

IMPROVING YOUR LEADERSHIP: JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU HAD IT RIGHT

By Paul Paese

†Ask the question, “Do we need change?,” and most of us will respond with a resounding “yes.” We need change in our corporations and government institutions. In our cities and neighborhoods. In our schools. And so on. But how many of us believe just as strongly, “I need to change myself”? The answer, I suspect, is very few of us. Deep down, most of us believe change is needed “out there” much more than it’s needed “in me.” This observation isn’t exactly new. Gandhi, for example, was particularly astute on this point, as he urged us to “be the change you wish to see in the world.”

The phenomenon of pointing the finger at others to change while remaining oblivious to helpful changes we could make in ourselves is a manifestation of *presumed rightness*. Rather than “being the change we wish to see,” we presume ourselves right and believe others should change. In conversation, this presumption turns into *one-sided control*, with each conversant trying to shape the dialogue and the direction it takes.

Presuming others need to change while exempting ourselves from the same need is the antithesis of effective workplace leadership, and it limits our effectiveness more than we realize. My aim in this article is to illustrate, at the level of thoughts and actions, how this phenomenon operates. I will describe how presumed rightness inserts itself – insidiously and persistently – even when leaders themselves are hard-working and well-intentioned. Through these illustrations and a bit of advice, I hope

to help leaders, team members, and any interested others recognize and manage this costly propensity. Successfully managing this propensity is a powerful means of increasing our effectiveness as leaders and team members.

IT’S NOT ABOUT “THEM”

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of presumed rightness, allow me to tip my hand as to where we’re headed. When I teach this material in corporate workshops and executive seminars, participants often say things like, “Wow, my boss *really* needs this,” or “I wish a few of my *colleagues* were here right now,” or “This workshop should be a requirement for all of our leaders, especially our top executives.” These statements are usually made in jest, but they almost always contain a hint of seriousness. And sometimes the person commenting is entirely serious, exhibiting no trace of irony or joking around.

Whenever I get these comments I always reply along the lines of, “Perhaps so, but I encourage you not to focus too much on others. Doing so can end up feeding, in *ourselves*, the very thing we’re trying to tame here.” Presumed rightness is so surreptitious that, even when it’s called to our attention, we sometimes peg others as “offenders” without realizing this pegging may be an “offense” of our own. That is, my act of noticing presumed rightness in other people may prevent me from noticing the same phenomenon in myself and may, perversely, fuel my sense of being right or better than them. Gentle encouragement to focus first on how this propensity “may be affecting me right now” is therefore helpful.

I’m not suggesting, by the way, that your boss or colleague would have no use for this article. Nor am I suggesting we should avoid trying to influence others. A leader’s work, especially, *often* consists of influencing others. What I am saying is that, when it comes to initiating change, we often try to influence or change others without simultaneously trying to learn of ways we may need to change ourselves. As a result, our efforts to “lead change” often lack both credibility and coherence. It doesn’t make sense to try to “change my organization” unless I’m open to “being changed” in the process – I’m a part of the

†*Author’s note:* The central themes in this article are drawn from the seminal work of Chris Argyris on espoused theory versus theory-in-use (see, for example, *Reasoning, Learning, and Action*, 1982; *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, 1990; and *Organizational Traps*, 2010). Despite the decades-ago publication dates of much of that work, its implications for leadership effectiveness remain widely underappreciated to this day. This article explains that work as I understand, experience, and apply it in my consulting and personal life. I am indebted to Chris and his colleagues – especially Bob Putnam, Iris Bagwell, and Phil McArthur – for helping me think and act more coherently and, not least, practice my craft more effectively. My sincere thanks, also, to Kathy Paese, Shirley Ashauer, Matt Paese, and Debra Gilin for helpful comments on this article.

organization, after all. Rather than being open to this sort of change, most of us actively resist it. Presumed rightness, moreover, plays a leading role in this resistance.

ORIGINS OF PRESUMED RIGHTNESS

Metaphorically speaking, we human beings are “programmed” by what we inherit biologically and learn during our upbringing. As it happens, the roots of presumed rightness trace back to a particular type of programmed action: fight-or-flight behavior. At first glance this behavior may appear unrelated to a presumption of rightness, but let’s take a closer look. The fight-or-flight response is an adaptive mechanism that increases our chances of survival in the face of physical threat. What fewer people may recognize is that fight-or-flight behavior comes in various forms. One of these is the hands-and-feet form – literally running away or fighting back in trying to survive a physical attack. Another form, one that is more modern in evolutionary terms, is verbal – saying something in an effort to win a spoken exchange or withdrawing verbally to avoid open disagreement.

