

Facing up to blind-spots

Written by Sarah Cook and Steve Macaulay

Sarah Cook and Steve Macaulay explain how L&D can help decision-makers with blind-spots

How confident are you in the quality of the decisions you take? If the answer is 'very confident', then it could be that you are not fully facing up to some blind-spots in your decision-making. Make no mistake, identifying, examining and taking action on your blind-spots is of enormous significance.

At a personal level, it could be a block on future career progress; at a team level it could mean whole groups of people could be underperforming and, at an organisational level, the consequences are equally serious.

This brief introduction to blind-spots is intended to make clear how important it is to home in on cloudy and hidden areas at an individual, team and organisational level.

The consequences of blind-spots

The consequences of failing to address blindspots could be considerable. Take a current organisational example of global retailer, Tesco.

Until recently, it was supremely confident in its chosen path and its ability to make the right decisions. Several profit warnings in a row and a new chief executive later, this avalanche of bad news has brought the company to a new low and its reputation is in doubt. It appears it had significantly underestimated the changes in the marketplace that had taken place and as a result its whole decision-making process and strategy was seen to be flawed. The significance of this has been huge and demonstrates the consequences of organisational and leadership blind-spots. Had the company and its top team identified sooner that it needed to change its strategy, then possibly its whole future course, involving redundancies and closures, would have been different.

Organisational blind-spots

This is just one example from an organisational leadership context. Does your organisation successfully read the macro and micro environment and proactively create and follow through effective strategies? Or does it fail to see some significant and vital trends, which could contain the seeds of potential problems in the future?

Most of us have an in-built bias which seeks to reinforce the status quo and to shut out alarm bells or contradictory information. A recent report by Sir Robert Francis¹ into NHS whistleblowers suggests that it is commonplace for managers and colleagues to make life

very difficult for people who stand up and criticise or question decisions. The NHS report spells out the consequences of this, with colleagues being ignored, cold shouldered or passed over for promotion, thus making it very difficult for anybody to speak out. The report suggests institutional ways to overcome this:

- culture change
- improved handling of cases
- measures to support good practice
- protecting vulnerable groups
- extending the legal protection.

It is clear such behaviour is very deep-seated within many organisations generally, not just the NHS. It is therefore worthwhile picking out some suggestions from the report about creating a culture of recognising and valuing contributions, therefore making it easier to be open about blind-spots.

Creating a culture of recognising and valuing all contributions

The report reminds us of good practice in creating an open culture. In particular it says:

“Culture and behaviours in an organisation is influenced by the signals the leadership sends about what it values.”

It makes clear that leaders in an organisation must demonstrate the value of speaking up and making contributions to improving the organisation. At board level, it says that progress in pushing forward and maintaining culture change must be reviewed at regular intervals.

Examples of recognising and valuing staff who speak up

The report lists some examples of best practice:

- Managers at meetings visibly encouraging people to speak up
- Notices posted which summarise improvements made as a result of employees raising issues
- Articles in in-house newsletters demonstrate how a concern was raised and the results of it, including how the learning had been shared
- Examples of raising concerns built into recruitment, induction and appraisal processes
- Senior managers personally ringing up to say thank you to someone who had raised an issue.

When Honda first went to America to build motor vehicles, it took an extraordinary step: it decided to build a factory in Lincoln, a small town in the South, without any preconception about what should be the perfect assembly manufacturing process. Instead, it sought out the views of everybody concerned and weighed them against what it knew elsewhere and the result was quite a different approach to the traditional Detroit Big Three company approach. It has continued in this manner to improve and innovate through listening and taking on board improvements and new ideas.

How many companies would be bold enough to adopt such an approach? Very few, because preconceived blind-spots, coupled with fear of the risks involved in going down completely new paths, shut out the possibility of radical new ideas.

Team blind-spots

Work teams can easily fail to give each team member a proper hearing, which can lead to not everyone pulling in the same direction. Sometimes apparent team agreement, with people not speaking out, masks poor decisions. Shortage of time is no excuse – in the end, engagement will lead to greater effectiveness for the group as a whole.

We worked with one contact centre team who worked together for some time. Their work environment was friendly and collegiate and their work patterns had not changed for the past three years. The team had built up a good reputation internally.

However, they failed to regularly seek feedback from their external customers, whose profile had been changing over the years. Subsequently, they were very surprised to discover that external customers had become lukewarm about what the department had to offer and that when more competition entered the marketplace, many customers failed to renew their contracts. The team's complacency and lack of response to changing customer needs was a blind-spot which was only discovered very late on, with damaging consequences.

What are common personal blind-spots?

Many people experience blind-spots in a variety of areas.

