

*Leadership Blindspots:**How Successful Leaders Identify and Overcome the Weaknesses That Matter*

Robert Bruce Shaw

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One of the most difficult tasks of a senior leader is to be self-aware and conscious of his or her performance. More specifically, there can be a natural resistance to identifying and acknowledging areas where a leader is under-performing. Ours is a culture that expects and wants leaders who are confident, clear, decisive, and who do not miscalculate. In fact, one could easily argue that a culture that values successful, persuasive, and charismatic leaders continually sets itself up for disappointment when these leaders stumble, that is, when they act like mere human beings who are trying their best.

The high-impact, nimble, and evolving organizational cultures we have created, along with the concepts of success that are deeply ingrained, for example, in our undergraduate and graduate educational systems have, in part, fueled the expectation that senior leaders should be competent, capable, responsive, consciously aware, and consistently effective. This external expectation or pressure, coupled with a leader's own internal resistance to recognizing and admitting performance weaknesses, can posture the leader for a significant operational or personal failure when they are unable to meet those expectations. Any leader who has exercised legitimate and personal power (French & Raven, 1959) understands the issues that surround his or her performance. A leader's title, position description, power, likability, and professional expertise place a heavy burden and demand on the leader to perform at the highest levels. Weaknesses and inefficiencies are viewed, like it or not, as a liability and source of criticism in the eyes of stakeholders and the leader. So, it seems it is only natural and understandable that senior leaders concerned about success and bringing a net

value-added to their organization would do everything possible to protect their “Achilles Heel.” Yet, this very decision and conscious effort to sequester and camouflage leadership vulnerabilities is one of the dominant reasons leaders can crash and burn. We read about these stories daily and, perhaps, we have “been” one of those stories ourselves.

Into this vortex of incredible tension comes Robert Shaw’s excellent book, *Leadership Blindspots*. To be clear, this book is not about blaming leaders for a grocery list of failures about which they should have paid closer attention. Nor does this book offer “six easy steps to eradicating failures and accelerate success.” Rather, Shaw takes the reader on a deep dive into the psychology and nature of cognitive schemas that can create blindspots that potentially set the leader up for struggle and failure. Additionally, Shaw addresses the most common leadership blindspots based on his years as a consultant and executive coach.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section addresses why uncovering blindspots is critical for the leader. The second section speaks to the process of identifying and resolving blindspots. The third section provides an excellent array of resources including assessments, surveys, worksheets, and additional readings. Overall, Shaw’s writing style is clear and straight to the point. He provides helpful anecdotal data drawn from his own research as well as poignant stories, pulled from the web, about well-known leaders from a variety of industries. In my own work as a leadership development consultant, I found Shaw’s findings and his treatment of blindspots to be consistent with what I have observed with clients. Moreover, the insights and solutions he offers to leaders, as they attempt to deal with their blindspots, are valuable as opposed to being trite and superfluous.

In section one, chapters one and two explore how leaders can delude themselves by ignoring blindspots and how, in some situations, ignoring a blindspot can serve the leader well. Shaw describes the process that helps uncover blindspots in a leader. It is chapter three, however, that brings significant value to the reader. Here Shaw details the most common blindspots that, in his opinion, can sabotage a leader’s performance and impact. He divides his top 20 blindspots into four

categories: blindspots that connect to self-delusion, blindspots that relate to how a leader views and interacts with his or her team, blindspots that nuance how the leader perceives and works with a company, and blindspots that impact how a leader interacts with markets. To ensure consistency in his description, Shaw breaks each blindspot into the belief of the leader, the common reality that often contradicts the belief of the leader, and a brief case study that clearly illustrates the blindspot in action within the context of an organization. This structure accelerates understanding and allows for direct application on the part of the reader.

By way of example, one of Shaw's blindspots under the "self" category is what he calls "overestimating strategic capabilities" (p. 40). Based on my own experience, many leaders do, in fact, overestimate their capabilities to think, act, and influence strategically. Shaw's assessment with this blindspot is exceedingly accurate. Each of the following 19 blindspots addressed has a clear ring of truth and accuracy. Shaw not only knows what he is talking about but has a deep and broad understanding of how to help leaders come to terms with these blindspots.

