By D.D. Warrick

“...the greater the responsibilities and the higher leaders advance, the greater the potential consequences from a lack of leadership awareness and leading with leadership illusions.”

Leadership Illusions

Important Implications for Leaders and Training and Coaching Leaders

You most likely have experienced the leadership illusions phenomena. An illusion is seeing something different than it is. The more illusions leaders have about themselves and other relevant information, the more flawed their thinking, perceptions, behaviors, and decisions will be. Perhaps you have experienced decisions coming from the top leader, or a top-level leader that make no sense to those who must carry the decisions out. The leader never bothered to listen to those closest to the issues being addressed and is certain the decisions are just what the organization needs. Maybe you know of a leader who believes he or she is an excellent and beloved leader. However, the reality is just the opposite. Employees see the leader as an arrogant, know-it-all leader with a big ego and little awareness of what is going on or how he or she is perceived.

The Major Focus of the Article

This article will focus on the need for self-aware leaders who know how to minimize their possible leadership illusions and the need for organizations and organization development professionals to provide much needed training and coaching in preparing leaders to be more self-aware. Interestingly, although some experts have cited self-awareness as the most important leadership capability to develop, training in self-awareness and how to minimize leadership illusions is rarely included in leadership development and organization development efforts (Hougaard, Carter, & Afton, 2018; Toegel, Ginka, & Barsoux, 2012; Goleman, 2014). However, building organizations and groups for success and effectively leading and managing change are highly dependent on leaders having a clear sense of reality.

Keep in mind in reading the article that while the article may bring to mind both good and bad leaders you have experienced who clearly have leadership illusions, the emphasis should be on clearing up your own possible leadership illusions. If someone else was reading this article, they may very well have thought of you or me as the ones with leadership illusions! Also, keep in mind that even though the article is about leadership illusions, we are all likely to have some blind spots and can learn from the concepts being presented.

Leading with Leadership Illusions Can Have Significant Consequences

The reality is that leading with leadership illusions is no small matter and that leadership illusions can have significant consequences to one’s own effectiveness, the effectiveness and morale of those who leaders lead, and to whole organizations, countries, societies, and groups of all types and sizes. For example, numerous studies have reported the impact of unaware leaders on employee motivation, morale, and health. One study reported that caustic, abrasive, and overbearing bosses may be taking years off their employee’s lives (Armstrong, 2005).

Especially in these fast-changing times, leaders at all levels are needed that are skilled leaders committed to achieving...
high level results and building healthy organizations. To do so and be effective in today’s times, leaders will need to have a keen sense of self-awareness and be skilled at listening to others, involving and engaging others, building trusting relationships, and welcoming and seeking candid communication and helpful feedback. Edgar and Peter Schein in their top selling book, *Humble Leadership: The Power of Relationships, Openness, and Trust*, point out that the old top down leadership where leaders are know-it-all leaders who make most of the decisions and keep a professional distance with employees is “hopelessly inflexible and outdated.” They point out that future leaders will need to be much more relational and able to build more personal, trusting, and open relationships as well as cultures also built on more personal intragroup and intergroup relationships (Schein & Schein, 2018). All of these skills will require highly self-aware leaders that are in touch with the people and realities they are involved with and that lead with minimal leadership illusions. The greater the responsibilities and the higher leaders advance, the greater the potential consequences from a lack of leadership awareness and leading with leadership illusions.

**Degrees of Leadership Illusions**

The term “self-awareness” in this article is intended to include both personal awareness and an awareness of what is going on in the organizations and groups that leaders are leading as well as other important information leaders need to be aware of to be effective leaders. The theories that particularly place a strong emphasis on self-awareness are *Servant Leadership* (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018), *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, 1995), *Transformational Leadership* (Warrick, 2018), *Positive Leadership* (Cameron, 2010), *Humble Leadership* (Schein & Schein, 2018), and *Authentic Leadership* (George, 2003). With limited self-awareness, leadership illusions are sure to follow with various consequences.

