

# Better Leaders are Closer Than They Appear: Redefining Leadership Blindspots

By: Emily Tracy, Park Elementary School

Contact: [etracy@mgusc.k12.in.us](mailto:etracy@mgusc.k12.in.us)

## **Background That Led to Your Inquiry:**

I am an overachiever in every aspect of my life. I often feel as though I go, go, go - so hard and so fast. After learning about blindspots at the initial IPLI seminar, I couldn't stop thinking about this concept. Am I oblivious to my blindspots and does this result in any negative occurrences limiting my leadership capacity? I often hear that I put too much into projects, take too much control, expect too much. In my mind, I am helping, serving, leading. However, this could be part of my blindspots that prohibit me from moving my staff forward. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to learn about leadership blindspots, find out which blindspots I hold, and how to overcome any unrecognized threats or weaknesses due to these blindspots.

## **Statement of Your Wondering:**

With this purpose, I wondered if I exhibit any of the common leadership blindspots. If so, is there a particular one that I tend to do more than others? Does it affect how I interact with people?

## **Methods/Procedures:**

To gain insights into my wonderings, I initially conducted a baseline survey to my staff simply asking to choose which two leadership blindspots I exhibit prominently on a daily basis. I chose to include the seven most common leadership blindspots that I learned of at the IPLI summer seminar. These include: needing to be right; being overly ambitious with goals; being too narrowly focused; expecting too much from others; self rather than organizational needs; looking good at all costs; unable to accept mistakes. The results gave me an uneven look as there was not a clear answer. I quickly realized this survey was not appropriate for what I needed to learn about myself. I did not inform my staff about leadership blindspots nor did I educate them on these specific seven concepts. After careful discussions with some key staff members, I realized the perception of a few of these blindspots in fact differ from what I understood. I first learned this survey data was not accurate and I needed to approach this from a different angle. If I don't know enough about these blindspots, my staff probably does not either. It isn't fair to ask which blindspots I hold when both parties are not educated in this area.

The next step for me was to educate myself on this topic. I held a surface level of understanding and needed to dive into foundation, real world examples, and strategies to overcome blindspots. After reviewing some materials, I came across the book *Leadership Blindspots: How Successful Leaders Identify and Overcome Weaknesses That Matter* (Shaw, Robert). This literature gave me a deeper meaning of what blindspots are and how to manage and maneuver around them to increase leadership capacity and awareness. I learned of the Blindspot Matrix, a tool I used to identify my weaknesses and strengths, both known and unknown. With this tool, I was able to recognize what my known strengths and weaknesses are and discover my unknown strengths and weaknesses. The unknown weaknesses are my blindspots: knowing the impact I hold; realizing the value of my leadership; placing my level of expectations on others. Contrary to my initial thinking, the unknown strengths are also my blindspots: my ability to lead; holding good intentions at the heart of every decision; recognizing the good in people when it seems easier to see the negative. The Blindspot Matrix is the

key piece to awareness and intention. It is placed on a large anchor chart in my office. It is placed in my daily planner. It is on my desk at home and at school. It is only through continuously reflecting with this data that awareness is at its highest level and intention is evident.

This process is ever changing and there really is not an end to increasing leadership capacity. We change as we learn new ideology, new strategies. Although the action research was intended to span over a few months, it really doesn't end in this case. It took a mere three months to figure out a few unknown strengths and weaknesses; however, many more will be uncovered as I continue to take steps throughout my journey as a leader.

### **Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:**

As a result of analyzing my data, three important things I learned include: 1)Blindspots are not all bad.; 2) There are many common blindspots that center around much more than just the individual.; 3) No amount of surveys will ever rid of any blindspot.

