

# The Michael Scott Syndrome

The real voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes but in seeing with new eyes.

—Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*

Have you seen an episode of the TV show *The Office*? It's a comical mockumentary revolving around Michael Scott (the main character, who is played by Steve Carell). He's the manager of a small, and increasingly struggling, fictitious paper company called Dunder Mifflin. One reason his character is so entertaining to watch is that he unknowingly embodies the leader who remains completely unaware of his own contradictory philosophies, offensive insecurities, and oblivious way of constantly insulting people. He's relationally awkward in dealing with his employees and remains blind to any and all of his limitations. Although he's awkwardly and obnoxiously funny, he is mostly naïve in his motives, and he projects

his underdeveloped self-awareness into the culture of his work environment and personal life, which produces frequent laughter from his TV audience. (If you haven't seen *The Office*, you're missing the best comedy on TV.)

Michael Scott represents the stereotypical supervisor who has no idea how his employers and friends view him. He's blind to his own dysfunctions, and completely unaware of all the contradictions in his leadership philosophy and practices. His inconsistencies are obvious to everyone, except of course himself. In one episode, he is interviewing for a job and is asked to list his strengths and weaknesses. (Don't you love this question in an interview?)

Michael tells the interviewer that he works harder than he should; he cares more than he ought, and he invests too much time and effort into his work. The interviewer looks puzzled and then asks Michael to tell him what his strengths are. With annoyance in his voice, Michael tells the interviewer, Oh don't you see? My weaknesses and my strengths are the same.

This scene reveals how he views himself—and isn't it like the way we sometimes view ourselves as well? We don't acknowledge our weaknesses, usually because we don't even realize what they are or because we prefer trying to hide them from others. Over and over again, Michael demonstrates complete unawareness about any of his limitations, not to mention having no sense of how others view him.

When someone lacks self-awareness, I refer to this dynamic as the Michael Scott Syndrome, because Michael is the epitome of *self-UNawareness*. Unfortunately, his prognosis is not good because he isn't actively seeking a cure for his syndrome. Instead, he embodies the mantra "ignorance is bliss." As a result, he remains blind to the reality of his relational world, and his leadership attempts suffer greatly. All along, the truth about him is painfully obvious to everyone else.

Even though *The Office* exaggerates these dynamics for the sake of comedy, it does illustrate how lack of self-awareness is

one of the most prominent obstacles to RI. We all could probably name a few people who have the syndrome, whether we see them at work, in our personal lives, or in other leadership arenas. Maybe it's that boss who always stereotypes people, but doesn't even realize it—and it's always offensive and insensitive. Or maybe it's a coworker who doesn't realize how irresponsible he or she is but always talks about how other people are being irresponsible.

The truth is, every one of us creates a certain relational culture around us that can have a negative or positive effect. Like Michael, we inject our personality, our value system, our emotions, and whatever our own level of relational *unintelligence* is into these contexts. The more we lack self-awareness, the more potential there is to create a negative environment where we constantly offend people because we don't understand their point of view, or we hurt people's feelings regularly because we lack sensitivity to what they're going through. Our inability to see our own limitations will stifle our ability to build and establish smart relationships.

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It may not surprise you to know that the Michael Scott Syndrome (MSS) is an epidemic. In fact, in my (not exactly) in-depth, formal, and scientific research, I've discovered that ten out of ten people are afflicted with some degree of MSS. No one can escape the contagious effects of this disease—not even you. The temptation is to notice this illness in others but fail to take an honest look at yourself. MSS is a syndrome we all must face. When we sit on the outside looking in, believing we are unaffected by this syndrome, we keep our own relational intelligence from growing. If we stay on the outside, others will be able to see our flaws, but we'll never step forward to identify and overcome them. The truth is, we all have a little bit of Michael Scott in us. If we want to be cured from the syndrome, we need

to move from the comfortable idea of ignorance being bliss toward engaging the life-changing reality of self-awareness . . . with honesty, vulnerability, and courage.

