Leadership Blindspots

How Successful Leaders Identify and Overcome the Weaknesses That Matter
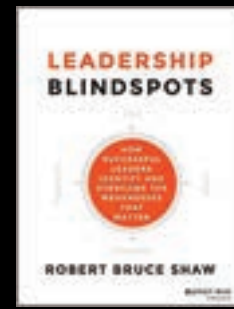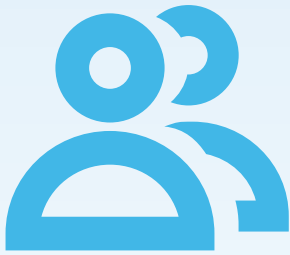
For anyone looking to examine how they lead, *Leadership Blindspots* takes a direct and honest look at the flaws and foibles that are hardest to see in ourselves, and provides a template for how those looking to lead can limit the impact that these weaknesses have in their professional lives.

Leadership Blindspots centers around the idea that leaders, as human beings, are flawed. Not only this, but many of our weaknesses are invisible to us. Robert Shaw's book is an attempt to provide strategies to account for things that we, by definition, cannot always see or anticipate. Shaw's approach is methodical, thorough, and clear-minded as he breaks down issues of great subtlety and ambiguity into actionable processes.

Robert Shaw's approach throughout the book is to introduce ways in which leaders may be blind to weaknesses, back them through specific examples, and return to the actions that might be taken to mitigate those weaknesses. Shaw's appreciation for the complex nature of leadership allows his advice to amount to more than just "be better." Rather, the entire book is an acknowledgment that errors are inevitable, and leadership is about how to mitigate and deal with mistakes as much as champion success.

Building upon his 30 years working as a leadership and management consultant, Shaw's core thesis is that a company cannot be successful over the long term without leaders who constantly strive to act with integrity and eliminate their worst impulses. The process of identifying and managing your blindspots includes:

- ✅ recognizing and accepting your own blindspots

- ✅ seeking honest outside evaluation

- ✅ understanding that your weaknesses and strengths can come from the same place

- ✅ incorporating social understanding into your leadership style

Initial Insights

Leadership Blindspots is constantly aware of the raw complexity of the task at hand. Trying to understand how one individual interacts with himself or herself is difficult. Trying to parse how that individual interacts with an entire company is borderline impossible. Instead of promising "do X and Y will result," the book provides a framework for analyzing approaches to leadership. Shaw focuses on theory in the first half of the book, so that by the time he begins discussing ways to implement these theories the reader is well grounded. Since the subject matter is often pragmatic, he consistently returns to some central concepts throughout, reinforcing each new lesson with familiar beats.

Everyone Has Blindspots

One of the real strengths of this book is its use of vivid, concrete examples. While it would have been easy to pick examples of failed leaders, or to lionize successful ones, Shaw makes it clear in *Leadership Blindspots* that some failed leaders had tremendous strengths (Robert McNamara), and that some successful leaders had huge weaknesses (Steve Jobs). By opening such big names to criticism, Shaw reinforces his basic premise: all leaders must be ready to accept and confront their weaknesses. He also provides examples from his own failures, and in so doing puts his money where his mouth is, so to speak.

> "...all leaders must be ready to accept and confront their weaknesses."

Blindspots Cannot Be Eliminated

There is a concept in writing and design called "pre-optimization." Basically, it means trying to make the perfect version of something immediately, skipping necessary failures, and, in so doing, failing to begin at all. While Shaw does not use this phrase, he makes use of the concept in repeatedly explaining what the different kinds of blindspots really are. He seems aware that some kinds of leaders, upon learning of these types of pitfalls, would seek to eliminate them. Shaw emphasizes that this is wasted energy, again tying it to simple human nature. Even if leaders could eliminate each blindspot they had—whether about themselves, their company, or their market —new ones would arise as a simple matter of individual psychology. Shaw's goal for you as the reader is to develop the necessary tools to help you constantly become aware of your weaknesses. He doesn't promise a quick fix, but rather calls for constant vigilance.

