

learning edge



360 FEEDBACK

is a valuable tool. So why does honest, insightful feedback so often fail to get through?

THE LAKE WOBEGON

EFFECT. In addition to the blindspots examined in this whitepaper, consider this: social psychologists tells us that regarding positive attributes, most people see themselves as at least “above average.” (Describing his fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keillor says that “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.”)

Think about it: do you know anyone who sees themselves as a below average driver, or having a poor sense of humor or bad judgment? Positive self regard helps us feel good about who we are, but can get in the way of learning and improving.

HOW TO HELP?

In order for high achievers to believe that they have something to learn they must come to see the connection between their behavior and problematic impacts on their colleagues.

Soft Skills, Hard Science, Real Results

Feedback in the Blindspot: When 360 Feedback is Only 345.

by Douglas Stone

CASE STUDY 115

Rajib is the leader of a high performing sales team at a pharmaceutical firm. He recently received 360 feedback that highlighted his intelligence and work ethic. And his difficult (read: impossible) personality. Enter executive coach.

The coach asks Rajib about the feedback. Rajib's response? "I run the top performing team. When you're on top, people try to take you down a peg. Jealousy and politics." Then he adds: "I used to have some sharp edges, but I've worked hard on that. Now, I'm always respectful. That's why this feedback is unfair. They're being petty."

Just then, Rajib's cell phone rings, and Rajib answers. After listening for a moment, he shouts: "Didn't we JUST talk about this!? Let me explain it again! This is YOUR responsibility. And I told you NOT to call me during a meeting. Thank you!" He hangs up, and rolls his eyes in frustration.

"That's a good example," he explains. "That was Evan. I just talked him through the new reporting structure this morning. He doesn't get it. So instead of working it through himself, he calls me. But we have this 'nice' culture, so I'm polite. I explain it again, and I make sure to say thank you."

You're probably noticing what the coach noticed: Rajib's 360 feedback sits right in Rajib's blindspot. And because of this, Rajib couldn't see what everyone else sees: that his behavior is having a seriously negative impact on people around him.

Let's compare three kinds of blind spots. The first is the real thing. Our eye literally has a blind spot. You don't notice it, because it's small and because your mind reliably fills in what's missing.

But the term is used most often to refer to the blind spot created when we're driving. There is a spot to the rear left that can't be seen in mirrors. To compensate, we have to look back over our right shoulder before switching lanes.

And then there are behavioral blindspots. Like driving, failure to compensate can be disastrous; but unlike driving, you can't overcome these blindspots just by looking around.

What Causes Behavioral Blindspots?

There are a few key causes.

I. We can't see ourselves. Other than on video or in the occasional mirror, we can't see ourselves when we're interacting with others. We have an image in our mind of how we *intend* to come across, but that image doesn't match up with our actual impact on others. We are blind to our own body language and facial expressions, and deaf to our tone of voice.

The gap between what we say and what is communicated is particularly wide in cases like Rajib's. He's genuinely *trying* to come across as friendly and respectful, but he's battling actual feelings of frustration and the sense that people around him are incompetent. His colleagues aren't reading him wrong, they're reading him right. They aren't hearing what he's trying to communicate (respect), they're hearing what he actually thinks and feels (contempt).



90% of managers think they are in the top 10% of performers in their workplace.

- Business Week Poll, 2007.

But Rajib doesn't know that. So when he receives feedback that says he's still difficult to work with, he's thinking, "but I'm being nice!" He's unaware of all the ways that his non-verbal communication is ratting him out.

2. We see our own difficult behavior as an exception to how we "really are."

When we think of the behavior of others, we attribute it to their personality. "Evan isn't a problem-solver. He's got a victim mentality." Evan's behavior, from Rajib's point of view, is a reflection of the way Evan *is*. When thinking about his own behavior, however, Rajib attributes it not to himself but to the situation. "Why was I frustrated with Evan? Because we were under time pressure and the clients are breathing down my neck." So Rajib sees his treatment of Evan (to the extent he sees it at all) as an exception that shouldn't be counted in the tally of "how I really am." The blindspot widens.

