The Power of Noticing:
What the Best Leaders See
Max H. Bazerman
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The one thing to note about Bazerman is that he brings deep and broad experience born from his work in public policy. As co-director for the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, combined with his work in the Harvard Business School, Bazerman presents the reader with insightful anecdotes and convincing arguments about the power of perception and the work of the leader. Specifically, Bazerman approaches the subject of “noticing” through the lens of applied behavioral psychology and how gaining an understanding of this specialized knowledge can open up a world of data and information that leaders can use (and that others will often fail to notice and integrate into their decision-making processes).

Bazerman’s (2014) book flows evenly and logically. He brilliantly leverages anecdotes throughout the book which are based on his own consulting experience, and which perfectly illustrate his points. After the opening preface, he explores the topic of noticing through 12 chapters, followed by a section of notes, and finishes with an index. He begins his argument by framing-up the issue of leadership and noticing or failing to notice. Leaders can easily fail to cultivate the capacity to notice what is at work in the immediate environment and thus miss critical information. This inability to notice is based on conditioning expressed through selective
noticing. Selective noticing means that we see only what we want to see and will not notice what we are not looking for even though it is readily available and despite the fact that this information we do not notice is critical to our decision-making process. This dilemma connects to the question, “Do we perceive with our eyes or do we perceive with our brains?” To a cognitive psychologist, the answer would be the latter...we perceive with our brains. Despite the fact that we observe what others may observe, our cognition process conditioned over time will only take in specific data, thereby leaving other important data ignored. From Bazerman’s perspective, when it comes to leadership, understanding this conditioned blindness and then beginning to make the necessary changes to eliminate or augment the blindness is crucial. The author goes on to state that leaders who can develop and sharpen their perception to notice will have a distinct advantage over those who do not (XXI). The chapters tend to follow this pattern of identifying a particular issue related to noticing and then offering insights to ways that can help leaders take the steps necessary to avoid these perceptual pitfalls.

Some of the valuable points that Bazerman presents in the early chapters address such topics as “inattentional blindness” and “bounded awareness” (pp. 12-13). For most readers these issues, which are critical to Bazerman’s foundation of noticing, may well be unfamiliar. Specifically, they speak to how people can be so intensely focused on a particular issue that they altogether miss critical events or moments that are unfolding right before their eyes or their scope of awareness. Bazerman’s solution is for leaders to intentionally think about what they might be missing in any given situation or circumstance.
Bazerman builds on these issues in the aforementioned paragraph by addressing the blindness that is intentional as opposed to blindness which results from lack of awareness. Here the author provides a compelling and powerful argument for the ways in which leaders can intentionally bias their opinions and positions by willfully ignoring concrete data that would argue that they consider an alternate position to the one they have taken. Bazerman’s anecdotes here are taken from examining how Penn State and its venerated football program approached the sexual abuse perpetrated by Jerry Sandusky. The author argues that, at its core, the key leaders and decision makers were not willing to “see” or “consider” the blatant acts of abuse that were unfolding before their eyes because of a greater concern for the preservation of the university and the continued veneration of its football program and the reputation of the coach. Despite the fact that the data was visible for all to see, no one was willing to actually see it and report it. As Bazerman notes, “when we have a vested self-interest in a situation, we have difficulty approaching the situation without bias, no matter how well-calibrated we believe our moral compass to be” (p. 23).

Bazerman discusses another related aspect to blindness that can also fuel biases, strengthening support for one’s position despite reality. This self-serving bias takes disconfirming information and translates it to the point that it ends up supporting and confirming one’s position. “We discount facts,” argues Bazerman, “that contradict the conclusions we want to reach, and we uncritically accept evidence that supports our positions. Unaware of our skewed information processing, we erroneously conclude that our judgments are free of bias” (p. 53).
Bazerman illustrates this bias at work in his research of the auditing process at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Despite the facts of contradiction and conflict of interest, auditors believe they are fully independent even when the successes of the organizations they audit are tightly connected to their own success. Bazerman notes that, based on their research, when individuals have a measure of self-interest in the outcome, “they are no longer capable of independence” (p. 55).

As Bazerman works through his chapters, he marvelously describes the many issues that connect to our inability (or unwillingness) to see the details we don't want to see, to uncover our biases that we believe we are free from, and to address how our opinions and decisions are fundamentally full of self-interest though we would argue to the contrary. Whether it is their own self-imposed misdirection or the misdirection they present to others, leaders need to get their minds around the accurate picture, the right data, and the correct and balanced interpretation of that data in a way that is fair, balanced, and good for the organization. Leaders must take note of what they do not see and what is not being said in order to begin to build a more comprehensive picture of reality. Bazerman extends the conversation of noticing to the issue of ethics and the slow erosion of ethicality over time when leaders are not paying attention (p. 98).

One of the strongest chapters in the book is chapter 9. Here, Bazerman addresses the importance of leaders thinking one or two steps ahead before they take a specific action. He uses the experiences of Tony Hayward, former CEO of BP, and the Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation's then CEO, Nancy Brinker, to illustrate his point. He describes the destructive results that emerged after these
CEOs made rash statements and actions. Had they thought about the implications and reactions to their statements and actions ahead of time, they might have chosen different courses of action altogether. Bazerman’s point is clear: leaders must think ahead sufficiently before taking action in order to avoid any damage to themselves or their organizations.

The final two chapters in the book are prescriptive for leaders who are thinking seriously about examining their actions, biases, perceptions, and cognitions as a way of eliminating flawed decisions and disastrous actions. Bazerman notes that leaders tend to make three specific efforts (p. 173). First, they can view the world in a more positive light than is warranted. Second, they can overly value the present and devalue or discount the future. Third, the adage to “do no harm” can too frequently mean doing nothing at all. The author then offers specific actions to mitigate the damage that can result. Leaders should first “recognize threats” (p. 176). Second, leaders should “prioritize threats” (p. 176). Third, leaders need to mobilize action in order to be prepared for the emergence of these threats. Bazerman offers a sobering note when he states that leaders should be “held accountable for any predictable surprises that occur” (p. 178). The book ends with some very clear direction on developing the capacity to notice. Specifically, Bazerman suggests that leaders become intentional about cultivating a noticing mindset, noticing what doesn’t make sense, and asking “why not?” (pp. 182-187).

In summary, the value of the book is significant in that it challenges leaders to move into conscious awareness of that which is often unconsciously executed. Every moment of every day leaders are gathering data through their perceptions of
observable data. It is rare when leaders begin to examine why they see what they see and why they interpret the data in specific ways. Moreover, because of the premium placed on execution, leaders can be less inclined to think through actions and decisions before they are taken. The power of noticing is about understanding what leaders see and why leaders take the actions that they do. This book is an invitation to explore the linkage between perception, cognition, and action. If a leader can better understand these linkages and, still further, do the hard work of understanding how their filters, grids, and biases nuance and perhaps even jeopardize their decisions, the organizations they represent and the people in those organizations will be better served.

**Key words:** leadership, leadership and perceptions, cognitive schemas, cognitions, cognitive psychology, biases, noticing and decision-making, decision-making and ethics.