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The Process Is Not Always Comfortable

Much of the strength of the book is in Shaw's strong grasp of the many factors underlying his advice. One of the types of blindness he identifies is a kind of two-way willful blindness, whereby lower-ranking employees, eager to please leadership, pass only good news up the chain while leaders, possessors of a healthy ego, want to believe the good news and can come to credit themselves unduly when things go well. Chapter by chapter, Shaw comes

back to this. Leaders must be willing to make themselves uncomfortable by requesting honest, direct feedback, and also must have the strength not to punish honesty, which defeats the purpose. The book also makes it clear that leadership must constantly evaluate which kinds of conflict are productive, rather than simply seeking to eliminate all contention in the ranks. Shaw points out repeatedly that employees who care about their work should engage in some debate about the right way to do things, and that when dealing with blindspots, leaders have to anticipate and even welcome a degree of pushback against their own ideas.

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Ambiguity Abounds

Shaw goes to great lengths to shy away from simplistic analyses. Very early in the book, he establishes that blindspots by themselves are not necessarily bad. He points out that some degree of blindness to reality is even necessary for people to function. The book uses examples like John Lasseter of Pixar, or the aforementioned Steve Jobs, as leaders whose whole careers were built on ignoring the reasonable, well-informed opinions of people telling them things they didn't want to hear. His subtler point is that one of the reasons blindspots are so hard to discern is that they are often inextricably linked to our greatest strengths. He uses the example of Henry Ford, a man of great vision and focus, who rose to greatness on those strengths in creating the Model T, but nearly destroyed his company when that same confidence in his approach made him fail to recognize when the Model T was outmoded.

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Leadership is About Working with People

One of the examples of his own failure that Shaw uses in *Leadership Blindspots* is a time he passed negative feedback from an employee to the manager he was consulting for. He failed to anticipate the fallout for the employee, or that the lower-level workers would then regard him with suspicion. As much as the book is about providing frameworks for how to run meetings or how to solicit feedback, it is really about remembering that you are leading human beings. Shaw is pragmatic, and makes it clear this isn't just about being warm and fuzzy. The hard fact, which he illustrates repeatedly, is that companies built on unhappiness and suspicion are at minimum opening themselves up to unneeded conflicts that are anathema to the honesty and comfort needed to address blindspots.

> "…companies built on unhappiness and suspicion are at minimum opening themselves up to unneeded conflicts…"

Parting Thoughts

In *Leadership Blindspots,* Robert Bruce Shaw has taken a challenging topic and broken it down as clearly as possible, using theory coupled with concrete examples. His methodical approach allows him to avoid oversimplification without losing track of his main argument. Many authors would seek to smooth over ambiguities when offering leadership advice, but Shaw dives into gray areas, giving readers a toolset they can use on a case-by-case basis. Shaw provides worksheets and questionnaires to supplement the book's content and to provide a jumping-off point for readers to start implementing its ideas. The book can be intense and persistent at times, but necessarily so given the complexity of the arguments Shaw makes. Unlike many similar books, *Leadership Blindspots* avoids buzzwords and jargon, and is stronger without these crutches. This book would be suited for anyone in a leadership role who is ready to take a very hard look at themselves and attempt to rebuild the way they view their successes and failures.

About the Author

ROBERT BRUCE SHAW is a management consultant specializing in organization and leadership performance. He has worked closely with leaders and their teams in a wide range of industries and is the author of several books.

Also by Robert Bruce Shaw

1 *Extreme Teams: Why Pixar, Netflix, Airbnb, and Other Cutting-Edge Companies Succeed Where Most Fail*, AMACOM, © 2017, ISBN 978-0814437179.

2   *Trust in the Balance: Building Successful Organizations on Results, Integrity, and Concern*, Jossey-Bass, © 1997, ISBN 978-0787902865.