Harvard Business Review
www.hbr.org

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What to Ask the Person in the Mirror

by Robert S. Kaplan

Reprint R0701H

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If you're like most successful leaders, you were, in the early stages of your career, given plenty of guidance and support. You were closely monitored, coached, and mentored. But as you moved up the ladder, the sources of honest and useful feedback became fewer, and after a certain point, you were pretty much on your own. Now, your boss—if you have one—is no longer giving much consideration to your day-to-day actions. By the time any mistakes come to light, it's probably too late to fix them—or your boss's perceptions of you. And by the time your management missteps negatively affect your business results, it's usually too late to make corrections that will get you back on course.

No matter how talented and successful you are, you will make mistakes. You will develop bad habits. The world will change subtly, without your even noticing, and behaviors that once worked will be rendered ineffective. Over a 22-year career at Goldman Sachs, I had the opportunity to run various businesses and to work with or coach numerous business leaders. I chaired the firm's senior leadership training efforts and cochaired its partnership committee, which focused on reviews, promotions, and development of managing directors. Through this experience and subsequent interviews with a large number of executives in a broad range of industries, I have observed that even outstanding leaders invariably struggle through stretches of their careers where they get off track for some period of time.

It's hard to see it when you're in the midst of it; changes in the environment, competitors, or even personal circumstances can quietly guide you off your game. I have learned that a key characteristic of highly successful leaders is not that they figure out how to always stay on course, but that they develop techniques to help them recognize a deteriorating situation and get back on track as quickly as possible. In my experience, the best way to do that is to step back regularly, say every three to six months (and certainly whenever things feel as though they aren't going well), and honestly ask yourself some questions about how you're doing and what you may need to do differently. As simple as this process sounds, people are often shocked by their own answers to basic management and leadership questions.

One manager in a large financial services company who had been passed over for promotion told me he was quite surprised by his year-end performance review, which highlighted several management issues that had not been previously brought to his attention. His boss read several comments from the review that faulted him for poor communication, failure to effectively articulate a strategy for the business, and a tendency to isolate himself from his team. He believed that the review was unfair. After 15 years at the company, he began to feel confused and misunderstood and wondered whether he still had a future there. He decided to seek feedback directly from five of his key contributors and longtime collaborators. In one-on-one meetings, he asked them for blunt feedback and advice. He was shocked to hear that they were highly critical of several of his recent actions, were confused about the direction he wanted to take the business, and felt he no longer valued their input. Their feedback helped him see that he had been so immersed in the day-to-day business that he had failed to step back and think about what he was doing. This was a serious wake-up call. He immediately took steps to change his behavior and address these issues. His review the following year was dramatically better, he was finally promoted, and his business's performance improved. The manager was lucky to have received this feedback in time to get his career back on track, although he regretted that he had waited for a negative review to ask basic questions about his leadership activities. He promised himself he would not make that mistake again.

In this article, I outline seven types of questions that leaders should ask themselves on some periodic basis. I am not suggesting that there is a "right" answer to any of them or that they all will resonate with a given executive at any point in time. I am suggesting that successful executives can regularly improve their performance and preempt serious business problems by stepping back and taking the time to ask themselves certain key questions.

Vision and Priorities

It's surprising how often business leaders fail to ask themselves: *How frequently do I communicate a vision and priorities for my business? Would my employees, if asked, be able to articulate the vision and priorities?* Many leaders have, on paper, a wealth of leadership talents: interpersonal, strategic, and analytic skills; a knack for team building; and certainly the ability to develop a vision. Unfortunately, in the press of day-to-day activities, they often don't adequately communicate the vision to the organization, and in particular, they don't convey it in a way that helps their people understand what they are supposed to be doing to drive the business. It is very difficult to lead people if they don't have a firm grasp of where they're heading and what's expected of them.

