

Self-awareness in leadership development: is it where you start from or where you're going?

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Leadership development: a dispensable expense?

When organisations are focused on trimming every external expense possible and managers are tasked with wringing every ounce of value out of a shrinking and de-motivated workforce, leadership may seem like just an aspirational activity. Providing a vision and inspiring others, being guardians of organisational culture and values, and managing top talent can begin to seem peripheral to the expediencies of getting through the here and now.

However, numerous studies – many of which are referenced in the Center for Creative Leadership's [Human Resource Planning Whitepaper](#) – show that effective leadership translates into revenue generation, and shores up productivity in the face of threats to employee morale and engagement. The decisions and actions taken by senior leaders in an organisation, and how these are communicated, affect everyone and will ripple through to every metric by which the organisation rates its performance.

So, selecting the right individuals for leadership positions is important, but for a number of reasons it cannot be the end of the process.

- First, leaders will be challenged to stretch beyond their existing capabilities. The behaviours that resulted in great performance evaluations at lower levels in an organisation won't necessarily lead to success on the next rung of the ladder. Leaders typically struggle with leaving their old ways behind and adjusting to how they should now be spending their time. A new mindset about what's important and how leaders need to behave in the new role – how to 'be' a new or different type of contributor – need to be learned and developed systematically, just as with any new skill.
- Second, any bad habits or inconsistencies become magnified under the pressure of learning a new role in the spotlight of increased organisational visibility and impact. Good leaders slip into bad habits as they allocate personal resources to coping with change and stress. Development programmes can help leaders get back on track.
- Third, even when a leader is well prepared for a transition and things go smoothly, leadership development can be a useful 'pulse-taking exercise' providing feedback on how he or she can hone their style and behaviours to become even more effective.

Of course, leadership development will have a financial cost as well as involving time away from the business for busy managers, but research as well as strong anecdotal evidence indicates that organisations that invest in leadership development programmes are better able to attract and retain top talent, improve financial performance, and increase the organisation's ability to nimbly react to novel challenges¹. The challenge for development professionals and coaches in these uncertain times is: *where best to focus for maximum impact and highest return on investment?*

Self-awareness – a self-fulfilling prophesy

In any leadership transition, clarity about job content and performance measurement is important, as are the abilities and motivation of individual leaders. However, the key catalyst for helping leaders change and develop is a robust insight into 'who I am'.

Why is this so important? Significantly, from a developmental perspective, self-awareness influences the degree to which leaders and other organisational stakeholders agree in their perceptions of the leader's behaviour. But more than this, research has demonstrated that a leader's effectiveness is positively *influenced by* his or her level of self-awareness.

¹ Center for Creative Leadership, 2008

Self-awareness can be defined as the level of understanding a person has of how they are seen by important others. Agreement between one's own and others' assessment in multisource feedback has typically been used to assess the level of self-awareness for the individual leader.

There are two main ways of achieving self-insight.

- **Personality assessments** can help leaders quickly develop self-awareness and a better understanding of their personal style. By enabling individuals to anchor themselves in a system of descriptors of universal personality traits, these instruments help leaders to see how their own underlying attributes are likely to play out in terms of behaviours and reactions. The fact that 'scores' are based on norms² also gives leaders a benchmark against which to compare themselves.
- **Multisource feedback systems – or 360-degree feedback** – offer leaders the benefit of insight into how others see them with regard to their behaviour at work and their leadership skills. The assumption underlying this is that they are thus much more motivated to change their behaviours and leadership style so as to achieve better outcomes. The honest feedback from multiple perspectives on the leader's behaviour and its effectiveness can be revelatory. When this external perspective is combined with the objective and accurate data from a well-validated personality assessment, leaders have a sure foundation on which both to build on strengths and to address gaps in their repertoire.

It's estimated that 90% of Fortune 100 companies utilise multisource feedback systems. Usually, the intention is to enhance the leader's awareness of their strengths and limitations and to promote behaviour change. As we've said, identifying discrepancies between our self-perceptions and how others see us promotes self-awareness, particularly of areas that may have been blind spots until now.

When feedback on a personality assessment is supported by specific examples from 360-degree feedback, particularly in the hands of a skilled coach, the leader is able to make sense of this new information as it applies to current challenges in their job. This, in turn, creates a platform for increased leadership effectiveness and performance.

The unique power of multisource feedback is that not only do recipients receive valuable information about their strengths and developmental needs but also that this information comes from several very different perspectives and, as such, is of a higher quality than supervisory ratings alone. Leaders are not likely to exert the effort required to change unless they understand how their behaviour both appears to, and does, affect others at all levels. Specific information from colleagues and subordinates – and, sometimes, external stakeholders – can provide compelling evidence of the need for change in some of those behaviours, as well as explain many unresolved difficulties in the workplace. The use of 360-degree feedback, then, assumes that leaders will better understand how others view them (ie increase their self-awareness) and therefore develop a more accurate sense of goal accomplishment and self-competence.