### **An Inside Look**

Many leadership gurus, spiritual sages, and people of great influence zero in on the far-reaching effects that lack of awareness can have on people's relationships with one another. Jesus himself addressed this issue of lacking self-awareness in Matthew 7. In this encounter in the Scriptures, a group of people gather around to listen to Him teach. Toward the end of what some call the Sermon on the Mount, He offers advice about the danger of personal dishonesty and pride when it comes to how we tend to deal with our own blind spot:

Jesus said to a crowd of people, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck of sawdust out of your eye,' and all along there is a log in your own eye?" You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."<sup>1</sup>

In this teaching, Jesus addresses the instinctive human drift toward comparison, hypocrisy, and arrogance, toward looking at others with a more critical eye than we use for ourselves. He knew that we only loosely hold ourselves to the standards we so dogmatically enforce for others. When we focus our critical attention on others, we tend to become judgmental, proud, and hypocritical. This is why he emphasized looking critically at our

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own life first before pointing out the deficits of others. He knew that most people, no matter how mature they perceive themselves to be, consistently fail to take a humble and honest look at themselves. Our inherent challenge is that we're acutely attuned to dysfunction when we see it in others, but significantly slower to recognize it in ourselves. We move toward making judgments of the people around us before turning that judgment inward. And sometimes we don't stop there. For a variety of reasons, we may even exaggerate the flaws of others, while minimizing our own.

I certainly am guilty of minimizing my own flaws and magnifying those of others. Sometimes I find myself talking negatively and critically about a mistake that a friend made even though I've made the same mistake many times. When I spot something another person did poorly, I sometimes want to tell someone else about it to make myself feel better about me. If I think someone doesn't tell the whole truth, I want to think of her as a liar because it makes me feel nobler. If someone gives a good talk, I may try to find one thing he didn't do well and tell other people who ask me about it, to put him down and lift myself up.

However this plays out in my life, it's often fueled by my own insecurities and selfishness. It can come from a variety of unhealthy motives, a dysfunctional competitiveness that creeps into my spirit. It may also derive from jealousy or envy, or it can even be pure arrogance, as if I think I'm somehow better than others. Whatever fuels it on a particular day, I know it's a flawed part of me, while it's also revealing of my own skewed perspective. Not only that, I know it can damage a relationship I have with someone if I don't monitor these motives and keep them in check. I'd like to say that I'm always positive about people, and that I don't struggle with insecurity, jealousy, or arrogance. But in the moments that I'm not proud of, I find myself zeroing in on the speck in someone else's eye while ignoring the log in my own.

## Work in Progress

When we engage the quest for self-awareness, we're reminded of our humanity—in both our beauty and our brokenness. Knowing our limitations ought not to discourage us, however; instead it can remind us that we are all works in progress, that God is working faithfully in our lives to complete the work that He started. This is part of what it means to live in the human economy, traveling through life together and connecting to God and people in a profoundly human way. This human way involves embracing the fullness of who we are—the good and the bad parts, the beauty and the brokenness—and remembering that to be human means to be imperfect and flawed, while simultaneously being God's unimaginable masterpiece and treasure.

When Bono, the social activist and lead singer of the band U2, was asked about how he viewed himself, he said, "I do see the good in people, but I also see the bad—I see it in myself. I know what I'm capable of, good and bad. It's very important that we make that clear. Just because I often find a way around the darkness doesn't mean that I don't know it's there."<sup>2</sup> Human beings have both good and bad in them, and the journey of transformation is moving toward more good and less bad. Maybe this is a more extensive journey for us to embrace this reality deeper, but at a foundational level we must understand the profound implications this has for our leadership and relationships. This journey involves beginning to fully embrace ourselves as God does, in our beauty and our brokenness, in our goodness and our deficiencies, in our light and our darkness.

The less accurately we see ourselves, the easier it is to forget our humanity, and even lose sight of who we are in God's eyes. No matter how many flaws, deficits, or dysfunctions we have, we can be reminded that God's love for us never changes. His perspective of every human being is always filled with the fullness of His love, and that's what we hold in dynamic tension of being both humbly honest about our flaws and at the same time

confident in who we've been created to be. This is the journey toward true and authentic self-discovery.

## An Unexamined Life

The *Harvard Business Review* published an article titled “Discovering Your Authentic Leadership.” In it are the results of the largest in-depth study ever undertaken on how authentic leadership fuels effectiveness and success. The article describes a critical component that every great leader needs in his or her journey toward authentic leadership. In one study, when seventy-five members of the Stanford Graduate School of Business Advisory Council were asked to recommend the most important capability for leaders to develop, their answer was nearly unanimous: self-awareness.<sup>3</sup> In this article we discover the truth that if we want to gain an accurate view of ourselves, we must consistently invest in *our internal growth potential*, not just in our external success. This article reveals that an unexamined life is an ineffective life.

