

Proof Point

Survival of the most self-aware

Nearly 80 percent of leaders have blind spots about their skills.

By J. Evelyn Orr

The concept:

Self-awareness is knowing strengths and limitations, the willingness to seek and act on feedback, the ability to admit mistakes, and the tendency to reflect and apply personal insights.

Used to:

Issue a reality check. Seeing yourself as others see you is a starting point for change and growth, and an inoculation against career derailment.

Measured with:

Korn/Ferry's ProSpective Assessment online, which allows leaders to assess their skills and ask colleagues to weigh in to potentially reveal blind spots or hidden strengths.

Important because:

Self-awareness measurably contributes to high performance and is an indicator of long-term career success. And yet 80 percent of executives have blind spots about their skills, and another 40 percent have under-used hidden strengths.

Leadership demands smarts, motivation, experience, interpersonal skills, and more. But when all things are equal, self-awareness is a key trait that explains why some business leaders succeed when others derail.

Korn/Ferry International recently released an online test that appraises an executive's level of self-awareness. This new assessment, called ProSpective, asks the executive to choose the skills he or she is best and worst at (relatively speaking), and then request similar input from colleagues. The results from the first wave of professionals (more than 2,750 people) to take the test were striking: 79 percent had at least one blind spot and 40 percent had at least one hidden strength.

What's a blind spot? It's when an executive lists a certain skill as among his or her strongest—but others say it's one of his or her weakest. Such overestimation of skills among managers and executives is the single best predictor of low performance appraisals. If executives don't become more self-aware and address such blind spots, their whole career can derail.

In a 2010 study, Korn/Ferry researchers discovered which specific skills are most frequently overestimated or underestimated. Working from a large database of multiple employers' assessment data, they compared executives' self-rankings to those given by their bosses, peers, and direct reports. For executives, the most prevalent blind spots included Making Tough People Calls (17 percent), Demonstrating Personal Flexibility (16 percent), and Getting Work Done Through Others (13 percent). While many businesspeople struggle in these areas, an awareness of these weaknesses is what gives certain leaders an edge.

Underestimating one's problem areas is another form of self-deception begging for a cure. For executives, the most frequently unrecognized problem areas that have the potential to stall careers include Too Narrow (18 percent),

Doesn't Inspire or Build Talent (14 percent), and Doesn't Relate Well to Others (14 percent). Of course, the effects of these problem areas can only be reversed once the executive becomes conscious of them.

Less of a career threat, but still potentially limiting, are hidden strengths. Forty percent of executives underestimate a skill they have compared to how others rate them. Without being fully aware of strengths, it's difficult to fully utilize them. But with some insight, executives can identify and nurture these strong areas to build toward success. For executives, the most common hidden strengths include Managing Up (26 percent), Understanding the Business (17 percent), and Being Organizationally Savvy (17 percent).

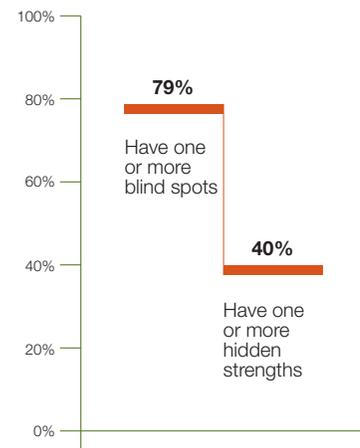
Raising one's level of self-awareness—and thus preventing or recovering from career derailment—is possible at any leadership level. It can begin simply by consciously observing others' reactions and subtle cues. Seeking out informal feedback from colleagues, comments on work performance from bosses, or taking in the results about skills and potential from assessments like ProSpective are all methods to achieve increased self-awareness. In addition, leaders are helped by reflecting on their internal thought patterns or beliefs, which might illuminate opportunities to change old behaviors. Ideally, a blend of external input, personal reflection, and a chance to test discoveries, will create a cycle of ever-deepening self-awareness.

Increasing self-awareness benefits not only individuals' careers, but also the whole organization. Leaders who are self-aware are more likely to be high-performing, to meet their business goals, and save on turnover costs. And, self-aware leaders extend their realistic outlook to the whole organization. This puts them in a better place to honestly size up the organization's capability and capacity, or to make sound decisions about investment of resources.

Becoming more self-aware may not be comfortable, particularly when confronting blind spots. But with risk comes reward. And ultimately, the price for lack of self-awareness is too great—for leaders and for organizations.

Figure 1
Executives with blind spots and/or hidden strengths

Of the 2,754 executives whose ProSpective Assessment included input from at least three other people, nearly 80 percent had a blind spot and 40 percent had a hidden strength.



About the Author

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The Korn/Ferry Institute generates forwardthinking research and viewpoints that illuminate how talent advances business strategy. Since its founding in 2008, the institute has published scores of articles, studies and books that explore global best practices in organizational leadership and human capital development.

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