



RESEARCH & IDEAS

Looking in the Mirror: Questions Every Leader Must Ask

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"Show me a company or nonprofit or government in trouble, and I will almost invariably show you a set of leaders who are asking absolutely the wrong questions," says professor Robert Steven Kaplan. He discusses his new book, What to Ask the Person in the Mirror. Plus: book excerpt. Key concepts include:

- Leaders need to address critical issues including: vision and priorities, time management, giving and getting feedback, succession planning and delegation, evaluation and alignment, being a role model, and reaching true potential.
- Leaders must have a clear vision and a set of priorities for the organization, and must ensure that their key subordinates know what those priorities are.
- Because CEOs don't have the benefit of feedback from their superiors, it's crucial that they solicit feedback about their leadership style from subordinates.

When CEOs speak with Rob Kaplan looking for answers, he usually focuses them instead on figuring out and discussing the right questions.

"Show me a company, nonprofit, or a government leader that is struggling, and almost invariably you'll see someone who isn't sufficiently focused on asking the right questions," says Kaplan, a Professor of Management Practice at Harvard Business School. "Most leaders spend a lot of their time looking for answers. Very often, they may feel isolated and alone. I want to help them refocus their attention on framing and then discussing the key questions that will help them regroup, mobilize their team, formulate a plan of action, and move forward."

In his new book, *What to Ask the Person in the Mirror*, Kaplan argues against the notion that great leadership is about having all the answers. He believes that leadership skills can be learned--and that many of these skills require executives to rethink their conception of what a superb leader actually does. Developing and practicing these skills requires hard work and

may demand that talented executives overcome some degree of discomfort and even anxiety in order to raise their game.

The book discusses several key areas of inquiry that can help leaders improve the success of their companies and nonprofit organizations including: vision and priorities, managing your time, giving and getting feedback, succession planning and delegation, evaluation and alignment, being a role model, and reaching your potential. "My objective is to help leaders reach their potential by helping them realize that they don't need to have all the answers or do this alone. I hope they will see that framing a question and listening can be enormously powerful in leading to excellent decisions. A leader needs to master the use of inquiry and reflection as well as advocacy in order to build his or her organization and career."

Have you developed a clear vision and key priorities for your enterprise?

"When I see a problem with a business or nonprofit, it often starts with a lack of clarity about the organization's aspirations," Kaplan says. The leader may have a clear vision in his or her head but has not communicated it effectively throughout the organization. "When there is not a clearly articulated vision along with a manageable set of key priorities, you may see an organization where employees are expending their energies in a number of divergent and uncoordinated directions."

Leaders need to ask whether they articulate a clear vision and, just as importantly, whether their key employees can rearticulate this vision in a consistent manner. For instance, DuPont's vision is "to be the world's most dynamic science company, creating sustainable solutions essential to a better, safer and healthier life for people everywhere." This vision helps DuPont employees better understand what (and why) they are spending their professional energies trying to accomplish.

Once the vision is established, Kaplan

advises leaders to come up with and communicate a list of no more than three to five priorities that are critical to the organization in order to achieve the vision. In his book, Kaplan describes various approaches to formulating and adapting these priorities to each department and geographic region in order to better achieve overall organization objectives. "When a leadership has this discipline, they focus much more intently on what tasks they need to do superbly well in order to achieve their goals. This also can help them to question certain activities where they are spending substantial time and money yet not contributing to organizational goals and maybe they shouldn't be pursuing."

Does the way you spend your time match your key priorities?

Many CEOs tell Kaplan that they don't have time to figure out their vision and priorities--they're working 80-hour weeks! In his book, Kaplan discusses techniques for matching available hours with key priorities, so executives can learn to do much more effective work and better manage their time.

He recommends that executives track their time for a couple of weeks and then analyze how it is being spent. If substantial time allocations do not match top priorities, he discusses how these tasks should be either delegated or eliminated.

"When someone asks you to spend time on work that doesn't match your key priorities, the right action is probably to say no," Kaplan says. "Once you have a better matching of your time with priorities, you'll want to encourage your direct reports to do the same."

Do you coach and also solicit feedback from your key subordinates?

Most good leaders understand they need to coach key employees, but fewer realize the importance of asking subordinates for coaching.

The more senior you are in a company, the fewer senior executives and peers are able to effectively observe and coach you. Kaplan gives advice on several techniques that leaders can use to solicit coaching from their direct reports.

"Ironically, the executives most in need of feedback in many organizations are very senior," he says. "They may have become isolated or not realize that their direct reports have constructive advice regarding specific changes they need to make to improve their leadership effectiveness."