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When we find the courage to look inside without allowing the filters of self-protection and self-preservation to blind us, it opens up a vista to personal growth that we never thought possible. We'll begin to see how we sometimes short-circuit our relationships, and how we use our power and influence inappropriately. As our self-awareness goes up, our relational intelligence goes up. This is why self-awareness is critical to learning this new way of being smart.

## Seeing with New Eyes

I was practically blind when I was a teenager, and didn't even know it. When my mom took me to the eye doctor for the first

time, the optometrist asked me what I did for fun, and I told him I played baseball. With a perplexed look on his face, he asked, “How exactly do you see the ball?”

My mom immediately interjected with concern: “What do you mean?”

The doctor said, “Your son can’t see the ball until it’s six inches from his face.”

I had a hard time absorbing what he had just said because this was a shocking discovery for me. I always thought that everyone else saw what I saw. It never crossed my mind that I had poor eyesight. As you can imagine, my immediate solution was to get prescription lenses that would help me see more clearly, and what followed changed my baseball future.

After I got contact lenses during the middle of my high school baseball season, my batting average skyrocketed. At first, my coaches and teammates thought that luck was on my side. But when it turned into weeks of continued improvement, they were curious to know the real reason behind my new success. I had begun the season as a mediocre hitter but soon maintained the highest batting average on the team. In one season, my batting average climbed more than a hundred points, and my improved ability to see catapulted my baseball career into another dimension. In fact, a few years later I went on to receive a Division One baseball scholarship to the University of South Carolina (and by the way, that’s the *real* USC, founded long before the University of Southern California).

My growing success in baseball traced back to identifying my greatest limitation: my inability to see clearly. After the doctor helped me make the necessary adjustments to improve my vision, the results that followed were extraordinary. I was opened up to a whole new world of seeing what I never saw before. I could see more clearly what I was swinging at, and I hit the ball with more force, precision, and impact.



## Prescribing a New Lens

The path toward increasing our greatest leadership impact begins with honestly acknowledging our inability to see ourselves clearly. As we acknowledge our blind spots and identify our limitations, we can make adjustments that allow us to improve our vision, and we can begin to develop a new level of ability that strengthens our leadership force, precision, and impact. We may never be able to eliminate all our blind spots, but the more we can acknowledge them the more we deny their power over us. Other people will start to wonder about the secret to our new success, and our new success will be seen in how we relate to people. They will see healthier, deeper, and more connected relationships. They will see trust and credibility emerge quickly, and they'll watch as it creates exponential leadership influence. They'll see not just an expanding quantity of relationships, but a growing quality in them.

Let's say your blind spot is that people on your teams see you as intimidating and unapproachable, but you don't see yourself that way. This may result in others not offering their opinions or suggestions in team meetings because you make them feel uncomfortable. Or it may result in a surface-level relationship because people don't feel safe with you, and therefore they remain relationally distant to protect themselves. But if you begin to recognize this reality in your relationships, you can be more intentional about identifying how you interact with people and how you might come across as intimidating or relationally unsafe. In the effort to overcome your tendency to be perceived as intimidating, you can be more intentional about inviting people to give their suggestions, and you can affirm them when they do offer their opinion in front of you.

Lack of awareness can manifest in many ways. Maybe you always contradict yourself and don't realize it, and it results in having less credibility with those around you. Maybe people don't feel as valued by you as you think they do, and instead they feel used but you don't even know it. Or maybe you don't

collaborate with the people on your teams as well as you think you do and your team members conclude it's a one-man show—and you don't even realize it. Whatever your blind spots are, remember that we all have them, and the journey is to recognize them as clearly as possible to help us overcome their negative effects in our relational world and leadership endeavors.

### Curing the Condition

We've discussed why self-awareness is so critical to RI and identified the importance of clarity and awareness in the growth process. Now, let's identify three life habits that can help increase your self-awareness and RI. These are habits, which means they're not something you do once; they are intended to become a new way of living that will lead to increased RI over time. This will help us cure the condition of MSS that we all have.

#### Habit One: Learn to Access the Perceptions of Those Around You

Have you ever seen a photograph of yourself and thought, "That doesn't look anything like me?" Maybe it wasn't the best angle. Maybe it wasn't your most attractive moment. Maybe you even felt like a celebrity who had a distorted portrait that was published in *People* magazine. But

It might be hard to admit it, but photographs don't lie. You just don't always get to see yourself from the angle that others see you from, or that you want them to see you from.

when you see a photograph of yourself that "doesn't look anything like you," unfortunately this is indeed what you looked like from that vantage point, on that day. You just don't always get to see yourself from the angle

that others see you from, or that you want them to see you from. It might be hard to admit it, but photographs don't lie (except in *People* magazine).

