

Career Compass No. 22: Overcoming Your Blind Spots

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest discusses how to recognize when you're wearing blinders, and how to remove them (or work around them when you can't).

My department head talks about listening to employees, wanting their ideas, promoting innovation, and providing support for staff. He seems sincere about these intentions but his actions demonstrate that he does not live these values. It seems to me that he has major blind spots like most of us. He does ask for feedback but no one tells him the truth.

As I develop my leadership capabilities, how do I become more self-aware so my behavior matches my intentions?

You are right; self-awareness is a primary competency for leaders at all levels of the organization. However, subordinates and colleagues do not typically provide candid feedback and therefore leaders do not have the opportunity to become more self-aware and make self-corrections. Without self-knowledge, a leader cannot know how to deploy his or her skills effectively, leveraging strengths and minimizing weaknesses.

There is no ideal leader. As Amgen CEO Kevin Sharer states, "Leadership has many voices." So the trick is to be "authentic"—

1. Know your purpose and calling
2. Practice your values
3. Lead with your heart as well as your mind.

Therefore, the challenge is how to become more self-aware and ensure that your actual behavior is aligned with your values and intentions. There is no perfect way to promote self-knowledge. Typically, you should try to integrate several of the following practices into your journey of becoming a more self-aware and better leader:



"With the blast-shield down, I can't even see. How am I supposed to lead?"

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR LIFE STORY

In a February 2007 *Harvard Business Review* article “[Discovering Your Authentic Leadership](#),” Bill George and his colleagues suggest that you must first learn from your life story if you want to become authentic. Given your formative experiences, what drives you? What is your calling? What are your “gifts” that you are willing to give away to others?

Having reflected upon my life story, I know that I am energized by improving communities and teaching others. My mother Rosy was a life-long teacher who was fearless. I spent my young adulthood as a community organizer in Mexico City and then in Connecticut. Like my mother, I am a teacher and coach. I too am adventuresome and a taker of risks. While my courage often enhances my leadership capabilities, I also understand that sometimes I am needlessly bold. Since I understand my life story, I can leverage my calling as a teacher and a leader of change, yet minimize any reckless behavior.

2. DEBRIEF EXPERIENCES WITH COLLEAGUES

To promote self-knowledge, you can create a habit within your unit to debrief all experiences. Even if you do not head the unit, you can ask your colleagues at a staff meeting to reflect with you about last night’s governing board session, the recent community workshop, or a multiagency meeting. You can all respond to three simple questions:

- What went right?
- What did not go so well?
- What did we learn for future practice?

If your team makes it a habit to debrief, you will help create a culture of learning, self-awareness, and self-improvement for all.

3. SET TIME ASIDE FOR SELF-REFLECTION

To debrief with yourself, you need to set some time aside to think about your leadership interactions with others and be purposeful about self-critique (“I’m going to take a walk or go to a café in order to think about how I’m leading my redevelopment project”). Ask yourself:

- How are people responding to my intentions and ideas?
- Are people choosing to follow my suggestions?
- What should I do differently?

I find it helpful to write down my conclusions and what I resolve to do, and then tickle a review on my calendar.

One of the most effective ways to promote self-knowledge is to write a journal. According to the book *The Progress Principle*, writing down a simple narrative of your daily events and identifying what went well and what did not go so well will assist you in:

- Acknowledging accomplishments, contributions to projects, and personal strengths
- Understanding missteps
- Gaining insight into your interactions with others.

In short, journaling helps you make sense of your efforts and promotes an awareness of self.

4. REVEAL YOURSELF TO OTHERS

Assuming that you are a good performer and are respected by others, you can safely create an environment of candid and helpful feedback if you reveal some self-criticism about a less-than-

positive move you've made. You are more likely to get constructive feedback if you have exhibited on several occasions some appropriate self-critique. By modeling an openness about your actions, you encourage forthright feedback.

5. ASK FOR SPECIFIC AND ACTIONABLE FEEDBACK AND TAKE CORRECTIVE ACTIONS

When requesting feedback, you need to focus on a specific experience or an aspect of a specific project. You are more likely to get helpful feedback if it is about a specific situation.