Of particular interest here is the verbal form of fight-or-flight, or what I will refer to as “win-or-withdraw” behavior. Another fitting label would be “dominate-or-submit.” Thanks to modern civilization, sharp spears and nimble feet are no longer necessities of living. Day-to-day threats to our physical survival are less prevalent than they used to be, so the old hands-and-feet response to threat is also less prevalent. The same cannot be said for verbal win-or-withdraw behavior. Indeed, to varying degrees, win-or-withdraw behavior is triggered routinely in present-day exchanges. For most people, win-or-withdraw is activated when they simply disagree with a statement made by someone else (e.g., “Global warming is utter nonsense”). Win-or-withdraw is also triggered whenever the discussion topic carries weight for an individual (e.g., “Fran, I want to talk about your recent job performance”).

A key feature of fight-or-flight behavior is that it’s an automatic form of “programmed action.” That is, it requires very little conscious thought. We hear footsteps approaching in a dark parking garage and instinctively walk faster or brace for a fight. While verbal, win-or-withdraw responding may be less instinctive, it is nevertheless highly programmed and automatic. In all likelihood, much of this automaticity is due to how we are socialized early in life. To raise children successfully, parents and other adults have

to “win” all kinds of verbal exchanges, especially when children are young, vulnerable, and have limited reasoning capacity (“It doesn’t matter if you think it would be fun, Johnny, I’m not letting you climb up on the roof”). Once they understand their parents’ terms, children, in turn, generally learn to withdraw and accept those terms, or suffer consequences. Rather than issuing simple yes/no directives as children get older, parents often win in more sophisticated ways (“Do you want to end up living on the street like cousin Doofus? No? Then why are you still watching YouTube and avoiding your homework?”).

The point is that verbal tactics designed to win are often used on us as kids. We typically come out on the losing end, or we withdraw to avoid conflict. Granted, we get to win sometimes too, as when dealing with younger siblings, cousins, or schoolmates. Then, when we become responsible for others later in life – whether as parent, manager, chairperson, teacher, whatever – we arrive in those positions programmed to execute win-or-withdraw actions automatically and skillfully. Having mostly been on the losing end as kids, we often arrive eager to accumulate the wins owed us by our newfound powerful status. Or, if we learned early on that withdrawing was the only means of getting along or being accepted, we may arrive predisposed to withdraw from conflict, despite having more power. Not all actions designed to win or withdraw are automatic, of course. But in the conversational realm, when the topic matters to us, automatic win-or-withdraw programming is very likely to drive our actions.

HOW “SKILL” COMES INTO PLAY

Win-or-withdraw programming and the presumed rightness it creates are helpful and valuable in some situations. These same processes, however, are fundamental causes of difficulty when people organize and try to work together. Because the win-or-withdraw program is built-in and automatic, the actions activated by this program don’t require much effort, nor do they require much conscious thought. Indeed, this is what makes the behavior “skillful.” So, when our neighbor says something disagreeable, or our boss wants to talk about our recent job performance, the win-or-withdraw program kicks in and we quickly say something designed to win the exchange, or we withdraw verbally to avoid open disagreement. The latter often takes the form of “skillful diplomacy.” In conversations that matter to

us, the win-or-withdraw program governs (or at least colors) our actions *without us realizing this is the case*.

Another aspect of our win-or-withdraw programming is the ability to quickly notice or infer plausible reasons why *other people* are wrong, misinformed, or up to no good. I win, after all, if I can show that others are wrong. This “you’re wrong” filter is the springboard for presumed rightness. And notice how presumed rightness becomes compounded if you and I disagree and the win-or-withdraw program is triggered in *both* of us: When this happens, I see you as wrong and you see me as wrong. To make matters worse, I don’t see my primary motive as wanting to win the exchange – I just see myself as right and you as wrong. Likewise, you don’t see winning as your primary motive – you simply see yourself as right and me as wrong. Perhaps the cruelest irony is that, while I don’t see winning as my primary motive, I will likely see it as *your* motive (“It’s not about winning, Mel, it’s about fixing the problem. You’re the one who always has to be right!”). What you see will likely be the exact opposite. As long as we remain triggered, each of us will continue to presume “I’m right and you’re wrong,” and we will keep battling until one of us shifts from win to withdraw.

