

Revealing leaders' blind spots

There is very little overlap between the management areas leaders think they need to improve and the weaknesses identified by those they lead. Reconciling these differences will improve leaders and their organizations.

by [Joan Shafer](#), [Adam Bryant](#), and [David Reimer](#)



Illustration by Lars Leetaru

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Senior executives, accustomed to annual performance reviews and 360-degree assessments, can be quick to acknowledge that certain aspects of their leadership style need more work. These might include having better time management skills, being more empathetic with coworkers, or focusing more on their team. The reviews represent an exercise in self-awareness that most leaders perform believing they can accurately figure out the areas in which they need to improve.

But what happens when you ask the members of their team what *they* think the boss should work on to be a more effective leader? The results are both unexpected and revelatory, and have implications not only for a leader's performance but also for that of his or her company.

Consider the example of Stephen (not his real name), the CEO of a 100-year-old organization that is navigating a fundamental shift in its business model. A dynamic speaker who radiates authenticity from the stage, Stephen received strong feedback every time he gave a speech. "You're such an inspiring presenter! We love hearing from you," people would say. But Stephen couldn't talk to everyone — either through a speech or in one-on-one conversation — directly. What he didn't understand was that even though the organization's strategy was clear in his mind, it was clear to others only if they were in the room with him.

This finally became obvious when Stephen saw the results of an assessment tool that solicited candid opinions from his direct reports and key employees. He understood that although people were ready and willing to follow him, they lacked clarity on where he was leading them and didn't fully understand how to execute his agenda. Organizational communication was his blind spot. Stephen worked with his communications and leadership teams to refocus efforts on crystallizing and cascading his vision of what he wanted people to do by repeating a simpler message through more communication channels. It helped improve both the bottom line and corporate morale.

As much as executives try to be self-aware, gaps — often big ones like Stephen’s — inevitably appear between how they think they are showing up in the world and how people perceive them. What is noteworthy is how widespread these misperceptions are. An analysis by Merryck & Co. and the Barrett Values Centre, which looked at the self-assessments of 500 leaders and the feedback from 10,000 of their peers over a period of 15 years, offers a humbling insight for any senior executive who aspires to be self-aware: The top areas leaders identified in themselves as needing work barely ever overlapped with what their peers and key colleagues saw as areas that needed improvement (see “Leaders are blind to what they most need to improve”).

The conclusion is that leaders are mostly oblivious to the way their colleagues view their weaknesses. And these disconnects have consequences. Leaders’ blind spots can limit their opportunities, impede their performance, and ultimately drag down their career. For executives in the most critical roles, these limitations can also hamper their organization’s ability to execute its strategy, as was the case with Stephen. Because the stakes are so high at the top of an organization, identifying and addressing an executive’s blind spots should be a priority for boards, for heads of leadership development programs, and, most important, for executives themselves.

The advantage of having a substantial data set is that the conversation can be moved out of the realm of opinion and into the world of facts. And not only does this effort show one leader where she or he is missing the point, based on the information collected, but it also underscores the fact that this is a common problem. Leaders everywhere have the same difficulty in assessing their weaknesses.

Fact finding

In 2004, we at Merryck & Co. started working with the Barrett Values Centre (headquartered in Lancashire, England) to come up with a way to identify leadership blind spots as part of our development work with senior executives around the globe. Our theory was that if executives realized how they were perceived by their coworkers and leadership teams, they would better understand how to improve their performance. For the next 15 years, we collected data on executives, mostly from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, but also from Asia, continental Europe, and Latin America. Of the assessed leaders, 26 percent were women and 74 percent were men. The assessment comprised two parts: The leader and the assessors were asked (1) to choose 10 traits out of a list of 100 words that best identified what the executive’s leadership team valued, both positive and otherwise, and (2) to answer open-ended questions regarding the leader’s strengths and areas for improvement, and to offer general feedback.

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The executives who participated were nominated by their organization for coaching or mentoring either as part of succession planning or in transition to new roles viewed as “key” or strategic by their organization. In general, these leaders and leaders-in-waiting were viewed as among the best and brightest. The overwhelming majority of executives had between 20 and 30 assessors each. They were given the freedom to choose most of their assessors themselves, following guidelines to include superiors, direct reports, peers, and key stakeholders outside that specific list. We asked that they pick people with whom their working relationship had not always been smooth. All responses were anonymous.

