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# **SELF-AWARENESS: THE FIRST STEP IN DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS**

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Recently I was watching a professional athlete being interviewed on television, and during the course of the interview he must have said the words, "you know," about three times every fifteen seconds. I wondered why he did this, and as I continued to watch the interview I finally realized that he didn't know he was doing it. It was an unconscious habit that he had picked up.

Like this athlete, we all have likely picked up managerial habits that others may find annoying, silly or ineffective that we are completely unaware of and have become second nature to us. Also, because as managers we are in a position of power, subordinates and peer managers are often unwilling to give point out these ineffective habits to us for fear of offending us. So, we walk around doing things that annoy others or are counterproductive because no one gives us feedback about what we are doing either because they simply do not want to hurt our feelings or risk our wrath.

Self-awareness is an important leadership skill (Whetten & Cameron, 2005). You cannot begin to improve yourself as a leader if you don't know what you need to improve upon. (Mendenhall, et. al., 2013) Successful leaders know what their strengths and weaknesses are and thus they have very few "leadership blind spots." And because they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, they are better able to use their strengths and to compensate in other ways in those areas in which they are weak. But if you are not aware of your weaknesses you cannot compensate for them – you will inevitably blunder into a situation and not handle it well and create problems for your staff.

So, how can you become aware of your weaknesses? First, don't get depressed due to the fact that you may have weaknesses. No one is a perfect leader. President Obama is not a perfect president and no one is a perfect CEO or manager or coach or teacher or parent. We all have areas of weakness, but we also all have strengths that carry us through hard times and that benefit others in our daily interaction with them. But no one is perfect. So, lesson number one in self-awareness is: "Admit you have weaknesses and join the rest of the human race."

Next, you have to find out what those weaknesses are. Introspection helps, but it is not enough. It is difficult to analyze yourself, for often we are poor observers of our own behavior. One good starting point to enhance your self-awareness is to make use of leadership and managerial assessments and inventories like the LPI, DDI, or DISC (McCarthy, 2008). These and others like them can be very helpful, and you can probably access them through your

company. Even after reading the results of these assessments, however, it is usually necessary to get specific feedback via 360 feedback instruments or simply from people who know you well and whom you trust.

Asking for feedback requires a certain measure of humility. When you ask your close friends if there is anything you do that may annoy people or be counterproductive to productivity, tell them to take some time to think about it first and to get back to you in a week or two. It is unfair to expect thoughtful feedback on the spot. So, lesson number two is: "Swallow your pride and ask for feedback."

When your friend gives you the feedback, follow lesson number three: "Listen, and don't interrupt." You will find yourself not wanting to remain quiet, but desiring to explain, justify, and defend the behaviors that your friend describes as being dysfunctional. Again, you must be humble enough to listen. Just listen. Be sure to express your gratitude to the person. Then, go home and think about what he/she told you. If you have asked two or three or four friends for their input, take what they said and see if there is a pattern, a consistency in their feedback. After hearing what they have to say is the time for analysis and introspection and the creation of a personal development plan to adjust your behavior (Mendenhall, et. al., 2013).

I have done this and found that it works. When friends have pointed out to me my blind spots, I have found that often the behaviors are easily changed. Sometimes the change has required more effort, because the behavior itself was deeply imbedded in a value that I held important. Finally, a word to the wise: this works not only in a job setting, but also in family settings too. Our spouses and children are often excellent sources of feedback that will help us grow and develop.

## REFERENCES

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