This was the problem at a large *Fortune* 200 company that had decided to invest in its 1,000 top managers by having them attend an intensive, two-day management-training program, 100 at a time. Before each session, the participants went through a 360-degree nonevaluative review in which critical elements of their individual performance were ranked by ten of their subordinates. The company's senior management looked at the results, focusing on the top five and bottom five traits for each group. Despite this being an extremely well-managed firm, the ability to articulate a vision ranked in the bottom five for almost every group. Managers at that company did articulate a vision, but the feedback from their subordinates strongly indicated that they were not communicating it frequently or clearly enough to meet their people's tremendous hunger for guidance.

Employees want to know where the business is going and what they need to focus on. As the world changes, they want to know how the business vision and priorities might change along with it. While managers are taught to actively communicate, many either unintentionally undercommunicate or fail to articulate specific priorities that would give meaning to their vision. However often you think you discuss vision and strategy, you may not be doing it frequently enough or in sufficient detail to suit the needs of your people. Look at the CEO of an emerging biotechnology company, who was quite frustrated with what he saw as a lack of alignment within his top management team. He strongly believed that the company needed to do a substantial equity financing within the next 18 months, but his senior managers wanted to wait a few years until

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two or three of the company's key drugs were further along in the FDA approval process. They preferred to tell their story to investors when the company was closer to generating revenue. When I asked him about the vision for the company, the CEO sheepishly realized that he had never actually written down a vision statement. He had a well-articulated tactical plan relating to each of the company's specific product efforts but no fully formed vision that would give further context to these efforts. He decided to organize an off-site meeting for his senior management team to discuss and specifically articulate a vision for the company.

After a vigorous debate, the group quickly agreed on a vision and strategic priorities. They realized that in order to achieve their shared goals, the business would in fact require substantial financing sooner rather than later—or they would need to scale back some of the initiatives that were central to their vision for the company. Once they fully appreciated this trade-off, they understood what the CEO was trying to accomplish and left the meeting united about their financing strategy. The CEO was quite surprised at how easy it had been to bring the members of his leadership team together. Because they agreed on where they were going as a company, specific issues were much easier to resolve.

A common pitfall in articulating a vision is a failure to boil it down to a manageable list of initiatives. Culling the list involves thinking through and then making difficult choices and trade-off decisions. These choices communicate volumes to your people about how they

Testing Yourself

To assess your performance and stay on track, you should step back and ask yourself certain key questions.

Vision and Priorities

In the press of day-to-day activities, leaders often fail to adequately communicate their vision to the organization, and in particular, they don't communicate it in a way that helps their subordinates determine where to focus their own efforts.

How often do I communicate a vision for my business?

Have I identified and communicated three to five key priorities to achieve that vision?

If asked, would my employees be able to articulate the vision and priorities?

Managing Time

Leaders need to know how they're spending their time. They also need to ensure that their time allocation (and that of their subordinates) matches their key priorities.

How am I spending my time? Does it match my key priorities?

How are my subordinates spending their time? Does that match the key priorities for the business?

Feedback

Leaders often fail to coach employees in a direct and timely fashion and, instead, wait until the year-end review. This approach may lead to unpleasant surprises and can undermine effective professional development. Just as important, leaders need to cultivate subordinates who can give them advice and feedback during the year.

Do I give people timely and direct feedback that they can act on?

Do I have five or six junior subordinates who will tell me things I may not want to hear but need to hear?

Succession Planning

When leaders fail to actively plan for succession, they do not delegate sufficiently and may become decision-making bottlenecks. Key employees may leave if they are not actively groomed and challenged.

Have I, at least in my own mind, picked one or more potential successors?

Am I coaching them and giving them challenging assignments?

Am I delegating sufficiently? Have I become a decision-making bottleneck?

Evaluation and Alignment

The world is constantly changing, and leaders need to be able to adapt their businesses accordingly.

Is the design of my company still aligned with the key success factors for the business?

If I had to design my business with a clean sheet of paper, how would I design it? How would it differ from the current design?

Should I create a task force of subordinates to answer these questions and make recommendations to me?

Leading Under Pressure

A leader's actions in times of stress are watched closely by subordinates and have a profound impact on the culture of the firm and employees' behavior. Successful leaders need to be aware of their own stress triggers and consciously modulate their behavior during these periods to make sure they are acting in ways that are consistent with their beliefs and core values.

What types of events create pressure for me?