The heart of the data gathering was a blank, open-field question. For the executives being assessed, the field read: “Describe three things you would like to improve or stop.” Their responses were confidential, and they knew we were not sharing the data with their organization. For their assessors, in a similarly anonymous format, we asked: “What three things would you like this person to improve or stop?”

Our analysis revealed three key findings:

- There was very little alignment between the senior executive and his or her assessors on the top three traits that leader needed to work on: In 80 percent of the assessments, all three areas on the respective lists were different. In 19 percent of the cases, there were one or two matches, and in only 1 percent of the cases were all three areas of improvement the same.

- Overall, across the aggregated data comprising 30,000 points of comparison, senior executives and their assessors came up with the same 10 traits that both expect in a role-model leader. This was without being prompted to tick a box; those fields were open-ended.

- This list of 10 important traits can be evenly grouped into two categories: *connecting with others* and *driving performance*. The greatest blind spots for executives were evenly distributed between the two categories. This defies popular generalizations about employees valuing the “soft skills” of people connection more than their leaders do.

Leaders are blind to what they most need to improve

The 10 leadership traits most commonly ranked by leaders and their assessors as needing improvement.

Area needing improvement	Rank among assessors' responses	Rank among executives' self-assessment	Percentage of responses in which leaders and their assessors identified same trait
<i>Connecting with others</i>			
Emotional intelligence/people skills	1	2	28%
Communication	2	5	14%
Delegation and trust	5	6	24%
Listening	7/8*	9	16%
Visibility and access	10	10	4%
<i>Driving performance</i>			
Time management	3/4*	1	28%
Vision, strategy, organizational priorities	3/4*	4	15%
Executive presence	6	3	26%
Development of team and other leaders	7/8*	8	9%
Accountability and conflict resolution	9	7	23%

*tied

Source: Merryck & Co. and the Barrett Values Centre

Each group's list of most common leadership traits included emotional intelligence (EQ), time management, listening, delegation, communication, team and leadership development, accountability, prioritization, executive presence, and vision/strategy. The most common areas of agreement by the leader being assessed and the assessors were EQ/people skills and time management, for both of which there was a 28 percent overlap, and executive presence (26 percent overlap). Executive presence is defined as boldness and confidence in speaking up.

EQ and time management often feature prominently in annual performance measures, including engagement surveys, and are frequently cited as reasons for seeking a coach. Despite all the attention paid to these capabilities, a majority of leaders remain unaware of their own ineffectiveness in these areas, as perceived by others.

But the biggest blind spots for leaders are their troubles with visibility and accessibility, development of teams and upcoming leaders, vision, strategy, and organizational priorities. According to the data, there is a 96 percent likelihood that leaders do not understand that their organizations perceive them as ivory-tower executives who do not provide adequate clarity on the company's strategy.

This has clear implications for how these leaders are perceived, and in this context, perception is reality. Take the example of Stephen, in which the blind spot was organizational communication of his vision and strategy. This perception impeded the company's ability to deliver on its strategy. The remedy: sharpening the message; linking it to expectations; and repeating it through a variety of formal and informal communication channels, including walking the halls, holding brown bag lunches and all-hands meetings, and relentlessly communicating the concise strategy and priorities via all leaders across the organization. But the remedy can be put in place only if leadership understands that there's a problem.

Identifying blind spots can also lead to actionable steps for CEOs, learning and development professionals, and board members making succession decisions. For example, we were asked to work with Carole (not her real name), a C-suite executive at a global company who was widely recognized for her towering intellect and quick decision making. In a high-IQ industry, she was often referred to as the smartest person her customers and colleagues had ever met. She had an impressive track record of making insightful decisions, building diverse teams, and collaborating well across silos in the organization, and she was confident that she was ready for more scope – and that she only needed to manage her time a bit better to take on added responsibility.

Then we asked her team for feedback. They loved working for her and respected her, and they agreed that time management was one area of focus, but they raised an important, related blind spot: Response after response reflected that the team had to go to Carole for every decision, down to venue selection and seating arrangements for customer events. They felt micromanaged and thought she should be spending more time on higher-altitude questions of strategy. It was the consistency of this feedback that prompted Carole to meet with her team to discuss where she should let go. She and her team also created "warning systems" so they could alert her when she started to

get too granular. The vicious circle of the team feeling the need to go to Carole for answers, and Carole feeling she had no time, was finally broken.

