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▶ Seeing Blind Spots

Identifying and Correcting Frontline Managers' Leadership Skill Gaps

by Scott Erker, Sr. VP, and Bradford Thomas, Manager, DDI

Objects in the mirror may be bigger than they appear. This is not just an adage for driving; it also applies to anyone who takes a moment to reflect on his or her ability. Managers are particularly prone to this kind of distorted view of their leadership skills. Have you ever had a manager tell you he is a good coach—only to hear a snicker from one of his direct reports? Or had a conversation with a manager who was just not picking up on the frustration in your voice or your non-verbal cues?

DDI recently completed *Finding the First Rung*, a study in which 1,130 respondents told us what it is like to be a frontline manager today. Do they know what it takes to be a good manager? Do they feel prepared for the challenge of leadership? Are they getting the support they need from their managers and their organization?

As part of the study we asked them a few questions about how they perceived their leadership skills. Not surprising, they are overwhelmingly confident in their leadership skills:

- 87 percent of managers rated themselves as “good” or “excellent.”
- Only 1 percent rated themselves “poor.”

When asked why they rated themselves the way they did, the most common response was the modest “there is always room for improvement.” But a significant number of respondents confidently voiced an opinion similar to this one from a public-sector marketing manager, “Because I am excellent at all I do!”

That confidence is heartening. But is it deserved? According to our research—not always.

Truly see yourself—warts and all

Saying you’re a good manager doesn’t make it so. You need to truly see yourself—realistically evaluate your level of skill in each success area—warts and all. For an overwhelming majority of managers this is like looking in a distorted fun-house mirror.

We asked over 200 managers going through DDI’s new frontline leader assessment, *Manager ReadySM*, to rate themselves in seven critical frontline leadership skills: coaching, communication, delegation, gaining commitment, planning and organizing, problem analysis, and judgment. We compared their self-ratings to their actual performance during the assessment. Assessment ratings were determined by assessors who evaluated leaders’ actions when responding to common challenges faced by those managing the front lines.

Key to Ratings

Considerable Strengths	
Strength	
Proficient	
Development Area	
Significant Improvement Required	

We found that 89 percent of the managers had at least one leadership skill where they rated themselves above their actual skill level. We call these “blind spots.” Fifty percent of the managers had three or more blind spots. In most cases these blind spots were areas they thought were “strengths” but they were actually just

“proficient” (see graph below for our rating scale). Forty-five percent of managers had at least one serious blind spot—that is an area they thought was a “strength” but in reality was a deficiency.

“Gaining Commitment” is the most common blind spot—affecting 52 percent of frontline managers. This blind spot stems from an inability to involve others or use appropriate influencing strategies to reach agreement on your ideas or plans. Managers who are successful in this skill make things happen because they are able to capitalize on the input and ideas of others, and rally support to get things done. Judgment was another common blind spot affecting leaders, while delegation was the least common one we found.

Blind spots are the Achilles’ heel of managers because they undermine performance. Someone who thinks she has good interpersonal skills may in fact be exhibiting behaviors that erode trust among her direct reports. Someone weak at problem analysis may make a hasty decision prior to gathering all the necessary information. Lacking the self-insight to know that one needs to improve, managers will turn down—or not fully engage in—development opportunities that would fill in missing skills. When the disparity persists, it’s to the detriment of the individual and his or her organization and teams.

What can you do about it?

There are three best practices that you should institute to eliminate blind spots and set managers on the path to readiness.

- **Provide assessment with in-depth insight to help leaders confidently know what they’re good at, and what needs attention to develop.** The assessment needs to accurately evaluate the behaviors and skills that are critical for success as a frontline leader and provide a comprehensive feedback report with insight that the manager can act on.
- **Leverage the results from the assessment to facilitate meaningful development discussions between the manager and their manager.** These discussions should lead to formal development plans with specific skills to be learned, specific ways to apply those skills on the job, and formal measures to track progress. According to the respondents in *Finding the First Rung*, this is one practice that isn’t followed very well—only 33 percent of managers have a specific, written development plan that they have agreed to with their manager.
- **Provide the manager’s manager with the skills he or she needs to develop them.** This includes training on how to establish strong development plans and provide balanced, timely feedback.

Flying blind can only lead to crashing...hard. Luckily, today assessment is more accessible and affordable than ever, making it a realistic tool for improving your frontline leaders. With accurate insight and some targeted development, frontline managers can combat their blind spots.

About the Authors

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[Access the full findings and tips,](#)
including a video summary from our *Finding the First Rung* study.



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for front line leaders: *Manager Ready*SM.