

A conceptual framework for understanding leader self-schemas and the influence of those self-schemas on the integration of feedback



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Orientation: Recently, the importance of blind spots, derailments and failures of leaders have been in the spotlight. Enhancing their levels of self-awareness is one of the steps leaders can take to avoid derailment. While it promotes self-awareness and decreases leadership blind spots, feedback is also considered one of the most effective tools available to modify behaviour. Researchers and practitioners are encouraged to explore the individual characteristics that will enhance or impede the feedback received from others so as to bring about behavioural change and increased levels of self-awareness.

Motivation for the study: The aim of this theoretical article was to consider various conceptual frameworks and literature in an endeavour to illustrate how leaders' self-schemas might explain the underlying reasons why some leaders are more likely to receive, integrate, assimilate and act on the feedback, while others are not, based on how they see themselves in relation to others.

Research design, approach and method: A literature-based method was utilised for this study in order to provide a critical analysis of the available literature and illustrate the different theoretical perspectives and underpinnings.

Practical/managerial implications: Leaders who are more likely to consider feedback and/or ask for feedback from others seem to be less prone to develop a blind spot and will therefore have a more accurate view of themselves. Those who have an over-rating of themselves are unlikely to have an accurate view of themselves. In an attempt to 'protect' this inflated view, such individuals will be less open to negative feedback, as it may challenge their own perspectives and opinions they hold of themselves. Individuals who hold an overly negative view of themselves are more likely to reject positive feedback and less likely to request or accept positive feedback as it may contradict the viewpoint they hold of themselves. They may however be more open to negative feedback that may 'support' their negative view of themselves.

Contribution: This article provided some suggestions as to why leaders may be less willing to accept and integrate feedback into their self-schemas as well as how to develop their levels of self-awareness in order to benefit from feedback.

Sometimes people don't want to hear the truth because they don't want their illusions destroyed.
(Friedrich Nietzsche)

Introduction

The popular media and news are fraught with reports of leaders who fail. It is sadly not uncommon to hear of unethical leadership behaviour or business leaders performing poorly. According to Rothstein and Burke (2010, pp. 1–3), 50% – 75% of all individuals in leadership positions are underperforming. This figure is supported by Gentry (2010, p. 316), who maintains that 50% of all managers are ineffective. Considered in this light, the popular notion of 'people do not quit companies, but they quit managers' rings true. In addition, Leslie and Wei (2010, p. 129) assert that those who lead, lack the appropriate skills to meet their organisations' current and future needs. These findings are particularly disconcerting when one bears in mind that leadership is one of the most salient aspects of organisational life.

Rothstein and Burke (2010, p. 1) and Bligh, Kohles, Pearce, Justin and Stovall (2007, pp. 528, 530) agree that although there is ample research focussing on the leadership aspects, factors or facets that make leaders successful, there is insufficient research available that investigates the

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'dark-side' of leadership, documenting leaders' blind spots, shortcomings, derailments and failures. While leadership research in the areas just mentioned deserves more attention, the need for effective leaders grows unabated (Rothstein & Burke, 2010, p. 2).

Literature review

Detecting leadership shortcomings, derailments and failures

Leadership derailment can only be addressed when the signs of derailment are discovered early enough and assuming certain conditions have been met. Leaders need to have a clear understanding of what it is that they need to change if they are to change their behaviour. In addition, they should be focussed and motivated to make the necessary changes, and have the necessary support to develop professionally. Self-awareness could be considered an antidote to derailment – if leaders wish to avoid derailment, they have to enhance their levels of self-awareness (Gentry, 2010, pp. 316–317).

Leadership and self-awareness

The ability to be self-aware, or to think about oneself consciously, is what separates humans from other living organisms. Sturm, Taylor, Atwater and Braddy (2014, p. 658) refer to various scholars who state that individual self-awareness can be traced back to early social, clinical and developmental psychology. These scholars define self-awareness as having two primary components: (1) how people see themselves and the process by which people make assessments about themselves (i.e. reflecting on their own levels of self-awareness) and (2) the ability to detect how they are being perceived by others (i.e. feedback received from other individuals; Sturm et al., 2014, p. 658).

Murphy, Reichard and Johnson (2008, p. 258) define self-awareness as, '... the similarity or difference in the way a person sees himself or herself, compared to how they are perceived by others'. Alimo-Metcalfe (1998, p. 37) holds a similar view to self-awareness, describing it as the way one sees oneself, compared with how others see you.

According to Butler, Kwantes and Boglarsky (2014, p. 88), Taylor (2010, p. 57) and Rothstein and Burke (2010, pp. 5–6), there is growing consensus among scholars of leadership that self-awareness forms the foundation for leadership development and leadership effectiveness, and is therefore core to leadership self-management efforts. Self-awareness is explicitly and implicitly recognised by various leadership style theories, including those on authentic, servant and transcendent leadership (Sturm et al., 2014, p. 658).

Butler et al. (2014, pp. 87–88) refer to various instances in the literature that demonstrate that leaders who exhibit higher levels of self-awareness are more likely to be aware of their own emotions and the impact thereof on others. They further quote research that has shown that self-awareness is a critical element to both the personal success of the leader

and the success of the organisation as a whole. This is substantiated by Cashman (2014), who argues that self-awareness is directly linked to tangible business performance. Cashman refers to research by David Zes and Dana Landis (n.d.) who used 6977 self-assessments by professionals at 486 publicly traded companies. The self-assessments were used to identify 'blind spots' – disparities between self-reported skills and peer ratings. At the same time, the authors tracked stock performance. Their analysis demonstrated that employees from companies that performed poorly had 20% more blind spots, and that those employees were 79% more likely to have low overall self-awareness.

