

HELPING LEADERS THINK AND WORK SMARTER

Sometimes, Greater Success Is Only One Viewpoint Away



A very simple process of identifying leadership blind spots can accelerate your organization's growth.

“I know something's off, or missing, but I just don't know what it is.”

Ever felt that way? If so, you're in good company. This is the kind of comment I hear quite often from executives who, by almost every measure, are showing signs of strong success. But they've got one problem they can't identify. And it's showing up as lackluster results—or increased frustration.

They've got a blind spot. Everyone does. Even the best leaders have negative behaviors that are invisible to them, but apparent to everyone else.

It's sort of like when my teenage son started driving recently. He knew something was wrong with his car's performance, but couldn't figure out the problem for himself. Fortunately, I was right there beside him and could see the issue more clearly. He hadn't released the emergency brake. Without that simple insight, he would not have gotten very far.

Similarly, blind spots can slow you down and inhibit your ability to lead. Unchecked, they distort judgment, corrupt decision-making, reduce awareness, create enemies and silos, destroy careers and sabotage business results—all seriously negative results.

As a leader, you're particularly vulnerable. One reason is that the more successful you are, the harder it is to get feedback. You may not be aware of what others see clearly.

You may also feel a pressure to have all the answers. Of course you want to appear self-confident. But don't let a need to be right trump your mandate to be effective. Having self-confidence at the expense of introspection and self-questioning is dangerous to

the organization and to your opportunities for greater success.

A few key insights can remove obstacles you may not realize are in your way. Please keep reading and let me show you how overcoming blind spots is a key to moving closer to your goals.

Blind Spots Limit Success

A blind spot is a performance-hindering mindset or behavior of which you're unaware or have chosen to overlook. What could this mean to you personally?

- A Hay Group study shows that an organization's senior leaders are more likely to overrate themselves and develop blind spots that can hinder their effectiveness.
- A study by Development Dimensions International, Inc., found that 89 percent of front-line leaders have at least one skills-related blind spot.

As executives rise within an organization, the less likely they are to see themselves as others perceive them. They often lose touch with those they lead—not surprising, given their increased isolation and their place in the executive suite. As they reach the pinnacle of their profession, they have fewer peers and greater power. Honest feedback and open dialogue become rare commodities. This poses a serious problem as researchers have found a direct correlation between high performance and accurate self-awareness.

What can you do?

You can learn to spot leadership blind spots by fostering a culture that values open feedback and dialogue (particularly at the top).

Blind Spots Come from Your Thought Processes

“Blind spots are the product of an overactive automatic mind and an underactive reflective mind.”

~ Steven Snyder, *Leadership and the Art of the Struggle*

The brain has two systems for thinking, explains Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*:

- System 1 for fast thinking
- System 2 for slower thinking

The fast, or automatic, mind reaches judgments and conclusions quickly, but often prematurely. It is eager to achieve order and understanding, so it's subject to making errors.

System 2, also known as the reflective mind, is slower and more methodical. It is capable of rational thought and even metathought: the ability to consciously observe your thinking processes from a distance.

System 2 helps you take intentional actions—but it's also slow and requires lots of energy. So it surrenders control to the automatic mind, which conserves energy resources.

The key is to train Systems 1 and 2 to work synergistically. Nurture your reflective mind to be more proactive, while training your automatic mind to increase its associative powers. You'll ultimately be rewarded with more creative ideas for your reflective mind to consider.

The Experience Blind Spot

“Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can't lose.”

~ Microsoft Founder Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead*

Success boosts confidence—and while it can feel especially good, it leads to errors in thinking.

People rarely examine or analyze what led to a successful outcome, including luck's role in the process. We automatically assume we did something right.

When you encounter a new situation, you spontaneously draw on your memories of success, without questioning whether prior strategies fit the current circumstances.

There is danger in assuming that past results will

guarantee future successes. Intuition takes over, shutting down the need for proper investigation and analysis.

The experience blind spot comes into play when you move into a new role or change jobs. It also surfaces when you're entrenched in a job and neglect to pay attention to shifting priorities and environmental changes.

The Personality Blind Spot

Personality-based blind spots are epidemic. You cannot avoid them unless you have a high degree of self-awareness, monitor your thoughts and make frequent course corrections.

Each personality type has strengths and weaknesses. But when carried to the extreme or inflamed by stressful situations, even your core strengths can become career-damaging weaknesses.

For example, if you're naturally optimistic, your thinking is biased toward the positive. This is usually good if you're charged with inspiring others. But there are times when optimism backfires and leaves you blindsided by negative realities—something you miss until it's too late.

Similarly, if you have a friendly personality you probably have strong interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, you may also avoid necessary conflict. For every strength, there's a related blind spot.

Personality blind spots are often hard to discover. But with increased awareness, you can train yourself to detect emerging blind spots.

Ask yourself:

- Am I playing to the downside of my strengths?
- How will I know when my strengths blind me to my inherent weaknesses?
- Who can be a sounding board as I work toward increasing self-awareness?

Blind spots restrict our options. Soliciting diverse perspectives helps expand our awareness.

The Values Blind Spot

When your attitude and emotions are out of sync with your values, you become uncomfortable and

“For every strength, there's a related blind spot.”

unbalanced. You have “cognitive dissonance” — what you say and do is incongruent with what you believe and who you are.

Values blind spots can occur on a personal or group level. They are particularly insidious when you’re somewhat aware of them, but fail to take appropriate corrective action.

In business situations, a values blind spot can affect large groups. Can you think of a time when an implicit incentive to maintain the status quo conflicted with a change initiative? That’s a typical values blind spot in action.

The Strategy Blind Spot

Organizations often reward conformity and punish critical or questioning voices.