How do I behave under pressure?

What signals am I sending my subordinates? Are these signals helpful, or are they undermining the success of my business?

Staying True to Yourself

Successful executives develop leadership styles that fit the needs of their business but also fit their own beliefs and personality.

Is my leadership style comfortable? Does it reflect who I truly am?

Do I assert myself sufficiently, or have I become tentative?

Am I too politically correct?

Does worry about my next promotion or bonus cause me to pull punches or hesitate to express my views?

The fact is, having 15 priorities is the same as having none at all.

should be spending their time. I spoke with the manager of a national sales force who felt frustrated that his direct reports were not focusing on the tasks necessary to achieve their respective regional sales goals. As a result, sales were growing at a slower rate than budgeted at the beginning of the year. When I asked him to enumerate the three to five key priorities he expected his salespeople to focus on, he paused and then explained that there were 15 and it would be very difficult to narrow the list down to five.

Even as he spoke, a light went on in his head. He realized why there might be a disconnect between him and his people: They didn't know precisely what he wanted because he had not told them in a prioritized, and therefore actionable, manner. He reflected on this issue for the next two weeks, thinking at length about his own experience as a regional manager and consulting with various colleagues. He then picked three priorities that he felt were crucial to achieving sales growth. The most important of these involved a major new-business targeting exercise followed by a substantial new-prospect calling effort. The regional managers immediately understood and began focusing on these initiatives. The fact is that having 15 priorities is the same as having none at all. Managers have a responsibility to translate their vision into a manageable number of priorities that their subordinates can understand and act on.

Failing to communicate your vision and priorities has direct costs to you in terms of time and business effectiveness. It's hard to delegate if your people don't have a good sense of the big picture; hence you end up doing more work yourself. This issue can cascade through the organization if your direct reports are, in turn, unable to communicate a vision and effectively leverage their own subordinates.

Managing Time

The second area to question is painfully simple and closely relates to the first: *How am I spending my time?* Once you know your priorities, you need to determine whether you're spending your time—your most precious asset—in a way that will allow you to achieve them. For example, if your two major priorities are senior talent development and global expansion but you're spending the majority of your time on domestic operational and administrative matters that could be delegated, then you need to recognize there is a disconnect and you'd better make some changes.

It's such a simple question, yet many leaders, myself included, just can't accurately answer at times. When leaders finally do track their time, they're often surprised by what they find. Most of us go through periods where unexpected events and day-to-day chaos cause us to be reactive rather than acting on a proscribed plan. Crises, surprises, personnel issues, and interruptions make the workweek seem like a blur. I have recommended to many leaders that they track how they spend each hour of each day for one week, then categorize the hours into types of activities: business development, people management, and strategic planning, for example. For most executives, the results of this exercise are startling—even horrifying—with obvious disconnects between what their top priorities are and how they are spending their time.

For example, the CEO of a midsize manufacturing company was frustrated because he was working 70 hours a week and never seemed to catch up. His family life suffered, and, at work, he was constantly unavailable for his people and major customers. I suggested he step back and review how he was managing his time hour-by-hour over the course of a week. We sat down to examine the results and noticed that he was spending a substantial amount of time approving company expenditures, some for as little as $500—this in a business with $500 million in sales. Sitting in my office, he struggled to explain why he had not delegated some portion of this responsibility; it turned out that the activity was a holdover from a time when the company was much smaller. By delegating authority to approve recurring operating expenses below $25,000, he realized he could save as much as 15 hours per week. He was amazed that he had not recognized this issue and made this simple change much earlier.

How you spend your time is an important question not only for you but for your team. People tend to take their cues from the leader when it comes to time management—therefore, you want to make sure there's a match between your actions, your business priorities, and your team's activities. The CEO of a rapidly growing, 300-person professional services firm felt that, to build the business, senior managers needed to develop stronger and more substantive relationships with clients. This meant that senior professionals would need to spend significantly more time out of their offices in meetings with clients. When asked how his own time was being spent, the CEO was unable to answer. After tracking it for a week, he was shocked to find that he was devoting a tremendous amount of his time to administrative activities related to managing the firm. He realized that the amount of attention he was paying to these matters did not reflect the business's priorities and was sending a confusing message to his people. He immediately began pushing himself to delegate a number of these administrative tasks and increase the amount of time he spent on the road with customers, setting a powerful example for his people. He directed each of his senior managers to do a similar time-allocation exercise to ensure they were dedicating sufficient time to clients.