The importance of self-awareness in relation to leadership is further emphasised in the literature by Rothstein and Burke (2010, pp. 5–6) who state that this psychological characteristic also provides the basis for introspection, choice, priority setting, change and development, whereas Taylor (2010, p. 58) asserts that self-awareness supports the learning process and psychological health of a leader. According to Drucker (in Rothstein & Burke, 2010, p. 5) and Kets de Vries, Vrignaud, Korotov, Engellau and Florent-Treacy (2006, p. 898), leadership success comes to those who know themselves. This is substantiated by Clawson (2010, p. 106), who states that effective leaders realise that the knowledge of who they are is the most important 'tool' that they have at their disposal and that if they cannot use it, they will find it difficult to achieve success. Mintzberg (in Clawson, 2010, p. 91) asserts that self-awareness coupled with reflection is a critical leadership skill.

Although self-awareness seems to be critical in leadership effectiveness, as highlighted in the literature cited above, the way self-awareness is achieved is not always described and articulated (Rothstein & Burke, 2010, p. 6). Herbst and Conradie (2011, p. 3) state that self-insight, which might result in a more accurate self-perception, has been recognised as a prerequisite for conscious, proactive personal change and development, yet it is often poorly developed in individuals. Sturm et al. (2014, p. 659) argue that because leadership transpires from social systems and is therefore a relational process that involves various individuals across a number of levels, leaders should be aware of their influence on others in order to be effective.

As relational beings, people (leaders, in this instance) must interact with others and receive feedback about themselves for healthy and effective functioning (Taylor, 2010, p. 60). Taylor (2010, p. 60) states that one of the ways in which leaders could gain access to the perceptions of others is through the process of feedback.

Leadership and feedback

Leaders can improve and monitor their own development and simultaneously enhance their self-awareness by opting to receive feedback, thereby addressing possible derailment behaviours proactively (Atwater, Waldman, Atwater & Cartier, 2000, p. 294; Sala, 2003, p. 222). According to Lang (2014), it

is almost impossible to become self-aware without receiving feedback from others. Some organisations, particularly those that can afford it will, therefore, utilise various tools and processes as a way to provide feedback to leaders (assessment centres, 360-degree feedback, upward feedback, performance appraisals, formal mentoring and coaching, psychological assessments) in an attempt to increase their self-awareness (Rothstein & Burke, 2010, pp. 4–5). However, Lang (2014) provides an opposing view, stating that a lack of feedback is rife in many organisations, a situation prevailing when feedback is the ‘... cheapest, most powerful, yet, most under used management tool and process that we have at our disposal ...’ to assist people understand how others perceive them.

Factors influencing feedback

In a meta-analysis conducted by Smithers, London and Reilly (2005), it was found that eight factors influenced individuals’ willingness to use feedback (from peers, subordinates, and supervisors) to improve their performance. These factors include characteristics of the feedback (positive or negative), the leader’s reaction to the feedback, his or her personality, their feedback orientation, their beliefs about the change suggested by the feedback, the perceived need for change, goal setting, and taking action from the feedback. Atwater, Brett and Charles (2007) provided a useful categorisation of the above factors into the following dimensions: factors to be considered before giving feedback (e.g. personality and goal orientation), factors to consider about the feedback process (e.g. positive or negative feedback and an individual’s reactions to feedback), factors to be considered after receiving feedback (e.g. goal setting, perceived need for change and organisational support in the form of feedback-coaching interventions) and outcomes associated with the feedback process (e.g. changes in behaviour, subsequent changes in performance ratings and employee engagement).

Leaders or managers who receive discouraging or negative feedback that threatens their self-esteem are less likely to use this information to change their behaviour (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Those managers who are conscientious, open to new experiences and able to manage their emotions are also more likely to implement the feedback they have received (Smithers et al., 2005).

There seems to be several personality characteristics that are likely to influence leaders’ reactions to feedback and willingness to use the feedback for goal-setting and action. Leaders who seek out feedback from others, care what others may think of them and are not afraid of receiving feedback are likely to be high in feedback orientation. In addition, such leaders are also more likely to take responsibility for implementing the feedback to improve their performance. Leaders with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to put in effort to change their behaviour based on the feedback they have received. Other researchers also found self-efficacy to moderate the relationship between feedback and performance (Bailey & Austin, 2006). It is likely that

individuals who receive positive feedback or feedback that is in line with their own perceptions may not see a real need to change (London & Smithers, 2002). Leaders who focus on performance improvement (rather than protecting themselves) are likely to set performance improvement goals. In addition, when such leaders emphasise developmental goals, they are more likely to implement the behavioural changes necessary to improve their performance. To implement such behavioural changes, leaders may use feedback-coaching interventions (Smithers, London, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, 2003). However, such interventions will only be successful if leaders have high levels of self-efficacy regarding their ability to implement the change (Bailey & Austin, 2006).

The challenge, however, is that there are many leaders who simply do not understand the need for feedback, upward and otherwise, in order to stimulate or advance their own development and careers. In addition, they do not have the foresight to see the need for increasing their personal self-awareness and how this may improve their ability to lead. In short, they do not know that they do not know that they should know (Church & Rotolo, 2010, p. 55). Reissig (2011, p. 30) shares a similar opinion, stating that a critical ingredient for a successful leader is that he or she should be open and courageous enough to seek honest feedback from others and to utilise the information in a constructive way to enact change.

