An executive I know believes that being a leader is far less complicated than we make it. He suggests that the best leaders simply make better decisions than their competition. When asked how to develop this capability, he smiles and says “Make a lot of bad decisions that don’t kill you.” The belief that good judgment is founded on bad judgment means that individuals learn primarily as a result of their experiences—particularly their mistakes. Over time, they develop better judgment as they live with the outcomes of their choices. The truth, however, is that experience is no panacea. Even the most talented and best prepared leaders are forced to learn on the job—facing complex, ever-changing, and often unpredictable challenges.

It is equally true that mistakes become more costly as you move up in a company. Take the recent case of Ron Johnson at JCPenney. Johnson was appointed CEO based on his stellar performance at Target and later at Apple, where he created a retail division that became one of most profitable in the world. Some viewed him as a retail genius. The board of JCPenney believed that Johnson’s innovative leadership was needed to revitalize their firm. Soon after being hired, he moved the company away from its historical roots as a retailer offering bargains on heavily discounted and private label merchandise. The company would now offer a range of branded products at “everyday low prices.” Johnson, extremely confident as a result of his past achievements, implemented changes quickly despite warnings that he was moving too fast in a company and marketplace that he didn’t fully understand. It was soon apparent that his vision was ill conceived and even more poorly executed. Many of the firm’s traditional customers stopped shopping at JCPenney, resulting in a loss of $1 billion in the first year of Johnson’s tenure. An observer of the firm’s downfall noted that “Penney had been run into a ditch when he took it over. But, rather than getting it back on the road, he’s essentially set it on fire.”
The truth is that experience is no panacea.

The Danger of Unrecognized Weaknesses

I use the term blindspot to refer to an unrecognized weakness or threat that has the potential to harm a leader and his or her organization (see Figure 1). The key point is that blindspots are not just weaknesses—they are unrecognized weaknesses. This definition of blindspots views them differently than two related concepts. Some failures are the result of so-called black swan events that are unpredictable, uncontrollable, and rare—and largely outside of the ability of a leader to anticipate or influence. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, who introduced the concept of events as rare as a black swan, cites the Internet as an example of something that could not have been foreseen but, once in place, changed the nature of society, including how business is conducted. The best a leader can do is to consider a range of potential disrupting events and how to respond if they do occur. Blindspots, however, are different than black swan events in being recognizable—that is, existing data allows a leader to see and address a weakness or threat if viewed properly.

There are also cases of “situational blindness” in which the environment makes recognition of a weakness or threat much more difficult. These situations are not as extreme as black swan events, but they have the effect

![Blindspot Matrix](image-url)
Blindspots operate at multiple levels.

of blocking awareness. Time is needed for events to unfold, for new data to surface, in order for a leader to gain a clear line of sight regarding the situation he or she faces. A leader may push her firm to launch a new product that has no equivalent in the market. Although prelaunch analyses can be helpful, the product needs to be in the market before data becomes available to fully inform the leader’s decisions on how to best promote it. Leaders are “flying blind” when they don’t have access to the information they need because the situation makes it impossible to obtain that information. In contrast, blindspots are visible to those willing to face them.

The most visible blindspots are typically a leader’s lack of awareness of his or her impact on others. This is the executive who ostensibly believes in empowering team members but then makes the key decisions himself, forcing others to do what he wants. He may tell a next-level manager, for example, that she can hire the members of her own team but then tells her the best candidates to fill open positions. His team members feel, justifiably, that he is micromanaging them and putting constraints on what they can do with their groups. In this case, however, the overcontrolling leader is not being hypocritical. He truly believes that he is acting one way (delegating authority) when in reality he is acting in a very different manner (making decisions for others).