Of course, the way a leader spends his or her time must be tailored to the needs of the business, which may vary depending on time of year, personnel changes, and external factors. The key here is, whatever you decide, time allocation needs to be a conscious decision that fits your vision and priorities for the business. Given the pressure of running a business, it is easy to lose focus, so it's important to ask yourself this question periodically. Just as you would step back and review a major investment decision, you need to dispassionately review the manner in which you invest your time.

Feedback

When you think about the ways you approach feedback, you should first ask: *Do I give people timely, direct, and constructive feedback?* And second: *Do I have five or six junior people who will tell me things I don't want to hear but need to hear?*

If they're like most ambitious employees, your subordinates want to be coached and developed in a truthful and direct manner. They want to get feedback while there's still an opportunity to act on it; if you've waited until the year-end review, it's often too late. In my experience, well-intentioned managers typically fail to give blunt, direct, and timely feedback to their subordinates.

One reason for this failure is that managers are often afraid that constructive feedback and criticism will demoralize their employees. In addition, critiquing a professional in a frank and timely manner may be perceived as overly confrontational. Lastly, many managers fear that this type of feedback will cause employees not to like them. Consequently, leaders often wait until year-end performance reviews. The year-end review is evaluative (that is, the verdict on the year) and therefore is not conducive to constructive coaching. The subordinate is typically on the defensive and not as open to criticism. This approach creates surprises, often unpleasant ones, which undermine trust and dramatically reduce the confidence of the subordinate in the manager.

The reality is that managers who don't give immediate and direct feedback often are "liked" until year-end—at which time they wind up being strongly disliked. If employees have fallen short of expectations, the failing is reflected in bonuses, raises, and promotions. The feeling of injustice can be enormous. What's worse is the knowledge that if an employee had received feedback earlier in the year, it is likely that he or she would have made meaningful efforts to improve and address the issues.

While people do like to hear positive feedback, ultimately, they desperately want to know the truth, and I have rarely seen someone quit over hearing the truth or being challenged to do better—unless it's too late. On the contrary, I would argue that people are more likely to stay if they understand what issues they need to address and they trust you to bring those issues to their attention in a straightforward and prompt fashion. They gain confidence that you will work with them to develop their skills and that they won't be blindsided at the end of the year. Employees who don't land a hoped-for promotion will be much more likely to forgive you if you've told them all along what they need to do better, even if they haven't gotten there yet. They may well redouble their efforts to prove to you that they can overcome these issues.

During my career at Goldman Sachs, I consistently found that professional development was far more effective when coaching and direct feedback were given to employees throughout the year—well in advance of the annual performance review process. Internal surveys of managing directors showed that, in cases where feedback was confined to the year-end review, satisfaction with career development was dramatically lower than when it was offered throughout the year.

While your direct reports know what you are doing wrong, most of them are not dying to tell you. It takes a concerted effort to cultivate subordinates who will advise and coach you.

As hard as it is to give effective and timely feedback, many leaders find it much more challenging to get feedback from their employees. Once you reach a certain stage of your career, junior people are in a much better position than your boss to tell you how you're doing. They see you in your day-to-day activities, and they experience your decisions directly. Your boss, at this stage, is much more removed and, as a result, typically needs to talk to your subordinates to assess your performance at the end of the year. In order to avoid your own year-end surprises, you need to develop a network of junior professionals who are willing to give you constructive feedback. The problem is that, while your direct reports know what you are doing wrong, most of them are not dying to tell you. With good reason—there's very little upside and a tremendous amount of downside. The more senior and the more important you become, the less your subordinates will tell you the "awful truth"—things that are difficult to hear but that you need to know.