Leaders have varying degrees of leadership illusions. In evaluating the potential for illusions, consider three levels of leadership illusions:

1. **Narcissistic Leaders.** Narcissistic leaders are leaders who tend to be know-it-all, egotistical, overly-confident leaders who have an inflated and unrealistic view of their capabilities and how they are perceived (Carlson, 2014; Maccoby, 2007; Maccoby, 2004; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). They are known for having a grandiose view of self while showing little concern or empathy for others and for having a high regard for their own opinions and ideas and little regard for the ideas and opinions of others. They discourage or dismiss feedback unless it fits with their own perceptions of reality. Narcissistic leaders are the most likely candidates for leadership illusions. Since their reality is the only reality and they are not that interested in soliciting ideas and feedback from others, they must rely on their own sometimes distorted perceptions of reality and the likely distorted information others share with them for fear of consequences for being candid. While some narcissistic leaders are smart enough and manipulative enough to be highly successful at achieving their personal goals, they are sure to have numerous leadership illusions that will have consequences for them and the organizations or groups they lead.

2. **Moderately Aware Leaders.** Moderately aware leaders are well intended leaders who have a good but not great sense of self-awareness and awareness of what is going on. Their good but not great sense of awareness could occur for many reasons. For example, they may not actively seek feedback and opportunities to listen to the ideas and perspectives of others. They may also have some behaviors they are not aware of that discourage open communication and feedback. In addition, they may be lacking in the knowledge and skills needed to gain a clear sense of reality and minimize leadership illusions. It may also be possible that they purposely avoid feedback or methods for discovering reality for fear of exposure or having to take responsibility for their actions.

3. **Mostly Aware Leaders.** Mostly aware leaders are leaders who have a high level of self-awareness as well as an awareness of what is going on that impacts their effectiveness. They make special efforts to welcome feedback and listen to the ideas of others and to assure that they are in touch with what is going on with those they lead and with information relevant to their effectiveness. Mostly aware leaders are typically humble leaders that genuinely care about the welfare and ideas of others and create a safe environment for open and candid communication. The term “Mostly Aware” is used to acknowledge that even the most aware leaders are likely to have a few blind spots and may not be aware of some information that could influence their effectiveness. Before placing yourself in the Mostly Aware category you may want to consider that a study by Tasha Eurich highlighted in the *Harvard Business Review* estimated that only 10-15 percent of people are self-aware (Eurich, 2018).

**Examples of Leadership Illusions and Their Consequences**

The following six real life examples illustrate that leadership illusions are a very real problem that can have significant consequences. Some examples are taken from a series of case books on leadership, leading change, and changing culture (Warrick & Mueller, 2011; 2012; 2014).

**Example 1:** A leader who is very intelligent and competent at many things but lacks leadership and people skills, thinks all is going well, but in reality, has created a culture of fear. The leader is skilled at management, finance, and achieving bottom line results, but is lacking in leadership and people skills and in building a culture of excellence characterized by open and candid communications, teamwork, and high morale. While he assumes that all is going well, his actions and overreactions and need to do things his way on his terms has created a culture of fear and an organization that is becoming increasingly...
dysfunctional. People tell him what he wants to hear, avoid being candid at the risk of real or imagined retribution, and find ways to stay out of trouble rather than operate at their full potential. Morale is sinking and his decisions, motives, and efforts to make changes are treated with suspicion. He is not trusted to look out for the best interest of his employees. He is out of touch with the realities of his organization and those he leads, and future results look questionable. He has put his organization, and possibly his career, in a vulnerable situation but he is the last to know the realities he is facing.

