



Recognizing Leadership Blind Spots

And Discovering the Road to Motivating Your Employees

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Greater profitability, loyal customers and engaged employees are objectives for every organization that has embraced the concept of the service value chain. It's become accepted wisdom that long-term, sustainable profit and growth are derived from customer loyalty, loyalty comes from positive customer experiences, and those experiences are created consistently only by engaged employees.

The chain's success, though, is ultimately driven by exceptional leadership, where leaders from the C-Suite to the front line appreciate the importance of each individual employee, putting in place systems and creating a culture that delivers a positive employee experience.

That makes it especially disturbing when recent studies continue to suggest that leaders' performance in many organizations still has a long way to go:

- In the "State of the American Workforce Report" released by Gallup in 2017, only 13% strongly agree the leadership of the company communicates effectively with the rest of the organization.
- Just 15% of employees strongly agree the leadership in their company makes them enthusiastic about the future.
- In another study, only 23% say that their leaders, overall, are effective (Ketchum Leadership Communication Monitor, 2016).

Statistics like that leave thoughtful leadership teams asking themselves some tough questions. It's not a lack of resources and effort: corporations in the U.S. alone spend billions on leadership training each year. Could, in fact, the emphasis be on the wrong components of leadership in creating first-rate employee experiences?

Every human has a physical blind spot, a point in our field of vision for each eye that we simply cannot see. A recent study conducted by Dale Carnegie suggests that leaders and leadership teams have blind spots, too. When it comes to some key behaviors that motivate and inspire employees to give their best efforts, leaders around the world consistently underperform.

The findings we present here are based on a 2016 online survey of more than 3,300 full-time employees over the age of 21 from a cross section of industries, company size and positions in the organization – from individual contributors to CEOs – across 14 countries in four regions. The primary objective of this cross-cultural leadership study was to identify key leadership characteristics that motivate and inspire people in the U.S. and around the world.

The survey required respondents to select from pairs of positive leadership characteristics those more likely to inspire and motivate them to do their best work. Employees were also asked which of their immediate supervisor's leadership behaviors are most important and to rate the performance of their supervisor on those behaviors. Respondents also told us to what extent they could rely on their leaders to be honest with themselves and others, and finally, they reported their level of satisfaction with their job and their plans for staying with their current employer.

While some differences existed across countries and regions, the data reveal a remarkable number of similarities in the way employees think about their leaders and leadership characteristics in general.

Leadership is a complex discipline requiring vision, strategic thinking, financial savvy and much more. When it comes to leadership behaviors essential to *engaging employees*, four high-level findings emerged from the study:

1. Leaders must give their employees sincere praise and appreciation.

It can get lost in the day-to-day rush to meet the next project deadline or delivery schedule, but simple, sincere appreciation, praise and recognition are essential to motivating employees around the world. Eighty-five percent of respondents worldwide said that getting sincere appreciation from their supervisor was somewhat or very important to their desire to give their best work. More than three quarters (76%) said a leader who gives praise and honest appreciation would be more likely to inspire them than someone who is more focused on getting the job done. It's especially important in the US and Canada, where employees tended to be particularly motivated by praise and appreciation compared with counterparts in other areas of the world. Consider a continuous supply of well-founded praise and sincere appreciation the fuel your people need to keep running.

2. Leaders do well to admit when they are wrong.

Everyone gets it wrong sometimes. That's life, and making mistakes is part of it. How we handle situations in which we realize we're wrong, though, says volumes about what kind of person we are. It takes high levels of honesty, integrity, and courage to admit when you're wrong. Perhaps that's why so few leaders do it. More than eight in ten respondents worldwide (81%) said that having a leader who will admit when he or she is wrong is important or very important to inspiring them to give their best efforts at work. Admitting when you are wrong demonstrates that the environment is safe for taking calculated risks, making mistakes and learning from them. And while good leaders will usually make the right calls, even the best will undoubtedly have opportunities to prove their reliability, trustworthiness and integrity by owning their mistakes.

3. Effective leaders truly listen, respect and value their employees' opinions.

People want to contribute to the mission and make a difference; that can only happen when leaders listen. Without it, employees are left feeling disconnected and rejected. Two of the top three leadership behaviors employees most often identified in the study as vital to their motivation were being “truly listened to” and “having their opinion respected” by their leader. The opportunities for direct and frequent communication between employers and their employees have never been more abundant given the available technology. Used wisely, leaders who listen can have tremendous impact. Henry David Thoreau wrote, “The greatest compliment that was ever paid to me was when one asked me what I thought and attended to my answer.”

4. Employees want leaders they can trust to be honest with themselves *and* others.

The study examined trust in two ways, described as external and internal reliability. **Externally reliable** refers to leaders who are dependable, say what they mean and mean what they say – people can count on them. Overall, about 30% of respondents said their immediate supervisor can always be depended upon to be honest and trustworthy when dealing with others. Respondents from the region including Brazil and Mexico, as well as the region encompassing the US and Canada, were more likely to say their immediate supervisor is always honest with others than respondents from Asia or Europe.

Internally reliable refers to leaders who are consistent in words and actions. They are true to themselves and avoid behaving in ways that are contrary to their core principles and beliefs. Thirty percent of employees from around the world said their supervisor can always be trusted to say and do things consistent with their beliefs, and again those from Brazil, Mexico, Canada and the US were more positive about their leaders' internal reliability than in other areas of the world.

Trust is the foundation of every relationship, and leaders who understand that it's based on more than just telling the truth when asked are on the right road to creating a culture that engages employees.

