrate themselves in self-awareness, self-management and social skills.

Regardless of leaders' numerous talents and successes, these are troubling blind spots that can significantly hinder their effectiveness as leaders.

Even if leaders know a lot about their work and their industry, or think there's nothing more to learn, they need to be cognizant that things aren't always as rosy as they may think, and they'd benefit significantly from getting and maintaining as clear a picture as possible of their job performance.

Identifying Blind Spots

According to Robert Bruce Shaw, author of *Leadership Blindspots: How Successful Leaders Identify and Overcome the Weaknesses That Matter*, there are four blind spots that frequently plague leaders.

1. Strategic Thinking

Many leaders are better at managing operations than thinking strategically. Leaders who overestimate their strategic capabilities can face serious problems when they're promoted into senior-level roles. These roles put a premium on identifying and acting on new growth opportunities, which is something that's hard to focus on if you're bogged down in managerial or operational tasks.

2. All-Knowing

Some leaders think they know more than everybody else about everything. Executives in this category don't seriously consider others' points of view, and they often prefer being right to being effective. Not only are they not always correct, but they distance themselves from their brain trust and make it harder to explore challenges and potential pitfalls.

3. Assumption

Many executives make the mistake of assuming other people are just like them – that they are motivated by similar things, think similarly, and would agree with the leader's decisions. As preposterous as this may sound, many leaders assume others see things as they do. This

propensity for assumption can lead to poor decisions and weak work relationships. Sometimes leaders exacerbate this problem by hiring people who are like them instead of hiring individuals who have complementary skills.

4. Stuck-In-The-Past

Oftentimes, leaders assume that their past experiences can help them fix new problems. While this may be true at times, leaders will frequently default to old methods that don't fit the current situation. Habitually, leaders' desire to take action can hinder their ability to pursue or consider alternative responses.

Preventing Blind Spots

So how can leaders see past their blind spots to ensure that they aren't misled about their performance and, more importantly, fail to provide the kind of objective, supportive and collaborative leadership that their employees want? Shaw suggests these three strategies:

1. Build A Good Team

Build a diverse team of smart people who are willing to candidly engage with you – and each other – in productive talks and debates about the best path forward.

My thoughts: Behind every great leader, at the base of every great tale of success, you'll find an indispensable circle of trusted advisors, mentors, and colleagues. These relationships are, quite literally, why some leaders succeed far more than others.

Leaders need healthy conflict and differing perspectives to dig out the truth from group-think. If everyone in the group has a similar point of view, work will suffer from confirmation bias, rarely breaking new ground and causing unnecessary failure. In this era of constant disruptive change, we all need to get better at disrupting ourselves, failing forward and seeing what no one else does. As a leader, it can be challenging to create an environment in which people will freely dissent and argue.

2. Assess Yourself from Time to Time

Use 360-degree surveys, skip-level interviews or similar feedback mechanisms that point out areas of potential weakness.

My thoughts: Keep learning. Only 50 percent of employees surveyed felt their leadership teams were doing a good or great job, and 23 percent described leaders' performance as poor or very poor. Problems cited with corporate leaders included insufficient communication, unrealistic workloads, and a lack of training and employee development.

Humility may be a virtue, but it's also a competitive advantage. According to research from the University of Washington Foster School of Business, humble people are more likely to be high performers in individual and team settings and they also tend to make the most effective leaders. Yet the attribute of humility seems to be neglected in leadership development programs and it's often misunderstood. The research team defined humility as a three-part personality trait consisting of an accurate view of the self, teachability, and appreciation of others' strengths.

3. Install A Warning System

Have at least one person who can offer you feedback that prevents you from being blindsided.

My thoughts: Brain science has proven that when we're presented with information that threatens us or our situation, our unconscious brain proceeds to distort our reality, filling in the blanks with evidence designed to reduce the threat and make us feel better. That programming is even stronger when it comes to protecting our beliefs about our businesses and ourselves in times of threat or opportunity, and leaders must constantly act to avoid the downside of this innate response.

Additionally, two of the best predictors of job performance are intelligence and conscientiousness, and humility predicted performance better than both. The best leaders are those who are behind the scenes, guiding their employees and letting them shine.

Employees don't expect perfection from their leaders. However, they do expect leaders to be self-aware and to proactively take steps to minimize their blind spots.