More than this, it's important to understand that *alignment between self and others' perceptions is a developmental goal in itself*. Research has consistently shown that when leaders' own and others' ratings are in agreement, these leaders tend to be high performers. However, when there are discrepancies between leaders' own and others' ratings, performance is typically lower³. This is the case both when the leader gives himself or herself higher ratings than others do, and when others' ratings are higher than a leader's self-ratings.

On the other hand, larger discrepancies between leaders' own and others' ratings lead to greater improvements in performance over time. In line with this, when leaders' own ratings and those of others tend to be in agreement, improvements in performance over time are much smaller or negligible.

The predictive power of personality

Researchers have expended a lot of effort examining how and why ratings from different sources disagree. The value of this is that by understanding the cause of disagreement between 'self' and 'other' ratings in multisource feedback systems, we can target our developmental efforts to be most effective. One model of rater agreement proposed individual characteristics as one of five influences on self and others' ratings. In other words, specific individual characteristics of the leader can influence his or her self-ratings and/or influence the ratings of others working with him or her, leading to the self/other rating discrepancy.

² The way an individual's scores are made meaningful is by taking the raw scores, which have no context by themselves, and comparing them with a normally distributed comparison group (a norm group) as a benchmark. Only when scores are viewed in the context of how other people score do they make sense.

³ Church, 1997; Van Velsor, Taylor & Leslie, 1993

For example, the gender of the leader has been found to influence others' ratings: 'others' rated women more highly than men. Age also influences self/other agreement, in that older managers tend to over-estimate their performance more often than do younger managers.

Early research showed that personality factors, such as internal locus of control (the belief that we have control of events in our life) and introversion, are related to self/other rater agreement. Recent studies have found, too, that a variety of personality factors are predictive of self/other rater agreement⁴.

However, the personality factors found to be predictive of self/other rating discrepancies vary depending on which rater group we consider. For example, personality factors such as dominance and privateness influenced rating discrepancies between the leader and his or her supervisor, while characteristics such as dominance, social presence, the ability to create a good impression, and communality predicted discrepancies between leaders' own ratings and those of his or her peer group. Finally, social presence and the ability to create a good impression were significant predictors of discrepancies between a leader's own and subordinates' ratings.

Personality and leader self-awareness

Research conducted by OPP in partnership with the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) examined the extent to which the 16PF[®] Fifth Edition Primary Factors influenced self-awareness in leaders. The study was based on responses to the 16PF questionnaire and the Benchmarks Survey from 279 managers who participated in leadership development programmes between April and December 2006.

The 16PF questionnaire is an empirically based, well-established measure that assesses the essential elements – traits – of normal personality. The Benchmarks Survey is a multisource rating assessment focusing on the leadership skills critical for success. The managers in this study comprised a diverse group from 240 organisations spanning 14 industries (eg finance, health, manufacturing) in the US. The group was also diverse in terms of formal leadership responsibility, with around one-quarter at Executive Level or higher, half in Upper Middle Management (department heads, plant managers etc) and one-quarter at Middle Management level.

A common barrier to successful leadership development is a lack of motivation to change, which, when absent, undermines return on investment as well as organisational effectiveness. The process of '360' feedback aims to maximise this motivation because it comes at individual assessment from so many angles, at least one of which typically resonates with the leader.

In this context, knowing that different personality characteristics influence the likelihood of discrepancies between a leader's own perceptions and those of specific other stakeholder groups can be a useful point on which to start a discussion. Where others' ratings are lower than a leader's own, it allows the leader to acknowledge the differences without seeing him/herself as either 'all bad' or deficient in some way. It also gives a coach the basis for supporting the leader as they move from denial – internally invalidating the feedback – to acceptance, to integrating it into their commitments to development.

It is not surprising, then, that the personality characteristics of the leader influence how far others' perceptions match their own, and that this depends on the raters' relationship to the leader. Indeed, given the multiple perspectives, agendas and goals of the stakeholders described above, we should expect this to be the case. Our expectations are in line with the results, as this complex pattern of relationships was observed in the current sample. In other words, the particular personality attributes of the leaders in our sample determined how well aligned others' perceptions were with the leaders' own self-assessment. The deeper insight, however, is that this match or discrepancy in each case did indeed depend on the relationship of the rater to the leader (supervisor, peer or direct report).

Unlocking discrepancies in perception – and leadership potential

In our research, there were larger discrepancies between self and peer ratings for managers who were group-oriented, affiliative and team players (*left-hand, or 'low', scores on the 16PF Primary Factor Self-Reliance*) in relation to listening, building consensus and influencing others (*leadership competencies on the Benchmarks 360 instrument*). These managers see themselves as participative by nature and therefore may rate themselves very highly on this leadership dimension – tending, in fact, to over-estimate their abilities in this area relative to their peers' perceptions.

In development discussions, the coach can use this opportunity to invite the leader to reflect on situations in which collaborative influencing was required and outcomes fell short of those the leader had anticipated. He or

⁴ Brutus, Fleenor & McCauley, 1999; Fletcher & Baldry, 2000

she could be encouraged to identify processes and stakeholders that merit greater and more visible consultation, and to focus on developing their ability to listen, rather than waiting to talk.