This same dynamic is revealed in leadership. There is a discrepancy between leaders' view of themselves and others' view of them. The truth is, the people around us are often much more discerning than what we give them credit for. Because it is impossible to see ourselves accurately from every vantage point, we need to learn how to access the perceptions of those around us. They can be our greatest gift in self-discovery, but it takes intention and courage to identify those perceptions. Perhaps we fear knowing what they are, or maybe we underestimate their importance. As leaders we need mirrors in the form of the people in our lives who can help us see from a variety of angles and allow us to see ourselves accurately.

A friend of mine was caught off guard recently, when someone he highly respected told him, "In some ways, you are better than you think you are, but in other ways, you are not as good as you think you are." Think about that for a moment. On the one hand, this person, whom my friend respects, is addressing his overinflated view of himself. On the other hand, he's pointing out that he is falling short of his potential (and he knows it). Sometimes we see ourselves better than we are and remain out of touch with our deficits. Other times, we feel like an inadequate failure because we're not living up to who we know we can be. No matter which side we're standing on, we're often afraid to hear the truth about ourselves. Sometimes the fear of being exposed stops us from the pursuit of honesty from those around us. When I was a kid, my favorite cartoon show was *G.I. Joe*. Every day after school, I raced home to watch it because I was enthralled with the guns that shot red and blue light beams. My favorite combat soldiers were Snake Eyes and Flint, and I especially loved when they all yelled in concert, "Yoooo, Joe!!" As I got older, my friends stopped watching cartoons like *G.I. Joe* and moved on (to more mature after-school shows such as *Saved by the Bell*). But I wasn't quite ready to let go, so I'd strategically not invite my friends over after school anymore because I didn't want them to know that I still watched it. I hid this secret

life for a long time, and then I just decided to come out of the closet. Even today, I secretly want to collect the newest *G.I. Joe* figures (which I've discovered you can still find at Toys "R" Us).

As adults, we often face similar dynamics of hiding things from others that we don't want them to see. In an effort to maintain a better image of ourselves, we fuel our own naïve belief that people don't see our flaws, insecurities, limitations, and even weaknesses. We subtly convince ourselves that every thought they have about us is positive. Or maybe we think they are not scrutinizing our motives simply because we haven't scrutinized ourselves. Truth is, there are many people who can see us with uncanny precision, especially if we are in a leadership position, because they watch more closely than we think. They see how our flaws affect our relationships, and they often see it better than we do. People can even sense whether we're healthy or unhealthy by recognizing the invisible motives that drive our behavior. They can often tell when we're being manipulative, and they can usually sense when we're using people for our own selfish agenda. They can discern when we're genuine and when we truly want the best for people. If our outcomes are successful, they even know when we're shortcutting the appropriate process or when we're doing everything with integrity. People watch how all this affects our interactions, and ultimately our capacity to lead and influence them.

Knowing that some may see us more clearly than we see ourselves, why wouldn't we invite them to share their perceptions to help us navigate our complex inner world? Sure, it's dangerous, a little scary, and vulnerable to invite them in. And though you certainly don't need to invite anybody and everybody into that intimate space, those who can be trusted may have more insight to offer than you've ever known. People don't always offer their opinions in a healthy and constructive way, so you must ask. If you don't ask for it, you may never get it. What often helps is to ask someone to think about it for a few days, and then you can initiate getting together with them

after they've had time to think about it. This usually helps them think through the best way to say it to you so that you'll receive it, understand it, and be better off for it.

These insights and vantage points of others can contribute profoundly to improving your RI and ultimately expanding your influence with others. We may be tempted to ignore the implications of other people's perceptions because we falsely believe that our position, or level of status, automatically ensures trust and respect. But instead of ignoring people's perceptions or pretending we don't have flaws, we ought to find wise and appropriate ways to benefit from them. Remember, it begins by simply asking.

### *Relationships of Honesty*

Seeking to gain a view of ourselves that is more accurate doesn't mean that everyone else's view is always correct, nor does it mean that our view is always incorrect. But it does mean that others play an important role when it comes to increasing self-awareness. To become more relationally intelligent, we must learn to foster and receive feedback from people who can extract insight from some of our best moments, as well as from some of our worst. This sparks new dimensions of self-discovery.

