

Overcoming Leadership Blind Spots

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SUMMARY

Receiving feedback is an essential part of effective leadership. With feedback leadership deficiencies can be identified and acted on.

THE REASONS FOR SEEKING FEEDBACK

It's true that communication effectiveness is based 7 percent on the words we use, 38 percent on our tone of voice, and 55 percent on what people see us do. When "what we say" and "what we do" are inconsistent, people take cues from the latter. Effective leaders exhibit a high level of consistency between words and actions.

Executives and managers in all areas of business tend to say (and believe) one thing and yet, unconsciously, do another. Not about everything – the subjects that trip us up differ – but we all have blind spots about our jobs, about our organizations, about others and especially about ourselves.

This happens for two reasons: Most of us don't seek feedback. We may even avoid feedback if we sense dissatisfaction. But, even when we do solicit feedback, others may be uncomfortable cooperating for reasons that range from not wanting to upset us (at best) to fear of retribution (at worst). If trust doesn't exist, the person approached for feedback may even provide false or misleading information. Obtaining objective and constructive feedback, no matter how distressing, is critical to our ability to grow and develop and, in some cases, it may be necessary to survive.

Working with both men and women in professional service and manufacturing firms, experience shows that personal or organizational crises invariably are triggered by blind spots. Problems evident to others often are not apparent to the individual, or group, causing them. That is, until the bridge collapses, the project bombs, the client changes firms, the key employee quits, your department is downsized or – most noticeably – you are fired. The cost both personally and organizationally of these blind spots is huge and avoidable.

DEVELOP A FEEDBACK SYSTEM

Whether your organization has a formal 360° feedback system or not, we all need to develop and implement a formal system to elicit feedback from supervisors (in the case of principals, consider asking your Managing Principal to participate), colleagues, and subordinates. Feedback from supervisors is not enough. Our peers and direct reports often have the most insightful comments. The challenge we face with supervisors, peers and subordinates is gaining access to their honest and candid views. Below are tips to help set up your feedback system.

First, secure a neutral interviewer or coach, someone you respect and trust, to gather and synthesize the data. While large firms may have someone in their human resource departments who can do this, architects in smaller firms will need to search out a coach. There are many management consultants around who can serve in this capacity, for a fee. Other recommendations can be gathered from the business school at a local university, trusted clients, colleagues, and even your local AIA component.

Once you have determined a coach, meet with them to discuss the feedback process and expected outcomes. Also start to define what you perceive as your strengths and development needs, or any specific issues you want probed.

The coach should:

- Meet with your supervisor, two or three members of higher management with whom you interact, and two or three of your peers or direct reports, to gain a broad perspective of your strengths and development needs. In some cases, key vendors or longstanding clients may be good sources too.
- Conduct a small focus group of your employees and colleagues asking for their perspectives on your strengths and development needs. If group cohesion is lacking one-on-one interviews might be preferred.

- Identify examples of areas for development from on the job observations, a half day will likely suffice. Even though you are aware of the observer in the room, the “problem” behaviors will surface because you are unaware of them. If your interactions vary dramatically depending on setting (e.g., onsite versus in the office), consider observations in each setting.
- Synthesize input from interviews, focus groups and observations to identify your areas of leadership development leverage.
- Review and discuss the data and findings.

If time constraints prevent collecting all suggested data, the interviewer should gather some input from each perspective (supervisor, peers, employees). Try not to sacrifice the half-day of observations, which almost always provides the most helpful data.

Expect some surprises and disappointments. You are unearthing issues not known to you previously. Executives often express feelings of hurt, anger, confusion, denial, defensiveness, and betrayal at this stage. What separates “leaders” from “leader wannabees” is the ability to channel those feelings into positive and productive change. Remember, most of what you learn is widely known already by those who work with you. Isn’t it better that you know it, too? Additionally, executives with the strength to participate in this feedback process earn sympathy and admiration from those around them. Many former critics become advocates once they have “dumped” on you without retaliation.

GOING FORWARD

Use the insight gained in the feedback sessions to establish leadership development goals including an action plan with milestones.

Share your results and new leadership development goals with your employees. During this session, avoid the temptation to attribute particular pieces of feedback to individuals. Explain how you intend to change your behavior. Ask for their help in keeping you on track. Your openness and dedication to ferreting out behaviors that impede organizational effectiveness will impress most of them.

Draft a memo to others who participated in the process, thanking them and mentioning one or two changes you are making (assuming there are any!) as a result of their feedback.

CONTINUE TO SEEK FEEDBACK

Six months after setting your goals, survey your employees anonymously regarding the extent to which they have seen improvements. Ask for suggestions about how to continue progress. Typically, surveys of employees six months post-process show that greater than 85 percent perceive improvements in the executive’s leadership skills. Your future depends on overcoming leadership blind spots. Learn to seek and act on constructive feedback. Become the leader you always wanted to be, or thought you were.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTOR

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RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 07.06.01 Why Put Off 'Till Tomorrow What Someone Else Can Do Today?
- 07.06.03 Leadership in Practice
- 07.06.04 NBBJ: Success in Leadership Development

For More Information on This Topic

See “Team Building for Architects,” by William C. Ronco, Ph.D., The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice, 14th edition, Chapter 4, page 128. The Handbook which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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