The book describes various approaches for giving and receiving feedback. In particular, it offers various techniques that should be implemented in advance of the year-end review, which typically arrives too late for professionals to make changes that would improve their compensation and/or promotion prospects in that year.

When senior leaders ultimately do cultivate junior coaches, they find that the criticism can feel "devastating at first because you realize it is accurate and that it is probably a widespread view within the organization. You have to thank the junior coach, and then go out and work on what they've told you." Not sure the assessment is accurate? Call a few close friends or loved ones and see what they think. Most likely, Kaplan says, they'll agree with your subordinates.

"Leadership is a team game," he says. "You have to solicit help from others or you're likely to under-achieve your potential."

Do you have a succession-planning process in place?

Kaplan stresses the importance of developing potential successors for key positions in your company—including your own—and creating a confidential list. "Many great companies do this but a surprising number don't," he says.

Senior leaders should leverage this depth chart information about up-and-comers by delegating to them more extensively. This also allows senior leaders more time to achieve a better match between their own time and key priorities. Leaders who fail to train successors risk not only doing too much themselves but also losing these valuable employees, who can become frustrated that they aren't being challenged to build their skills and careers at the company.

If you had to design your company today with a clean sheet of paper, what would you change?

The world doesn't stand still and it's natural for companies to fall out of alignment with

achievement of key objectives. Too often, leaders don't realize how off-track they are until serious damage has been done to the business or the firm's reputation. Kaplan likens the situation to realizing your health is at risk only after you're stricken with a heart attack.

He describes various approaches for reviewing your organization with a clean sheet of paper. For example, one approach involves creating a task force of younger emerging company leaders. "Emerging leaders, organized and mandated properly, can give you fabulous strategic recommendations," he says. "Looking to up-and-comers is not only quite effective in getting great strategic advice but also in motivating these future leaders."

Do you act as a role model?

Leaders don't always realize that their actions set an example for the people who work for them, especially if they have risen through the ranks of a company so quickly that they fail to realize their influence as role models. Kaplan learned this from personal experience during his tenure at the Goldman Sachs Group, where he worked in several capacities, eventually serving as vice chairman before leaving the firm in 2005.

"I went from being a junior person to running a large business in what seemed like a nanosecond," he says. "And suddenly more people were watching what I did, and I had to adjust my actions because I wasn't quite ready for that." In his book, he discusses various approaches that leaders should take in order to connect their behaviors with the messages they want to be sending.

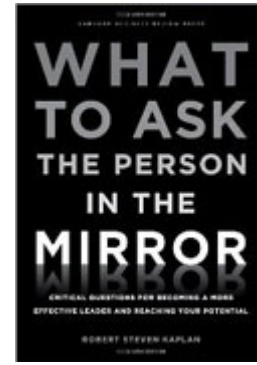
Are you reaching your potential and being true to yourself?

While much of this book is about tangible "blocking and tackling" to become a more effective executive, Kaplan dedicates the last two chapters to methods of gaining perspective and managing oneself more effectively.

"In the end, it's not about meeting everyone else's expectations," he says. "It's about reaching your unique potential and developing your own leadership style."

Book Excerpt from
What to Ask the Person in the Mirror—Critical Questions for Becoming a More Effective Leader and Reaching Your Potential

Recognizing Your Passions



As a leader, you do need to be aware of what you enjoy. In particular, which tasks do you really enjoy and which would you prefer not to do yourself?

What you delegate, how you structure your job, whether or not you are in the right job—all of this should flow from and be influenced by a realistic understanding of your likes and dislikes. If you hate doing something, you are likely to avoid it. Conversely, if you love doing something, you are likely to arrange your time so you can do more and more of it.

The question then becomes, how do your passions coincide with the needs of the business? Have you reconciled your passions with these business needs?

The CEO of a nursing home/health services company in Europe was very discouraged about her struggles to manage a number of her key employees. She became so discouraged, in fact, that she was questioning whether she wanted to continue to be CEO of the firm. She asked to come see me to discuss this. During our meeting, she vented about the various frustrations she was experiencing—including unusually high turnover among her senior facilities-management staff, as well as various back-office struggles, computer system failures, and so on.

I surprised her a bit by asking her first what she loved about the business: "Why in the world did you choose to take this job?" She thought for a few seconds, and then said that she truly loved helping people in need—the firm's clientele. She was enormously motivated by developing (and then executing) senior housing concepts that improved the quality of life for senior citizens and those with chronic health conditions. She was extremely good at understanding the customers' needs and then devising solutions to fit those needs. She got a thrill out of it!

