



Seeing Yourself as Others See You

10:39 AM Friday September 16, 2011 | [Comments \(55\)](#)

In our last blog (<http://blogs.hbr.org/hill-lineback/2011/08/the-first-requirement-for-beco.html>), we argued that becoming a great boss required courage — in particular, the courage to find out how others see you. Almost certainly, we said, others' perceptions of you will differ in important and perhaps disconcerting ways from your self-perceptions.

Many of you responded with thoughtful comments — thank you! Some of you agreed with us and some took exception to at least some of what we said. Best of all, the blog catalyzed lively discussions among you, its readers.

This is an important topic. It's not about being liked or popular, as some assumed in reading our previous blog. It's about your ability to exert influence, which is your major task as a manager. If you don't know how your words and actions are perceived and understood, if you don't know if others trust (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/09/does_your_company_have_a_cultu.html) you (and if they don't, why not), if you don't know what others want and expect from you, how can you exert the influence you want?

The problem is, how do you find out? As many of you pointed out, simply asking is unlikely to produce a true or complete answer. As the boss, you will often have trouble finding out the truth about anything, especially when it's negative or problematic. Even if you're trusted, people are still aware you hold the keys to promotions, pay, and choice assignments. And if you're not trusted, why would anyone tell you the truth?

Though there are no simple solutions, we can offer some guidelines (and we hope you'll add more in your comments):

You're more likely to hear what people think and feel, if you've established real, ongoing human connections with them. Think of your interactions with those around you — your people, your colleagues, even your boss and others above you. Is there an easy give-and-take between you? Are you able to carry on a real conversation (<http://hbr.org/web/slideshows/difficult-conversations-nine-common-mistakes/1-slide>) about a variety of topics, business and personal? Can you disagree and respectfully discuss your differences? Without such connections, which require time to establish, little else you do is likely to uncover others' thoughts and feelings, especially about you as a boss.

You're more likely to hear people's real thoughts and feelings once you've established a history of reacting calmly and constructively to comments of all kinds, even when they're personal and not positive. You needn't accept everything you hear. But when you disagree, do you seek clarification, pose thoughtful questions, and ask for examples? Or do you respond angrily and deny defensively what you're hearing? If you want to know what people think, you cannot deny the reality of their perceptions, even when you disagree. Only as people test your tolerance will you slowly build a reputation for a willingness to hear and accept candid comments.

Seek out people's perceptions and perspectives in the context of a specific task, project, or program. Asking broad, general questions can feel threatening to those you're asking, particularly if they work for you. So, develop a practice of "checking in" with people at the beginning and end of a piece of work (and in the middle if it's a lengthy project). At the start, ask what people hope and expect to get from you, the boss, through the course of the work. At the end, ask if people got what they needed. Use the specific piece of work as a setting for a candid discussion of what worked and what didn't, where you might have done less or more, and what you should do differently next time. That discussion can sometimes serve as a springboard to a more general discussion about you as a manager and what people need from you.

This approach can work even for everyday tasks. Every time you make an assignment or request, no matter how small, ask if what you want is clear. And then ask what the person needs from you, if anything, to perform that task. The answer will often be, "Nothing." But when the person does make a request, agree on what you will do, do it, and then check back to see if everything, including your role, worked out as hoped.

Approaching every task, large or small, this way may or may not produce direct game-changing insights for you, but it will create relationships in which people know you're open to their thoughts and insights.

Build a developmental network (<http://blogs.hbr.org/hill-lineback/2011/03/the-three-networks-you-need.html>) of people who will give you candid feedback. These should obviously be people you trust and with whom you have strong, ongoing relationships. These people can give you reactions to what they see and hear from you and can communicate to you what they hear about you from others in the organization. They are most likely to be peers and colleagues and may include an older and more senior mentor. But personal networks don't usually include those who work for you because including them can complicate your relationship and color your judgment in making hard decisions that involve them.

Finally, if she's willing, your boss can also be a valuable source of feedback based on her own experience with you, and she can pass on what she hears about you from others. It requires a boss who's willing to be a strong coach and developer and not just the judge who evaluates your performance. Such a relationship, if you can encourage and create it, offers clear advantages. Your boss has access to organizational information and commentary not available — but useful — to you and so can offer a broader perspective on how you're perceived. She's also likely to speak candidly with you. It's certainly worth testing whether your boss is willing to play this role.

All these approaches require time and ongoing effort. Getting the truth about how you're perceived and whether you're trusted doesn't only require the right questions. It requires the right relationships.