

Blind spots about our own leadership excellence

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Blind spots about our own leadership excellence are common. What are the barriers to seeing the best parts of ourselves? How can we break through them to manifest our full potential?

Two important blind spots about excellence concern:

1. **our personal strengths** “Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong. And yet, a person can perform only from strength.” (Peter F. Drucker in Managing Oneself Harvard Business Review, January 2005)
2. **how we get things done** “Amazingly few people know how they get things done. This may be an even more important question than ‘What are my strengths?’” (Drucker, 2005)

Examining stories about successful leadership interventions is an immediate way to capture information relative to these blind spots. But, without careful active listening from another person, I find leaders (including myself when I was an organizational leader) often recount events in such perfunctory ways that it is hard to capture specifics about strengths or actions.

Here is an example of one leader’s story of a successful intervention:

Background This story is from a project leader of a major initiative in a large healthcare organization which had required building consensus over two years among five different departments. In one of our periodic conversations on other matters, I asked him about a meeting I knew he had facilitated recently with executives from each of the departments. If they did not achieve consensus on a crucial issue, the whole project could fail.

Story told by the leader *“All of the executives were able to get their differences on the issue on the table, really listen to each other, and come to a plan—finally! I am drained and exhausted.”*

It would have been easy to congratulate the leader and end the conversation at this point. But that would have left us blind to critical details about the situation and the leader’s actions.

Our further exploration over 20 minutes was aided by awareness of the following barriers to seeing clearly:

1. Hindsight bias inhibits our ability to learn from experience.

I expressed congratulations with a certain exuberance that startled the leader. I had to remind him that two years earlier we had both considered the project at high risk for failure because of a long history of very difficult tension between the departments and lack of firm direction from the CEO. The leader was grateful to remember this assessment as it pointed to the true level of difficulty in the situation and also the high level of skill required to make even small gains.

This loss of perspective is due to a common and pervasive, learning-inhibiting bias called “hindsight bias.” “Outcomes fail to surprise people as much as they should so outcomes are not as instructive as they should be. We tend to misremember the strength of our original predictions.” (from Associates in Process Improvement The Improvement Handbook 2005).

2. Certain crucial skills of leadership seem commonplace and not new or exciting.

As we talked about the leader's specific actions, I remarked on his amazing persistence and skills over two years. In all conversations with the departmental executives, managers, and staff: he kept the vision for the project in the forefront; he was explicit about the values of collaboration and held to them in the face of provocation; and he skillfully handled push-back as he engaged the departments with each other over time for learning about each other's situations. This gradually led to mutual respect and a sense of mutual opportunity.

Such relationship and communication skills can feel commonplace and unexciting but **they "require uncommon levels of discipline, courage, persistence and common sense."** (from Patrick Lencioni in The Advantage: how organizational health trumps everything else 2012),

3. Our culture has a left-brain bias for doing tasks and for technical issues.

At first the leader was dismissive of his relational skills by calling what he did "therapy." But, what he did was definitely not therapy—this label is a sign of how much our culture devalues relationship building compared to technical issues and doing of tasks. "We value doing more than relating and thereby reduce our capacity and desire to form relationships." (Edgar Schein in Humble Inquiry, the gentle art of asking instead of telling 2013).

4. It is hard to see ourselves very clearly while we are in action.

Even if you complete a survey about your strengths, the knowledge has to be connected to day-to-day practice over and over in order to see ourselves clearly. "The only way to discover your strengths is through feedback analysis. Whenever you make a key decision or take a key action, write down what you expect will happen. Nine or 12 months later, compare the actual results with your expectations. I have been practicing this method for 15 to 20 years now, and every time I do it, I am surprised." (Drucker 2005)

5. Blind spots about excellence can easily reoccur in the midst of continuously difficult and complex situations.

With further exploration, the leader and I recalled that, over the two years, he had periodically gotten discouraged about his efforts and skills. At such times, he realized he had talked to me or other colleagues and he would find renewed clarity and energy for staying the course.

It is amazing how easy it is for anyone to lose hold of self-awareness and focus under stress.

Looking back, the leader felt that regularly reviewing what he did well was very valuable.

It takes a community. Other people's "eyes" help us sustain clarity about our excellence and our focus for action. "Without a community, it is nearly impossible to exercise the "power of one" in a way that allows power to multiply." (Parker Palmer in Healing the Heart of Democracy 2011)

*Neil Baker M.D. helps leaders and teams who need to move fast and far on results but feel constrained by organizational and people challenges. He brings 30 years of experience in leadership, behavioral science and quality improvement to help design practical, customized strategies to put into action on current priorities—not creating new work or projects. For more information, resources and articles, see his website at neilbakerconsulting.com or email him at neil@njbaker.net. You may also reach him by phone at **206-855-1140**.*