To get feedback that is "actionable," it is wise to ask follow-up questions such as "what is one thing I could I do more of?" "What is one thing I could do less of?"

It is easy to get defensive when receiving feedback. If we get defensive, colleagues will tend not to give us feedback in the future. Therefore, it is a good idea to listen without interruption, summarize what you heard, ask a clarifying question if needed, and then simply thank the person for their feedback.

Of course, feedback is impotent if you do not reflect upon it and try to make self-corrections. Once you take corrective action, it is a good idea to share with your team the steps you have taken. Sharing with colleagues in such a fashion accomplishes two aims. First, you are reinforcing your changed behavior by verbalizing your actions and making them "public." Second, you have encouraged helpful feedback in the future because the feedback has been acted upon.

6. USE A SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

Through a seminar or course, it is helpful to take a self-assessment tool (for instance Myers-Briggs or Strength Deployment Inventory) in order to identify the way you perceive the world and your style of interacting with others. After you get the results, you can discuss the findings with the instructor or trainer and consider the implications of the scores and if they ring true in assessing your interactions with others.

7. SCRUTINIZE YOUR "STRENGTHS"

We often acknowledge our strengths and look elsewhere for improvements. However, if our strengths are "over-done," they turn into weaknesses of which we may be unaware.

Let me give you a personal example of one of my strengths. I love to come up with new ideas and talk about them. Sometimes my ideas have attracted others and led to creative team projects. However, other times I throw too many ideas in a short time at a team, am too passionate about the ideas, and grab too much space in team meetings talking about my ideas. I can easily lose people's attention if I am not selective in the ideas that I promote. Worse yet, colleagues may shut down if I don't adequately provide the time and opportunity for people to think about a few choice ideas, react, and offer their best thinking. Dialogue and listening usually enhance and transform the idea, thus creating a shared ownership of the proposed project or initiative.

8. ASK YOUR COACH

In developing a "dream team" of special advisors (see *Career Compass No. 7*), one of your formal or informal coaches (a colleague, senior manager, family member or friend) may be in a position to observe your behavior and give you appropriate feedback. Even if a coach does not directly observe you, you can debrief a specific experience, share your intent, describe various reactions to your actions, and get some perspectives from your advisor.

9. LEARN FROM YOUR “CRUCIBLES” OF LEADERSHIP

Periodically, we are tested by a difficult challenge. How we act and lead given this adverse experience will shape us and transform our future leadership capacity. These situations are called “crucibles.”

One of my crucibles of leadership was trying to develop a job center for day workers. As a young city manager, I worked in a somewhat conservative community that was struggling with the problem of recent Latino immigrants (some of whom were undocumented) congregating on downtown street corners, causing traffic problems as they ran out into the street to solicit day work from contractors and residents seeking their services. There was littering, urinating in the bushes, and complaints from businesses and their customers. As city manager, I got much pressure to use the police in moving the day workers out of the downtown. Instead, I proposed a city-operated job center located in a trailer on a vacant city-owned lot. I encountered a fire-storm of opposition to helping “illegals,” doubted my own judgment, was tempted to withdraw the proposal, yet persevered with the help of the ministerial association and one council member who saw the job center as a practical approach to a difficult social problem. We tried out a pilot program and then made the job center a permanent facility. I was tested as a leader but learned that I could take calculated risks, experiment, and succeed for the benefit of the community, even amid much adversity and criticism.

10. USE A “MOVIE” METAPHOR

In the November 2011 *Harvard Business Review* article “[Fire, Snowball, Mask, and Movie](#),” authors Peter Fuda and Richard Badham encourage leaders to think of their interactions with others as part of a “movie.” The movie metaphor suggests that leaders evaluate—on their own or with a trusted colleague—the “raw footage” after an incident or experience and think of what they could have done differently. A leader can “view” and “replay” their actions, “edit” their performance, and “direct” a story that is better aligned with their values and vision.

To become an authentic and better leader, you must be willing to look inward. As Jeff Immelt, CEO of GE, states, “Leadership is one of those great journeys into your own soul.”



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.