

# Preface

**W**E LIVE IN COMPLEX TIMES. EVERY DAY, LEADERS MAKE decisions that affect thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of people. Yet, due to the complex nature of our organizations, the outcomes of these decisions are often unintended and even unknown. There is a school of thought that suggests that many of today's senior jobs are unfeasible. The scope of these jobs and the constant, all-pervasive nature of change places an almost intolerable burden on decision makers.

Yet, despite the complexity, important decisions have to be made. And the more senior the decision maker, the greater the number of people affected by their decisions. It is difficult to make good decisions in situations characterized by:

- fragile, dispersed relationships;
- paucity or excess of information;
- high levels of uncertainty;
- clashes in cultural values and beliefs;
- complex, interdependent social and economic systems.

In these circumstances it is easy to miss important events or to dismiss alternative ideas or opinions. It is easy to get caught on the treadmill with no time to make sense of what is happening, no time to experiment and no time to develop the range and depth of your leadership style. In other words, in these circumstances it is easy to develop blind spots.

Blind spots emerge when, for a variety of reasons, we do not want to listen or learn. The reason for this is that learning can be both painful and time-consuming; as a result, we often avoid it. We all tend to learn what suits us and the temptation to do this once in a leadership position is great. The clique that often surrounds a leader suggests that many leaders consciously limit the people who influence them. Leaders, too, can be highly resistant to change.

Whilst leaders have always had blind spots, the stakes today seem higher. It is not unusual for leaders' decisions to have a global impact – for good or bad. It seems right, therefore, to bring out a book that looks at these blind spots in more detail, exploring where they come from and what can be done to address them.

This book is based upon an extensive research project that looked at how leaders and their staff learned and adapted when their organizations went through change. The 21 people who participated in this research completed learning diaries over the period of a year and underwent a number of in-depth interviews. Their stories have contributed towards a model that helps us to better understand when and how people learn and when and how they develop blind spots. However, this book is not simply about understanding blind spots – it also seeks to address them. We have identified eight learning practices, which, if implemented on-the-job, will help leaders to improve their decisions, increase their learning agility and boost both their personal and their organization's performance.

The first part of this book explores some of the sources and possible impact of leadership blind spots. Chapter 1 provides a definition of blind spots and looks at how the blind spots of three leaders affected their decision making and performance. Chapter 2 introduces a new theory of learning and blind spots. It draws on the stories of the participants in the original research to bring the theory to life. This chapter also presents the eight learning practices that form the basis for the second part of the book. Chapter 3 looks at the impact of leaders' blind spots using real life examples, showing just how important this whole area is. Chapter 4 looks at a different kind of leadership blind spot. We identify some of the reasons that people throughout organizations avoid taking leadership, despite the need and opportunity for them to do so.

The second part of the book looks at each of the eight learning practices in depth. The last chapter offers some exercises to support each practice, many of which can be applied on-the-job.

There are two areas where some controversial choices were made. First, the focus is almost exclusively on individuals. We look at individual blind spots and individual learning. This is based on an assumption that a more thorough understanding of how individuals learn and overcome blind spots will provide a sound base for exploring more about how groups and organizations learn. Second, we have used the term *leader* to describe people in formal, senior leadership positions. Of course, leaders exist throughout the system – in both formal and informal positions. However, the focus of this book is on people in senior positions who are making decisions that affect large numbers of people. They may not be leaders in the true sense of the word – they may simply be senior managers in positions of leadership, who may or may not inspire followership. However, their power and influence suggest that their blind spots could have major ramifications. For this reason, we have focused on those in senior positions and have referred to them as ‘leaders’. Nevertheless, the model and the ideas described here are relevant to everyone.

This book offers those in leadership positions a challenge. It has often been said that learning is a company’s only sustainable competitive advantage. This is particularly true today, when business models and markets can change every few years. Knowledge and skills that we build up over a lifetime can be made redundant within a few years. In a rapidly changing and complex world, the leaders who succeed will need to be able to accelerate learning – both their own and their organization’s. Central to this will be the ability to know, face and overcome both personal and organizational blind spots. This is not easy. It takes character, integrity, resilience and determination. Many leaders, for a number of reasons, will not rise to the challenge. Yet, without a doubt, the ability to learn rapidly and effectively will be the hallmark of successful leaders in the 21st century. This book hopes to encourage debate and learning around these issues. It is a tentative step in offering ideas, techniques and models whilst recognizing that the best learning comes when many people join the debate. I look forward to the ongoing dialogue I hope these ideas will inspire.

