A Leader's Periodic Self-Evaluation

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Healthy relationships with friends have many benefits. One is that they are willing to share resources.

A valued client told me about a Robert S. Kaplan article, "What to Ask the Person in the Mirror," in the January, 2007 "Harvard Business Review." Because of its insights, I share it in this week's column.

Robert Kaplan was a consultant with Goldman-Sachs for 22 years, was on the faculty of the business school at Carnegie-Mellon University for 16 years, and has been on the Harvard Business School faculty since 1984. Kaplan is the author of 13 books, four of which address the use of a "balanced scorecard," a strategic concept Kaplan initiated with co-author David Norton.

Kaplan's article starts this way. "If you are like most successful leaders, you were, in the early stages of your career, given plenty of guidance and support. You were closely monitored, coached, and mentored. But as you moved up the ladder, the sources of honest and useful feedback became fewer, and after a certain point, you were pretty much on your own."

Kaplan advocates that you pause every few months, "and certainly whenever things feel as though they aren't going well, and honestly ask yourself some questions about how you're doing and what you may need to do differently."

I, too, advocate reflecting on the results you've been obtaining and the effectiveness of your actions. It is appropriate to evaluate how you see yourself, your circumstances, and your relationships. Kaplan identifies seven specific areas to investigate, with questions that I am paraphrasing for each.

Vision and priorities. How often and how clearly do I communicate a vision for our organization? Are my employees able to articulate the vision and our three to five priorities for achieving that vision?

Managing time. How am I *really* spending my time? Does it match my key priorities? How are my direct reports spending their time? Do their activities match the key priorities for our organization?

Feedback. How often and how directly do I give feedback to people in my organization? Do five or six people in my organization tell me things I need to hear, even when I may not ask for it or want to hear it?

Succession planning. Have I considered potential successors? Am I developing and coaching my direct reports, giving them challenging assignments? Am I delegating sufficiently? Have I allowed myself to become a decision-making bottleneck?

Evaluation and alignment. Is the design of my organization still aligned with our key success factors? If I had to create my organization from scratch today, how would I design it? If I organized a task force of subordinates to answer these questions, what would their recommendations be?

Leading under pressure. What types of situations create pressure for me? How do I behave when I feel that pressure? Are the signals I'm sending to my subordinates helpful, or are my behaviors inadvertently undermining the success of our organization?

Staying true to self. Does my leadership style reflect who I truly am? Do I assert myself sufficiently, or have I somehow become tentative? Am I too aggressive? Does worry about my next promotion or bonus cause me to hesitate to express my views, or maybe become too demanding?

These few paragraphs merely cover the high spots Kaplan offers. A copy of the article, complete with case studies, is available at https://hbr.org/2007/01/what-to-ask-the-person-in-the-mirror. Or contact me at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com. Or leave a message for me at 770-286-2250.