

Leadership Improvement: Raising Your Awareness

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Do you want to enhance the level of leadership competency in your organization? I've learned that before an individual will commit to pursuing new skills, he or she must first be aware of how those capabilities will help. Put bluntly, the developing leader must understand, "What's in it for me?"

My clients love to tell me of new insights they experience. I smile when I hear them, as each one represents a stepping stone of growth.

Paradigm shift. A paradigm is a perception, a way of "seeing" or thinking about a given situation. A change in that outlook results in "seeing" the situation differently. An expression of surprise often accompanies a paradigm shift, because the situation is understood in a new, fresh way.

Your paradigms are never totally accurate. They are influenced by filters such as your history, your habits and tendencies, your motives, and your preconceived beliefs about what is and what should be. The "Aha" that accompanies most paradigm shifts is an expression of satisfaction at having a new outlook that you feel is closer to the truth.

Once you "see" a situation differently, you may choose new behaviors. When you take different actions, you usually experience different outcomes. Since my clients want to experience better results, they usually find relevant paradigm shifts very beneficial.

Feedback. Leadership development authorities advocate that if you want to improve, seek lots of feedback. That's because you are often deceived regarding the effect you have on others.

You go through life believing that what you intend with your actions is what actually happens. Much of the time, however, you are wrong. The other person knows fully what the effect of your behavior was, but does not know your intent.

If what was experienced felt offensive or hurtful, the presumption is that you intended it to be hurtful. Yet you are headed off to your next activity, oblivious to the fact that you've damaged your relationship with that individual.

When told of what effect your behavior actually had, you are usually surprised. You may respond with "Oh, I'm sorry, that's not what I meant!" If you focus on justifying what you did rather than listening for the potential insight, you've just lost the opportunity to experience a new awareness.

For example, a leader rated himself strong in the attribute of "approachability." His direct reports told me independently that they have difficulty being open and comfortable with him. When I shared this information with the leader, he was surprised, clearly unaware of his impact. Either no one had ever given him that feedback, or he had discounted previous attempts!

Just noticing. "You can observe a lot just by watching." So noted Yogi Berra, famous not only as a New York Yankees catcher, but also for his unique style in expressing the obvious.

Paying attention to your surroundings is simple, but it may not be easy. Although information is constantly bombarding your senses, your brain filters much of it out so that you can focus on what you consider important in the moment.

To practice "noticing," take a moment to just be aware of your posture, the feel of your clothing on your skin, and the presence of background noise. "Noticing" is not complex, yet we tend to jump to analyzing or understanding before we are fully aware of our here-and-now experience.

Okay--so you realize you can raise your awareness by just noticing, by receiving feedback, and by experiencing a paradigm shift. What makes new insights so valuable? I'll address next week the importance of "awareness" in building new skills.

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