Evidence of Leadership Blind Spots

Few are likely to argue with the importance of the leadership behaviors just outlined. Each of us, in our various roles as employees ourselves, has felt the presence or absence of each of them, and can reflect on the impact it had on our motivation to give our best. While these may be simple concepts, they are not easy, and this is clearly reflected in the fact that so many employees are disengaged in their jobs. And leadership is the primary reason. According to Gallup (2017), just 15% said their leaders make them enthusiastic about the future, and another study found that just 23% say their leaders are effective.ⁱ

The problem arises when leaders believe they're demonstrating these behaviors, and their employees don't. Research suggests it happens more often than we'd like to think, because human beings are predictably overly optimistic when evaluating their own performance of social and intellectual tasks.ⁱⁱ The exact reasons for this aren't entirely clear, but the tendency is evident in an often-replicated experiment that demonstrates that “the average person, when asked, typically claims that he or she is ‘above average,’ which is, of course, statistically impossible.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As we examine important leadership behaviors, then, it's essential to keep in mind that we all have blind spots, and by their very nature, it's difficult to be fully aware of them. Here are the common blind spots uncovered by the Dale Carnegie & Associates study:

Blind Spot #1:

Showing Appreciation

Modern leaders are well beyond the old dismissive “Consider your paycheck your thank you note.” Leaders understand the importance of human capital and most undoubtedly feel they appreciate their employees. Yet fewer than half of the employees in the study said their own supervisor makes them feel sincerely appreciated most or all of the time. Often times it is the frequency of praise or not being sincere where most leaders fall short.

Blind Spot #2:

Admitting When Wrong

A willingness to “admit when they are wrong” was the leadership behavior that generated the largest disparity between its importance and supervisors' performance. While as stated earlier, 81% of respondents said it was important to their motivation to give their best, only 41% said their supervisors could be trusted do so consistently – a gap of 40%

Blind Spot #3: Truly Listening

“We want to hear from you!” Today, nearly every phone call and page view generates a survey. But asking isn’t the same as listening, and employees know the difference. Just 49% of respondents said they could confidently expect that when they spoke with their leader, they’d truly listen most or all of the time. Actively listening is critical, and part of that is showing respect for what the other person has to say.

Blind Spot #4: Honesty With Self And Others

No one wants to think of themselves as dishonest, and yet nearly two in ten employees (17%) stated that their own supervisor is rarely or never honest and trustworthy with others. While the veracity of this belief may be called into question, it’s the perceptions employees have that leaders must contend with in order to effectively lead. In the same vein, 16% of respondents said their supervisor is rarely or never internally reliable, meaning these employees view their leader as behaving in ways that are inconsistent with their leader’s own principles and core beliefs.

Why It Matters

The data suggest that the return on investment on efforts directed toward these areas is significant. Globally about 17% of respondents reported being very satisfied in their job, and research has shown that a high level of job satisfaction is both correlated with, and likely necessary for, a high level of employee engagement. Findings in the Dale Carnegie & Associates study corroborate previous research demonstrating the impact effective leadership behaviors have on overall job satisfaction. For those with supervisors who frequently exhibit these important leadership behaviors, the number of employees who report being highly satisfied more than doubles to 36%.

Employees are nearly ten times more likely to be very satisfied with their job when their leader is always externally reliable (honest and trustworthy with others) compared with those whose leaders rarely are. Those who believe their leader is rarely externally reliable are nearly four times more likely to be looking for a job right now compared with those who see their leader as consistently externally reliable.

When leaders are consistently internally reliable (true to their beliefs and principles), employees are nearly seven times more likely to be very satisfied with their job than those whose leaders rarely are. They are also more likely to stay with their current employer and only about a third as likely to be looking for a new job.

What Leaders Can Do

Simply having an awareness of these blind spots may help all of us better see the gap between our actual behavior and our desired behavior, when it comes to getting the best from those who look to us for leadership. Leaders who choose to actively work to identify blind spots in these four areas and learn to overcome them on a personal level have considerable potential to impact the employee experience of those who report to them and interact with them.

When it comes to evaluating the impact of our own behavior, keep these tips in mind:

- Assume that we are not objective when assessing our own capabilities. That means we need help. There are a variety of 360-degree feedback tools available that can provide insight into the perceptions of those with whom you work.
- Prepare yourself for feedback. It can be difficult to set egos aside, and many people benefit from learning adaptive techniques that help them approach and accept feedback constructively.
- Appreciate the intent. While *getting* feedback that reveals blind spots can be uncomfortable, remember that it's also difficult to *give* constructive feedback. Chances are, those providing it are trying to help.
- Disrupt routines. We are blind to the things around us when we become set in our own ways and fall into routines regarding how we engage others, including reacting to issues, running meetings or coaching our employees.
- Just do it. Given the importance of these leadership behaviors, there's no downside to simply taking action to become even better at them. Research suggests that the simple act of learning can also encourage greater self-insight,^{iv} which means there's twofold benefit to taking action: becoming aware of and simultaneously working to improve one's performance of these crucial behaviors for motivating employees.

We can never completely eliminate our blind spots; they are part of human nature. But through candid self-reflection combined with focused effort, we can safely steer ourselves toward becoming the exceptional leaders we want to be.

ⁱ Ketchum Leadership Monitor, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Ehlringer, Joyce, Kerri Johnson, Matthew Banner, David Dunning, and Justin Kruger. "Why the unskilled are unaware: Further explorations of (absent) self-insight among the incompetent." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 105.1 (2008): 98-121. Web.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*

^{iv} *Ibid*