The win-or-withdraw program isn’t all or none. It gets activated to varying degrees depending on the circumstances and the things we’re sensitive to given our personal histories. An important feature of the win-or-withdraw program is that, the more strongly it’s triggered, the more it governs our actions, and the less aware we are that this is the case. If the win-or-withdraw program is triggered only mildly, for example, we may have some awareness of our impulse; that is, we may be aware of *wanting* to win or be right. When the response is triggered strongly, however, we don’t notice the impulse at all. We simply *become* right, and our awareness consists of *knowing* we’re right. What this means is that the more strongly we’re triggered, the bigger our so-called blind spot becomes. When we’re extremely triggered, we may go completely blind to what we’re doing in the moment. Such complete blindness means that our “presumed” rightness has hardened into a “convinced I’m” rightness. In the heat of the moment, this belief may be unshakeable.

Just as the win-or-withdraw program varies in degree of activation, so the grip of presumed rightness varies from weak to strong depending on the weightiness of circumstances. Presumed rightness also varies with personality. Baseline presumed rightness in some people is both strong and constant,

whereas in others the baseline is weak and infrequent (e.g., competitive versus meek personality types). Most people fall somewhere between these two extremes. With the possible exception of those living in monasteries or cloisters, everyone falls prey to presumed rightness at least once in a while. For most of us, presumed rightness is a subtle overlay that tints our waking hours and stirs occasionally into full color (red, of course). As noted previously, however, sometimes presumed rightness gets stirred so strongly that it becomes, at least momentarily, more of a certainty than a presumption.

NOT WALKING OUR OWN TALK

The harmful effects of presumed rightness are not limited to in-the-moment exchanges with other people. This propensity also contaminates after-the-fact *recollections* of what we were doing and what our motives were. To give an analogy, and with apologies to readers unfamiliar with American football, consider the star quarterback who is interviewed after the game and asked, “How did you make such accurate passes despite being hurried all the time [by pass rushers]... I mean, what was running through your head?” If you’ve watched post-game interviews like this, you know players typically answer by saying things like, “It’s what we work on in practice, I was just doing my job” or “It comes down to confidence in myself and my teammates” or “I did it for our fans – they deserve this win.” In other words, players rarely attempt to describe what they thought and did during the moments of skill execution in question. Because their skills are so automatic, players have little conscious access to what they were thinking in those moments, so they typically answer with less-than-precise *construals* of what they were thinking (which, for this viewer, often sound comical or painfully cliché).

An analogous phenomenon happens routinely in the workplace. Consider a leader who is recounting a performance review that went badly. According to the leader, her direct report “wasn’t open to feedback, got really defensive, and ultimately shut down.” If we ask this leader, “How did you handle the meeting?,” the leader’s answer will probably include some accurate recollections of what she said. But in all likelihood, her recollections will also include some less-than-accurate reporting of what she said, as well as biased reporting of *how* she said those things. This is because performance reviews – especially those involving unfavorable feedback – are often inherently “high stakes” for both reviewer and reviewee, and are

therefore likely to trigger the win-or-withdraw program in both parties. In our leader's case, the more the win-or-withdraw program was triggered, the less aware she would have been during the meeting and the more she will exhibit presumed rightness, both then and now. The more she was triggered then, the more her recounting now will consist (necessarily) of self- and other-construals rather than direct recall. These construals, in all likelihood, will include little or no awareness of her primary motive (winning the exchange). They are also likely to contain self-serving distortions of her own and her direct report's behavior. By "distortions" I mean perceptions that deviate from how an impartial observer would see their behavior.*

To illustrate how these construals arise in practice, and how programmed behavior comes into play, it's helpful to distinguish between intentions and actions. Consider a division VP who is trying to coach a team leader who reports to him. The VP has his own idea of what the leader needs to do to make her team more successful, but he wants any new plan to be "her idea" so she'll be committed to following through on the plan. Consequently, the VP enters the conversation with the good intention of "making sure she owns" any plan she agrees to implement. What the VP ends up doing, however, runs counter to this intention. Rather than truly letting the direct report choose from a set of viable options, the VP ends up "steering" her toward the course of action he believes is best, and he does this without realizing his steering is robbing her of ownership. This is a very common occurrence. I call it the *Disguised Steering* method of coaching (see sidebar).

