Blind CEOs

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

In my consulting work, I am often called in by senior executives (CEO, COO, or VPHR) to help them improve trust within the organization. The conversation usually starts out with some form of description of a dysfunctional organization at the shop floor level. Often the lower level managers and supervisors are singled out as the culprits, and the top officers are asking me to come in and "fix them."

This is often a dilemma for me because if I say something like "have you considered what your contribution is to the problem," I find myself out in the street on my butt. If I do take the challenge to go in and fix the lower ranks, it is inevitable that these lower managers will tell me that the main source of the problem is the senior level. This article shines a light on the problem of CEOs (and other top leaders) being blind to their personal contribution to a toxic environment. I will offer some ideas on the cause and several antidotes that can be tried to achieve a more balanced, and hence more effective approach to reduceing organizational problems.

The CEO is ultimately responsible for everything that happens in an organization, but there is often great frustration because, while the CEO has set out a vision and tries to communicate it often, the rank and file keep accusing her of not communicating well. Several studies have revealed that employees most often state "lack of communication" as either the number one or number two reason for employee dissatisfaction (Wiedmer, 2009). This is extremely frustrating to many CEOs, because they are sincerely working hard to communicate every day. Given a choice between their own defective "mouth," and the employees' defective "ears," most CEOs would rather focus blame on the employees.

In many cases, the root cause of the frustration is neither defective outgoing communication nor listening prowess. It is a lack of trust. There is a cultural schism between organizational levels that is based more on fear than on lack of communication. Workers do not often verbalize the fear because, well, they are afraid. So the issues get reported as communication problems.

CEOs are blind because they understand their own objectives clearly and are fully justified internally for every action they take. Reason: it is next to impossible for a sane person to take an action different from what he or she believes is the best one at the moment. If there was a better choice, that would be the one selected. So the CEO is doing the "right" thing in nearly all cases in his or her own opinion. If people interpret the CEOs actions as inconsistent with the values, then they must be wrong.

Another cause of CEO blindness is lack of Emotional Intelligence. Daniel Goleman(1997) described a phenomenon where individuals with low EI struggle because they have a blind spot and cannot see themselves as others do. A person with low EI will believe the problem exists with other people and not be aware at all of his or her own contribution to problems. One way to begin to see is to get some formal training in Emotional Intelligence.

What are some of the other ways a CEO, or other top officer, can begin to see his or her contribution to organizational problems more clearly?

Become a level 5 Leader - as described by Jim Collins (2001). Get some coaching on humility and try to begin using the "window/mirror" analogy. This is where a leader looks out the window at others in the organization when things are going well, but looks in the mirror at herself when there are problems.

Become a mentor - Seek out several informal leaders in the organization and begin to mentor them. The process of building trust with strong underlings will allow more flow of critical information about when the leader is sending mixed or incorrect signals. It is important to listen to these individuals when they give input.

Do more "management by walking around" - This may seem awkward at first because the CEO may prefer the security and isolation of the ivory tower. That is one hallmark of the problem. Too many meetings and lunches in the Executive Dining Room give rise to insulation that renders the top executive insensitive to organizational heat.

Conduct a 360 Degree Leadership Evaluation - A periodic measure of high level leadership skills is one way to prevent a top leader from kidding himself. There are numerous instruments to accomplish this. Personally, I found the surveys to be similar and missed some of the more important aspects of true leadership. In frustration, I wrote my own assessment for top leaders. It is available at www.leadergrow.com/leadership-assessment. Doing an assessment is important, but taking the data seriously and creating a plan from the information is crucial.

Get a good coach - Every leader needs a coach to help prevent myopic thinking. Seek out a trusted advisor for a long term relationship that is candid and challenging.

Coaching sessions can be efficient by doing them after hours on the phone, or by using SKYPE technology.

Develop a leadership study group - A leader can grow personally in parallel with underlings by investing some time studying the inspirational writings and video work of top leadership authors or benchmarking leaders from other organizations. There are literally thousands of resources already available that can both inspire and challenge any group. These investments are very low cost, and all that is required is to read the books and carve out some discussion time with direct reports in a group setting. Many leaders prefer the "lunch and learn" sessions. Some leaders work with a skilled facilitator to keep things on track; other leaders prefer to proceed on their own without outside assistance. If face time is impractical due to travel, that does not prevent an online discussion on leadership concepts from literature.

Subscribe to some Leadership LinkedIn Groups - There are dozens of excellent leadership groups on LinkedIn. These groups can have thousands or tens of thousands of leaders who can benchmark each other and help resolve typical problems. There are also numerous local and national organizations on leadership development that can provide provocative ideas for growth.

These are just a few ideas that can broaden the view of a top executive. Becoming less blind has the wonderful effect of helping a leader become more effective over time. I believe it is incumbent on all leaders to have a personal development plan and to give it a high priority in terms of effort and budget. Seeking to constantly grow as a leader is truly important, and growing other leaders should be the highest calling for any leader.

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