Blindspots are not all bad. Through learning about leadership blindspots, I was able to reflect upon assumptions and realities associated with leadership blindspots. Many assume that all blindspot are bad simply because they are defined as weaknesses or threats that are unrecognized. Although they tend to end up doing more harm than good, if we take a closer, more intentional look at our blindspots, we are able to raise the awareness. By doing this, we are turning these blindspots into positive occurrences rather than negative. Take for example, holding too high of expectations. This is a common leadership blindspot. Yes, if unaware, this turns negative quickly in a leadership position. Staff may house negative feelings towards a leader who expects unrealistic outcomes. Having high expectations is a great thing and if a leader is aware this is a common blindspot for them and intentionally thinks about it prior to starting new projects and initiatives, the leader is able to hold those high standards without overwhelming staff. Awareness is key. Throughout my data, I learned that I have tendencies for this very blindspot. After readings and reflections, I now know that I must be intentional about my blindspots. I must keep them at the forefront of everything I do so that they do not threaten or weaken my capacity to lead but rather strengthen that capacity. This has proven that blindspots are not all bad. It is a matter of how you deal with your own blindspots.

There are many common blindspots that center around much more than just the individual. As I began this action research, I assumed that there was a simple list of just seven leadership blindspots that all seemed to center around the individual. Through reading the text, *Leadership Blindspots: How Successful Leaders Identify Overcome the Weaknesses That Matter* (Shaw, Robert), I learned the individual is the just the beginning. Once we learn to identify these weaknesses and overcome them, we can then move to our teams, our organizations and finally our market. Through the self assessment results, I learned that my two areas with moderate probability for blindspots are in fact the team and market. A few areas with the team I need to conduct more research is identifying stretch assignments for my team members and track performance over time; periodically conduct skip-level interviews with those reporting to my team members to assess how things are operating within their groups; and conduct assessments of my team members using appropriate tools such as 360 surveys or leadership assessment tools. Within my market, I need to consider meeting with those I have recently hired from other firms to understand their view of our industry and our response to competitive realities; periodically assess in a disciplined manner our competitors (their strengths and weaknesses, our opportunities and threats); meet with outside experts to solicit their views of how my industry is changing; and assign internal "sentinels" to monitor emerging marketplace trends in targeted areas (such as new technologies) and report back to me with their findings.

No amount of surveys will rid of any blindspot. I started this process thinking I needed surveys to aid to my data compilation for this action research. I started my action research with a baseline survey to my staff trying to uncover what leadership blindspots I exhibit. I thought I was going to give a mid project survey showing my progression and then a final survey proving I was able to rid those blindspots. I quickly learned through my research that it just doesn't work quite like that. What I needed was to learn, increase awareness, and become more intentional with my actions. When this is present, I am able to turn the threats and weaknesses into positive occurrences increasing my leadership capacity.

### **Providing Concluding Thoughts:**

As stated above, this process has taught me that self discovery is ever changing. I began this research journey with a mindset that I was going to do what it takes to rid of my threats, my weaknesses. I set out to send surveys to prove my growth and ability to lead. I have learned that I, as an administrator, I underestimate my ability, my impact and influence. I often hold unrealistic expectations on others because that is what I expect from myself. These are all blindspots, good or bad, and it is up to me how I deliver to my staff.

The Blindspot Matrix is the key piece I will continue to utilize on a daily basis. This matrix helped define my known and unknown strengths and weaknesses. These don't just simply appear from a self-assessment or survey. They appear through careful attention to planning, processes, and reflection. As I embark on new projects, new initiatives, and new adventures, I will resurface the matrix to ensure I am intentional with decision making, collaborating with stakeholders, and learning about my market. I can only do this by using my blindspots to my advantage.

Where am I headed with this newly learned research? I am going to educate my staff on blindspots. We will dedicate our self reflective practice on this very topic to become aware of blindspots within ourselves, our school and our organization. We will learn how to operate on multiple levels, avoiding the tendency to think only in terms of the leader's self-concept -- to truly understand the relevance and importance of the team, the organization and the market.

### **References:**

Shaw, R. B. (2014). Leadership blindspots: How successful leaders identify and overcome the weaknesses that matter. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.