A few years ago, I had a defining moment in my life that brought both pain and truth. What led me to this moment started back in college when I had a life-changing encounter with Jesus. In the weeks that followed, friends of mine recognized the changes happening in me, and they began asking me for spiritual guidance. I was young, so I'm not sure how much my advice helped. In those weeks, however, my passion was ignited to guide people in their spiritual curiosity and introduce them to what it meant to have a relationship with God. This passion drove me to help people in their spiritual journey. At one point, I decided to live out this passion as a church planter, which I believed was the optimal way for me to have an impact.

For the next few years, I trained to become a church planter. I paid thousands of dollars and spent hundreds of hours in study,

internships, personal development, and mentoring relationships. I pursued planting a church every step of the way. I was 100 percent invested in this pursuit.

One night I had dinner with a mentor whom I admired. He knew me well, and as we discussed my future I asked for advice on my church planting endeavors. I had always given a lot of weight to his insight about me. After I told him my thoughts, plans, and strategy, he looked across the table with a spirit of love and honesty, and by his demeanor I knew he was going to say something I didn't expect. What he told me was difficult for me to hear, as he said, "Steve, I don't think you'd be the best church planter."

Ouch.

I was shocked, offended, disappointed, and hurt. In that moment, I was hoping for affirmation, encouragement, and support, but instead I received his gut-level honesty. All those years, all that money, all that investment—for him to tell me that? Who knew that one simple statement could create such chaos and disappointment within me?

But in the coming weeks, as I thought about what he had said and talked with others who knew me, I realized he was more right than I wanted to admit. It certainly wasn't an easy process for me, but this defining moment reminded me of the importance of having people in my life who are willing to tell me the unfiltered truth about what they see in me. It doesn't mean they're always right, but these types of relationships are what every leader needs to become relationally intelligent. To engage in honest relationships like this helps us improve our RI. If I had not invited this mentor to speak honestly with me, I might have continued down a path that would not have been my most optimal route. He helped me see what I couldn't see, and it's helped me further my leadership potential in ways I would never have imagined.

Of course, we must be wise in whom we invite into that intimate relational space to speak honestly into our lives and address what we might not see clearly. I remember one day when I left the stage after speaking, and someone walked backstage to

find me. She held up a full page of written feedback about things she said she had to tell me so that I could be a better speaker. I said firmly but graciously, “Thanks for offering your feedback, but I have other people who know me well whom I’ve already asked for input.” It was a thanks-but-no-thanks moment as I tried to handle her lack of relational intelligence in the most gracious but firm way possible.

Certainly, there will be people who attempt to enter whom we haven’t invited to have a voice in our lives, but there are appropriate ways to create boundaries for them. In an effort to improve our approach, here are a few brief guidelines on whom to invite into that space. These are ideal, and of course we may not necessarily find all of these facets in one person, but they can serve to guide us.

Is willing to be honest, but speaks the truth in love  
 Recognizes our potential and believes the best in us  
 Embodies gentle strength  
 Has a humble desire to be helpful and serve us well  
 Is seen as wise and insightful  
 Knows us well and has the ability to be specific in feedback  
 Is trustworthy

Don’t forget to be this kind of person yourself.

In choosing whom we bring into personal and honest conversation, we need to look for people who are willing to be honest enough with us to say difficult things that might be hard to hear. Along the way, of course, we should not limit our openness only to people who simply make us feel better about ourselves. In fact, there should definitely be some people who practically make us nervous about what they might say because they are willing to be so completely honest. Many times, if the conversation becomes painful, it often means they’re closing in on a persistent blind spot. These kinds of relationships enlighten us; we begin to see ourselves with new eyes and, as a result, increase our relational intelligence.

## A Word of Caution: Knowing the Truth About Yourself

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In seeking people to help you identify your blind spots, don't limit yourself to those who always agree with you. People who are yes-men say things that make us feel good, which everyone seems to enjoy. But that's not going to help us much in unveiling our blind spots. Many of us create circles of friends who are yes-men because we are afraid of the truth. Our ego is so fragile that we'd rather avoid the pain that comes with honesty and truth. But if we want honest feedback and input about our relationships, leadership, and even character, then it will demand courage to overcome these unseen yet powerful fears, and invite others into our vulnerable relational space.