*Self-serving biases in human behavior are well documented. Among behavioral scientists, the leading explanation for self-serving bias is "motivated information processing." That is, people are said to encode, store, and retrieve information in ways that are, quite unwittingly, skewed toward their own self-interest. While this explanation is well supported, it is by no means the whole story behind presumed rightness. The inflated self-construals that distinguish presumed rightness are not so much the product of how available information is processed, but more the result of "denied access" to self-observation and information about oneself. Win-or-withdraw responses, especially when strongly triggered, are so skilled and automatic that we typically have little or no conscious access to the "program" driving our actions. This is a crucial distinction. In a very real sense, the win-or-withdraw program *seals itself* from detection the moment it is activated. This makes presumed rightness more pernicious than other forms of self-serving bias such as over-confidence in judgment or inflated perceptions of one's own abilities.

Continuing with our scenario, let's assume the team leader ends up "choosing" the plan the VP prefers. If we ask the VP how the meeting went, he will likely recall that it went well, thinking he succeeded in having the team leader feel like the chosen plan was her idea. Meanwhile, if we separately ask the leader how the meeting went, there's a good chance she'll say her VP's preference became obvious to her, so she went along with it even though it wasn't her preferred plan. While he (the VP) believes she is committed to the plan because it was "her idea," in truth she merely complied and is, consequently, much less committed than she could be. This is just one example of how our actions and results may contradict our intentions and recollections. Presumed rightness causes similar contradictions in countless other contexts (e.g., an associate who means to "help" but essentially "takes over" a colleague's project; or, a manager who sets out to "speak the truth" to senior leadership but unintentionally conceals his message beneath layers of sugar-coating).

The key point about intentions and actions is this: *When we're emotionally invested in a situation (and the win-or-withdraw program is activated to some degree), the good intentions we hold consciously in our heads often run counter to the unconscious program that shapes our actions. Because our intentions are conscious and our programming is unconscious, our good intentions mislead us into believing we are acting (or have acted) in accordance with our intentions.*

It's no wonder, then, that we often see others' words and deeds as hypocritical, yet we rarely see ourselves this

Disguised Steering

VP: So, Jen, I see your growth plan basically involves increasing the number of contacts your team makes.

JEN: Yes, I think that's what we need to do.

VP: Well, do you really think that's the best approach? Is contacting even more client prospects really the best solution for your team?

JEN: What do you mean?

VP: What's going to be the best investment of your time – making even more contacts or targeting them better so your success rate is higher?

JEN: Well, of course a higher success rate is the goal, but the targeting has to be accurate.

VP: Exactly.

JEN: So... you think the solution is better market intelligence? Rather than increasing our contacts with potential clients?

VP: I want to know what you think.

JEN: [pauses] Well, now that I think about it, honing our market intelligence does fit with the "work smarter" ethic the firm has been pushing.

VP: It does indeed.

JEN: I see your point.

VP: But do you agree?

JEN: Yeah, I think so.

VP: You sure?

JEN: Yeah, I see what you mean. Makes sense. Thanks.

VP: It's your call. Just trying to help.

way. Indeed, with rare exception, people don't knowingly exhibit hypocrisy; by its very nature, hypocrisy happens outside of the actor's awareness. Thanks to the speed and stealth of presumed rightness, we construe our actions as being consistent with our good intentions yet peg others for the slightest inconsistency. In this sense, presumed rightness is inherently perverse; it is the underlying mechanism by which our good intentions end up, as the expression goes, paving the road to hell.

THE UPSIDE AND DOWNSIDE

While the costliness of presumed rightness is the primary focus of this article, it must be noted that presumed rightness is sometimes beneficial. Just as successful parenting involves taking for granted "I know best" and controlling children to some degree, so too does effective leadership – in some situations – involve presuming one's own rightness and directing others. Consider, for example, the lead surgeon during an emergency procedure, a police officer during a bomb threat, or a top official faced with a rapidly escalating budget crisis. Or, on a more mundane level, consider a basketball or football coach on game day (especially if the score is close and the clock is winding down). In all of these situations immediate action is needed, so the lead person needs to take control and coordinate group members by directing their actions. Here, presumed rightness is necessary and beneficial, provided the lead person has the requisite knowledge or expertise.

