

# RESOURCE A

## BLINDSPOT Q&A

1. How do you define blindspots?

Blindspots are unrecognized weaknesses or threats that can harm a leader and his or her company.

2. Why don't you view unrecognized strengths and opportunities as being blindspots?

Leaders sometimes fail to leverage their strengths or recognize opportunities in their organizations and markets; that said, the most succinct way to view blindspots is in terms of the weaknesses and threats that can derail a leader.

3. What is the difference between a blindspot and a black swan event?

A black swan event is one that can't be predicted in advance, such as the rise of the Internet. Blindspots, in contrast, are knowable weaknesses or threats. They either exist today or can be anticipated if one looks for them.

4. Do all leaders have blindspots of some type?

T. E. Lawrence observed that all people dream, but not equally. Similarly, all leaders have blindspots, but not equally. A number of factors produce blindspots, and a key takeaway from this book is that no one escapes unscathed.

5. Are there different degrees of blindness?

Yes. If we take the analogy of actual blindness, there are those who are completely blind and those with varying levels of visual impairment. Likewise, there are times when leaders may be completely blindsided by a weakness or threat that they had no awareness of, and there are other times when they may be partially aware of a weakness or threat but fail to understand its potential impact.

6. What are the different types of blindspots?

We often think of blindspots in terms of a leader's self-perceptions and, in particular, the impact of his or her behavior. For example, a leader with an authoritarian style may believe she is being inclusive and may not realize that her style has the consequence of undermining the accountability of her team members (as they know

that key decisions will ultimately be made by her). However, blindspots also exist in relation to the ways in which a leader views his or her team, organization, and markets. Blindspots in these other areas are equally if not more important in some situations.

7. You suggest that blindspots can be positive? How so?

Most people believe that awareness is always a positive and good thing—that it is productive to confront reality in all situations. This view is true in that denial of the “real deal” can have devastating consequences for both a leader and his or her organization. However, it is false in that awareness can erode a leader’s confidence and make it harder to inspire others. What you don’t know can hurt you. What you do know can hurt you.

8. How can someone simultaneously both know and not know of a weakness or threat?

This is one of the most interesting qualities of blindspots. While knowing and not knowing appears to be logically impossible, it does occur. A leader can know that meeting an aggressive product launch schedule will be very challenging, but he convinces himself, and others, that it can be done. He knows there are a myriad of potential obstacles but blocks them from awareness and pushes ahead.

9. What is the *optimal margin of illusion*?

Research shows that being slightly more positive than you should be is an adaptive trait in motivating productive action. The trick lies in not slipping from this optimal state into being delusional—that is, allowing the gap between your beliefs and reality to become excessive.

10. What is the difference between productive and unproductive blindspots?

Productive blindspots give you and others the confidence and motivation needed to achieve great things without excessive risk. Unproductive blindspots expose you and others to potentially fatal risks. The art of living with blindspots is managing the line between the two.

11. Why do you say that the greater the leader, the greater the potential for blindspots?

Research indicates that self-awareness, all things being equal, is correlated with effectiveness. That said, there are exceptions. Michael Maccoby coined the term *productive narcissist* to describe visionary leaders who are not particularly self-aware but are extraordinarily effective. Leaders, in some situations, need to have a few blindspots.

12. What is the best way to ensure that blindspots don’t harm you?

You need to create mechanisms that surface the blindspots that matter. This is the equivalent of what you find in some new cars that have a blindspot warning system which notifies the driver when another car has entered his or her blindspot (the area

where you don't see another car approaching). Such mechanisms are important for leaders because their own internal warning capabilities always have limitations. So you need to put into place external mechanisms (people, processes, practices) that warn you when your blindspots are potentially dangerous.

13. What is an example of such a mechanism?

One of the best is the talented confidant who knows and respects you—but will tell you when you are failing to see a weakness or threat. The best leaders have different people who act as warning systems in different areas (such as strategy or operations). But you want at least one person who is first among equals in offering feedback across a variety of areas.

14. Why is it easier to see a blindspot in others than in ourselves?

Seeing ourselves accurately is simply very hard for a whole range of reasons. In part, we become protective when it comes to looking at our own shortcomings and are thus more likely to distort what we see. A myriad of studies show that people consistently rate themselves less accurately than others rate them on traits such as intelligence, honesty, and attractiveness. Similar patterns are evident when looking at 360 survey data, where a person's self-ratings are the least accurate on most traits when compared to objective criteria.

15. At the same time, you argue that what others see is not always on the mark. Why can it be hard for others to identify our blindspots?

This occurs for at least three reasons. First, others may not see you in a variety of situations and thus may have less accurate information about you than you have about yourself. Second, others don't have direct access to your "internal" information, things about yourself that you may understand better than any outsider—such as your motives. Third, blindspots don't exist just in the person being observed. They may be evident in other individuals and groups. For example, consider the female executive who is told that she is being too aggressive. In reality, she is being appropriately assertive, and the problem is not her behavior but the expectations of others regarding female leaders. What others observe about you sometimes says more about them than you. Thus, leaders need to understand how they are perceived and their impact and then determine if change is needed.

16. Why do you describe mistakes as the "royal road" to understanding blindspots?

Mistakes occur for a variety of reasons. But in some cases they happen because you don't recognize a weakness or threat that is significant. This is particularly likely to be true when you repeat a mistake in different situations. Such repeated missteps are a red flag pointing to a blindspot that needs to be examined. Disappointments can also be helpful in surfacing blindspots. For instance, if you are passed over for a promotion that you think you deserve, that might be a sign that you lack awareness of a significant weakness in your leadership capabilities

or behavior. These situations, painful as they are, are useful in learning about your blindspots.

17. Are there any unintended consequences in focusing on your blindspots?

It can result in you becoming less trusting of your own instincts and, as a result, more tentative. For instance, a leader who is told that he dominates team discussions may become a passive observer in team meetings and question when he should voice his point of view. I don't see this as a major issue, however, as most leaders are more at risk of ignoring blindspots than overreacting to them.

18. What is the best way to provide feedback regarding a blindspot that you see in another person?

Carefully. Blindspots are often closely tied to a leader's strengths and, more generally, his or her self-concept. You should not assume that people will respond positively when you point out, even with the best of intentions, their blindspots. The key is to be skillful in how you provide feedback. It also helps, when possible, to have built a relationship based on trust that can withstand giving such feedback.

19. What does being "skillful" involve when one is giving feedback on a blindspot?

First, determine whether the blindspot you see is truly important to the success of the leader or the organization. If not, let it go. Second, determine the best time and place to discuss it. Third, come with specific examples of the weakness you see or data on the threat that is being ignored. Finally, offer your feedback as something for a leader to consider—he or she owns the decision to change or not.

20. Why is curiosity so important in managing blindspots?

Leaders who are curious are more likely to take feedback and explore possibilities, including what they don't know about themselves, as well as their teams, organizations, and markets. As a result, they are better able to grow into their roles and are more agile in adapting to changing conditions. In contrast, those who are dead certain about their beliefs and plans have an increased risk of making major mistakes because they push ahead in the face of weaknesses or threats they don't see or fully understand. You don't need to look far to identify political and business leaders who were "often wrong but never in doubt."

21. What do you see as the key takeaways from the book?

- All leaders have blindspots because of a range of psychological and organizational factors. Realizing that you are not the exception is an important insight.
- Some blindspots are destructive and some are adaptive. The skill is knowing which require your attention and which are better left alone.
- You want to surround yourself with people, processes, and practices to surface the blindspots that have the potential to derail you and your firm.