Finding honest relationships doesn't necessarily need to be a formal process. It's more about a lifestyle of inviting people into our relational space where we let them openly speak into our lives. This is about inviting people to analyze, critique, and evaluate us—hopefully in the spirit of love. It's about freeing people to make suggestions that help us grow in self-awareness, and ultimately in RI. Then of course we must decide what to do with their input and feedback.

### *Voices of Wisdom*

There's a proverb that says, "Wisdom shouts from the rooftops." This is absolutely true, but it's amazing how we continuously find ways to ignore it. Wisdom is available to us in many forms and from many places. One of the primary places to find it is in the people around us, whom we trust and respect. But it is our responsibility to turn our attention to accessing that wisdom from the voices of people we trust and respect. We are responsible for inviting their honesty, and if we do we'll be tapping into an unlimited resource to help us on our journey toward self-discovery. When we as leaders value honest relationships as a way of life, it has a ripple effect on how it affects others.



## Habit Two: Learn to Activate the Reflective Mind Within You

Another way to cure the Michael Scott Syndrome is through learning to activate the reflective mind within us. By this I mean the consistent habit of gaining insight through replaying situations in our minds. Every one of us has the ability to reflect and learn from it. The best athletes in the world watch films of previous games so they can see and learn from what they did well, and what they did poorly. They often spend hours and hours studying their performance in an effort to become the best they can be because they know that an unexamined life is an ineffective life. Too often we don't pay close enough attention to examining our relational interactions, which as a result causes us to keep making the same mistakes time and time again.

Recently, I was watching Oprah (as I was just passing by the TV, of course) interviewing a family from a reality TV program about their everyday life. The show is called *Little People, Big World*. It's an inside look at a family of little people going about their everyday lives. At one point, Oprah turned to the father of the family and asked, "What are the challenges of having your lives so exposed on film for the world to see?" He said, "Actually, it's been less of a challenge and more of a catalyst for growth in my personal development." He went on to describe that he watches every episode after it is filmed. As he watches, he observes the nuances of his interactions with his family. He sees his moods, behaviors, and attitudes, as well as noticing how his values are fleshed out in his everyday relationships.

He recalled one specific example when he was watching an episode. While he was working on his computer, his son walked up and asked him a question. As he watched the replay of this scene, he saw the subtle annoyance he expressed because of the interruption. By his own admission, he realized that this was a missed opportunity with his son. In essence, he had lacked RI in that moment. In the unconscious awareness of his aggravation,

he pushed his son away and unknowingly hurt the boy's feelings. From that moment on, he decided he was never again going to make his computer a priority over his son. He described how he never would have seen the impact of his actions, and the subtle posture of his heart toward his son, if he had not seen it on camera afterward. He explained how it made him sad to see how unaware he was of his own interpersonal behavior.

Most of us don't have the luxury of pulling out the films of our reality show so we can work to become better men or women, but we are capable of watching the ins and outs of our daily lives in the context of our mind. Through our thoughts, we can replay the virtual video of our actions, attitudes, and words as they relate to our interactions with others. We can reflect on how we treat and interact with others, how our conversation could have gone better, or how our mood negatively affected a certain scenario.

I try to walk away from every leadership team meeting I lead reflecting on what I could I have done differently. For example, I may ask myself what I could have added to the conversation, or what I should not have said that I now regret. I sometimes wonder what results, outcomes, or goals came from the meeting, and I ponder whether the decisions were the right ones. I ask questions of this kind and ponder the flow of the meeting in my mind, hoping to learn. I know that I don't have control of what other people say or do, but I always try to learn how I could have said or done something better in that meeting. And if I said something that offended someone else, I try to apologize, or at least check in with that person to make sure everything is all right between us. These reflections help me think more thoroughly about relational dynamics and inevitably help me increase my RI.

### *The Cost of Reflection*

If you're wondering why more people don't practice more reflective thinking, I wonder the same thing. I'm not convinced that we don't value reflection, but I do think we tend to avoid the

cost that comes with practicing it because the cost involves time, effort, and sometimes even personal pain. As we replay a specific situation, we may realize how and why we failed, and this can be hard to swallow. When our failure to execute produces negative consequences, it bothers us because we realize it could have gone differently. We see how one altered decision could have changed the negative outcome. And when we see these painful mistakes, we also become more sensitive to our regrets. All this is hard to deal with because we realize what we should have done and where we didn't measure up. At the same time, mistakes create a context for transformational learning.

