

Do You Know What You *Don't* Know?

Determining what you *don't know* can be every bit as important as what you *do know*. As a leader or manager, you can't possibly know everything, nor should you have to. But what you *do* need is a curiosity and thirst for information about what you don't know, the humility to admit that you don't know it, and people around you that you trust to tell it like it is.

Insulation in leadership is an all-too-common dynamic that occurs when others tell a leader what he or she wants to hear rather than the hard facts. "Reasons" can be as varied as the Grid style of the leader. With a paternalist, people don't want to risk being out of favor. With a 9,1 leader, they are afraid disagreement might lead to dire consequences. With the 1,9 leader, people might be afraid of hurting his or her feelings. With the 1,1 leader, people know he or she doesn't want to be bothered in the first place. What is important to realize is that the more power and status you have, the thicker and more elaborate these layers of insulation against reality become. As a leader, it is your obligation — to your organization and its employees — to make sure that the actions you take, decisions you make, and projects you plan are armed with the best possible input from all available sources.

Dream big, plan big, but know who your implementers are. Trust them and ask them what you *need* to know. Ask them how to make your idea *better*, not just how to make it *happen*. Hear what they have to say rather than just allowing them to speak.

What Can You Do?

Surround yourself with knowledgeable, trustworthy people.

Beware of the insulation factor. Everyone prefers to work with people they like and who think like they do, but these can be the very same people who insulate you from reality. Make sure that the project team you assemble is populated with people who have the proper knowledge of the subject matter and can be counted on to give you sound advice about the devil in the details. They all should share one characteristic: the courage to be candid with their critique and other input.

Develop a tougher hide. Once you have chosen the right team composed of the right people, don't take negative input personally. Acknowledge to yourself that these people know what they're talking about, or they wouldn't be on the team. If they are poking holes in your proposal or idea, it's because there is something wrong with *it*, not with *you*.

Evaluate input on its own merit. Don't discount input from anyone based on "who" they are, but rather evaluate "what" they're saying. What you can discount are personality clashes, issues of personnel rank, or any other factor that doesn't involve the merits of the input.

If someone says, "That's impossible," ask why. It may be a gut reaction and not well thought through; or there may be sound reasons why "That's impossible." It could also be that the truth lies somewhere in between. Only sound exploration, based on facts and logic, will yield a proper determination.

Don't reject input because it "appears" to be negative. If someone points out a potential problem, explore the reasons behind it and determine if it can be practically and effectively overcome or even avoided altogether. Determining potential problems, whether in pre-critique or later is essential to avoiding a path fraught with potholes, sometimes big enough for the entire project to fall into. And above all, don't "shoot the messenger."

Don't assume that silence means agreement. Solicit the person's input with specific questions regarding his or her particular area of expertise. "Wesley, you haven't said much. Do we have the resources to cover this? How do you see this working?"

"Try on" other ideas that may be offered, especially if they run counter to your own. Recognize that differences of opinion are untapped sources of creativity and synergy. Any concept not in alignment with your view has the potential to strengthen it by adding extra value. Explore the differences to determine what positive contribution this dissension can make.

And last, but perhaps most important...

Be willing to give up your own idea. If thorough critique and discussion renders your original idea impractical, or if a sounder idea emerges, step aside and let the sounder idea flourish. If you are the leader of the group, the final decision is yours. Make it the best it can be.