The above challenge becomes even more problematic when one considers the fact that leaders at the highest of managerial or leadership levels are often uninformed about how others perceive them, as they habitually surround themselves with those who are less willing and less likely to provide them with truthful feedback (Gentry, 2010, p. 317). Sala (2003, p. 226) mentions a couple of reasons for the lack of feedback to leaders. According to Sala, people who are higher in the organisation are less likely to receive feedback as they have fewer opportunities for feedback, because there are fewer people higher up in the hierarchy and lateral to them who can provide them with feedback. Also, lower-level employees are less likely to give constructive feedback, given their position and their ineptness to understand the complexity of the role of the leader and the skills that it requires. They, therefore, do not feel that they are in a position to comment (provide feedback). Taylor (2010, p. 62) argues that this lack of feedback might also be ascribed to longer tenured leaders who are less likely to seek feedback from others in an attempt to appear more confident and in control, and that those leaders are often seduced into creating a reality for themselves that is disconnected from the realities others in the organisation share.

The lack of feedback may intentionally or unintentionally lead to yet another conundrum, referred to as a blind spot.

Leadership and blind spots

Blakeley (2007, p. x) is of the opinion that blind spots emerge when people do not want to listen (and by implication receive feedback) or learn. The reason provided is that this type of

awareness can be both painful and time consuming and as a result people often avoid it. This is corroborated by Reissig (2011, p. 30) stating that leader blind spots occur when leaders are not actively seeking out independent sources to receive feedback from, and that leaders are not equipped to have their weaknesses identified. As a consequence, their blind spots remain.

Clawson (2010, p. 92) states that people often do not see themselves as others do. This view corresponds with the popular and now dated Johari Window model, which advocates that if there are things that others see and the leader does not, it will increase the 'blind spots' of that person. Blakeley (2007, p. 3) asserts that all people have blind spots and that it is the responsibility of leaders in particular to overcome their blind spots, as blind spots contribute to inferior decision-making, which can lead to flawed decisions, resulting in possibly detrimental consequences for various stakeholders, not just for the leaders. According to Blakeley (2007, p. 4), people refer to blind spots as areas where people remain stubbornly fixed in their views, and they are more likely to dismiss sound arguments, refute evidence and refuse to change their view in any way in those areas. Individuals with a blind spot do not want to expand their understanding by listening to the views or the opinions of others that they in some way 'dislike'. Blind spots, according to Blakeley (2007, p. 7), are often rooted in the threat presented by certain types of information (feedback in this instance) to a person's self-concept and sense of identity.

Reissig (2011, p. 30) is of the opinion that leaders are not always interested to learn about their blind spots as it stirs up feelings of inadequacy, rejection and certain other negative behaviours that are often difficult for them to confront in themselves. This will be exacerbated with time, considering Clawson's (2010, p. 92) theory that the older people get (and, by implication, leaders), the more blind spots they tend to develop.

The underlying assumption regarding feedback is, therefore, that those who receive feedback (leaders, in this instance) will be able to minimise their blind spots, identify their developmental needs and improve on their leadership performance as a consequence (Atwater et al., 2000, p. 276). The problem with this assumption is highlighted by research by Atwater et al. (2000, p. 278), who refer to research by Kluger and DeNisi (1996), providing convincing evidence that feedback does not automatically lead to improved performance for everyone. In their research, Kluger and Denisi (in Atwater et al., 2000, p. 278) have shown that in over 33% of the cases, the performance actually decreased after feedback. It is highly likely that a combination of the eight factors highlighted by the meta-analysis conducted by Smither et al. (2005) might to a varying degree account for these findings. One factor not explicitly identified by the meta-analysis (Smither et al., 2005) nor by Atwater et al. (2007) is the role of self-schemas. The next section will illustrate how leadership self-schemas might be the underlying reason why leaders often fail to seek feedback or integrate it when it does occur.

Leadership self-schemas

Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer and Hogg (2005, p. 496) assert that the way a person perceives himself or herself (their self-concept or identity) will have a direct bearing on how a person feels, what they believe, the attitudes they hold, the goals they set and the behaviour that they will exhibit. Other scholars, such as Emery, Daniloski and Hamby (2011, p. 201), however, draw on the term 'self-identity', which frequently appears in contemporary social science and which refers to the 'totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object'. Markus and Sentis (1982) and others (in Stein, 1995, p. 188) employ the term 'self-schemas' to refer to the 'knowledge structures about the self', 'the cognitive residual of a person in interactions with the social environment', 'the active, working structures that shape perceptions, memories, emotional and behavioural responses'. For the purposes of this paper, the authors will use the term 'self-schemas' because it provides a more holistic view and also explicitly and implicitly represents and incorporates the aspects in the realm of self-concept and self-identity.

Murphy et al. (2008, pp. 252–253) express the view that leadership behaviour are particularly affected by the way a leader thinks about himself or herself and that to fully comprehend leadership effectiveness one has to understand the self-schema of a leader. The following sections will, therefore, endeavour to provide a précis based on the available literature showing how feedback might be impacted by a person's (a leader's in this instance) self-schema and, by implication, the level of self-awareness.

Carless, Mann and Wearing (1998, p. 493) state that a leader will avoid or ignore feedback that would contradict their self-schemas or become defensive about feedback received when their view of themselves and those that others hold of them, differ (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998, p. 38). Alimo-Metcalfe (1998, p. 38) states that leaders do this as a way to maintain a positive self-schema in order to maintain self-esteem. Stein (1995, p. 188) confirms this, referring to various researchers who have shown that people are more likely to direct their attention to information if it is consistent with their established self-schemas.

