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STRATEGIES

Business leaders must watch out for blind spots

Martha Stewart took an insider's tip and sold stock to prevent a \$51,000 loss. That decision cost her two years of painful public scrutiny, massive legal bills, five months in jail and hundreds of millions of dollars of net worth.

Not to be outdone, former Qwest CEO Joe Nacchio committed illegal insider trading that landed him a lengthy jail sentence.

Both decisions are examples of operating from a personal blind spot. In the business world, leaders act out their blind spots every day. The consequences aren't always as public as these examples, but they can be just as harmful.



MANAGEMENT

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Blind-spot behaviors are unconscious, negative actions often stimulated by external events. Their root causes are unresolved emotions and deep-seated beliefs based on historical events or relationships. They are so deeply ingrained that they're invisible to the person exhibiting them. Common examples in business are:

- A division president who yells so loudly when things get tense that his staff runs for cover.
- A human resources director who immediately resorts to blame and finger-pointing when someone notes a team mistake.
- A plant manager who notices critical problems but looks the other way because she doesn't want to make anyone uncomfortable.
- A line supervisor who coddles employees instead of correcting them, or joins them in blaming "higher-ups" for an unpopular new policy.

At every level, blind-spot behavior causes productivity to slow down, stop or take a bad turn. It leads to a loss of credibility for the person performing the behavior and to confusion, stress and mindless compliance from the people receiving it. Mediocre results in business often are caused by personal, team or corporate blind spots.

The troubling aspect of blind spot behaviors is that everyone except the person with blind-

ers can see them as they're acted out, knows something is wrong, but rarely speaks up to help the other person change the behavior. Complicity in this silence can be so formalized that some companies give it a nickname, such as "The Nod."

The good news is that blind spots can be dealt with effectively if people are open to giving and receiving feedback. Feedback can neutralize blind spots and replace them with new, more effective behaviors.

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Blind spots are like rumors — as soon as they're brought to light, and talked about openly and respectfully, they begin to lose power, weight and momentum.

Giving feedback doesn't require expertise in the other person's subject area. Feedback's main purpose is to let another person know how their communication or actions affected you.

It's simple, but it requires courage to respectfully point out ineffective behavior and talk about how it affects you without blame or aggression. People are often too polite to tell a manager or peer the truth of how he or she came across. The result is that the person has no idea how their message or actions have been received.

Feedback is the fastest way to reduce the lag time and unsatisfactory results of ineffective behaviors. Some tips for giving feedback are:

- Don't just launch into the conversation. Give the receiver some breathing room: "I noticed something troubling that involved you at our meeting yesterday. I want to talk to you about it. Is this a good time to do that?"
- Talk about the impact of the behavior on you with directness and respect. By definition, a blind spot is something the person doesn't see clearly and is likely to be too sensitive or

defensive to discuss.

Talking about how you experienced the behavior raises your odds of being heard: "I know that you are upset about our progress on the project, but from my perspective, you got very quiet during the meeting yesterday. I got worried that you had important things to say that you weren't saying."

- Use open-ended, emotionally neutral questions. This invites the other person to be honest and discover for themselves the impact of their actions: "Do you agree that you got quiet? Can you tell me what was going on for you?"

- Give the person receiving your feedback plenty of room. Allow them to ask you questions and express their opinion. Unconscious negative behavior requires some time to talk through.

The best way to learn to give feedback is to receive it yourself. Ask for it directly. Remember that most people aren't accustomed to being frank, so make it safe for them to speak openly. Assure them that you really want to hear what they have to say. Be very specific about the feedback you want. Promise them that they don't need to worry about hurting your feelings.

Some tips for receiving feedback are:

- Resist the desire to push back or argue. Even if you disagree, listen for the kernel of truth. Don't dish it out, just take it.
- The best response to feedback is "thank you." Even if you find it uncomfortable or difficult to hear, engage in a dialogue that makes it easy for people to give you feedback. Thank them for taking the risk of talking to you about a sensitive subject.

- You don't have to like it or agree with it. Listening to someone's feedback doesn't mean you have to agree with it. Relationships are built when you demonstrate that you're willing to listen.

Blind spots can trip up even the most successful business leaders. Make sure you don't compound the problem by failing to listen to the feedback that can help you see the light.

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