Implications and actions

The lack of awareness on leaders' part on how they are perceived means they are probably not getting the best out of their followers. Here, collecting the data helps identify where things are going wrong. The survey questionnaire can prompt a kind of self-assessment. This can begin with ranking the areas where you think you could improve, and then collaborating with your HR business partner to survey key stakeholders. If it turns out your own priorities for improvement exactly match your organization's perception of them, then congratulations: You're in the 1 percent club. If not, your initial developmental priorities should become clear.

For heads of learning and development, we are not suggesting scrapping existing frameworks, competency models, or leadership pillars. Nor are we suggesting that you drop your preferred psychometric or 360-degree provider. The power of this data set lies in its two foundational principles.

First, many organizations devote too many cycles to trying to develop a multiple-choice list of strengths or weaknesses or competencies that are used to prompt reactions among employees assessing their leaders. Our data indicates a simple conclusion: You're overthinking it. Don't try to start with a perfectly curated list of words from which assessors and leaders can choose. Rather, start with a simple question and a blank field. This approach will pay off in enabling core issues and priority development areas to surface naturally.

Second, although you can certainly set general parameters for who those assessors are — their hierarchal relationship to the leader, and their mix of loyalty to or independence from the leader — the leader should be allowed to choose his or her own set of assessors within those parameters. This allows the executive to take full ownership of the process, and minimizes his or her possible rejection of the results because he or she doesn't consider the assessors "true stakeholders."

By using this data-based approach as a starting point to establish the weak points and blind spots of the current executive leaders and their potential successors, an organization can often identify system-wide patterns of both clarity and disconnection. The specific blind spots that come up and the degree of disconnection can be used to inform the existing learning and development curriculum and experiential learning opportunities, as well as to add rigor to measuring the impact of coaching or other developmental efforts.

Finally, for board members trying to evaluate succession candidates across a slate of critical roles, this exercise can be used to investigate a leader's self-awareness as one criterion for "ready now" versus "ready next" status. One word of warning: It is important that directors use HR-generated or HR-delivered data on such topics, rather than direct observation from the board. The vast majority of senior executives, and particularly C-suite candidates, are skilled at managing upstream perceptions. Because the approach we describe draws from peers and those the executive has led or will lead, the weak spots are more apparent. And if a leader's level of self-awareness fails to evolve over time, that alone provides directors with an insight that they and their board can use to help determine his or her chances of leading the organization in the future.

Using insights

This list of common blind spots is not meant to be viewed as revelatory in and of itself. The fact that the assessed executives and their assessors agreed on the main 10 areas for leaders' self-improvement should indicate that people share an archetypal view of good leadership traits, and that the challenges to developing those are well known. Strategies exist for addressing shortfalls in each area — they just need to be deliberately organized into readily accessible methods and approaches.

The new and important insight is the clear measurement of how markedly unaware leaders are of their own shortcomings. Even if the assessors' perceptions are technically inaccurate — if, for instance, a leader has a clear long-term strategy and aligned priorities — the fact that those who look to that leader do not see that internal clarity translated into organizational understanding indicates that the perception of the people being led trumps the leader's assessment of reality.

Illuminating such disconnects is actionable. It is up to both individual executives and the learning and development function broadly to identify them. And it is the board's opportunity to link accountability for understanding one's own blind spots to succession decisions for key roles. Making leaders aware of their blind spots and ensuring they take actions to correct them will create benefit for the organizations, the leaders, and those they lead.

Author Profiles:

Joan Shafer is the chief content officer of [Barrett Values Centre](#) and a member of the coaching advisory board of Merryck & Co.

Adam Bryant is managing director of Merryck & Co. He is the author, with Kevin Sharer, of the forthcoming book *The CEO Test: Mastering the Seven Critical Challenges That Make or Break All Leaders*, to be published in early 2021 by Harvard Business Review Press.

David Reimer is CEO and managing partner of Merryck & Co. Americas and executive editor of the journal *HR People+Strategy*.

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