There are other costs of reflection that may involve going back to fix a problem we created or mend a broken relationship. But no matter the cost, developing the discipline of reflection is worth it because it can accelerate our growth in self-awareness, and therefore enhance the quality and depth of our relationships. If you engage this quest to become more self-aware, you'll hurt people less, help people more, and create a distinctly more positive relational culture around you.

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### Habit Three: Write Clarifying Statements

The third habit to develop involves gaining clarity. If we think of our blind spots in vague terms, it's much like telling a doctor that we are in pain without clarifying where the pain is. Not knowing the location of the pain is unhelpful to the doctor because her treatment or prescription is entirely dependent on our ability to describe where the pain is and what it feels like. This is sometimes what we do with our blind spots: we know we have them ("the pain"), but we just don't know where they are; therefore we aren't able to identify the prescription or treatment needed to manage or overcome their negative effects. At best,

we may use vague sweeping statements to describe that we have them (“I know I have weaknesses, but everybody does, so what’s the big deal?” “I know I have character issues, but I’m trying to improve.”). But without becoming more specific, we will stunt our capacity to cultivate healthy relationships.

The first two habits help us look more closely at our blind spots, and as we gain their insights, it can be helpful to practice this third habit by clearly writing down the insights we’ve gained from others and through reflection. If we want to increase our relational intelligence, we must learn how to identify our blind spots clearly and specifically, while also paying attention to how they affect our leadership and relationships. Naming our specific blind spots can help us know which specific prescription or treatment is needed.

In effort to get us started in this process, here are a few examples of some common blind spots:

- I struggle with becoming easily envious of others’ accomplishments, so I get discouraged about my ability to succeed when certain people in my field—even friends—have success.
- I get easily insecure about my own sense of worth and value, so when not enough attention is on me from my supervisor or coworkers, I feel devalued and internally weak.
- I usually think of myself as wanting to build others up, but in reality I find myself putting others down in effort to deal with my own deficiencies.
- When I make decisions, I often fail to consider the opinions of others on the team, and it often stifles team cohesiveness and ownership.
- I usually think of myself as a good listener, but the truth is I have a reputation of always talking about myself rather than focusing genuinely and unselfishly on others.

- I like to be in a position of control, and it's hard for me to let others lead.
- I often think of myself as warm and personable, but when I take an honest look at myself I tend to come off as aloof and impersonal.

These are common examples of writing clarifying statements that we may resonate with, or at least that might get us thinking about our own blind spots. This will certainly take additional reflection as well as vulnerability and honesty on our part. There are numerous resources that have helped me, and others, identify and process blind spots, so here are a few to help you go further and deeper.

- *The Leadership Challenge* has a 360-degree feedback tool that you can take with those around you to help give you insight in your own self-awareness (more info at [www.leadershipchallenge.com](http://www.leadershipchallenge.com)).
- The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a popular assessment tool to help people identify their personality preferences; it can also help point to blind spots (that is, which things are *not* preferences). There are innumerable Web sites, books, and other materials related to the MBTI.
- The Character Matrix is an assessment to help someone identify strengths and weaknesses of character and become more self-aware of character-related matters in life that may be blind spots. (More info on [www.relationalintelligence.info](http://www.relationalintelligence.info))
- Other tools include the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis (<http://www.tjta.com>), the DISC Personality Profile (<http://www.onlinediscprofile.com>), and the Gallup Strengths Finder (<http://www.strengthsfinder.com>).

## What If We Don't?

Without developing a keen sense of self-awareness, how we relate to people may be no more than accidental. If our philosophy becomes “ignorance is bliss,” or if we feel that “everyone has weakness so who cares,” then the quality of our relationships and influence will certainly suffer. To be sure, we don't always have control over the outcomes of our leadership endeavors or how others choose to relate to us, but we do have control over how we treat people, how we relate to them, and who we become in the process. If we ignore our blind spots and refuse to seek the accurate truth about ourselves, we will overlook critical components of our leadership impact.

True self-awareness guides us more accurately down the path toward becoming who we really long to become in both our leadership and our relationships. We begin to better understand who we truly are and move toward who we really want to become. This inevitably fuels unimaginable influence and a relationally centered approach to our leadership. If we desire to expand our influence, we must push through the muddied waters of self-denial into the clarity that self-awareness brings.