It takes a concerted effort to cultivate subordinates who will advise and coach you. It also takes patience and some relentlessness. When I ask subordinates for constructive feedback, they will typically and predictably tell me that I'm doing "very well." When I follow up and ask "What should I do differently?" they respond, "Nothing that I can think of." If I challenge them by saying, "There must be something!" still they say, "Nothing comes to mind." I then ask them to sit back and think—we have plenty of time. By this time, beads of sweat begin to become visible on their foreheads. After an awkward silence, they will eventually come up with something—and it's often devastating to hear. It's devastating because it's a damning criticism and because you know it's true.

What you do with this feedback is critical. If you act on it, you will improve your performance. Equally important, you will take a big step in building trust and laying the groundwork for a channel of honest feedback. When subordinates see that you respond positively to suggestions, they will often feel more ownership in the business and in your success. They'll learn to give you criticisms on their own initiative because they know you will actually appreciate it and do something with it. Developing a network of "coaching" subordinates will help you take action to identify your own leadership issues and meaningfully improve your performance.

Succession Planning

Another question that managers know is important yet struggle to answer affirmatively is: *Have I, at least in my own mind, picked one or more potential successors?* This issue is critical because if you aren't identifying potential successors, you are probably not delegating as extensively as you should and you may well be a decision-making bottleneck. Being a bottleneck invariably means that you are not spending enough time on vital leadership priorities and are failing to develop your key subordinates. Ironically, when leaders believe they are so talented that they can perform tasks far better than any of their subordinates and therefore insist on doing the tasks themselves, they will typically cause their businesses to underperform, and, ultimately, their careers will suffer as well.

The succession question also has significant implications that cascade through an organization: If leaders do not develop successors, then the organization may lack a sufficient number of leaders to successfully grow the business. Worse, if junior employees are not developed, they may leave the firm for better opportunities elsewhere. For these reasons, many well-managed companies will hesitate to promote executives who have failed to develop successors.

It is sufficient to identify possible successors without actually telling them you've done so—as long as this identification causes you to manage them differently. In particular, you will want to delegate more of your major responsibilities to these professionals. This will speed their maturation and prepare them to step up to the next level. By giving demanding assignments to these subordinates, you strongly signal an interest in their development and career progression—which will encourage them to turn down offers from competitors. Leaders who do this are much better able to keep their teams together and avoid losing up-and-coming stars to competitors.

A loss of talent is highly damaging to a company. It is particularly painful if you could have retained key employees by simply challenging them more intensively. I spoke with a division head of a large company who was concerned about what he perceived to be a talent deficit

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in his organization. He felt that he could not use his time to the fullest because he viewed his direct reports as incapable of assuming some of his major responsibilities. He believed this talent deficit was keeping him from launching several new product and market initiatives. In the midst of all this, he lost two essential subordinates over six months—each had left to take on increased responsibilities at major competitors. He had tried to persuade them to stay, emphasizing that he was actively considering them for significant new leadership assignments. Because they had not seen evidence of this previously, they were skeptical and left anyway. I asked him whether, prior to the defections, he had identified them (or anyone else) as potential successors, put increased responsibilities in their hands, or actively ratcheted up his coaching of these professionals. He answered that, in the chaos of daily events and in the effort to keep up with the business, he had not done so. He also admitted that he had underestimated the potential of these two employees and realized he was probably underestimating the abilities of several others in the company. He immediately sat down and made a list of potential stars and next to each name wrote out a career and responsibility game plan. He immediately got to work on this formative succession plan, although he suspected that he had probably waited too long already.

When you're challenging and testing people, you delegate to them more often, which frees you to focus on the most critical strategic matters facing the business. This will make you more successful and a more attractive candidate for your own future promotion.

Evaluation and Alignment

The world is constantly changing. Your customers' needs change; your business evolves (going, for instance, from high growth to mature); new products and distribution methods emerge as threats. When these changes happen, if you don't change along with them, you can get seriously out of alignment. The types of people you hire, the way you organize them, the economic incentives you offer them, and even the nature of the tasks you delegate no longer create the culture and outcomes that are critical to the success of your business. It's your job to make sure that the design of your organization is aligned with the key success factors for the business. Ask yourself: *Am I attuned to changes in the business environment that would require a change in the way we organize and run our business?*

Such clear-sightedness is, of course, hard to achieve. As a leader, you may be too close to the business to see subtle changes that are continually occurring. Because you probably played a central role in building and designing the business, it may be emotionally very difficult to make meaningful changes. You may have to fire certain employees—people you recruited and hired. You may also have to acknowledge that you made some mistakes and be open to changing your own operating style in a way that is uncomfortable for some period of time.

