

# On Leadership

## Leaders and Windshields: The Art of Deflecting Essential Information



### Executive Summary

- ▶ The inability to communicate the sense of presence creates that shield and prevents engagement, dialogue, and understanding.
- ▶ While building windshields is a natural process, leaders should analyze their use of windshields and work toward eliminating the need to be protected behind their invisible walls.
- ▶ Building a diverse advisory group can help leaders assimilate communication more effectively.

**T**HE ONLY REAL RESOURCE that leaders have is information. Leaders synthesize a wide variety of information from their five senses, mix that in their little black box of decision making, and come out with conclusions and directions to guide the organization. But it doesn't always happen that way. Many convolutions come along to interfere with the information-gathering process that distort the information and its interpretation. Unfortunately, much needed information is deflected off the leader's senses, just as a car windshield deflects wind, rain, and bugs. Reality is also distorted by ice and rain on windshields, just as our own reality is distorted with the "bad weather" of a bad day. Windshields have wipers to clear the view. However, leaders do not have built-in wipers. We lose valuable information because we don't have the skill set to read the emotional or early warning signals that are deflected with the barriers we erect. The leader who deflects feedback with instant verbal and nonverbal messaging back to the audience blocks information. Sometimes that information is too painful to hear, and sometimes we simply don't want anyone to "rain on our parade," so we set up an elaborate system of windshields around us. However, this method of avoiding pain doesn't work. The leader will soon fail because uninformed leadership leads to bad outcomes. Leaders can become the victim of a coup that is precipitated by people who feel they are not heard. Windshields are not the answer to a pain-free life as a leader. They are a temporary fix for a

problem that escalates every moment the windshield is in place.

### The Fine Art of Windshielding

For some leaders, erecting windshields and deflecting information is an art. With just one look, like the one your mother used to give you, a leader can silence a conversation quickly. Or perhaps the leader considers only a few select colleagues valued repositories of information.

In the age of PDAs, Blackberries, and other electronic diversions, it is common for multitasking to take the place of engaging in a personal conversation and effectively places a windshield between you and your fellow conversationalist. The inability to communicate the sense of presence creates that shield and prevents engagement, dialogue, and understanding.

The alpha male, according to Ludeman and Erlandson (2004), has many techniques for stamping out communication such as interrupting, reacting with angry outbursts, monopolizing conversations, bullying, intimidating with data, and becoming verbally abusive. And the alpha female? These authors contend the behavior is different since, early on, the alpha female learns techniques that also deflect painful information but in a more subtle way.

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Rather than intimidate, the “velvet hammer” approach is used to make the successful climb to the top for the alpha female. Although hesitant to delve into the touchy-feely side of corporate life, women are usually more willing than alpha males to engage in interpersonal issues.

Other techniques frequently used by both alpha females and males are the tactics of changing the topic, glossing over the importance of the feedback, inserting humor, etc. The more adept the leader is at erecting windshields, the more dysfunctional is the organization because the leader cannot obtain the best information to guide the organization. These authors cite the example of Dell Computers, and the metamorphosis that CEO Michael Dell and President Kevin Rollins made from the competitive alpha male behavior toward each other, to that of caring colleagues. This relationship permeated and changed the behavior of the entire organization. An important part of this process was embedding a 360 feedback process within the culture. People can and do change.

### **Creating Structures to Minimize The Number of Windshields**

While building windshields is a natural process, leaders should analyze their use of windshields and work toward eliminating the need to be protected behind their invisible walls. Building a diverse advisory group can help leaders assimilate communication more effectively.

*Building advisors.* Leaders should surround themselves with people they trust, and who will give them honest feedback and suggestions. Leaders should construct a purposefully appointed group of experts to not only do the work of the organization, but to be partners in a think tank. In a small unit, the membership of this group can be defined as an educator, the co-chair of the unit-based shared leadership council, a key physician, a clinical nurse specialist, two to three staff nurses picked from a representative group such as new graduates and senior nurses, and two to three well-respected experts from other units or parts of the organization. Establishing this group should be given as much seriousness as the hiring of staff. It should be done by plan, and not by convenience. Joni (2004) notes that some leaders use this “kitchen cabinet” approach to construct their advisory team, but warns that relying on the same

advisors over a period of time is fraught with difficulties. Leaders who surround themselves with advisors who protect the leader from distractions or unpleasantness build a windshield. These advisors are perceived to have power over the leader, and the leader’s isolation leads to decisions based on misinformation.

In the best of all worlds, the leader will choose advisors who are articulate, willing to speak up to the leader and to the others in the “cabinet,” and who bring real learning to the group. These people are chosen not for their past allegiances, but because of the discrete information and level of observations they bring to this role.

*Avoiding overreliance on one advisor.* It’s easy to bundle yourself with someone who is willing to give you advice and support. However, this can be a destructive relationship. Destructive confidants can create chaos in a team and wreak havoc for the leader. Sulkowicz (2004) notes that often a leader, especially a CEO, can be the most isolated and protected employee in the organization. Unfortunately, the leader is often the last person to realize that this relationship has become toxic. Sulkowicz (2004) identifies three types of destructive confidants: (a) the reflector who constantly tells the leader she is the fairest of them all, (b) the insulator who keeps information about the organization away from the leader, and (c) the usurper who cunningly takes over the role of the leader which often precipitates a coup and the leader is either out of a job or loses any semblance of the ability to influence.

*Breaking up dysfunctional kitchen cabinets.* Dysfunctional advisory groups miss the point that the role of the leader is to serve the front lines who are serving the patients, and to remove roadblocks as soon as possible to achieve greatness in patient care. The president of Medtronic, Bill George (2003), describes his process of assessing the team, determining the gaps as soon as possible, uncovering the people who are the outliers and won’t accept your leadership or are hoping to get your job, and assembling a team around you that complements your weaknesses and your strengths. He describes a leadership team that has the ability to directly discuss issues and to do so within a partnership model. In many situations, the “old gang” needs breaking up, and a more diverse group needs to be constituted to help the leader with reality-

based feedback. Some leaders change their advisory group each year to achieve fresh viewpoints.

*The plea for diversity.* We often like to hear information that is pleasant and matches our perception. However, as a leader, there are many perceptions of you, and each is valid from that person’s perspective. Diverse groups of people will give you diverse opinions and information that will provide for a stronger agenda for your leadership. Diversity in your advisory team is essential.

### **Summary**

Do you know how much information you deflect in a day? Do you know what techniques you use to keep information at bay? We all erect windshields. It is just a matter of degree. Sometimes we deflect information in spite of our good intentions. If we are not present when people are in dialogue with us, we soon lose the attention of that person. If we are leading a meeting and the feedback begins to get uncomfortable for us, we can interject the techniques of the alpha male or alpha female, or a variety of our own. But the audience knows you are not listening, and they soon go underground with their comments and interpretations. Soon you are cut out of valuable feedback. Deflecting information by surrounding yourself with windshields just won’t work. We need second and third opinions continually.

One of Warren Bennis’ (2002) ten traits to becoming a “tomorrow leader” is that of ensuring that the leader’s boundaries are porous and permeable. In his view, leaders need the foresight to see around the corner long before others do. His belief is that the only way to do this is to be in touch with your customers, and the outside world. But that only happens when the leader’s boundaries are porous and permeable so that information can seep in. Effective leaders learn to lead without windshields. \$

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