Example 2: A fast track, high potential middle level leader who is a favorite of top management for rapid promotion has a very different reputation among her peers and employees. You have probably witnessed a similar situation where both top-level management and a high potential person have blind spots that are having consequences that are not seen by either. The fast track leader is highly motivated, works long hours, and is known for doing whatever it takes to get people to deliver the desired results on time and on schedule. What the leaders don’t know is that among her peers and employees, she is known as a know-it-all, self-promoting, manipulative, not-to-be-trusted leader who is very congenial and supportive if she wants something, but can be abrupt, critical, rude, and demeaning if her direct reports do not do or say what she wants. This has resulted in leadership illusions on her part and the part of her leaders as she gets excellent feedback from the leaders and has no idea how she is seen by her peers and employees as she does not receive feedback well that she disagrees with. The leaders will likely continue to promote her based on assumptions that are only partially accurate. The illusions will eventually have costs to both the high potential leader and upper management if they are not corrected.

Example 3: A top level leader who is very confident and persuasive but rarely seeks the involvement or counsel of others launches an organization-wide change that requires considerable time and resources and makes little sense to those who must carry out the change. A member of an executive team of an organization is very confident in his ideas but lacks skills in listening to others, involving and engaging people in sharing ideas and making decisions, and in welcoming feedback or considering the implications of his decisions. He reads a book that recommends having every unit in the organization prepare a detailed report on its performance and value to the organization and purging the organization of low value operations. He assumes that this approach will be of considerable benefit to the organization and persuades the other top-level leaders to launch the program. However, he does not consider involving those impacted by the approach in evaluating the plan and its implications.

The leader launches his plan that occupies the time and resources of hundreds of units and thousands of employees throughout the organization. The approach pits organizations against one another as they all prepare reports favorable to their self-interest. There is considerable confusion about what should be in reports, how to rank order the units, how decisions will be made, and what constitutes a unit that may not be cost effective but is critical to the mission and success of the organization. Morale, teamwork, and trust are eroded, and the process becomes so demoralizing and confusing that basically nothing is changed. The leader did not solicit or receive feedback on the project and assumed that it failed because people are resistant to change. The leader will probably involve the organization in other time and resource consuming projects in the future and will be just as unlikely to be aware of the implications and consequences.

Example 4: A skilled and well-intended leader who wants to build an exceptional organization characterized by open and candid communications has gotten so busy that she has become out of touch and inaccessible and her approach to open communications is causing the opposite response to what she thinks. A capable leader who genuinely cares about her employees and wants to build something special is so swamped with meetings, e-mails, filling out reports, and trying to get bottom line results that she is becoming increasingly inaccessible and out of touch with the realities of her people and her organization. She also has a blind spot about how to achieve a goal that she is very passionate about. She is strongly desirous of candid and open communications, but her busyness has limited her communications with others and her approach to achieving candid and open communication is not well informed. She believes that setting an example of confrontational, in-your-face, tell-it-like-it-is communication will cause others to be more open. She is unaware that being so inaccessible and out of touch is affecting her decision making and credibility and that her approach to open and candid communications shuts down rather than encourages open communications. Dissension, frustration, and low morale in her organization is growing and she has no idea.

Example 5: A talented and respected leader makes an important decision without considering the implications, involving key stakeholders, or exploring innovative alternatives and causes a world-wide reaction that derails his career. One of the more interesting examples that should alert all of us to the potential for leadership illusions comes from a university President who was an outstanding leader and President but allowed a leadership illusion to derail his career and bring world-wide bad press to his university (Edgers & Schworm, 2009). During a recent global financial crisis, the university President was faced with declining revenues and endowments from donors and faced a shortfall of $10 million. The President and the Board of Trustees reasoned that a quick solution would be to sell off some of the art work assessed at over $350 million from their world-renowned art museum and possibly close the museum since attendance at the museum was somewhat low.

The decision made good sense to the President and Board of Trustees but their lack of involvement of key stakeholders in the decision or in exploring other possible alternatives resulted in a significant
leadership illusion regarding the reaction they would get. The museum board, Director, and employees were shocked and outraged as they learned of the decision second hand. Faculty leaders were deeply concerned that such a significant decision that affected the reputation of the university would be made without their input. Students let their voice be heard in various student outlets such as the university newspaper and the press. The story made the news across the US and art enthusiasts and associations from around the world condemned the decision and how it was made. The President eventually resigned.