In section two, Shaw's attention turns to acknowledging and remediating a leader's blindspots. Each of the chapters in this section follows in a logical order and serves the purpose of moving the leader forward on a journey of authentic discovery and action-taking. Each chapter follows Shaw's 5-stage model which includes discovery, data collection, developing awareness and vision, establishing a team of advisors, and encouraging push back and creative conflict. I will address chapters six and eight that fall within this section.

Chapter six asks the leader to seek out disconfirming data about his or her blindspots. This chapter may be one of the strongest and informative in Shaw's book. Here, leaders learn of the differences between gathering data that confirms their positive belief system about themselves (this could be considered our natural, empowering, and nonthreatening psychological disposition that only looks for and collects data that supports preexisting and necessarily positive views of the self) and gathering disconfirming data that contradicts the leader's belief system. Typically, argues Shaw, leaders spend most of their time only gathering data that

confirms all that is good. It is not typical that a leader would look for disconfirming data that is incongruous with his or her established belief system. Because this data is disruptive to established cognitive schemas, leaders tend to ignore it. However, if a leader intends to address and overcome blindspots, opening oneself to disconfirming and disruptive data that calls into question one's established assumptions, then, says Shaw, eliminating or at least augmenting blindspots is a real possibility.

Chapter 8 describes the importance of establishing a group of advisors - but not just any group of advisors. Shaw suggests that leaders surround themselves with specialists who can address different aspects of the leader's work. While these areas will depend on the type of organization and context the leader works within, Shaw identifies at least six types of people who possess specialized knowledge and experience in: markets and strategy, technology and innovation, organizations and people, politics, crises management, and personal impact (p. 134). While it might be challenging for a leader to target these types of individuals who possess these areas of expertise, Shaw's point is clear and exceedingly important: effective leaders seek the expertise and honest appraisal of other trusted professionals who can constructively identify a leader's performance gaps and suggest ways to close those gaps.

The final section of the book, section three, offers four resources designed to help the leader address and remediate blindspots including a collection of additional readings which, from the reviewer's perspective, could be more substantial. The endnotes are predictably detailed and provide an excellent resource for the reader to do additional research and inquiry on their own.

Overall, Shaw's work is an excellent and fresh approach to dealing with the performance and perception gaps of a leader. From my perspective, there are at least three primary audiences for this book. First and most obvious, Shaw's book is an excellent read for an established senior-level leader. By senior-level I mean a mid- to senior-level manager, supervisor, dean, division head, senior administrator, senior executive, or C-suite leader. Now, there is a caveat to suggesting this book to

someone in a leadership position. Because the title of Shaw's book uses words such as blindspots, overcoming, and weaknesses, it is important to put the book in context. I suggest that you read this book first and then suggest it to those you work with as a resource you have found to be particularly helpful in strengthening your practice of leadership. If the leader is a trusted colleague with whom you share a good working relationship, Shaw's book could be offered as way of helping the leader improve his or her leadership effectiveness (based on your observations and the observations of others). If the leader is clearly struggling and has acknowledged the fact that he or she is looking for direction, guidance, or suggestions on how to improve his or her performance, recommending Shaw's book would be an excellent response.

A second audience would be emerging leaders. If your organization has a leadership succession program of any type, this book would be an excellent resource to include as part of the curriculum. Learning the importance of and finding a system for recognizing and eradicating existing and/or emerging blindspots would be a great advantage early in one's career. This reviewer wishes a book such as Shaw's would have been available in my formative years as a leader.

Finally, Shaw's book is an excellent read for any individual who wants to learn about the practices and challenges of being a leader. These individuals are often debating whether or not they are "called" to be a leader, if they have the fundamental characteristics of a leader, and how they might begin to prepare themselves to move toward leadership by looking closely at the way they act, the way they think, and the way they evolve and grow.

In summary, *Leadership Blindspots* is an excellent resource that is well-written, accurate, practical, thoroughly researched and supported, and, perhaps most importantly, honest in its appraisal of leadership performance issues and helpful in its offering of possible solutions. It is without hesitation that I recommend this book to the readers of The Chair Academy's Leadership Journal.

Key words: Leadership, Leadership Blindspots, Leadership Failures, Cognitive Bias, Professional Development, Leadership Development, Support Networks

French, J. R. P., Jr., & Raven, B. H. The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright et al., *Studies in social power*. Ann Arbor: *Institute for Social Research*, 1959, pp. 150-167.