Because of the difficulty in facing these issues, it's sometimes wise to call on high-potential subordinates to take a fresh look at the business. This approach can be quite effective because junior employees are often not as emotionally invested as you are and can see more objectively what needs to be done. This approach is also a good way to challenge your future leaders and give them a valuable development experience. You'll give them a chance to exercise their strategic skills; you'll get a glimpse of their potential (which relates to the earlier discussion of succession planning), and you might just get some terrific new ideas for how to run the business.

This approach worked for the CEO of a high technology business in northern California, whose company had been one of the early innovators in its product space but, in recent years, had begun to falter and lose market share. In its early days, the company's primary success factors had been product innovation and satisfying customer needs. It had aggressively hired innovative engineers and marketing personnel. As new competitors emerged, customers began to focus more on cost and service (in the form of more sophisticated applications development). Stepping back, the CEO sensed that he needed to redesign the company with a different mix of people, a new organization, and a revised incentive structure. Rather than try to come up with a new model himself, he asked a more junior group of executives to formulate a new company design as if they had a "clean sheet of paper." Their study took a number of weeks, but upon completion, it led to several recommendations that the CEO immediately began to implement. For example, they suggested colocating the engineering and sales departments and creating integrated account coverage teams. They also recommended that the company push more of its engineers to interact with customers and focus on this skill in recruiting. The CEO regretted that he had not asked the question—and conducted this assignment—12 months earlier.

Even the most successful business is susceptible to new challenges posed by a changing world. Effective executives regularly look at their businesses with a clean sheet of paper—seeking advice and other perspectives from people who are less emotionally invested in the business—in order to determine whether key aspects of the way they run their organizations are still appropriate.

Leading Under Pressure

Pressure is a part of business. Changes in business conditions create urgent problems. New entrants in the market demand a competitive response. Valued employees quit, often at the most inopportune times. Leaders and their teams, no matter how smart they are, make mistakes.

The interesting thing about stressful events is that they affect each person differently—what causes you anxiety may not bother someone else, and vice versa. For some, extreme anxiety may be triggered by the prospect of a promotion; for others, by making a serious mistake; still others, by losing a piece of business to a competitor. Regardless of the source of stress, every leader experiences it, so a good question to ask yourself is: *How do I behave under pressure, and what signals am I sending my employees?*

As a leader, you're watched closely. During a crisis, your people watch you with a microscope, noting every move you make. In such times, your subordinates learn a great deal about you and what you really believe, as opposed to what you say. Do you accept responsibility for mistakes, or do you look for someone to blame? Do you support your employees, or do you turn on them? Are you cool and calm, or do you lose your temper? Do you stand up for what you believe, or do you take the expedient route and advocate what you think your seniors want to hear? You need to be self-aware enough to recognize the situations that create severe anxiety for you and manage your behavior to avoid sending unproductive messages to your people.

I've met a number of leaders who behave in a very composed and thoughtful manner the great majority of the time. Unfortunately, when they're under severe stress, they react in ways that set a very negative tone. They inadvertently train their employees to mimic that behavior and behave in a similar fashion. If your instinct is to shield yourself from blame, to take credit rather than sharing it with your subordinates, or to avoid admitting when you have made a mistake, you will give your employees license to do the same.