Example 6: A leader has strong convictions about how to run an organization and how to get things done and is so convinced that he is right in his perceptions and ideas that no amount of feedback or information is likely to change his mind unless it agrees with his own thinking. While the leader is good at saying the right things, delegating responsibility, and even involving others in sharing ideas, in the final analysis, it is well-known that it is his way or the highway. While he sees himself as a skilled leader, he is known by his people as a micro manager who over-manages what goes on and how things are done. There is some evidence to suggest that if you disagree with him or he does not like you or something you are doing, you are likely to have consequences. He can be very charming in achieving his agendas and does have his followers who have learned how to please him and get along with him. However, he also has his share of those who do not trust him and do not like working for him. The turnover of people who work for him is quite high, but he believes that the reasons have little to do with him.

Hopefully, you are now seeing the picture of the significant potential costs of leadership illusions and the need to train leaders with skills in knowing reality before making decisions that can have undesirable consequences. While no one operates with a total sense of reality and while we all have illusions, there are ways to minimize our illusions and the potential consequences.

### Why Leaders Develop Leadership Illusions

Having worked with thousands of leaders in many types and sizes of organizations for over 45 years, I have noted ten patterns of how leaders develop leadership illusions that are likely to have consequences to the leaders, to those they lead, and to their organizations. There are no doubt other patterns that could be added but these ten will give leaders important considerations to be aware of.

1. **Having a leadership style that discourages openness and feedback.** There is considerable research available on the significant impact of a leader’s leadership style (for example, see Voon, Lo, Ngui, and Ayob, 2011; Warrick, 2016). However, few leaders seem to be aware of the possible positive and negative consequences of their style. A study of close to 4,000 leaders worldwide by the consulting and organizational research firm DDI, found that most front-line leaders lack the fundamental interaction skills and behaviors needed to be effective leaders and that senior leaders have even worse skills (Frasch, 2013). In the DDI study they also found that 90 percent of executives act before checking their understanding of an issue and are ineffective at inviting ideas from others. A large study by the Gallup organization showed that most leaders score low on emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. It takes aware and skilled leaders to create a safe environment for people to be open and candid. Unfortunately, many leaders have a leadership style that discourages openness and feedback. Their words, behaviors, and reactions may come in many forms, but they make it clear that it is risky to be open and candid and especially to provide feedback. These leaders place themselves and those they lead in potentially precarious situations because they train others to tell them what they want to hear and to avoid providing them valuable information and feedback.

2. **Assuming that you know more than you do.** Any time that leaders operate on assumptions that they do not check out, they run the risk of making faulty decisions based on faulty assumptions. This is particularly true of overly confident, strongly opinionated leaders who prefer to express their own ideas rather than listening to the ideas of others and who give the impression that they know all and see all and will ultimately do things their way on their terms. They make assumptions, assume that they are right without checking their assumptions out, and behave based on their assumptions. This can cause leaders to have a limited view of reality and to be the last to know when their assumptions are wrong.

3. **Personal blind spots that go unchecked.** It is unlikely that anyone has reached a level of perfection where they do not have any blind spots that need improving. Blind spots are areas of our behavior and life that others see that we do not see. For teachable and humble leaders who seek and welcome feedback, blind spots are usually fairly easy to correct. However, for leaders who by their actions and reactions discourage feedback, the blind spots continue and most likely grow. Blind spots can create disconnects between how leaders think they are seen and how they are actually seen, between the reality they are operating by and the reality that actually is, and between their perception of how their decisions are received and how they are actually received.

4. **Flawed knowledge, thinking, and paradigms.** We can be completely wrong, slightly wrong, or sincerely wrong about our knowledge, thinking, and paradigms, but the outcomes of being wrong will likely be the same. Leaders may not be knowledgeable about how to lead or about other skills they need or other things they need to know to do their job. Their lack of knowledge or possible flawed thinking or paradigms will influence their perceptions, reasoning, behaviors, and decisions unless they are cleared up. Leaders who have a high degree of awareness and are constantly learning and growing and are open to correcting flaws or gaps in their
knowledge, thinking, and paradigms will be less prone to this particular source of leadership illusions.

