

Leadership Barometer 120 Blind CEOs **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



This article shines a light on the problem of 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 reducing organizational problems.

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." Sometimes it is that the different silos are not getting along at all.

This is 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 work to improve the lower ranks, it is inevitable that these lower managers will tell me that the main source of the problem is the senior level.

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 him of not communicating well. Note: I will use the male pronoun here for simplicity, but the problem is gender-neutral.

Several studies have revealed that employees most often state "lack of communication" as either the number one or number two reason for employee dissatisfaction. 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. 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 believes is the best one at the moment. If there was a better choice, that would be the one selected.

The CEO is doing the "right" thing in nearly all cases in his own opinion. If workers 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 described a phenomenon where individuals with low EI struggle because they have a blind spot and cannot see themselves as others do. 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 contribution to organizational problems more clearly?

Double Communication with People Working Remotely

In a hybrid situation, it is important to increase the flow of information in order to avoid isolation. Leaders need to take more time and intentionally ramp up communications in a hybrid or remote situation.

Become a Level Five Leader

In the book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins described what he called a Level Five Leader. 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 himself 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. When the person giving input is candid, it is important that he is made to feel glad he

brought up the issue. Many leaders punish people who bring up inconsistencies, which becomes a huge trust buster.

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 too much time spent in the office give rise to insulation that renders the top executive insensitive to organizational heat.

Conduct a 360 Degree Leadership Evaluation

A periodic measure of key 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.

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 remote 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 a virtual 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. For example the Association for Talent Development and the National Human Resources Association have many programs for leadership development.

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.

Robert Whipple is also the author of The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals and, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online. Bob consults and speaks on these and other leadership topics. He is CEO of Leadergrow Inc. a company dedicated to growing leaders.

