



TURN YOUR BLIND SPOTS INTO ASSETS

Recognizing how others view you can pave the way for greater career achievements.

By Claudia Shelton

Luke had been a rising star throughout his career, but suddenly after entering a new company, he hit a wall. The company's 360-degree leadership survey results placed him at the bottom of his 12 peers.

In a culture that valued collaboration, his boss was concerned when people who worked with Luke said

they didn't trust him. They found him distant and aloof. Luke was shocked to hear how his co-workers viewed him. In his search for solutions, he turned to a coach, who helped him see his blind spots for the first time. When the survey was repeated a year later, Luke's score jumped to first place—not just on the survey overall—but on almost every question.

SEEING THE POSSIBILITIES

Blind spots are defined as traits we fail to see that get in the way of our goals.

Everyone has them. Stress makes them worse because we become more inflexible in our habits. Blind spots lead us to see ourselves very differently than others see us. For Luke, that disconnect was the reason why no one wanted to follow him.

A positive outlook is absolutely essential for turning a blind spot into an asset. While blind spots can be viewed as “unacknowledged weaknesses” or “cognitive distortions,” which can lead to career derailment, that perspective can undercut the positive attitude

needed to change them. Blind spots must be viewed more broadly, as doors to tremendous possibilities for achievement that we can't see for ourselves.

The key to building this positive perspective is to develop an objective model, which can serve as a focal point for discussion. We communicate judgment in many ways. For example, the simple word "assessment" suggests evaluation. To help someone identify a blind spot, we need to keep the process totally neutral. A single judgmental word or action will shut the individual down, which will delay results.

RECOGNIZING BLIND SPOTS

The most common blind spot does not come from a fault or weakness, but instead from overusing our greatest strength, which happens routinely under stress when we resort to mechanized behavior.

Luke had great analytical strength that led him to think carefully about issues before discussing conclusions with others. However, under stress, Luke relied too heavily on this strength to the point where it became rigid and inflexible. The resulting constant pause and withdrawal from people was seen by others as a sign of distance and untrustworthiness. While Luke believed he was adding value, others perceived this behavior as "being sneaky."

It's difficult to overcome our blind spots. While everybody has them and everybody else sees them, people don't want to talk about them because they don't want to make us angry or hurt our feelings. When they try to tell us about our blind spots we often get defensive, and they back off.

So how did Luke break through these barriers? Through the help of coaching, he identified his greatest strengths and potential blind spots as part of a continuum. Realizing the potential negative impact of his overused strength, Luke was able to see where he needed to throttle back on the analysis to be more effective with people.

Then Luke developed a clear sight plan—no more than two steps done

FIVE COMMON BLIND SPOTS IN THE WORKPLACE

- 1. Misusing strengths.** Many people use a strength too little or too much. For example, you entertain or perform often but are not disciplined enough in your communications.
- 2. Old habits.** We often rely on old behavior that made us successful in the past but is no longer effective. For example, relying on referrals for new business may have worked well for you in the past, but now you may need to supplement them with cold calling and mass emailings.
- 3. Expressing stress.** Your behavior often affects others when you are under stress. For example, you may hand in assignments late, display distracted behavior, or be unapproachable.
- 4. Misreading people.** You may be ignoring nonverbal cues that you give and receive. For example, you display an angry posture unknowingly or you don't see that someone else is truly unhappy.
- 5. Failing to communicate.** We may ignore factors that are important to good communication. For example, we don't listen to others or don't engage them in conversation.

Source: *Blind Spots* (Wiley, May 2007)

consistently over time to turn his blind spots back to assets. His clear sight plan included learning to communicate with others earlier in his thinking process. He also began articulating to others how important time alone was to doing his best work. They learned to understand his point of view and began to see him as thoughtful, not sneaky.

To change our blind spots, we must first identify them with the help of a clear sight plan. While the system at first glance appears deceptively simple, there are several essential principles that we must follow to use the system effectively for our clients and ourselves. **Shift to neutral.** When getting lost on an unknown road, we shift our car engine to neutral and think about what to do next. Beating yourself up for a wrong turn doesn't help you reach your goal. You need to find a simple route to your destination. Adopt a neutral attitude when considering blind spots. If you pre-judge a blind spot as a nega-

tive trait, you make it harder to modify. For example, when Sarah missed a promotion to chief financial officer of her division, she was angry and questioned whether favoritism or gender had played a role. She had a talk with her boss and expressed her views. Then she shifted to neutral by completing a blind spot profile analysis, which gave her a model to observe her strengths and blind spots as she considered the next steps in her career. From that perspective she left her anger behind and developed an objective perspective of the situation.

Consider new possibilities. Some blind spots are simple to discover and act on. Others mark behaviors that cannot be accounted for within the scope of our current personal beliefs. Gather information. Talk with others who know you well and can understand the situation. Gaining clear sight involves consciously reconciling feedback we receive from others with what

The most common blind spot comes from overusing our greatest strengths, which happens under stress when we resort to mechanized behavior.

we believe about ourselves. Observing her model and talking to others, Sarah realized her strengths as an energetic, risk-taking individual, and realized how this behavior always created a blind spot for her in dealing with her boss. He was naturally far more financially conservative than Sarah and uncom-

fortable with her risk-taking posture. She had tried to moderate her risk-taking orientation. Now, she considered the possibility that a more risk-oriented CFO role in another division might be a better personal fit.

Take simple actions. Commit to one or two actions that will shift the blind spot back into an asset. The steps should be adapted into your daily routine. A few simple actions implemented consistently have far more power than an elaborate plan.

Always set yourself up to succeed. Sarah started networking to discover new possibilities for positions, committing to two phone calls and one meeting a week and always leaving room on her calendar for these activities. In six months, she found a new position in which her new boss recognized the blind spot in relationship to her former

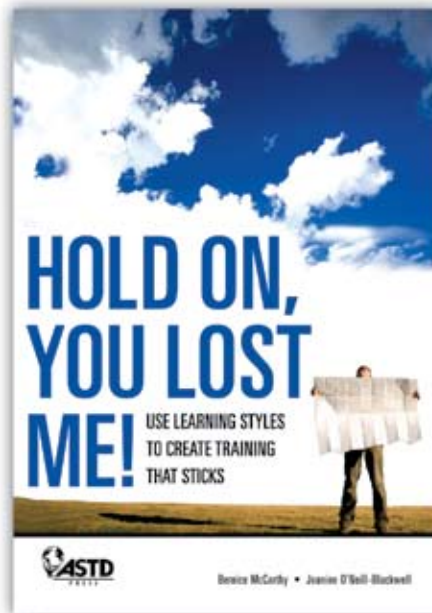
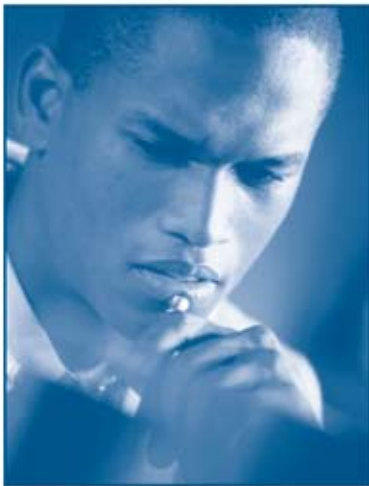
boss as a strength. Sarah was able to turn her blind spot back into her greatest asset.

Like our lives, our blind spots are constantly changing. As we evolve over the course of our careers and meet the challenges of different positions, we will find that different blind spots cross our path. Taking time to understand these blind spots will help us to not only reach our goals, but to better understand who we are and what we want for ourselves and those important in our work and personal lives.

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