5. **Out-of-touch with present realities.** Unless leaders are committed to being in touch with the realities of those they lead and have an organized way to keep up to date on current events, best practices, and future trends that influence what they do, they can become out of touch with internal and external realities that impact their ability to be effective leaders. This is easy to do with the high pressure demands to get results, do more with less, and meet institutional demands and government regulations. Leaders can easily become preoccupied with performance, meetings, electronic communications, and busywork, keeping them increasingly inaccessible and detached from the realities of those they lead. However, it does not change the fact that making important decisions without being in touch with present realities can have significant implications.

6. **Not understanding the importance of involvement and wise counsel.** Many leaders either do not understand the importance of involvement and seeking wise counsel before making important decisions or they do not have good skills in involving others and seeking wise counsel. Therefore, leadership decisions are often made without the benefit of input and buy-in from key stakeholders or contributors who could provide valuable input into decisions and their implications.

7. **Not understanding the value of good listening skills.** One of the most important skills a leader needs to develop to avoid leadership illusions is good listening skills. Good listening skills require more than being silent while someone else is talking. It is important for leaders to create a climate that invites open and safe communications, to draw others out, and to listen more than they talk. Unfortunately, leaders are not typically known for their listening skills. They are more likely to not be that interested in listening to the thoughts and ideas of others, to be over-confident in their own thinking, and to dominate conversations, all of which limit what they can learn and know from others.

8. **Listening to the wrong people.** Just as problematic as not listening is listening to the wrong people. Leaders sometimes rely on information from people that do not provide reliable information or wise counsel or who have ulterior or self-serving motives. An article in the *Harvard Business Review* (DeSteno, 2014) points out how important it is for leaders to know who they can trust. Bad decisions have been made and careers sometimes ruined by trusting and listening to the wrong people.

9. **Convictions and personal agendas that go unchallenged.** An extreme form of leadership illusions occurs when leaders have such strong and often wrong thinking, convictions, agendas, and motives that no amount of feedback, data, or counsel can influence their pre-conceived ideas. This happens particularly in the political or activist arena where facts may have little influence on perceptions, realities, and decisions. However, it can also happen when leaders have uninformed or wrong paradigms about leadership and how to build a successful organization and when leaders are over-confident and assume they are right regardless of the contrary information they receive.

10. **Organizational dynamics.** This source of leadership illusions was included last because it is clearly one of the most common causes of leadership illusions. Unless organizations have excellent leaders committed to building healthy organizations and cultures and to keeping people well-informed, leaders are often lacking in the information they need to do their jobs and at best get incomplete, conflicting, and inconsistent information. Add to this a culture that is somewhat dysfunctional and does not value openness, teamwork, and collaboration, and the result is leaders at all levels trying to make decisions based on faulty information and assumptions. This tends to create a blame game culture where leaders avoid making needed decisions knowing they will be blamed for things going wrong.

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Ideas for Increasing Leader Awareness and Minimizing Leadership Illusions

Ten ideas are presented that can improve skills in increasing leader awareness and minimizing leadership illusions (See Table 1). You can well imagine how much more effective leaders would be if they significantly increased their self awareness and decreased their leadership illusions. The ideas discussed below can be taught in leadership development programs and can be coached by organization development professionals in helping leaders build healthy, high performance organizations and lead and manage change.
1. Develop a leadership style that encourages open and candid communications. This is the most critical of all the solutions. If a leadership style does not encourage open and candid communications, the other solutions will be suspect and limited in their effectiveness. It is well documented that humble and approachable leaders who genuinely care about others, have good people skills, and have good emotional intelligence not only create a climate of openness that encourages candid communications and feedback, but are also likely to achieve results far above the norm (Collins, 2001; Goleman, 1995; Tischler, 2005). An effective leadership style invites open and straightforward communication and encourages others to provide helpful feedback that makes it possible to correct personal blind spots.