While these strategies may not eliminate all leadership deficiencies, they can certainly reduce the frequency of them while also diminishing their impact.



Michelle M. Smith, CPIM, CRP is a highly accomplished international speaker, strategist, and author on performance improvement. She speaks and writes about what she knows first-hand – as a former executive of a Silicon Valley start-up, a Fortune 100 global conglomerate, and as a researcher and strategist. Internationally renowned as a respected authority on leadership, workplace culture, talent and employee engagement, Michelle passionately shares new insights and tools for leaders to confidently, effectively and strategically lead their organizations to success.



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Speaker ~ Author ~ Strategist

Areas of Expertise

- Next Practices in Leadership; The Future of Work
- Employee Engagement, Talent & Corporate Culture
- Global Trends in Recognition, Incentives & Motivation
- Branding; Creating a Unified Corporate/Employer Brand

Previous Speaking Engagements (sample)

- The CEO Summit
- ExecuNet TV
- Corporate Executive Board Executive Insight Conference
- CEB's Re-Imagine HR Conference
- The Conference Board of Canada
- Northwestern University FORUM Think Tanks
- Constellation Research's Connected Enterprise Conference
- Renaissance Executive Forums
- Ragan Communications Conferences
- CAI HR Management Conference
- Furniture Marketing Group Annual Symposium
- The Motivation Show (*United States, Spain, Mexico, Australia, United Kingdom & Portugal*)
- WorldAtWork Annual & State Conferences; WorldAtWork TV
- Incentive Marketing Association Executive Summits (*United States, Canada & Europe*)
- SITE International Conferences (*Hong Kong, Iceland, Mexico, Canada & United States*)
- SHRM Annual, State and Regional Conferences
- ANA's Business Marketing Assn. Conferences & Events
- International Marketing Congress (*Portugal*)
- Motivate Europe Live (*United Kingdom*)
- CIPD Reward Conference (*United Kingdom*)
- NHS Employers Conference (*United Kingdom*)
- National Incentive Show; Incentive World (*United Kingdom*)
- Institute for Human Resources Rewards & Recognition
- Recognition Professionals International Conferences
- PPAI's Annual International and Brand Conferences
- Advertising Specialty Institute Conference
- Promotional Marketing Conference (*United Kingdom*)

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Biography

Named as one of the Ten Best and Brightest Women in the incentive industry and to the Employee Engagement Power 100 list, Michelle is a Change Maker, Top Idea Maven, and President's Award winner, who has worked in every facet of recognition and incentives, both domestically and internationally.

A highly accomplished international speaker, strategist, and author on performance improvement; Michelle is a respected authority on leadership, workplace culture, talent and employee engagement. She speaks and writes about what she knows first-hand – as a former leader of a Fortune 100 global conglomerate, and now as a researcher and strategist.

Michelle has published and presented more than 1,500 articles and speeches and is a trusted advisor to many of the world's most successful organizations and the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States.

She loves solving complex problems, and put that to good use representing the Incentive & Recognition Industry in educating and lobbying the U.S. Congress on industry best practices.

Michelle is the Past President of the FORUM for People Performance at Northwestern University and President Emeritus of the Incentive Marketing Association. She's Vice Chair, Corporations for the Incentive Federation and was the Founder and Editorial Chair of *Return on Performance* Magazine.

Michelle is also active in the C-Suite Network, the National Speakers Association, WorldAtWork, SHRM, Recognition Professionals International, the Marketing Leadership Roundtable, and the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence.

For more information:

Michelle's Speaker Video: https://youtu.be/aU_3UkQH7c

Visit Michelle's profile on LinkedIn:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/michelle-m-smith-cpim-crp>

Blog: <http://www.eremedia.com/author/michelle-m-smith/>

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/theMichelleMSmith>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/michelleMsmith9>

Fun Fact:

Michelle has appeared in a Glenn Frey music video, a major motion picture starring Al Pacino, and sang under the direction of the Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra.

Published & Broadcast Media (sample)

Fox Television, the BBC, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Inc.*, *TLNT*, *B2B Marketer*, *Marketing*, *Financial Review*, *Huffington Post*, *Workforce*, *Return on Performance*, *Career Contentment Radio*, *Business America Radio*, and contributions to the books "Bull Market" by Seth Godin, "Contented Cows Still Give Better Milk" and "Social Media Isn't Social."