Murphy et al. (2008, p. 259) and Yammarino and Atwater (1993, p. 234) have shown that self-aware leaders are better able to incorporate others' assessments (feedback) about them into their self-schemas and are, therefore, better able to adjust their behaviour and improve on their shortcomings. This is corroborated by Alimo-Metcalfe (1998, p. 36), who has shown that employees are more satisfied with a leader when their perceptions of the leader match the self-perceptions that the leader holds of himself or herself – being self-aware. Leaders who are self-aware also tend to receive higher leadership ratings (Murphy et al., 2008, p. 259) compared with under-raters and over-raters who normally receive the lowest ratings. Herbst and Conradie (2011, p. 4) state that leaders who have high self-perception accuracy are more

open and willing to incorporate feedback into their self-perceptions. The opposite is also true; those who have low self-perception accuracy results have a tendency to close themselves for or ignore or discount negative feedback that does not resonate with the view the leader has of himself or herself. Church and Rotolo (2010, p. 55) consequently raises the question as to what extent leaders are capable and accurate in their own assessments and whether they may have a tendency to believe their own internal assessments over the perspectives that others may have of them.

Yammarino and Atwater (1993, p. 234) have found that it is not only self-schemas and self-awareness that might impact the ability to integrate feedback into self-schemas, but that there are also various personality and ability factors that might impact a person's self-perception. Those factors could explain why some people are more willing and open for feedback. Although beyond the scope of this research, it is nevertheless important to at least acknowledge those aspects.

Problem statement

Scharmer (2008, p. 52) and Boaz and Fox (2014, p. 4) argue for more research to understand the 'inner place' from which leaders operate. These authors' view is corroborated by Emery et al. (2011, p. 200), who maintain that leadership scholars have recently recognised that self-perception, which forms part of the 'inner world' of a leader, is an important part of leadership and warrants further investigation. Murphy et al. (2008, pp. 250, 252) state that there is too little research available exploring the impact of leaders' self-perception on leadership behaviour, and that only a few leadership scholars utilise theories of the 'self' when attempting to understand leadership behaviour. Murphy et al. (2008, p. 260) also recommend continued research on the development of leadership identity and schemas, while Van Knippenberg et al. (2005, p. 498) have made a persuasive argument for further research in the development of a leader's conception of the self. The aim of these recommendations is to improve our understanding of leadership effectiveness, development and self-awareness. Alimo-Metcalfe (1998, p. 37) and Rothstein and Burke (2010, pp. 4-5) also argue for more research on leadership self-awareness, as self-awareness is an important concept encircling the self that has far-reaching implications for leadership behaviour, leadership development and leadership effectiveness (Murphy et al., 2008, p. 259).

The literature indicates that feedback is one of the most effective tools and processes available to modify behaviour, while it simultaneously promotes self-awareness. People vary in the way they utilise feedback, however. Some embrace the information (feedback) they receive from others to make adjustments, while others disregard it (Murphy et al., 2008, p. 259). On the basis of what Atwater et al. (2000, p. 294) and Yammarino and Atwater (1993, p. 243) found, the authors of this article formulated the following problem statement: Which self-schemas will enhance or impede the feedback received from others so as to bring about behavioural change

and increased levels of self-awareness as well as positive organisational outcomes (e.g. higher levels of employee engagement)?

Contribution and aim

In view of the above problem statement, the aim and contribution of this literature review was, therefore, to consider the available literature explaining the specific self-schemas at play that will enhance or hamper the feedback received from others, while drawing on a conceptual framework from the Arbing Institute (2008). The authors will endeavour to illustrate how this might explain what types of people (leaders, in this instance) are more likely to receive, integrate, assimilate and act on feedback, and the underlying reasons why that is the case. This article also wishes to contribute to the existing literature by proposing an integrated conceptual framework of leadership self-schemas, in the absence of such a framework in the current literature, and to consider how this might be related to other available literature.

Research design

Research method

A literature-based method was utilised for this study in order to provide a critical analysis of the available literature and illustrate the different theoretical perspectives and underpinnings. This approach allowed for the expansion and adaption of current literature, so as to address the aim of this research.

Location and collection of literature

Various electronic databases were consulted for the purpose of the literature review, which included the business source complete PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO. Only texts published in English were considered in the database search. From all the texts yielded by this search, only those that addressed leadership ineffectiveness, 360-degree feedback, self-awareness, schemas and feedback were included for the review. The reference lists of the articles yielded from the returned results were also consulted for other relevant literature that may not have been considered.

Presentation of literature

The literature will be presented by providing a conceptual framework in light of the objectives and aim of this article, after which the article will conclude with a critical discussion and practical implications, and some suggestions for further research.

A conceptual framework

This section considers the available literature in an attempt to propose an integrated framework to understand leadership self-schemas and those aspects enhancing or impeding feedback from others. Taxonomies from the Arbing Institute, which focussed on self-deception; Yammarino and Atwater (1993), who focussed on 360-degree feedback;

and Clawson (2010), who focussed on two types of leaders, will be considered in an attempt to offer an integrated framework to understand the phenomena under investigation.

In its book entitled *The Anatomy of Peace*, the Arbinger Institute (2008) developed a complete theory to explain how the phenomenon of self-deception develops within individuals. Simply stated, self-deception is the problem of a person not knowing that he or she has a problem, while blaming others for their problem. One of the Arbinger Institute's (2008) conceptual taxonomies illustrates how people adopt various styles or self-perceptions or self-views, depending on how they see themselves in relation to others. The proposition is that people either hold others in the same regard that they hold themselves (others count the same) or they separate themselves from others by either elevating themselves in relation to others or lowering themselves in relation to others (other people then do not count the same anymore in both these stances). As a consequence, people become self-deceived about the nature of their relationship with others and their realities. This proposition is corroborated by Emery et al. (2011, p. 201), who stated that individuals who view themselves in a certain way will, as a consequence, act in accordance with the way they perceive themselves.