The problem, of course, is that presumed rightness revs up in situations that are emotionally triggering yet far less time-critical. As a result, leaders often exert more control than they need to, and this over-control produces an underutilization of the group – that is, an underutilization of what the members see and know first-hand, and what they could create if given the opportunity. I'm assuming the group consists of typical "knowledge workers," as opposed to, say, unskilled laborers. Even worse, by its very nature over-control constrains or reduces the choices group members could make for themselves (or it reduces their input into choices made by the leader). This exclusion from choice-making naturally reduces their sense of ownership in whatever the group is doing or trying to accomplish. In other words, over-control by the leader undermines the emotional and behavioral commitment of group members, and this lack of commitment exacerbates the underutilization of the group. Some exceptions to this rule are the rare (and

usually unskilled) workers who want to be told what to do or, as noted previously, groups facing a time-critical emergency. Generally speaking, people yearn for self-determination, and this desire can only be met by making choices and participating in the choice-making process.

Presumed rightness can be a liability for anyone, but leaders especially pay the price. This is partly due to underutilization of the group, as just discussed. Another factor is that, more than others in the organization, leaders are expected to walk the talk and serve as role models for others. And the higher the leadership position, the stronger this expectation is. But from one day to the next, members of the organization don't pay the same amount of attention to what their leaders are doing. The attention they pay goes up or down depending on the circumstances. On which occasions do people pay more attention to what their leaders say and do? You guessed it: on the very occasions when more is at stake – e.g., when the group is put under stricter oversight, when someone openly questions the team's direction, when a difficult choice has to be made, and so forth. A leader will likely be scrutinized more on occasions that carry more weight – i.e., occasions that are likely to be "triggering" for everyone, including the leader. So here we have another cruel irony: The nature of presumed rightness means that leaders may be at their worst precisely when their best is needed, on the very occasions that can damage their reputations and, not least, the organizations they lead. It should be noted that this irony may be negated if the weighty situation is also highly visible. When there is high visibility to stakeholders or the public, leaders may become more deliberative over how their actions will be perceived.

More than ever before, skillful conversation is recognized as central to effective leadership and productive teams. Articles and books on this topic are now in abundance, and some even argue that one-to-one conversation has the power to bring about large-scale social change. What remains underappreciated, however, is the degree to which our human programming works to undermine our conversational ideals. Genuine conversations are guaranteed to have difficult moments, sooner or later, and self-contradictions (between intention and action) are rife in those moments. Some people steer clear of self-contradiction by avoiding difficult conversations in the first place. But this avoidance, ironically enough, is a reflection of the same programming that gives rise to self-contradiction. Until we learn to see and rein in our propensity for self-contradiction, our conversational ideals will remain just that – ideals.

Even worse, as ideals go unrealized, some people may conclude erroneously that the promise of conversation has been overblown, and dismiss it as an empty fad. This is why our first steps in learning to talk more productively must involve recognizing and reining in presumed rightness.

WHAT TO DO

The big question thus becomes: “What are these first steps, and how do we take them?” The steps I have in mind harken back to the notion of “leading change.” Simply put, *by presuming myself right, I resist change. And the resistance stemming from my presumed rightness is mostly invisible to me.* This is why our efforts to initiate change often lack credibility and coherence. It’s also why the recipients of our change efforts often lack commitment to the changes we initiate. We set out as leaders to influence or change others, yet we unwittingly remain closed to changing ourselves.

With this in mind, allow me to recommend, in the form of an exercise, a first step in building your productive conversation skills and leading change more coherently. Please keep in mind this exercise is one of various possible first steps, but it’s an excellent starting point (or midpoint, or later point if you’re further down this road). First, set aside any desire you may have to forward this article to others who seem, in your view, to have a bad case of presumed rightness. Instead, make a short list of people who, upon reading this article, might conceivably think *you* need to read it. Your direct reports perhaps? Your colleagues at work (especially those who tend to disagree with you)? Dare I suggest your partner or spouse? Then ask those individuals to read this article, and include a note that conveys the following:

“I’m trying to get an idea of what my blind spots are as a leader [or team member]. Are there any habits or tendencies I have – in conversations, meetings, whatever – that seem counterproductive or contrary to what we’re trying to do as an organization? I’m asking you to be completely honest. By the way, I’m *not* asking for this feedback because I hope you’ll turn around and ask me for similar feedback in return – there’s no ulterior motive here. Rather, I’m just trying to get some feedback on what others see that I don’t see myself, as a reality check on

whether I’m acting consistently with the changes we’re trying to implement.”