3. We don't see our contribution to the problem. When Rajib thinks about his teamwork with Evan, he sees clearly what Evan has contributed to their problems, but doesn't see his own contributions to those problems. Was Rajib as clear about the line of command as he thinks he was? Was Rajib as clear about when he would be in meetings? Are Rajib's expectations reasonable under the circumstances? In general, it's easy to see how others are messing things up, but difficult for us to see the ways we're contributing to the problem.

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Now re-consider the feedback that Rajib is getting. What is he to make of the

claim that he's difficult to work with? He might agree that he's demanding, and he might agree that he used to be a little "direct," but he simply doesn't see how he's difficult. In fact, he's going out of his way to demonstrate that he's polite and respectful.

The situation, from Rajib's perspective, becomes clear. If you're bending over backwards to be respectful, and people are still accusing you of being difficult, it must be because they have other motives. They are jealous. They are being political. They are trying to tear him down. The feedback is all about Rajib's blindspot and rather than helping Rajib to see his own blindspot more clearly, it just makes it bigger.

What to Do?

There's no easy fix. Blindspots are, after all, blindspots. But there are several things that can make a big difference – for you and for the people you work with.

1. Assume you have blindspots.

Virtually everyone (particularly competent, over-achieving types) assumes that they are the exception -- "sure, others have blindspots, but not me." And even as you read this, you might be thinking, "it's true, most people do think they're the exception, but they're not. But I actually am the exception." Here's a surefire way to know if you have blindspots: (a) are you human? (b) do you interact with humans? If you answered yes to both of these questions, you've got blindspots. End of story. Now the only question is "what are they?"

2. Ask "what if" not "whether". When we get any negative feedback, our tendency is to try to figure out if it's true and right and accurate and fair. In any given case, it may not be. After all, there are many reasons why people might give us feedback that's just plain wrong or at best partial. They may see only a small piece of our behavior, or they may indeed be jealous of us. Or any of a hundred other reasons. It's okay and in fact perfectly human to puzzle over those questions. So go ahead and puzzle. But ask another question as well. *What if* the feedback were right, or at least, what if it were a true reflection of someone's view? What would that mean for me? What could I learn from that? What interpersonal issue that I've had trouble with over time would that help explain?

3. Invite clarification. If feedback is unclear to you, don't simply reject it out of hand or pretend it's totally clear. Admit your confusion. "Here's what I'm not understanding." "Here's what isn't making sense to me." And be explicit that the feedback may be landing in a blindspot: "One way for me to make sense of this is that there's something I'm doing that I'm not aware of. Can you help me figure that out?"

4. Ask for patience. Make an agreement with colleagues who are willing to give you feedback. You'll work hard to listen and understand it, and they'll work hard to be patient. Ask them to remember that this is a blindspot, and that it won't simply disappear overnight. It will require you to see yourself and others in new ways. It will require others to see that they too have blindspots. In other words, it will require you to be in a relationship with people over time, and won't improve with a one-time fix.

In Rajib's case, he was able to work through these issues with the help of his coach. But you may not have access to a coach. Luckily, you can make serious strides on your own. Taking in and understanding feedback in a blindspot isn't easy and can sometimes be painful. But the rewards are worth the effort. You'll learn and improve; problems that have dogged you for years may start to ease; and your colleagues will see you as someone who values openness, feedback and learning.

About Us

At Triad, we integrate the latest research into our work with senior management.

For those who are skeptical of soft skills, drawing on recent progress in understanding brain circuitry, emotional processing, behavior change, and the effect on bottom line outcomes can be transformative. They suddenly see the link between the soft skills, and the performance of their team. And they are eager for more.

To learn more about Triad, drop in on our website: www.diffcon.com, or give us a call to see how we can help you and your organization.

It all starts with a conversation.