

# Where's Your **Blind Spot**?

Are you ready to look at yourself through the eyes of others?

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM

**D**id you know you have blind spots? It's OK, we all do! As a speaker and leader, there are things you cannot see, hear or independently know about yourself. The good news: Once you learn what's in your blind spot and incorporate this information into your own development, the more likely you are to win contests and elections and garner the trust and confidence of colleagues and clubmates.

When you drive a car, despite rear and side view mirrors, there is an area that you, as a driver, physically can't see, a spot where another car, motorcycle or bicycle may be lurking, yet you are not aware of it.

How do you deal with *your* blind spots? Only when others reflect back to you what they see do you gain insight into how you're perceived. And many times it's *not* as you intended to be seen or heard. Therein lies the disparity.

## **Feedback Illuminates Your Blind Spots**

To compensate for natural blind spots, we rely on tools like mirrors when we're getting dressed and 360-degree reviews in our employment appraisals. As speakers and leaders, we don't know what we don't know, but key members in Toastmasters clubs can help illuminate our blind spots.

Key members, for example, can include a speech evaluator, an assigned mentor or a guidance committee for your hand-picked High Performance Leadership project. These colleagues can help you see what you cannot, and help you know how you come across to others. Through their feedback you improve and grow as you harmonize your projections with the perceptions of others, and your intentions with actual results.

Are you ready to look at yourself through the eyes of others? The more you know about how others see you, the more informed your decisions will become.

## **Opening the Doors of Perception**

One speaker sees himself as bold, but audience members perceive him as arrogant. Another speaker sees himself as the ultimate improviser, while others regard him as unprepared. Perceptions are often in the eyes of beholders; they don't often match our own sense of how we are perceived. Worse yet, we don't even realize the disparity.

Why don't people see us the way we see ourselves? Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen address this question in their 2014 book *Thanks for the Feedback*.

## **Universal Blind Spots: Our Leaky Face and Leaky Tone**

"Some blind spots are common to all people," explains co-author Stone, the founder of Triad Consulting and a lecturer at Harvard Law School. "Our face when giving a presentation is a literal blind spot. We tend not to be aware of the unintended signals our facial expressions may be conveying." Our eyes literally can't see ourselves when we are speaking. Our audience not only sees but also interprets our facial expressions which may belie our words. For example, a speaker's furrowed brow or look of disdain will contradict a verbal message intended to convey concern, care or love.

"We also have trouble hearing our voice the way others hear it," writes Stone, explaining the physiological reasons for this. From the time we are infants, we humans develop an ability to hear through

our superior temporal sulcus (STS) located just above our ears. This helps us interpret human sounds and the emotions embedded in them, and helps us decipher tone and meaning. Yet when we speak, our own STS turns off. We literally can't hear our own tone the way others can. We don't realize how we sound. It's often a big surprise when our evaluator, mentor or loved one tells us we sound sarcastic, tired or disinterested, distrustful or dismissive. It's a blind spot we all have. Stone recommends coaching and videotaping in instances where blind spots exist.

## **When Perception Doesn't Match Intention**

"Many of us have trouble understanding the impact we have on others," explains Stone. "It's because we tend to judge our impact based on our intentions, and they are often very different than how others perceive us." Some people are naturally more empathetic, and some less so. How aware are you of how you "come across" to others? Sometimes feedback from listeners derived from this gap between a speaker's intention and the audience member's perception can range from mild surprise to disbelief. Seemingly innocuous feedback from a speech evaluator that illuminates a speaker's blind spot may nevertheless land harshly. While it's no big deal to the evaluator, "to the receiver, feedback that illuminates a blind spot can (sometimes) be devastating. It impacts a speaker's sense of who he or she is, and wants to be, in the world," says Stone.

Stone offers this example: "If I think of myself as generous and kind and learn that others don't think of me that way, that can take a long time to make sense of."



The speaker and evaluator should be aware of the power of feedback. It's all in how it's received. Many factors may be at play, including one's upbringing, past traumas or psychological make-up. If the parties know and trust each other, the degree of feedback and candor can be calibrated to what the speaker is able to handle. Yet the evaluator often doesn't know the speaker well, and therefore well-intentioned suggestions or critiques can hit a vulnerable speaker hard and deep when shared right after a speech is delivered, despite the evaluator's best intentions.

### Factors Affecting Feedback

Receiving permission to evaluate, provide feedback or coach a speaker or leader is the first step. Unsolicited feedback may be unwanted, untimely and thus unwise to bestow. Good timing is also essential. Often speakers are vulnerable right after they finish their speech; they haven't processed their own performance yet and are ripe for bruising. Toastmasters are trained to temper criticism with praise, and lead and end with praise using the sandwich approach in an official speech evaluation.

Stone points out a common flaw in such an evaluation. Many times the praise given is general while the criticism is specific. Stone advises a more even-hand-

ed approach, "Too often we give general positive comments, specific and lengthy negative ones and then finish with more general positive ones. Better to be as specific with the positive as the negative."

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Professional speaker and speech coach Max Dixon of Seattle, Washington, says one key to coaching speakers around perceived blind spots is to go slowly. In his coaching he emphasizes implementing that "one single, simple, doable thing" that eases a client into change. Too often speakers being coached are given too much to think about, or to try to implement at once. Stone concurs, "A good guideline is that people can take in one thing at a time (if that)."

### Professional Speakers Have Blind Spots Too

Like Toastmasters, professional speakers strive for continuous improvement. They have a vested interest in discovering blind spots that could offend or alienate clients and mitigate repeat business. The most

astute professional speakers seek feedback from meeting planners, those who hire them, and speaking bureaus who procure them for clients. Professional speakers need to be mindful of such issues as excessive selling from the platform, allowing their religious or political beliefs to filter into their business presentations and being respectful of the diversity in their audiences, to name a few of the many challenges.

### Set Your Sights on Insights

"Our perception could either be our path to nirvana or an invisible cage that bottles us up," states author and technology leader Pawan Mishra. When you seek to discover your blind spots you create opportunities for growth and self-improvement. Are you ready to open your blinds? ■

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**DTM Craig Harrison, PDG**, *discovered, with the help of other Toastmasters in his district, his numerous blind spots the year following his term as District 57 governor. Knowing about these helped him improve as a leader when he subsequently served as president of the National Speakers Association—Northern California chapter. Access some of his complimentary learning tools for professional and amateur speakers and leaders through [www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com](http://www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com).*