Observation - A Critical Leadership Skill
By Andrew Cox

Leaders know observation skills are critically important to success - in any dimension. They work hard to develop their own, and to identify the skill in their people.

Leaders rely heavily on the observations of others to test their own impressions, and to add to their body of knowledge about whatever issue is on the table. Observation is learning on the fly – it's not something you sit down to do. And every experience adds to your body of knowledge, leaving you a top asset to your organization, your industry, your family, and yourself.

At the same time that it is such a valuable skill, it's amazing how little value is attached to it by many, many managers. Again and again you'll see people leave a meeting with the statement that it was a waste of their time. When pressed, they will state that they learned nothing, or the meeting was inconclusive, or they weren't the right person the be there, or they felt muzzled.

A suggestion: the next time you find yourself in a meeting where you feel it's a waste of your time, promise yourself that you will take from that meeting at least 3 items of information – perceptions, opinions, facts, observed behavior, that can be of help in your work. Then apply those elements to your relationships. It works – most people don't do it. Most people don't become effective leaders. In the case of most people, they don't even know observation is a highly prized skill.

If you want to be in the top ten percent of whatever you do, work consciously and hard on the development of your observation skills. It will pay off – I guarantee it. If you want to be world class in anything, you gotta develop the skill of observation - seeing the world around you and seeing it every day, in every way, and make observing a habit of thought. The price of success is stepping out - observing the world in all its variety, learning from it, and taking that accumulation of inputs and putting them to use in decision making - in improving intuition - in building relationships.

Ten behaviors and habits of thought critical for developing accurate observation skills:

Sizing up people – people watching

Clarity – seeing the world as it is

Curiosity – asking why

Listening skills

Willingness to set aside personal biases

Willingness to seek the inputs of others

Seeking out new experiences and possibilities

Being comfortable with ambiguity
Knowledge of the behaviors and attitudes of people

Self knowledge – accurately knowing your own behaviors, attitudes and personal skills, and how they impact others

It's easy to get so focused on our own job that we really don't see the forest for the trees, even if we're invited to the highest ranger station in that particular forest.

A personal story:

I was hiking in the Phoenix Mountain Preserve and coming down a steep, rocky, narrow path. Approaching me from below was a young woman, baseball cap pulled down over her eyes, dark sunglasses, hydration backpack, and earphones. I stepped aside to let her pass - hikers ascending have right of way - I said "Hello," and she went past me - within inches of touching me - without acknowledging me! Wow - two people, close enough to touch, no one else around, and not so much as a nod.

Just what does this have to do with observation skills? A lot. This hiker was so into her own zone that nothing around her could enter her consciousness. The birds singing, the green of spring, the warning rattle of a rattlesnake, the crunch of boots overtaking her, the beautiful blue sky - none of it could penetrate her "zone." I see that a lot. Mountain bikers, hikers, runners- all intent on their journey - oblivious to their surroundings except for what is right in front of them - and in danger of missing all kinds of messages. Observation? Other than their own heart rate, miles covered, calories burned, goals met, time elapsed, mountains climbed, Gatorade consumed, how they feel - they could be in a dark tunnel. Too bad for them - they miss all kinds of critical inputs that could help them grow and develop and enjoy the process of gaining physical fitness.

To the extent that we close ourselves off from the unfamiliar; from things that would challenge us; from things that make us think; from things that disagree with our beliefs; from things that can stimulate our senses, we create our own little cocoon - that safe place where we can exist unaffected by all the stuff that swirls around us. Some people call it focus - I think not.

A suggestion. We all need to gain or regain our sense of wonder about new things. Take a different route to work, buy a different newspaper, listen to a different news show, take a run over unfamiliar territory, hike in the woods or mountains - without your IPod, try a different routine at the gym, eat a meal you have never had before. And observe through all your senses. Gaining observation skills is an active, exciting process. It's best accomplished by sensing - as if for the first time - the world around you, and then seeing more than you saw the last time.

Try it - today. Become an active observer of life - and gain greater success - in whatever way you define success.

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