How does it feel to contemplate asking for this type of feedback? If you’re like most people, this prospect doesn’t exactly fall in the “sounds like fun” category. It might even feel like an invitation for others to pounce on your vulnerabilities. How soon you solicit this feedback, or whether you do so at all, should depend on how ready you feel and the likely supportiveness of your feedback providers. If you’re feeling disinclined or ambivalent, I suggest giving form to your thoughts and feelings by writing them down. Perhaps the prospect of asking for this feedback feels threatening or counterproductive. If so, write down why it feels that way. In the interest of full disclosure, there’s no guarantee this exercise won’t backfire. If there’s already a “wall” between you and your feedback providers, for instance, the wall may get higher if their comments seem unfair and you become defensive.

Writing down why we feel disinclined or ambivalent is helpful in two ways. First, it helps us organize our thoughts and check them for inconsistencies and contradictions. Second, once we’ve clarified our thinking, we’re in a good position to *talk about* our ambivalence if we so choose. That is, rather than asking for feedback, we can talk with our would-be feedback providers about the exercise we’re contemplating and why we’re hesitant to go through with it. This intermediate step of talking about our ambivalence can be a good way of testing the water, so to speak, and making it safer to proceed.

If you do proceed and others agree to offer feedback, I encourage you to sit down with them and talk face-to-face. This will allow you to ask questions and get clarification. As you listen and ask for clarification, pay attention to your own internal reactions to what they say. Notice your impulse to defend, your impulse to point out why their feedback is wrong or off base. Just notice this without reacting or defending. Simply notice your reactions while listening to the other person, and get as much clarification as you can. Afterward, assuming the other person has made a genuine effort to be honest and helpful, be sure to express your appreciation. After all, there’s a good chance it took some courage for the person to talk candidly with you. After hearing from all of your feedback providers, take some time to reflect on what they have told you. Then, if you’re still not clear or new questions arise, go back and ask for further clarification.

A word of warning is needed here about seeking clarification (and about feedback in general). We’re

all good at remembering our impressions of other people, but we're not nearly as good at remembering what we specifically heard and saw that led to those impressions. Let's suppose, for example, one of my feedback providers says, "You tend to be impatient when people don't agree with you." I then ask what she means by impatient, and she replies, "Well, sometimes you cut people off." I don't remember cutting anyone off, so I ask for an example or two. My feedback provider then says, "Well, I remember you interrupting Sam recently, and I know you've cut me off before, but I can't remember a specific example right now." Let's suppose I don't recall any such incidents, so now I'm wondering if her memory is accurate. At this point, if I continue asking for more clarification, my efforts may begin to feel like the grand inquisition to her. The point is that limited memory often constrains the level of detail others can provide, so it's best to anticipate this possibility and remember that others are, in all likelihood, just trying to help. For more specificity, and at the risk of sounding solicitous, it can help to work with a good coach who knows how to provide actionable feedback.

Even when specificity is lacking, this feedback exercise can help us gain awareness of our tendencies and reduce unintended gaps between our intentions and actions. As alluded to earlier, an important aspect of this exercise is noticing our "I'm right, you're wrong" impulses and deliberately *not indulging* them. Noticing an impulse and suspending our automatic response is a powerful practice because we're hitting the pause button, so to speak. Pausing in this way creates a self-aware "space" in which we can see the link between our inner reactions and our outward behavior. This self-awareness, in turn, allows us to *choose* how to respond, rather than reacting mindlessly. Mindless reaction is the hallmark of incompetent leadership. Effective leadership, on the other hand, is firmly rooted in conscious choice. By taking this exercise seriously and responding thoughtfully to what we learn, we can rein in some of our presumed rightness. Inevitably, these measures also serve to raise our game as leaders and team members.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Proactively learning about our blind spots takes courage, and gives new meaning to the notion of taking ownership. Owning up to, say, micromanaging my staff or provoking others is difficult enough if I already admit to perfectionism or pushiness. Taking

responsibility for uncovering missteps of my own *that I'm not currently aware of* is even more difficult. Yet we're all human, and presumed rightness is a universal phenomenon. So the likelihood is high, to say the least, that I too am blind to some of my missteps. For this simple reason, facing and investigating where I tend to go blind is my responsibility – *if* I'm serious about "being the change I wish to see."

If this undertaking feels daunting, take heart in knowing what I have witnessed in my consulting practice. I have seen leaders learn to welcome feedback they would have suppressed not long before. And I have seen the success and stature of those leaders increase as a result of their continued openness. What may feel like a daunting chore is actually an often-missed or under-tapped opportunity. And a highly rewarding opportunity at that. Don't miss out.^{††}

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