Leadership theories regarding leadership style typically encourage leaders to develop a leadership style that places a strong emphasis on people and performance (Warrick, 2016; Cuddy, Kohut, & Neffinger, 2011). This balanced approach to leadership where leaders treat people with considerable respect and value and motivate people to perform at a high-level, builds credibility, trust, and confidence in leaders that helps create a culture of open and candid communication.

As mentioned previously in this article, specifics on developing a leadership style that increases awareness and minimizes leadership illusions can be found particularly in leadership books and articles on Servant Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Transformational Leadership, Positive Leadership, Humble Leadership, and Authentic Leadership. Servant Leadership focuses on serving others, placing the needs of others above your own, helping others learn, grow, and develop, and seeing a leader’s primary role as service to employees, customers, shareholders, communities, and the general public (Greenleaf, 1970). Emotional Intelligence (EI) emphasizes that the heart (emotions) and mind (intelligence) must work together in managing yourself and your relationships. EI relies on skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman, 1995). Transformational Leadership requires leaders to create a culture of openness, engagement, and collaboration so leaders and employees can work together to achieve high level goals (Bass, 1985). Positive Leadership emphasizes creating a positive work climate, developing positive relationships, using positive communications, and making work positive and meaningful. All of these efforts help create a climate of trust and openness (Cameron, 2012). Humble Leadership is essential for creating a culture where leaders are approachable and where you can be open and candid with leaders without fear of retribution. There is increasing research that suggests that the leaders of the future will need to be humble enough to diligently seek and listen to the ideas of others in order to be aware enough and on top of reality enough to succeed (Hess & Ludwig, 2017). Authentic Leadership emphasizes the importance of leaders being self-aware, genuine, fair-minded, doing what is right, and being transparent (George & Sims, 2007; Luthans & Avello, 2003).

2. Encourage and solicit helpful and accurate feedback. This is related to the first solution but much broader. A wise leader will make a practice of welcoming and soliciting appropriate feedback from trusted people and sources. The focus could be on the leader’s leadership style and its consequences, on what is going on in the organization that the leader may not be aware of, and on other relevant information and possible blind spots. Leaders can increase their self-awareness and awareness of what is going on by using informal and formal methods such as asking questions that will provide valuable feedback and using questionnaires and interviews to gather relevant information pertaining to how they lead and how the organization they lead is doing. It can particularly be helpful to gain feedback from 360-degree questionnaires and interviews that typically provide self-ratings as well as ratings from a leader’s manager, direct reports, and peers. Some assessments are best done by professionals that can provide a process for finding out what is going on and help interpret the results and provide follow-up coaching.

3. Seek involvement, collaboration, and wise counsel before making important decisions. To avoid making foolish assumptions and decisions, it is important for leaders to learn to involve the appropriate people in the decision-making process, to value collaboration and the ideas of others rather than thinking they see all and know all, and to have at least a few trusted people from which they can seek wise counsel. Leaders particularly should involve knowledgeable people in evaluating the potential implications of decisions, and when they do make decisions, to build in progress reports so that needed corrections can be made.

4. Listen more than you talk, use speech that encourages open dialogue, and learn to be discerning about who can be trusted to give candid and objective information. It takes discipline and self-control for leaders to learn to listen more than they talk and use speech that encourages open communication. Leaders need to develop skills in humbly “drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person,” (Schein, 2013). They also need to learn to choose wisely what they say, how they say it, and when they say it to encourage vital and candid dialogue and not unintentionally discourage open communication. There is no great virtue in “telling it like it is” and “saying what you think and feel” without doing so in helpful rather than harmful ways. It is also important for leaders to be discerning about who they listen to and who will provide information in a straightforward, concise way without exaggeration or the infusion of personal agendas.
5. **Check out assumptions before assuming they are accurate.** It is important for leaders to learn to check out their assumptions. Especially over-confident leaders can tend to assume that their perceptions, ideas, paradigms, and convictions are correct and therefore are prone to acting without checking their assumptions out. This can result in faulty thinking that can lead to faulty decisions. The solution to avoiding this potential for developing leadership illusions, like the solution to avoiding many other leadership assumptions, is to check out assumptions with informed and knowledgeable people before proceeding as if they are true.