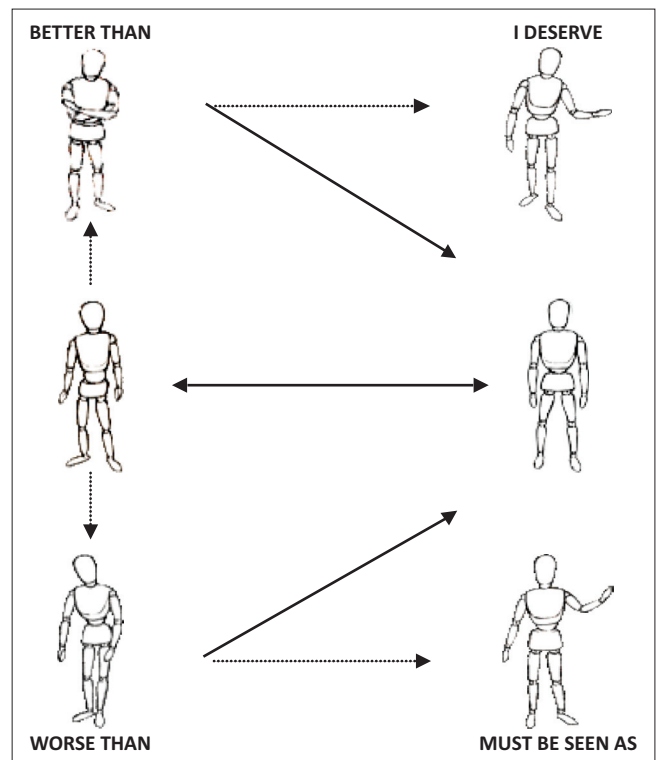
The Arbinger Institute (2008) depicts four types of individuals (resonating with self-schemas) based on how the person sees himself or herself in relation to others, which will ultimately impact how they relate with or behave towards others. This proposition is diagrammatically depicted in Figure 1.

The next section will provide a synopsis of the four types of styles (schemas, in light of the context of this article) as identified by the Arbinger Institute (2008). It is proposed that people are more likely to consider new information from others when they see others as people and if they feel that others view them as people too. This article endeavours to illustrate that people are less likely to consider new information (feedback) if they uphold any of the four schemas depicted in Figure 1, and to show how this relates to the other two taxonomies proposed by Yammarino and Atwater (1993) and Clawson (2010).

Four schemas

Each of the four styles (Arbinger Institute, 2008) will be discussed briefly, and then current research will be considered against this taxonomy. How this could play out in feedback will be explored by means of examples.

Type 1a: 'I am better than': The Arbinger Institute refers to a type of person who holds an 'I am better than' opinion about himself or herself. Someone with this type of self-view tends to view himself or herself among others as someone who is superior, important, right and virtuous in relation to others. In other words, a person with this type of schema tends to view others as inferior, incapable, irrelevant and wrong (Arbinger Institute, 2008, pp. 106–111).



Source: Arbinger Institute. (2008). *The anatomy of peace*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, pp. 106–123

FIGURE 1: Way of viewing the world.

Type 1b: 'I deserve': Associated with the previous schema, the Arbinger Institute identifies another type, one who holds a self-view of 'I deserve'. A person who tends to hold this view of themselves tends to view himself or herself as someone who is being mistreated, a victim and unappreciated, while viewing others as mistreating him or her, being ungrateful and unwise.

Arbinger asserts that although a person may have a view of themselves as 'I deserve' or 'I am better than', it will show up in different ways (e.g. behaviour, cognitive schemas, self-perception), but that these two types still share a similar source in that the person sees himself or herself as better and more worthy than others, and therefore he or she deserves better. For example, 'I deserve' better and different treatment from others, because I feel 'I am better than' others and when this person does not get it, it shows up in that the person sees himself or herself as a victim or as being mistreated (Arbinger Institute, 2008, pp. 111–114).

The interconnectedness between the two preceding types shows up in a case study provided by Blakeley (2007, p. 7), who refers to blind spots, while unintentionally also illuminating the proposed taxonomy to understand why leaders do not react on feedback. The author refers to a case study where she (Blakeley, 2007, p. 7) observed a leader (while consulting him) who was confident and full of self-belief. He subsequently developed a vision for his organisation and enforced its implementation. As a consequence, people started to resist his efforts, as they felt that he was not listening to them and considering their

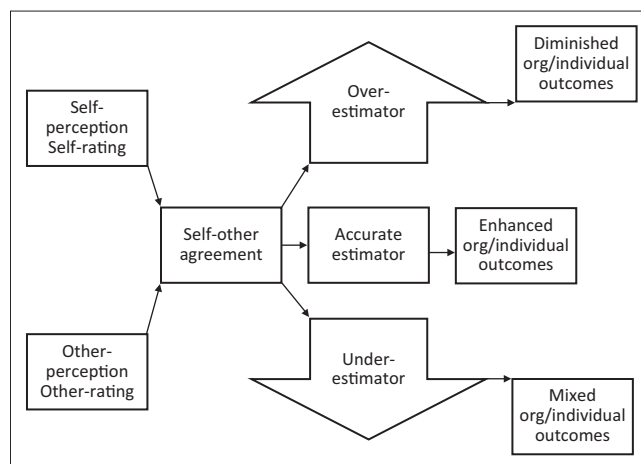
feedback efforts. According to Blakeley (2007, p. 7), his blind spot is that he has fallen into the trap of believing that his understanding and vision are superior to that of everyone else. Where people came up with reasons why the vision will not work, he dismissed their insights and regarded them as 'resisting change' and unappreciative of his efforts. This is in accordance with the proposed taxonomy of the Arbinger Institute, which states that people with an 'I am better than' self-view, by which they see themselves as superior and right in their thoughts and actions, are therefore more unlikely to incorporate others' feedback (new information) into their current self-schemas and to adjust their mental models. This case study also shows how a person may move from a 'I am better than' self-view to a 'I deserve' self-view, as the leader in this case study may view himself as being mistreated and unappreciated by his employees, while seeing himself as better than they are. This highlights the issue that people might have different styles that they may apply and that style or self-schema is not rigid. People's self-schema may change, depending on the situation.