The CEO of a large asset-management firm was frustrated that he was unable to build a culture of accountability and teamwork in his growing business. At his request, I spoke to a number of his team members. I asked in particular about the actions of the CEO when investments they recommended declined in value. They recounted his frequent temper tantrums and accusatory diatribes, which led to an overwhelming atmosphere of blame and finger-pointing. The investment decisions had, in fact, been made jointly through a carefully constructed process involving portfolio managers, industry analysts, and the CEO. As a result of these episodes, employees learned that when investments went wrong it would be good to try to find someone else to blame. Hearing these stories, the CEO realized his actions under pressure were far more persuasive to employees than his speeches about teamwork and culture. He understood that he would have to learn to moderate his behavior under stress and, subsequently, took steps to avoid reacting so angrily to negative investment results. He also became more aware that subordinates typically felt quite regretful and demoralized when their investments declined and were more likely to need a pat on the back and coaching than a kick in the pants.

It's extremely difficult to expect employees to alert you to looming problems when they fear your reaction—and even more so when they think it's better to distance themselves from potential problems. This can create an atmosphere where surprises are, in fact, more likely as the company's natural early-warning system has been inadvertently disarmed. If you have created this kind of culture, it is quite unlikely that you will learn about problems from subordinates spontaneously—unless they want to commit career suicide.

Part of the process of maturing as a leader is learning to step back and think about what creates pressure for you, being self-aware in these situations, and disciplining your behavior to ensure that you act in a manner consistent with your core values.

Staying True to Yourself

Most business leaders ask themselves whether their leadership style fits the needs of their business. Fewer managers ask whether their style also fits their own beliefs and personality. The question here is: *Does my leadership style reflect who I truly am?*

A business career is a marathon, not a sprint, and if you aren't true to yourself, eventually you're going to wear down. As you are developing in your career, it is advisable to observe various leadership styles, and pick and choose elements that feel comfortable to you. Bear in mind, though, that observing and adopting aspects of other styles does not mean you should try to be someone else. During my career, I was fortunate to have had several superb bosses and colleagues with distinctive and unique leadership skills. While I tried to adopt some of their techniques, I also learned that I needed to develop an overall style that fit my unique skills and personality. Your style needs to fit you; even an unorthodox style can be enormously effective if it reflects your skills, values, and personality.

As you become more senior, you'll need to ask yourself an additional set of questions relating to style: *Do I assert myself sufficiently, or have I become tentative? Am I too politically correct? Does worry about my next promotion or my year-end bonus cause me to pull punches or hesitate to clearly express my views?* In many companies, ambitious executives may try to avoid confronting sensitive issues or making waves. Worse than that, they may spend an inordinate amount of energy trying to ascertain what their boss thinks and then act like they think the same thing. If they're very skilled at this, they may even get a chance to make their comments before the boss has a chance to express his opinion—and feel the warm glow of approval from the boss.

The problem is that confrontation and disagreement are crucial to effective decision making. Some of the worst decisions I've been involved in were made after a group of intelligent people had unanimously agreed to the course of action—though, later, several participants admitted that they had misgivings but were hesitant to diverge from the apparent group consensus. Conversely, it's hard for me to recall a poor decision I was involved in that was made after a thorough debate in which opposing views were vigorously expressed (even if I disagreed with the ultimate decision). Companies need their leaders to express strongly held views rather than mimic what they believe to be the party line. As a leader, therefore, you must ask yourself whether you are expressing your views or holding back and being too politic. At the same time, leaders must encourage their own subordinates to express their unvarnished opinions, make waves as appropriate, and stop tiptoeing around significant issues.

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Successful leaders periodically struggle during stretches of their careers. To get back on track, they must devise techniques for stepping back, getting perspective, and developing a new game plan. In this process, having the answers is often far less important than taking time to ask yourself the right questions and gain key insights. The questions posed in this article are intended to spark your thinking. Only a subset of these may resonate with you, and you may find it more useful to come up with your own list. In either event, a self-questioning process conducted on a periodic basis will help you work through leadership challenges and issues that you invariably must tackle over the course of your career.

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What to Ask the Person in the Mirror is also part of the *Harvard Business Review* OnPoint collection **Habits of Highly Effective Managers, 2nd Edition,** Product no. 1728, which includes these additional articles:

Beware the Busy Manager
Heike Bruch and Sumantra Ghoshal
Harvard Business Review
February 2002
Product no. 8903

Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?
William Oncken, Jr. and Donald L. Wass
Harvard Business Review
January–February 2000
Product no. 3928