6. **Develop and continuously improve an effective communication system.** Effective, two-way communication is essential to avoiding leadership illusions. It can be helpful for leaders to involve key people in planning a system for communicating and keeping people informed. The communication system may include, for example, the types of meetings that are needed, how often to meet, and what meetings should include. It could also include various ways to keep people informed and to communicate the information people need to know to do their jobs well and ways to periodically evaluate and improve the communication system.

7. **Plan ways to stay in-touch, engaged, and involved, and do regular reality checks.** Faced with the many demands that preoccupy the time and priorities of leaders, leaders can get out of touch with the realities of the organizations they lead and assume that all is going well while the organization is regressing (Warrick, 2002). Leaders need to have planned ways to be visible, accessible, and engaged and to stay in touch with the realities surrounding their jobs. This can be done with regularly scheduled, well-planned, and purposeful face-to-face or virtual meetings, brief reports, quick reality check surveys that track performance and cultural essentials, arranged focus group meetings, and specific meetings in which the leaders are involved to evaluate what is going on and what needs to be done or improved. It is also helpful to assign people with the responsibility of keeping current in key areas and to share what they have learned. Bringing in those impacted by what a leader’s group does can also be helpful. Especially important is focusing on both performance and people indicators.

8. **Develop an organized way to stay up-to-date and skilled at what you do.** In such a fast-moving world, it is also important for leaders to have an organized way to personally stay up-to-date and skilled at what they do. It can be helpful, for example, for leaders to subscribe to one or more management journals like the Harvard Business Review and a few journals in their area of expertise and to attend at least one valuable association meeting or conference each year that exposes participants to the latest thinking, trends, and best practices. It can also be helpful for leaders to have good internal or external contacts, consultants, or coaches they have access to who they can rely on for wise counsel and keeping up-to-date. Without an organized way to stay up-to-date, it is easy for leaders to rely on what they used to know and do and to become increasingly less effective and out-of-touch with current best practices.

9. **Involve the appropriate people in building a healthy, high performance organization and culture.** An excellent way to minimize leadership illusions is to create an on-going process for involving the appropriate people in identifying and managing what it would take to build a healthy, high performance organization and culture. The dialogues involved in implementing decisions in building the organization and culture will keep leaders and those they lead well informed about the organization and what is working and what needs to be improved (Lencioni, 2012). Keep in mind that the more poorly led and run dysfunctional the organization and organization culture is, the greater will be the potential for leadership illusions throughout the organization. This is another area where it may be helpful to engage internal or external professional expertise.

10. **Provide training, consulting, or coaching.** This last point is perhaps the best way to help leaders avoid leadership illusions. Providing training that presents concepts and skills similar to those presented in this paper has the advantage of reaching a larger population of leaders and of creating a group learning dynamic that is more likely to change behavior than encouraging leaders to make improvements on their own. Training can also be complimented by working with consultants or an executive coach.

**Implications for Leaders and Training and Coaching Leaders**

This article has important implications for leaders, for training leaders, and for organization development professionals who are helping leaders build healthy, high performance organizations and manage change. Leader effectiveness is significantly influenced by a leader’s self-awareness and clear sense of reality. Blind spots in self-awareness and miss-perceptions in understanding what is going on, what it will take to succeed, and in effectively managing change will lead to leadership illusions that can have consequences to a leader’s effectiveness, the effectiveness and morale of those leaders lead, and to the organizations and groups leaders lead. Making leaders aware of the importance of self-awareness and minimizing leadership illusions and training leaders in skills in being more self-aware and aware of the realities they need to know to be effective can have considerable payoffs to leaders and those they lead. The article presents an area of leadership development and coaching that should be given careful consideration in preparing leaders, groups, and organizations to succeed.
References


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