Type 2a: 'I am worse than': A person with this self-view tends to view himself or herself as fated, insignificant and deficient in relation to others. People with this self-schema tend to view others as privileged and advantageous and are therefore more likely to incorporate feedback in an already fragile self-schema, characterised by being defective and flawed, rarely able to discern between helpful and unhelpful feedback (Arbinger Institute, 2008, pp. 120–123).

Type 2b: 'I must be seen as': Associated with the previous self-view comes another type, which is referred to as the 'I must be seen as'. Someone with this type of view tends to project an image to others of how they want to be seen, in an attempt to ensure that others view them in a particular way – putting on a mask in an attempt to cover up their inefficiencies. They tend to view others as judgemental, threatening and evaluating.

The Arbinger Institute asserts that although a person may view himself or herself as either 'I am worse than' or 'I must be seen as', it may show up in different ways (e.g. behaviour, cognitive schemas, self-perception). Both these types still share a similar source in that the person sees himself or herself as less than others. Illustrative of the interconnectedness between these two types is someone who sees himself or herself as less capable than others (for whatever reason), but who is afraid that others will notice and judge him or her accordingly. Therefore, a person with any of these two schemas projects a self-image of 'must be seen as' in an attempt to divert the attention from his or her insecurities (Arbinger Institute, 2008, pp. 115–119).

Blakeley (2007, p. 13) provides a practical example to illustrate the interconnectedness of these two types, although the author refers to it as blind spots. The author cites a case study where she (Blakeley, 2007, p. 13) observed a leader (while consulting), who had an unsurpassed knowledge in the financial field, but her understanding of people management



Source: Yammarino, F.J., & Atwater, L.E. (1993). Understanding self-perception accuracy: Implications for human resource management. *Human Resource Management*, 32, 232. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.3930320204>

FIGURE 2: A model of self-perception accuracy.

was limited. Her employees experienced her as cold and aloof and wanted her to become more consultative and involved with the team. She was resistant to accepting feedback about her management style and refused to change her behaviour. On closer examination, the leader disclosed to the consultant that the main reason for her resistance was that she believed that her authority would be undermined if she became too close to people. She feared that they will challenge her more readily if they became too comfortable with her and that she might be considered weak and even incompetent in the area of people management. Hence, she refused to even consider the prospect of changing her management style. Blakeley (2007, p. 14) argues that it is this refusal to consider her team's feedback, together with the emotional resistance to personal change, that indicates a blind spot.

In terms of the Arbinger taxonomy, someone who views himself or herself 'deficient' (i.e. worse than) in some way, as in the case with this leader who thought she had a limited understanding of people management (in relation to others or to what the position requires), might resist feedback (as in this case), because it might confirm something he or she already knows about himself or herself. In an effort to hide this deficiency (ego), he or she puts on a mask, figuratively speaking, and justifies not considering the feedback received from subordinates.

The preceding taxonomy shows a resemblance to the taxonomy developed by Yammarino and Atwater (1993, p. 232) within the context of 360-degree feedback. This configuration provides a similar stance, but the authors go one step further by indicating that an overestimation (which resembles the 'better than' and 'I deserve' self-schema, as illustrated by the previous model) will lead to diminished organisational and individual outcomes, as depicted in the graphical representation in Figure 2.

The model in Figure 2 asserts that accurate estimators are those individuals whose self-ratings (and by implication, self-perceptions) are in agreement with the ratings of others.

Over-estimators are individuals whose self-ratings are significantly inflated above the ratings of others (representing the 'Better than' and 'I deserve' types in the previous taxonomy) and under-estimators are those whose self-ratings are significantly below the ratings of others (representing the 'I am worse than' and 'I must be seen as' types in the previous taxonomy). Yammarino and Atwater (1993) have illustrated in their research that the individual and organisational outcomes for people in these three different categories (accurate, over- and under-estimators) will differ from each other. They have found that people who have an accurate view of themselves bring about positive and enhanced organisational outcomes, whereas over-estimators produce diminished organisational outcomes, realised in poor supervisor-subordinate relationships, for example. Under-estimators, in turn, affect some organisational outcomes favourably and other less favourably. Under-estimators may, for example, on the one hand show interest in self-development and training, but may on the other hand not pursue possible promotions, given that they see themselves as fated and deficient in relation to others (Yammarino & Atwater, 1993, p. 232).

Sala (2003, p. 225) shows that higher level employees (leaders in this instance) are more likely than lower-level employees to have an inflated view of themselves. Sala (2003, pp. 225, 227) further points out that high-performing individuals' self-perceptions tend to match the perceptions or ratings of others and also refer to research that indicates that poor performers tend to over inflate their self-perception.

The ideas above are supported by Blakeley (2007, pp. 36–37), who states that a person would be more likely to consider feedback if that feedback is in accordance with the person's self-concept (how people view themselves – self-schemas). The author states that a person's self-esteem is founded on three fundamental needs, namely:

- the need to feel respected and valued by those around them
- the need to feel competent and in control
- the need to feel liked and accepted.

