

When Blind Spots Rule



Several months ago, the Coaching Forum began the first of an occasional series about leadership blind spots. That column focused on unhelpful *managerial practices* that leaders may unconsciously adopt and perpetuate.

This column is devoted to *personal blind spots* or “areas in which one inadvertently fails to exercise judgment or discrimination,” as Webster’s Dictionary defines them. It is dedicated to a nurse leader who recently shared her concern about the group of managers who report to her. Katie is frustrated by the actions of several members of her otherwise high-performing nurse manager team. Some of these managers generously contribute their time and efforts to create high quality team events, even when they are discretionary. They volunteer to find appropriate settings, prepare food, and otherwise do what it takes to coordinate their group functions.

However, other nurse managers in Katie’s group do not contribute to these activities, and this really bothers her. She takes this position: all these nurse managers work on the same team, and they are all supposed to do what’s needed to achieve strong levels of staff engagement and a healthy work environment. Katie believes that these managers are a community of professionals, and they should fulfill their responsibility to ensure the well being of their group by contributing fully to every activity.

It is difficult for Katie to understand, let alone accept, that some of the nurse managers are not able or willing to give extra time to participate in activities that are optional. When Katie talks privately about her feelings, it is clear that she is really irritated. Her frustration is caused by a significant personal blind spot: Katie is convinced that everyone should view their responsibilities for voluntary team events the way she views them. They should share her conviction that there is high value in going the extra mile for those with whom we

work. In other words, Katie believes there is a single “right way” for these managers to behave. Of course, the right way is her way!

How many of us identify with Katie, sometimes falling into this same trap? How many of us find ourselves believing that there is a “right way” to do things—ours?

In a diverse culture, this blind spot can carry serious negative consequences. In Katie’s case, *her frustration leaves her unable to effectively encourage participation in group events. She is also unable to model the behavior she would like for these nurse managers to adopt. Since she is so annoyed, she cannot authentically invite open dialogue about individual values or barriers to broad participation in group events.* Ironically, if Katie could have such a conversation, she might be able to create a shared sense of what is important about their group activities and develop a compromise that would work for everyone.

Here are other examples of personal leadership blind spots.

We handle mistakes poorly. It takes courage, maturity, and grace for leaders to admit mistakes, especially publicly. Yet when we display humility and say that we have erred, most people can forgive and forget. It is ironic that leaders who do not readily admit making errors are the same leaders who are not well trusted by their colleagues. Honestly owning and admitting what is true is a powerful practice for leaders. Not only does it create a safer environment for others who may make mistakes, it also fosters trust in the relationship with the leader. Admitting our own mistakes helps establish a blame-free, “just” culture.

We don’t exhibit a sense of humor. Leaders who take themselves too seriously are difficult to know and even more challenging to trust. When we can laugh at what is genuinely funny, even if that is something we’ve done, we reveal our humor and

humanity. This builds our relationships and empowers us as leaders.

We aren't prepared. There is no excuse for a lack of preparation for health care leaders. The good news is that I have encountered very few nurse leaders who I experience as ill-prepared. That truly is fortunate, because there is never a substitute for competence.

We are prepared, yet we are also overly anxious. This is the other side of preparation, and I do see this with some nurse leaders. Sometimes we tend to over-study an issue before we feel comfortable speaking about or taking the lead, particularly in a difficult situation. It is important for us as leaders to prepare enough. Then we can solicit, take action, and relax.

We are not open to nor do we ask for feedback. The simple act of asking for feedback and being open to others' input is easy, powerful, and often overlooked. This is true for many leaders, and it is especially harmful for leaders who are at the top. As we ascend the organizational hierarchy, fewer individuals are willing to give us direct and honest feedback. We may not know how the speech went, and we don't ask. Or if we do ask, people may say "very well," even if it's not the case. It's up to us as leaders to create the safety for people around us to tell us what they really think. This doesn't mean we need to agree with or change because of their opinions. But we are always stronger leaders when we hear others' feedback.

We lack transparency. We aren't transparent when others are left to guess our true position on a given subject. This is a problem for several reasons: first, it is difficult for people to trust leaders they don't feel they really know. Second, people don't know where we stand on an issue. Not only does this leave them guessing, but it also invites them to invent a story about what we think. People need answers to the questions that

are important to them. When they aren't given the answers, they will create their own.

We are too transparent. In other words, we explain too much. How many of us know leaders who explain themselves too often? They share great detail about what they are doing, how they came to do it, and how it's going. A leader who explains too much can sound defensive; people wonder why the person is sharing so much detail. Are they unsure of their position? Are they looking for approval? These are not the kinds of questions we want people to ask about us. Leaders who are attending to this blind spot are minding the quality and quantity of their communication.

The most serious problem with all of these blind spots is that they rob us of our true power. It is a trap to believe we can hide our feelings, know most everything, and rarely, if ever, make mistakes. This is a nasty trap, because we cannot hide, we can never know it all, and we will always make mistakes. What allows us to be truly capable leaders is our competence; our willingness to be authentic, honest, and open; and our readiness to be human with others.

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC, is president of The Leadership Studio®, a national firm that provides coaching and leader-as-coach training to nurse leaders and nurse managers and their teams. She is an experienced health care leader and a master certified coach. She can be reached at cathy@leadershipstudio.com.

1541-4612/2008/ \$ See front matter
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doi:10.1016/j.mnl.2008.09.005

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