We also saw high self/peer rating discrepancies around decision-making under pressure and developing solutions to complex strategic problems in managers who were ideas-oriented, imaginative and creative (*right-hand, or 'high', scores on the 16PF Primary Factor Abstractedness*). Although these managers may generate new ideas or solutions to problems, peers may view the absent-mindedness associated with very high scorers on the Abstractedness factor as representing a tendency to neglect practical issues. Peers judge this behaviour as detrimental to strategic thinking and problem-solving, and thus award lowered ratings – leading to higher rating discrepancies.

It's the coach's job to help the leader find ways of anchoring his or her decisions in data and evidence, and of seeking out those with relevant, practical experience and insight to contribute to them. He or she needs to get into the habit of testing tactical decisions against concrete data – and following through with actions that transparently reflect this – before moving on to fusing these skills with their existing approach to bigger picture issues.

Research revealed discrepancies between leaders' own and supervisors' ratings for managers who were less forceful and more cooperative (*'low' scores on the 16PF Primary Factor Dominance*) around listening, building consensus and influencing others. These managers probably felt they led with a participatory style and thus rated themselves higher on this dimension, relative to how their supervisors perceived their leadership style.

Coaching has an important role in helping managers who are less naturally dominant exert influence and build consensus. This is, to some extent, about making the leader aware that being amenable does not necessarily mean that he or she is better at building consensus; such leaders are, perhaps, not dominant enough to influence others, but not sufficiently self-aware to notice it. Coaching can help them to appreciate that neither listening, consensus-building nor influencing are passive, but rather need to be planned, proactive and purposeful.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, managers who were reactive and emotionally changeable (*'low' scores on the 16PF Primary Factor Emotional Stability*) were subject to larger discrepancies between self-ratings and supervisor ratings for decision-making under pressure and developing solutions to complex strategic problems. Supervisors observed that these managers did not function well under pressure and thus rated less emotionally stable managers more harshly on these important leadership skills.

One of coaching's greatest contributions in this area can be to help leaders build both their confidence and their support network so that they become more resilient. In helping these leaders recognise how an apparently emotional response affects their credibility, a coach can also guide them towards stress identification and management strategies that will help their reputation and their effectiveness under pressure.

Our research revealed larger discrepancies between self and supervisor ratings for managers who were cooperative and deferential (*'low' scores on the 16PF Primary Factor Dominance*), and restrained and serious (*'low' scores on the 16PF Primary Factor Liveliness*), on behaviors related to relationship building, negotiation and cooperation across reporting lines. Although lower scores on Dominance are related to cooperation, essential to building relationships, the lower scores on Liveliness could depict a leader as being uninterested in others – as a result of their lower evident social energy and lack of spontaneity – or potentially lacking in dynamism.

Successful leaders are often vocal, communicative and expressive. Where a leader's liveliness is lower than that of most people, development that focuses on how to project and magnify his or her communication style can make a difference. The leader needs to reflect that 'low' Dominance and 'low' Liveliness can potentially create an impression of indifference and phlegmatism.

Coaching can also help the leader learn to deploy other attributes in a compensatory way – for example, if a leader is 'high' on Warmth or Social Boldness – to improve perceptions of social energy and 'presence'. It can also teach the leader to be more vocal and verbally engaged in discussions, which can go some way toward managing impressions more accurately.

Using *all* the data to drive development

So what does this research tell us? Organisations struggle to effectively equip managers for success in key leadership roles, although they generally do well in providing new or rising leaders with an opportunity to deepen self-awareness. In this context, knowledge of how individual characteristics can influence the results emerging from multisource feedback systems can help both to inform the feedback process and to improve the developmental experience for leaders.

Another important outcome of this research is that it offers us greater insight into the precise characteristics associated with self-awareness. Knowing how personality is related to likely discrepancies between self and others' perceptions can help leaders and executive coaches to understand where perceptual differences stem from and then to use this information to shape a high-impact development plan.

Some leaders participating in a development programme may see such discrepancies as proof that the feedback they are receiving is not valid. However, there is no objective basis for truth when dealing with the perceptions of others. To coin a phrase, 'perception is reality' in terms of daily working life. People act on their perceptions, and any disagreements in these only serve to highlight the need to tailor our communication style for different stakeholders.

Results of personality assessments enrich the insight provided by 360-degree feedback in many ways, but also help the coach (and, potentially, the line manager) to gauge a leader's likely level of self-awareness. When the 16PF and Benchmarks instruments are used in conjunction, the personality characteristics of the leader shed light on why the leader may see him or herself differently than various stakeholders in the organisation do.

The results of this collaborative study indicate that certain personality characteristics are associated with accurate self-evaluations about leadership style. However, personality is only one of many influences on a leader's degree of self-awareness. Other factors also influence realistic self-appraisals in a leadership role, including timely feedback on performance, organisational values and other contextual factors (such as education level, managerial experience, number of employees supervised). To achieve maximum benefit from any investment in development, the leader's development plan should take into account as many of these influences as possible and consider how they are operating in conjunction with each other.

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