Then I asked her what she hated about her job. She hesitated, but finally confessed that she really didn't enjoy the day-to-day management of the facilities, recruiting talent, or coaching young people. I asked how that could be possible, given that she had built a firm of more than a thousand people and had achieved a record of consistent success.

She explained that in the early years, she was so excited to be building a business of her own that she took the time to recruit and coach. Once the company developed a track record, however, she reverted to doing the things she loved best. In some ways, this made sense—after all, she was a superb conceptual thinker and also loved spending time with the company's clients. In other ways, though, it was a disaster

in the making. The company's key facilities management, coaching, people development, and recruiting functions were allowed to atrophy. As the organization grew in size, this neglect became a bigger and bigger problem.

We discussed the fact that leaving these key tasks poorly attended to—even unattended—didn't make much sense. On the other hand, not everything had to be done by her, personally. She needed to identify (or hire) a senior leader who would be empowered to lead the recruiting effort, take responsibility for coaching key staff, and identify other leaders who would extend the coaching effort still further.

After our discussions, she asked one of her senior leaders to fill the newly created position of chief operating officer (COO). In this role, the new COO was directly responsible for addressing these key facilities operation and talent development/coaching needs. He was someone who knew the company and its culture and thoroughly enjoyed the critical tasks the job called for. He was very effective, and this created more room for the CEO to focus on the essential tasks at which she was superb.

Our work was not quite over. In subsequent discussions, I stressed the fact that the CEO could not simply "punt" altogether on the coaching and people development front. I suggested that she needed to think of those elements of coaching that she did enjoy and could do effectively. After thinking about it, she realized that she did love to sit down with junior executives, discuss new development projects, and brainstorm about ideas for better serving clients. She agreed that she could, and should, do this more frequently.

Six months after the conclusion of these discussions, I received an update from her. She told me that she was far happier and that the company was operating much more effectively. She admitted that she was a bit amazed that the "fixes" were so easy.

Passion for What You Do: Achieving Sustained High Performance

Perhaps this story seems simple, and its lessons obvious. How could this leader have failed to see that she was neglecting tasks so fundamental to the business? How could she not recognize that she should delegate these tasks if she couldn't stand to do them herself? In my experience, this circumstance is not as unusual as you might think. Many executives believe that there are certain key tasks they must do themselves, whether or not they fit their competencies or interests. They believe it is a sign of weakness to delegate these tasks. As a result of this view, they perform those tasks poorly or irregularly.

Ask yourself, do you neglect important tasks you don't enjoy, and fail to delegate them to others? Do you focus most of your time on the tasks you really do enjoy, at the same time leaving other important functions unattended? Ask yourself these questions, face up to the answers, and then—if necessary—develop an action plan to proactively deal with the situation.

Again, as emphasized in previous chapters, you have to match your time to the organization's key priorities. Having said this, you also have to enjoy those selected tasks if you're going to do them on a sustainable basis—that is, at a high level of excellence. Consider whether you do have sufficient passion for those tasks you choose to spend time on.

This is a critical area of advice that I regularly give to MBA students as they are thinking about their first job and industry choice. The prospect of financial gain is a strong motivator for many young people. Unfortunately, financial rewards typically take years to achieve, and they typically come only through sustained outstanding performance. It's tough to perform at an outstanding level for a sustained period if you don't enjoy what you're doing! This is a critical lesson for young professionals who are just starting their careers and want to get started on a path to success.

Once you become a more senior professional, the nature of your job is likely to change. Among other things, you gain the

opportunity to delegate key tasks. Invariably, as a more senior leader, you will enjoy certain tasks more than others. For those tasks for which you lack passion, consider delegating primary responsibility to someone who will have the passion. I recommend you take this one step further and make sure that your direct reports undertake this same exercise.

No, I am not suggesting that all key tasks have to be enjoyable. Certain tasks that come with the territory of being a leader—for example, deciding compensation and promotions, conducting reviews, and firing people—range from being a pain in the neck to being downright unpleasant. A leader has to learn to spend time on and embrace these activities. I am suggesting that, when possible, executives should concentrate their time on tasks that fit their skills and their passions—and make sure that, whether they do tasks themselves or delegate them, these critical responsibilities are getting accomplished at a high level of quality that fits the needs of the organization. [WIK](#)

About the author

Carmen Nobel is senior editor of *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*.

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