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I recently observed a town hall meeting where a new leader had just been promoted to run his division. In his introductory remarks, many – including me – were struck by his declaration, “One of the things you’ll find is that I’m very self-aware and open to feedback.” Even from the side of the room, I could see the eye rolling.

Over my 30-year career working with leaders, I've heard many declare such self-enlightenment. But telling people you're self-aware doesn't mean you are. And while we know that higher self-awareness leads to better team performance, unfortunately, [research](#) suggests that most people aren't very self-aware at work.

After the leader's speech, I introduced myself and asked him with curiosity, "So what have you done to become so self-aware and open to feedback?" Proudly, he responded, "I make it a priority to get a 360 feedback review every year." I probed further, "And what kinds of things have you been able to improve in your leadership as a result of all that feedback?" With remarkable sincerity, he said, "Well, for example, last year I received feedback that our staff meetings were too long so I shortened them by 30 minutes." I now fully appreciated the eye rolling.

Fortunately, you don't need to collect formal 360 feedback to learn how others experience you as a leader. If you want to understand how people genuinely perceive you, try these four things instead:

Ask your coworkers' to push back. The most basic way to understand what people think of you is to ask them. If you're not soliciting dissent, it's unlikely you're hearing the truth about what it's like to work for you. No news is not necessarily good news. Whether in group meetings, or one on one, people need to [feel comfortable pushing back](#) and if you don't have people routinely [offering dissenting ideas](#), or raising concerns about actions you are contemplating or have taken, you should worry. After meetings where particularly difficult issues or decisions are discussed, one leader I work with asks a few members of her team, "How do you feel that went, and what could I have done differently?" Her team has come to realize she genuinely wants pushback and accepts it graciously. Too many 360 feedback processes, because they allow people to hide behind anonymity, have become replacements for great conversations instead of instigators of them. But any feedback exchanged between leaders and followers should ultimately strengthen the relationship, not further strain it.

Read nonverbal cues. People are constantly telling you how they feel about you through their nonverbal cues. While people may withhold verbal feedback, their faces and bodies will often tell a different story. If you learn to read them, these cues can provide a steady stream of useful feedback about how your words and actions are being received. Allan and Barbara Pease suggest in their book, *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, that because more than 65% of interpersonal communication is nonverbal, spotting the contradictions between someone's words and body language will dramatically increase your ability to accurately perceive what's happening. When people look down or avoid eye-contact with you, when a typically engaging colleague suddenly becomes quiet, or when an even-keeled colleague gets defensive, pay attention. Don't ignore these critical cues. Offer your observation graciously. One leader I worked with did this masterfully. When moods or countenance took a sudden shift, he would say something like, "Tell me how I should interpret your silence," or "You suddenly seem to not want to look directly at me. I'm concerned something I've said isn't sitting well. Can you help me understand if that's true?" These tactful observations invited others to

share what was happening internally, and in turn, helped the leader adjust, deepening the trust between him and those who observed his changing behavior.

Monitor how you narrate the story. We are naturally inclined to interpret how things are going in overly positive ways. Pay attention to your [inner narration](#) of what’s happening around you. If that voice is working to convince you things are fine, step back and re-assess. Watch out if the voice in your head is doing a lot of self-justifying or self-soothing, like, “I think that presentation went really well...so what if they didn’t have any questions,” or “They understand that you get a little impatient sometimes, but they know it’s because you really care,” or “I can’t believe they think I’m indecisive! You can’t rush the creative process!” Force yourself to consider alternative explanations. Perhaps they don’t understand why you get impatient or you are being indecisive. Be careful not to become overly self-critical either. You’re aiming for a balanced, informed perspective, not one that protects or harms your ego.

Know your triggers and encourage others to call them out. All leaders have buttons that get pushed. Some leaders react defensively when confronted with mistakes. Others become sarcastic or passive-aggressive when they don’t get their way. And some become harshly impatient when things don’t move quickly enough. Whatever they are, self-aware leaders [know their triggers](#), and let others name them. One leader I worked with became painfully verbose when he was anxious. During meetings where contentious issues were being discussed, he would launch into lengthy diatribes in an unconscious effort to calm his [discomfort with conflict](#). One of the ways he worked to improve was to acknowledge to his team that he was aware he did it (which they greatly appreciated) and he asked them to simply hold up their hands when they felt he’d gone on too long. The first few times people raised their hands, he struggled to shut up. Someone on the team finally said, “If you want us to help you stop rambling, you have to agree to actually stop talking when we raise our hands.” He did. He eventually learned to be brief, by writing out concise statements he could employ as needed. Great leaders also [apologize when they’ve behaved poorly](#), cleaning up any emotional messes they’ve left behind.

There is a lot of data already available to you about how you are perceived as a leader. To be effective, don’t over-rely on a formal 360, just start listening to – and acting upon – the information that’s already there.

Ron Carucci is co-founder and managing partner at [Navalent](#), working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change for their organizations, leaders, and industries. He is the best-selling author of eight books, including the recent Amazon #1 [Rising to Power](#). Connect with him on Twitter at [@RonCarucci](#); download his free e-book on [Leading Transformation](#).
