



## Leadership Illusions

Warrick, D.D. (2019). Leadership illusions: Important implications for leaders and training and coaching leaders. *Organization Development Review*, 51, 6-13.

If you are an academic leader, such as a dean or department head, you have probably experienced, at one time or another, feedback that you were not perceived to be as effective as you thought you were. Such a dose of reality can be devastating and, according to D. D. Warrick, is a sign of *leadership illusion*—the tendency to see things differently than they really are. In this article, Warrick describes three levels of leadership illusion and their consequences, why leaders develop illusions, and ways to minimize them.

At the top of the illusion tree are *narcissistic leaders*. You know them, the know-it-alls, the overly confident, the ones with inflated views of themselves and of their own capabilities. They lack self-awareness and have not a clue about how others perceive them. They have little concern for others' feelings or opinions, and they dismiss or discourage feedback that disagrees with their strongly held views. Those around them might even contribute to the illusion by communicating distorted information to avoid the negative consequences of being candid.

Next are the *moderately aware leaders* who are well-intentioned but still lack awareness about themselves and about what is going on in the unit. There may be several reasons for this—not actively seeking feedback from others, unintentionally discouraging feedback, lacking skills to seek and receive it, and not seeking it so as to avoid taking responsibility for how things are going.

*Mostly aware leaders* are least likely to fall under the spell of illusion. They possess a high level of self-awareness and have a good sense of how things are going. They achieve this by seeking out and welcoming feedback. Such leaders are typically humble and caring of others. They create a safe environment where open, candid communication is the norm. Warrick uses “mostly aware” because in truth all leaders have blind spots, which come from unawareness of situations or behaviors that make them less effective.

Warrick goes on explain why leaders develop illusions. They may have a leadership style that discourages openness and feedback. They may assume they know more than they actually do. They may have flawed knowledge, thinking, or paradigms. Or, they may simply be out of touch with reality, to name a few.

Perhaps more importantly, Warrick offers the following ideas for increasing self-awareness and minimizing illusions:

- Encourage open and candid communication.
- Encourage and solicit helpful and accurate feedback.
- Seek involvement, collaboration, and wise counsel before making important decisions.
- Listen more than you talk; use speech that encourages open dialogue; learn to be discerning about who you can trust to give candid and objective information.
- Check out assumptions before assuming they are accurate.
- Develop and continuously improve an effective communication system.
- Plan ways to stay in-touch, engaged, and involved, and do regular reality checks.
- Develop an organized way to stay up-to-date and skilled at what you do.
- Involve the appropriate people in building a healthy, high-performance organization and culture.
- Provide training, consulting, or coaching to those in leadership positions.

If you are in a leadership position, or if you are responsible for providing leadership development within your institution, Warrick's article provides helpful information on how to recognize and minimize leadership illusions.