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Discover Your Leadership Blind Spots

From insisting on doing too much alone to avoiding confrontation, leadership blind spots are common and can be lethal for business

By Loretta Malandro, PhD

Too often, leaders demonstrate behavior that sabotages their success and undermines both their team and their organization. To succeed as a manager, you need to learn how to recognize your blind spots and overcome them.

Let's not kid ourselves. We all have blind spots – unproductive behaviors that are invisible to us but glaring to everyone else. Our behavioral blind spots create dire and unintended consequences: They corrupt decision-making, reduce our scope of awareness, create enemies, silos, and camps, destroy careers, and sabotage business results.

In good times blind spots are annoying and frustrating; in tough times they can be lethal.

No one is immune to blind spots, of course. But leaders are particularly vulnerable. It's enough that they must often navigate massive change and cope with stressful situations every day. But add to this the overpowering belief that many leaders shoulder: "I should have all the answers, I should know what to do, and I should be able to handle challenges alone." For many, the need to be right becomes much stronger than the need to be effective. And only the most confident leaders are willing to surround themselves with people who will point out what they're doing wrong-and be rewarded for their honesty. More often, everyone is forced to endure the boss' weaknesses in silence.

Blind spots are not flaws; nor are they malicious. They are automatic behaviors. The real culprits are not the blind spots themselves. The problem is when they are unidentified and mismanaged.

There are 10 blind spots that persistently knock people off the career ladder and undermine organizational performance. Below are ones that I have come across most often in my work as a leadership consultant.





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SHARE THE BURDEN

The first is the instinct to go it alone. In my experience, that is the No. 1 blind spot. It's an obvious peril when dealing with self-sufficient, independent leaders who have a need to be perceived as strong and tough. If you have a tendency to shoulder the burdens of life by yourself and unintentionally exclude others – colleagues, friends, and even family – then you need to be aware that this is a blind spot.

Some of the symptoms of going-it-alone include rejecting offers of support, refusing to ask for help, not talking about your stress, pressure, or anxiety, isolating and withdrawing in group situations, and not including others in your thinking or in decision-making. In short, you are stoic.

You may think that your independent streak is a sign of strength. In actual fact, your behavior leaves others feeling frustrated, angry, and devalued. People view you as missing in action and acting as a team of one. Instead of empowering your team, you undercut it by refusing to share responsibilities, information, and decision-making. Your employees lose their enthusiasm, and you lose their support.

IMPACT AWARENESS

The second blind spot that I have frequently encountered over the past three decades is the tendency of leaders to be insensitive to their impact on others. They're simply unaware of the damage their behavior can create. They have a low threshold for picking up on the reactions of others, perhaps because they have never bothered themselves too much with what others think.

The potential perils of insensitivity become heightened when you ascend to a leadership spot. Suddenly, you control the destiny of people around you. If you're making repeated blunders that you don't even see, there's little option for your team but to walk out the door.

If this blind spot applies to you, your intentions may be positive but your behavior is ineffective. The rub is that people judge you by your behavior, not by your intentions. Symptoms include expecting others to respond the same way you do, not recognizing cultural differences, and





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dismissing feedback from others about your behavior.

When you are insensitive to others, people tend to withdraw their trust. They'll work around you. At best, they may tolerate you. Others may marginalize you and, if they can, ultimately fire you. Sensitivity isn't about being soft. It's about being aware of the signals and needs and contributions of the people around you. It's critical to effective leadership.

BOTTLING IT UP

Finally, I'm frequently struck by the tendency of many managers to avoid difficult conversations. This might seem odd when the previous two blind spots may evoke the image of a boss who doesn't particularly care about what people think. But the truth is that most of us dislike feeling uncomfortable or creating discomfort in others. We avoid confrontations, especially in the workplace.

The fear among some managers is that they will open Pandora's box and be faced with a negative or emotional reaction, conflict that will escalate, or a relationship that cannot be recovered. Some might be nervous about a lawsuit or resort to less obvious ways of making their dissatisfaction known.

If this is one of your blind spots, you have a dilemma: what you cannot talk about, you cannot resolve. When you avoid tough conversations, problems are repeated and issues escalate. Worse, your behavior sends a message that unacceptable behavior or performance will be tolerated in the organization. You essentially give poor performers the same treatment as your stars and, worse, the people on your team don't really know where they stand.

Symptoms include softening your message, talking in generalizations instead of providing specific examples, and expecting others to read between the lines instead of actually telling them where they're falling short.

When you avoid difficult conversations, you are not doing anyone a favor. People may be confused by your mixed messages. They don't understand why they're passed over for plum assignments or promotions because no one has confronted them about their work. They think you don't notice. Everyone else thinks you don't care.





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You can't do anything about your blind spots until you can recognize them when they occur. The first step is to ask others for their candid feedback. Your opinion about how you think your behavior affects others isn't sufficient. The reason these behaviors recur is that you're not aware of what you're doing. Second, take accountability for your impact and stop justifying your behavior by defending your positive intentions. Third, in the absence of a structured process, ask those who do see certain weaknesses to coach you the moment your blind spot surfaces. Finally, stop the behavior the instant you see it by acknowledging it.

Be courageous and say something like: "I'm beating around the bush. My commitment is to give you direct feedback. Let me start again." Then, start again. Your goal is not to be perfect. It's to check your blind spot and recover quickly.

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