A person will be more receptive of new information (conveyed via feedback) if it supports these needs, and people are more likely to reject information (conveyed via feedback) if they sense that the information will challenge their self-schema.

Clawson (2010, p. 94) provides a valuable contribution to the understanding of leadership schemas by identifying two types of people (leaders, by implication). Type 1 refers to 'Outside-In', which is characteristic of people who would adjust their behaviour based on the expectations and requirements on the outside. They will, therefore, consider what the world (and by implication, others) will 'say' or 'think' before they act. Conforming to the expectations of the world is living 'Outside-In'. One of the main reasons provided why people tend to live this way is the fear of

rejection. People, therefore, adjust their behaviour in order to fit in. This description seems to refer to 'must be seen as' when one applies the Arbinger framework.

Type 2 refers to 'Inside-Out', which is characteristic of people who are egocentric, narcissistic, self-centred dictators. This group of people would care little to nothing about the views and opinions of others, even of society, and tend to do what they want, how they want, when they want. According to Clawson (2010, p. 95), there are more of the latter type in leadership positions than the former type. Sala (2003, p. 228) asserts that type will have a direct bearing on leaders who wish to develop and promote a culture of upward feedback. When one applies the Arbinger framework, the Type 2 may refer to either the 'I am better than' or 'I deserve' modalities. The situation becomes dire when we consider that Gentry (2010, p. 316) refers to research that suggests derailments (egocentric, narcissistic, self-centred dictators) are often the result of personality characteristics formed during early ages and are unchangeable when the person reaches adulthood. The author denotes that it is therefore very unlikely that any personality changes would be possible during the adult years. Some managers and leaders may, therefore, be more likely to derail because of their personality and, by implication, no feedback would salvage the situation.

According to Blakeley (2007, p. 45), cognitive dissonance theory suggests that when people are confronted with information that contradicts or challenges their existing beliefs (self-schemas, by implication), they are thrown into a tense and dissonant state of mind. In an attempt to restore harmony, they may avoid the new information or they may change their existing beliefs to support the new information. When new information is too challenging, people tend to have a strong tendency to distort it (provide justification) in order to preserve their existing core beliefs. This might be more so for leaders, considering the literature by Taylor (2010, p. 62) who refers to research by Baumeister (1999) showing that a leader's underlying motive is to preserve his or her self-image and would therefore be highly unlikely to seek out the views of others. The author refers to research that suggests that a person's desire to understand the perspectives of others is influenced by a leader's degree of self-efficacy, self-esteem and impression management behaviour, all of which shape the leader's self-perception.

Critical discussion and practical implications

Self-awareness is not a soft skill anymore, as illustrated in this article and corroborated by Cashman (2014). Cashman (2014) considers it 'the most crucial developmental breakthrough for accelerating personal leadership growth and authenticity and that it is critical to leader success'. Taylor (2010, p. 62) holds the same notion and suggests that organisations should pay more attention to the level of self-awareness among its leadership group, because if leaders are not aware of their impact on others they may not be able to effectively diagnose how others experience their efforts to lead, which will greatly impact their effectiveness as leaders.

The mentioned categories (accurate estimators, over- and under-estimators) in this article may, therefore, have certain implications for leaders in such matters as likelihood for feedback and the development of blind spots. The following three hypotheses could be formulated, given the preceding literature.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Accurate estimators (Yammarino and Atwater)/not separating themselves from others (Arbinger).

It is the hypothesis of the authors of the current article that individuals (and, by implication, leaders) who are more likely to consider feedback and/or ask for feedback from others will consequently be less prone to develop a blind spot and will therefore have a more accurate view of themselves.

- **Hypothesis 2:** Over-estimators (Yammarino and Atwater)/‘Better than’ and ‘I deserve’ (Arbinger).

Those who have an over-rating of themselves are unlikely (as suggested by the literature) to have an accurate view of themselves. In an attempt to ‘protect’ this inflated view, such individuals will be less open to negative feedback, as it may challenge their own perspectives and opinions they hold of themselves. However, this group may be more prone to be on the lookout for positive feedback that reinforces and support the belief they have about themselves. This may lead to situations where such individuals are much less aware of their blind spot(s).

Hypothesis 2 is supported by Murphy, Reichard and Johnson (2008, p. 259), who have illustrated that leaders who overestimate themselves (‘Better than’ and ‘I deserve’ in the Arbinger framework) pertaining to their leadership (skills, expertise and behaviour) will be more likely to ignore feedback from others and therefore make them unlikely to set self-improvement goals, which might, by implication, lead to less awareness of the self and by default to more blind spots. People and, by implication, leaders who have an overestimation of their leadership skills are therefore also more likely to misjudge and misdiagnose their own need for improvement (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998, p. 36). This explains their poor performance, as research by Atwater, Roush and Fischthal (2000, p. 278) show that leaders who overrate themselves, relative to other ratings (feedback), tend to be poorer performers. Herbst and Conradie (2011, p. 10) refer to research by Sosik showing that over-estimators may be viewed by their subordinates as unreceptive, inauthentic, self-centred and uncaring. These adverse perceptions are unlikely to build follower trust and commitment. Atwater, Roush and Fischthal (1995, pp. 38–39) found that leaders who have an inflated view of themselves pose at least three potential problems for organisations, namely (1) if a leader does not perceive weaknesses, he or she will not be aware that changes in behaviour are needed, (2) leaders who have inaccurate self-ratings, compared with those of others, have been found to be poorer performers than those who have accurate self-ratings and (3) those who have an inflated view of themselves are less likely to seek out feedback.