Financial matters

Some people find financial matters hard to grasp and they will say things like "I leave that sort of thing to the accountants." Yet in doing so they run the risk of poor advice or just failing to understand the consequences of important decisions. Paul Flowers headed up the Co-operative Group at a time when it took what turned out to be a series of highly risky financial decisions which led to an enormous crisis in the business. What caught the headlines was his own personal inappropriate behaviour that meant he was forced to resign. Yet in many ways, at least as shocking was that he appeared to have little or no understanding of corporate finances. Decisions were taken which drained away the group's resources at an alarming rate and put what had been a healthy balance sheet into one that seriously threatened the future of the organisation.

People and emotional issues

Some managers seem to be blind to the consequences of their actions on people who are affected. They take decisions oblivious of their impact on others and are unaware of the reactions and signals which suggest they ought to rethink what they are doing. Some people seem to have a shutter which comes down when they should be observing undercurrents, nuances, verbal and non-verbal signals such as questioning, looks of disquiet, distress or even anger. This can lead to a situation escalating and which can become more and more damaging when it could have been headed off earlier.

Communication

Few would dispute that regular communication in an organisation is a must, yet how often do employee surveys come up with the conclusion that communication is absent, inadequate or patchy? Good communication is two-way, but good, attentive listening is often absent. The result is that people feel left out, sometimes resentful and particularly their ideas and contributions are missed. In our experience leaders tend to believe they listen: their followers don't rate them as such.

Innovation and new ideas

All organisations must be alert to the need for changes, both big and small. Very few organisations do not profess these days to operate on a policy of continuous improvement. Innovation is often said to be at the heart of what they do. Yet time and time again organisations squash new ideas. They fail to spot changes and nurture innovation and ideas and to develop them. As a consequence, many large organisations ossify and eventually decline. Previously successful businesses start to founder. We have already looked at one example of the big supermarkets in UK who are now facing up to the difficulties of trying to adapt in the face of considerable change.

Yet decline is certainly not inevitable – finding and overcoming blind-spots and seizing opportunities is the only way to succeed and secure a sustainable future. This must involve opening oneself up to new horizons and on the way giving up old ideas and taking on board new ways. Of course this is risky, but this more open-minded approach faces up to realities in time to take anticipatory action.

Lack of customer awareness

An inward looking approach is common in many big and medium sized organisations. It is all too easy for organisations and individuals to confine their attention to the closed boundaries of their organisation. This can lead to people ignoring an important and necessary outer world, the world of the customer. Many of the energy companies in the UK are classic examples that seem to have lost their ability to deal with the customer promptly and with sensitivity because they fail to put themselves in the customer's shoes and respond to their issues, even though they are the lifeblood of the organisation.

Ways to reduce the damaging effects of any blind-spots

You can lift your sights beyond blind-spots. Here are a few development strategies:

1. Consciously broaden your horizons:

- Be aware of the context in which your organisation operates: the political, economic, social and technological trends which impact your business long term
- Read analysts' reports
- Find out more about competitors
- Personally visit customers.

2. Challenge your thinking:

- Undertake 360 degree feedback
- Seek out new perspectives
- Regularly question whether you or your organisation has got stuck in a rut.

3. Focus on improving your skills to look beneath the surface:

- Learn more about ways to develop emotional intelligence
- Learn to actively listen and act on the results
- Improve your politics of influence.

4. Seek out trusted second opinions:

- Don't isolate yourself

- Get second opinions
- Be wary of only seeking confirming views.

5. Make a point of encouraging diversity:

- Recruit outside the known network
- Resist the temptation to dismiss the unconventional
- Eliminate look-alike, comfortable old boy networks.

The L&D response to tackling blind-spots

An important remit for L&D is to raise awareness and set a development agenda for improvement and change at every level. At an individual level by providing tools to diagnose and plan actions; building skills in key areas, such as interpersonal skills, better listening and emotional intelligence.

At team level – provide accessible diagnosis of team effectiveness, help raise awareness of unspoken and undealt-with issues. While at an organisational level facilitate a dialogue about the culture, its strengths and weaknesses and necessary changes.

It will be no easy matter for L&D professionals to help their organisation and its individuals to face up to their blind-spots. Often, people will become very defensive and will need to be dealt with using skill and empathy.

You would do well to start by assessing your own blind-spots and what you should do to correct them. You could usefully go on to look at common blind-spot areas in your organisation, particularly at a leadership level. However difficult to raise, the benefits outweigh the undoubted risks and lead to improvements in handling today's complex world, provide a better response to change and healthier decisions by taking account of all factors.

The complexities of a fast-changing world mean decisions are having greater and far-reaching consequences. L&D needs to rise to the challenges posed in helping decision-makers to deal with difficult areas, and ultimately to contribute to assisting the organisation to thrive and survive today and in the future.

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