

LEADERS & SUCCESS

Boss, Improve Thyself

By Sonja Carberry Posted 08/27/2010 04:34 PM ET

The best bosses don't wear blinders. They analyze their abilities — especially those soft skills like communication and collaboration. How chiefs shore up shortcomings:

- **Look inside.** The best leaders are self-aware. That's the conclusion of a research study by **Green Peak Partners**. The consulting firm's managing partner, **J.P. Flaum**, says introspective CEOs achieved the best financial results for their firms.

Conversely, the worst performers lacked personal insight. "It literally led to decreased results in every area we looked," Flaum told IBD.

CEOs who knew their flaws were likelier to fix them.

"It doesn't overly scare us to find someone who's not perfect," Flaum said. "But it does scare us to find someone who thinks (he is)."

- **Grasp it.** Green Peak's study found that when executives hop from job to job, it's often because they have unresolved flaws in how they deal with people. Instead of fixing those failings and staying put, they take the problems to a new job. "They're not learning what life's trying to teach them," Flaum said.

- **Watch closely.** Employees might not say what they think about your management style, but their bodies will do the talking. So try to spot nonverbal cues, says "The Communication Problem Solver" author Nannette Rundle Carroll.

She suggests that when you notice a staff member's negative body language, such as a defensive stance, probe with questions like:

"What obstacles do you foresee in this task?"

"How does this task fit in with your priorities?"

That keeps the discussion business-focused, but lets subordinates comment on what they're thinking.

- **Check your perceptions.** The high-level misstep that gets discussed most in Carroll's seminars? Superiors who judge or label their subordinates.

"(Stereotyping) puts people in a box they can't escape from," Carroll said. "If a machine breaks, we don't say it has a bad attitude."

Are you letting those first impressions stick? Ask yourself what happened in the moment you formed that opinion. Was it a one-time thing or a continuing pattern?

If it's the former, drop the prejudice.

If it's the latter, address the problem and go on without the moniker.

• **Pursue the ideal.** "If You Will Lead" author Doug Moran studied history's memorable leaders — from Mahatma Gandhi to Ronald Reagan — and found 16 key characteristics.

Patience, vision, stamina and integrity made the list. As did courage, accountability and strategic boldness. Can you be all of those?

"Even the great ones have big, glaring gaps," Moran said. "I don't think anyone is the whole package."

Leaders do strive for perfection by working on areas where they fall short. They hire people who are strong where they are weak.

• **Keep it real.** People in charge need a grounder — "someone they can talk to who doesn't treat them as if they are someone special," Moran said. "I think it's critical, especially for corporate executives who are really intelligent. Those are the ones who need it most."