Awareness Comes Before Competency

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2007, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Saturday, Nov. 10, 2007

Awareness comes before competency. That's not only true in the dictionary. I find it to be a fundamental requirement when working to build skills in leaders.

Forward-looking leaders want to improve the leadership skills of those under their authority. Some have tried unsuccessfully. Others realize they aren't effective in doing it alone. Some anticipate future growth and want the organization to be prepared to handle the additional demands.

Research indicates that only 10% of leadership development occurs in the classroom, at conferences, and in special team-building events. Another 20% comes from observing and emulating the behaviors and thought processes of role models and mentors. A whopping 70% of leadership development occurs right on the job. However, that development only occurs if the individual has a willingness to experiment with some different approaches. For most individuals, that requires some changes in perspective.

If new insights are not established, there is usually little motivation to do something different in building skills. Individuals "who don't know and don't know that they don't know" are usually unwilling to put much effort into improving. Those individuals are both **unaware and incompetent**.

You may immediately think of the unemployed or under-employed. However, otherwise capable leaders are sometimes victims of deception in specific skill areas, unaware of their ignorance. Your initial challenge is to raise their awareness (or your own), helping them see the huge opportunity they have for making enhancements.

If you successfully stimulate some paradigm shifts, the person moves quickly to the **partially aware yet incompetent** category. These individuals have new insights into the potential contributions they could be making. For most, this new hunger stimulates a desire to learn and improve. They realize that acquiring new leadership skills will be good for them, their organization, and their customers.

Individuals who seek education and practice new skills move slowly into the **partially aware and competent** category. They are capable and can explain what they do to achieve an outcome. They make good role models—that is, you can learn from them by watching what they do. They also make good mentors. When asked why they choose particular behaviors—and how to execute them-- they can provide helpful, descriptive explanations.

The final category includes individuals who are comfortable with their current capabilities, yet often have a great capacity for performance increases. They are **competent yet unaware**. Some of these individuals are blessed with inherent talents, such as gifted athletes or "natural-born leaders."

These individuals may be good role models, but they typically make poor mentors. They have difficulty explaining <u>why</u> and <u>how</u> they do what they do. This limits their ability to build the capacity of their organizations. Failing to realize the need for future leaders is a significant blind spot.

So how can you, a leader in your organization, build your organization's capacity for the future?
- Increase the value placed on "leadership development" in your organization.
- Realize that you have blind spots. Welcome and encourage feedback, so that you are more aware of your opportunities for improvement.
- Build a personal leadership development plan and share it with those you influence.
- Create an environment that fosters self-awareness. Encourage new insights by providing feedback to individuals and offering group sessions to reflect on recent victories and losses.
- Personally and organizationally, welcome and celebrate paradigm shifts.

Has your organization (or have you personally) become satisfied with "good enough"? Becoming a leader of leaders requires a major paradigm shift. When you embrace intentional leadership development, for yourself and the individuals you influence, opportunities unfold before you!