This situation might be further complicated when considering a comment by Chris Argyris of Harvard University (in Clawson, 2010, p. 93) about people who carry with them an image that they are ‘smart’, and who would naturally tend to assume that their self-image is accurate. He raised a very valid question: How to teach these smart people to learn, when they assume they know more than they do – even about themselves? Hoffer (in Clawson, 2010, p. 93) also points out that the ‘learned’, that is those who ‘know’ things, are therefore more likely to be less interested in learning. Hence, they also become less interested in feedback.

- **Hypothesis 3:** Under-estimators (Yammarino and Atwater)/‘Worse than’ and ‘I must be seen as’ (Arbinger).

Individuals who hold an overly negative (i.e. degrading) view of themselves are more likely to reject positive feedback and less likely to request or accept positive feedback as it may contradict the viewpoint they hold of themselves. They may however be more open to negative feedback that may ‘support’ their negative view of themselves.

To summarise the three hypotheses: it is likely that individuals who have inflated views of themselves may find it difficult to accept feedback or new information from others, or they would be reluctant to seek such feedback, and those with a deflated view of themselves may reduce further self-evaluations (seek out feedback).

Herbst and Conradie (2011, p. 12) suggest the development of intensive leadership feedback processes that would provide leaders with comprehensive feedback within a supportive environment in order to increase their level of self-awareness. Upward feedback is especially valuable in attempts to improve leaders. Subordinates are the direct targets of a leader’s behaviour and can therefore provide valuable feedback to a leader about his or her leadership from first-hand experience. Subordinate appraisals are also important because often leadership behaviour is observed only by the leader and the subordinate. Subordinate feedback can provide information to the leader about follower perceptions of his or her strengths and weaknesses, and about the degree to which the leader’s perceptions match those of the followers (Atwater et al., 1995, p. 36).

Renshon and Renshon (2008, p. 509) state that what leaders see is to a large extent filtered through multiple, though inconsistent, lenses of their own psychologies and beliefs, subject to significant cognitive limitations. Given the problems caused by inaccurate self-evaluations or perceptions, there are at least three ways according to Atwater et al. (1995, p. 39) in which upward feedback may help resolve these problems for leaders: (1) feedback to leaders may make them more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, (2) if this feedback suggests weaknesses the leader was previously unaware of, changes in behaviour may result in order to improve the weak area and (3) an understanding of the discrepancy between self- and other rating responses to feedback would be helpful in determining how feedback should best be delivered.

People should be trained to give, receive and seek out constructive feedback. Coaching might also be a possibility to help leaders identify their blind spots and increase the accuracy in the way they are perceived by others. This approach is supported by Atwater et al. (1995, p. 35), who refer to research by Prue and Fairbank (1981), who have demonstrated that objective feedback had a positive effect on individual performance.

In an effort to enhance the self-awareness of leaders (organisations and those responsible for leadership and management development), learning spaces could also be developed where open dialogue can occur between leaders or managers and those they lead (followers in this instance). Yammarino and Atwater (1993, p. 243) are of the opinion that leadership development programmes should be designed that use upward feedback mechanisms that would permit leaders to learn how they are perceived by others and how to adjust their self-perceptions and behaviours. This is corroborated by Taylor (2010, p. 64), who suggests more opportunities for 360-degree evaluations. Gentry (2010, p. 317) offers specific ways to increase the self-awareness of leaders, which include utilising personality assessments, journaling and using mentors or executive coaches. Leaders are more likely to incorporate the feedback from others into their self-schemas when they see the innate value of the feedback, according to Atwater et al. (2000, p. 280).

It is, therefore, imperative that organisations and those responsible for the development of leaders first assist leaders and managers to understand how their self-schemas might impact or derail the feedback they receive from others. As indicated in this article, self-schemas could derail the best efforts of those who are responsible for the development of leaders, and the research highlighted in this article may save organisations that up to now tried to launch efforts without considering the self-schemas of those they wish to develop millions of rands.

Research considerations

Van Knippenberg et al. (2005, p. 498) insist that the role of a leader's self-conception within leadership effectiveness should be further investigated. Their view is corroborated by Herbst and Conradie (2011, p. 12), who accentuate the need to develop valid measures of self-awareness that are independent of multirater assessment instruments. This is necessary because, according to Yammarino and Atwater (1993, p. 231), various authors have demonstrated that self-estimates are problematic, as they are often inflated, unreliable, invalid, biased and generally suspect when compared to ratings by others (clients, peers, direct supports and superiors). Herbst and Conradie (2011, p. 12) also emphasise the necessity for future research determining alternative and more direct methods for assessing self-perception accuracy beyond the ratings congruence paradigm.

In addition to self-schemas, Atwater et al. (2007, p. 304) suggest future researchers to try and answer the following questions: How does coaching and training enhance feedback, given that feedback allows leaders to move from a self-focus to a task focus? How does the 360-degree feedback create self-awareness in a leader that will be motivational in nature rather than debilitating (emphasising the self as focus)?

Conclusion

Organisational change is inseparable from individual change (Boaz & Fox, 2014, p. 1). This means that leaders will struggle to transform their organisations to become effective if they do not first transform themselves. This article endeavoured to illustrate that, generally, the more accurate an individual's self-perceptions, the greater the likelihood of enhanced outcomes for that individual and the organisations that they lead or manage.

Hopefully, upward feedback in organisations will one day become as common as downward feedback, which could very possibly be more effective for improving performance than the standard processes that are in use currently. Upward feedback has the potential to address and detect leadership shortcomings, derailments and failures while simultaneously facilitating greater self-awareness in an attempt to reduce the blind spots of leaders and managers. This would be more probable if those responsible for the development of leaders and managers first address the omnipresent self-schemas of those they wish to develop.

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Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed to the conceptualisation and writing of the article.

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