

Shining a Light on Self-Awareness

New research coming from Columbia Business School suggests many in your organization are in the dark as to how they're being viewed by others. According to experts, however, this does not present an insurmountable challenge.

By David Shadovitz

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If you've held a job for any length of time, there's a good chance you've worked with an overly assertive person -- someone who pushed too hard and maybe could even be described as a "jerk."

There's also a strong likelihood that individual doesn't have a clue as to how they come across, according to researchers at the Columbia Business School in New York.

In a study titled "Pushing in the Dark: Causes and Consequences of Limited Self-Awareness for Interpersonal Assertiveness," the researchers found a significant disconnect between how people see themselves and how they're being perceived when it comes to their assertiveness.

Moreover, the co-authors of the study -- Daniel R. Ames, professor of management at the Columbia Business School, and Abbie S. Wazlawek, a doctoral student at the university -- report that "people seen as getting assertiveness wrong often think they've gotten it right, and that people seen as getting assertiveness right often think they've gotten it wrong."

The researchers conducted four studies, including three involving MBA students enrolled in a negotiation course at Columbia and one online survey of 500 United States adults. In the classroom studies, the MBA students participated in mock negotiations and were asked about their own assertiveness as well as their counterparts assertiveness. They then were asked to guess what their counterparts said about them.

In the online survey, participants were asked to recall a negotiation experience and evaluate their own assertiveness as well as that of their counterpart.

The studies revealed that negotiators have a lot of work to do as far as self-awareness is concerned.



One study, for example, found that 57 percent of the respondents who were viewed by their counterparts as under-assertive thought they had come across as appropriately assertive or even over-assertive; and 56 percent of those who were seen by their counterparts as over-assertive thought they had come across as appropriately assertive or even under-assertive.

In effect, the researchers found, people had a "coin-flip" chance of recognizing how they were perceived by others.

The data seems to match what Kevin Cashman, a senior partner in the Minneapolis office of Korn Ferry, sees happening in today's workplace.

"Who we really are is usually somewhere in between how we see ourselves and how others see us -- so it's not surprising that these might be out of sync," he says.

Cashman suspects the disconnect is more prevalent in situations in which there's less assessment and leadership development being done.

Dick Axelrod, president of the Axelrod Group, a Chicago-based consulting firm, says he isn't surprised by the researchers' findings. "Everyone is being viewed through a different lens – so it makes sense that the way people view themselves isn't always aligned with the way others see them," he says.

Axelrod, co-author of *Let's Stop Meeting Like This: Tools to Save Time and Get More Done*, recalls a leader he recently coached who considered himself very "passionate" about what he does; others, however, viewed that same leader as being way too pushy. "It's hard to get a good beat on yourself without some kind of external feedback," he says.

Studies suggest there's also a price to be paid for not addressing this issue.

Korn Ferry's research, for instance, finds the lack of self-awareness to be the No. 1 derailer for leaders.

Of course, there's no simple fix to this disconnect, but executive coaches such as Cashman advise HR leaders to regularly evaluate their leadership development programs and ensure that they are truly encouraging self-awareness. "Do they give people an understanding as to how they're showing up to others?" he asks. "Are they giving leaders the tools to help them reconcile these things? If not, a lot of people will derail."

Experts point to 360 assessments as an excellent tool for fixing any disconnect.

"A lot of times, those in positions of power don't get the 360s and the feedback they need, because they're too bossy and people are scared to share it with them," says Joel Garfinkle, a San Francisco-based executive coach and author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*. As a result, he adds, these leaders lack the self-awareness that's needed to change.

Garfinkle says he advises clients he's coaching to pay close attention to how their behavior is affecting others. "How do people react to you? Are clients not returning phone calls? Is your behavior making people feel pressured and uncomfortable?"

Most leaders don't ask the questions they need to ask, he says.

"Jerks out there get results all the time -- that's not the problem," Garfinkle says. "The problem is they're leaving a negative wake in what they touch that's undermining their relationships and making people feel belittled – and this can have a ripple effect."

Garfinkle cites the example of someone he once coached, a COO at a \$1 billion technology company. That COO, he says, was given four months to complete a project, but decided he would prove to the CEO and board he could finish it in one week. "The downside of this is he had a third of the company working seven days a week, even through a holiday, to get it done," he says. "It was all about the results to him; he viewed his people as commodities, not people."

In order for people to change, he says, there needs to be a wake-up call. "Awareness alone won't change them, but without it, it's not going to happen."

One suggestion, Garfinkle says, is to involve the individuals who participated in the 360 assessment as stakeholders in the coaching and development process, including asking them to inform the leader when he or she may be slipping back to their old ways.