When a collective worldview becomes self-reinforcing around a set of practices, assumptions or beliefs, groupthink kicks in. You become less creative, less agile. Conformance rules. Risk is discouraged.

Strategy blind spots can occur in any organizational area. Unfortunately, they are often spotted in hindsight, after an important opportunity is missed.

Leaders who prize openness and transparency have the best chance of spotting strategy blind spots. They encourage input at all levels, fostering a culture of trust where ideas are honestly debated.

The Conflict Blind Spot

Conflict can be healthy in relationships and organizations where trust has been established. Diverse perspectives challenge tunnel vision and the status quo, while promoting learning and innovation. When issues are constructively debated, new solutions emerge.

But it’s human nature to want to defend and win an argument. Conflict becomes destructive when positive energy turns negative and erodes trust. Empathy and insight are tossed aside when you filter incoming information through the lens of what you believe and want. Others are seen as the enemy, who must be wrong.

Instead of debate, conflict becomes a power struggle that prevents you from seeing any solution (other than winning your point). The automatic mind is in full force, fueled by strong emotions, and the reflective mind is ignored.

To find your way out of a conflict blind spot, slow the discussion. Take a break if you need to. Re-center yourself. When you return to discussions, acknowledge common ground instead of focusing on gaps. What problem do you both want to solve? What goals and values do you share?

“...acknowledge common ground instead of focusing on gaps.”

The Vision Blind Spot

This last category of blind spot is one that is less discussed, but just as common—especially at senior levels. It has to do with your ability to envision your future.

Executives are supposed to be good at envisioning the future, right? Some executives are good at crafting a “vision statement” for the sake of the organization, but internally, they’re unclear about their own future.

In some cases, it’s a true blind spot. They just can’t see the picture. They’ve either been in a position for so long that it’s hard to see new possibilities, or they haven’t committed the time and energy to explore what might be next.

If this describes you, you may have devoted so much of yourself to your firm or organization that you’ve lost a part of yourself. You presume you’ll follow the path of your predecessor, or you may just have little energy to focus on your own future.

In other cases, the vision blind spot is false. This occurs when executives say they’re not sure about what they really want or what lies ahead. But deep inside there is a little glimmer of the future that is visible to them in their mind.

If this describes you, you have an inkling about something that you want to do or create in the future, but you’re not willing to look at it for some reason.

It could be:

- It’s so different from your current role that you’re dismissing it too quickly.
- You’re too concerned about what other people might think, including some of the people who are closest to you.
- It scares you. It seems too big or daunting.
- You’re afraid you’ll lose something—financial security, family, support, for example.

The false vision blind spot is important to acknowledge because it holds the greatest seed of promise for you. It has entered your mind for a reason.

Explore the idea.

Develop the idea.

Trust the idea.

Find other people who share or embody part of your vision.

How to Overcome Blind Spots

A blind spot's effects may not show up right away. Unless you're paying careful attention, you could miss the warning signs. But with awareness, you can discover your own blind spots before you feel the effects.

Begin overcoming blind spots by taking a look at past or current struggles to determine whether an unseen issue hindered your performance. As you reflect on these struggles, what can you learn from your mistakes? How can you break the patterns that don't serve you well?

Entrenched viewpoints aren't always easy to detect and correct on your own. That's why they are blind spots. That is also why I am particularly suited to help you see these areas more clearly.

For many years now, I have worked closely with executives and leadership teams to help them expand visions, think and act strategically, and inspire change.

If you're already a client or if we've worked together, you know how important it is to gain clarity about yourself and others to accomplish team and business goals. If you sense it's time to revisit these issues or other challenges that hold you back, please let me know.

If we haven't had the opportunity to work together yet, let's get started. Get clear.

Assessing your strengths and blind spots is an important step to help you or your team achieve what's most important.

To explore how I can help you, your team or your organization achieve the results you really want, contact me at 205.879.8494 or gayle@workmatters.com.

To your greater success,

Gayle

WorkMatters, Inc.

PO Box 130756 | Birmingham, AL 35213
205.879.8494 | gayle@workmatters.com
www.workmatters.com



About Gayle Lantz

Gayle Lantz is a leadership expert and founder of WorkMatters, Inc., a consulting firm designed to help leaders think and work smarter.

A sought-after consultant, executive coach, facilitator, and speaker, Gayle works closely with executives and leadership teams to expand their vision, think and act strategically, and inspire change.

Through consulting, coaching and assessment services, Gayle's clients gain insights about themselves to overcome blind spots, build leadership capability and achieve results more quickly and easily. They also learn how to select, develop and retain talent in their organizations.

Together, Gayle and her clients increase business results and help make work matter at every level of the organization. These clients have included NASA, Microsoft, MassMutual, Southern Company, Lockheed Martin, BBVA Compass Bank as well as small and mid-sized firms.

Gayle also runs senior executive roundtable groups comprised of executives from non-competing industries. Participants meet regularly to exchange ideas, sharpen executive leadership skills and gain objective perspective to help them grow their business.

Before starting her own business in 1998, Gayle worked as an executive in the insurance, financial services and investment industry. She most recently held an officer-level position with TIAA-CREF, a leader in its industry, serving those in the academic, medical, cultural and research fields.

Gayle's articles and/or quotes have been featured in a variety of national and global business publications including BusinessWeek, Harvard Management Update, Wall Street Journal Online, FastCompany.com, CEO Online and The New York Times. She is also author of the award-winning book *Take the Bull by the Horns: The Busy Leader's Action Guide to Growing Your Business... and Yourself*.

Gayle is a graduate of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and has been honored as one of Birmingham's Top 10 Women in Business.