Blindspots, however, are not just situations in which we fail to see ourselves or our actions accurately. They are evident in the way we view our teams, organizations, and markets. Some leaders, for example, may perceive some of their team members as being much more talented than is actually the case. Or, an executive may believe that her organization is making steady progress on implementing a reorganization. What she doesn’t see is that some of the “old guard” in her company are resisting her new design—telling her that things are fine but then standing on the sidelines and not providing the support needed to make the change a success. Still other leaders have blindspots about their markets and customers, as some suggest was the case during Ron Johnson’s reign at JCPenney. Blindspots thus operate at multiple levels—including how you view yourself and your impact, the strengths and weaknesses of your team, your organization’s capabilities, and the forces operating in the industry in which you compete. A savvy leader understands that blindspots can exist, often to varying degrees, at each of these levels.

The Tenacity of Blindspots

Two surprising qualities of blindspots are worth noting. First, strengths are often found in close proximity to blindspots. Leaders who are deeply passionate, for instance, can believe in their own views to the point of dismissing contrary views or information that doesn’t fit with their plan. A leader’s towering strengths, the very strengths needed to be successful, can have an equally powerful downside. As a consultant, I have learned that most leadership strengths come with a shadow blindspot—the greatest leaders often have the greatest blindspots. A second, and related, quality of blindspots is that they may be recognized only to reappear again later in a leader’s career. In other words, awareness of a blindspot doesn’t mean it disappears. I worked with a leader, for example, whose blindspot was being too optimistic. This trait was adaptive in many ways and she moved up in her company. She was successful, in part, because she took risks on initiatives and people. However, her optimism became a weakness when she waited too long to make tough decisions to move people out of positions in which they were failing and lacked the skills needed to be successful. You might assume that this blindspot would be corrected once she was “burned” from being too optimistic. However, she would revert to an overly optimistic style without realizing she was doing so, even after experiencing the downsides of her
Awareness of a blindspot doesn’t mean it disappears.

approach in managing people. This was a blindspot of a particular variety in that she experienced the risk but continued to ignore the consequences.

The points can lead you to conclude that blindspots are inevitably bad and should be eliminated. Not true. Some blindspots, in some situations, are adaptive and serve a leader well. Blindspots can protect a leader from doubt, helping push him or her forward in the face of uncertainty and adversity. In particular, a leader with blindspots may see what is possible and be more optimistic than a realistic assessment would suggest is sensible. Confidence of this type often involves some level of denial, or lack of knowledge, regarding the challenges facing a leader and his or her company. Blindspots can allow a leader to reach higher and achieve more than would otherwise be possible. They also help sustain self-confidence because setbacks are seen as temporary and not an indication of one’s ability to lead. An example of the potential benefit of blindspots is found in the story of Sara Blakely, founder of the multibillion-dollar women’s apparel company Spanx. Blakely noted that her own lack of knowledge of the challenges she faced was a key to her success. “What you don’t know can become your greatest asset if you’ll let it and if you have the confidence to say, I’m going to do it anyway even though I haven’t been taught or somebody hasn’t shown me the way. . . . I wasn’t as intimidated as I should have been.”

Confidence has another benefit. Studies show that people are more likely to follow those who are self-assured, outspoken, and driven. In essence, people want leaders who are sure of their own abilities and willing to exert influence over others. This tendency even extends to leaders who behave in a narcissistic manner. One psychological study, for example, put people into self-managing teams and then gave the teams a task to perform. The researchers were interested in who would emerge as leaders in these groups. The findings indicated that those who were more narcissistic, and by definition more confident in themselves and their own points of view, were more likely to become the leaders in these groups. In addition, they were seen by other members of their group as being more qualified to lead because of their demeanor and drive to influence the group’s outcomes. Confidence, even when excessive, makes a difference in who leads and who follows.

I experienced this dynamic in a setting far removed from a corporate office. I was hiking Mount Kilimanjaro several years ago with a group of ten people. Summit day began in the middle of the night and I was worried that I might not make the final push to the top. I decided to walk directly behind the strongest and most experienced individual in our group. He had made it up a number of tough mountains and told us that this climb was relatively easy for him. I recall thinking that I would benefit by placing my belief in him as someone to follow. I didn’t say anything to him but remained focused on him, step after step in the dark and cold, until we reached the peak soon after sunrise. The next day, on our way back down the mountain, I told another climber in our group what I had done. He said that he had done the same in following me up the mountain—using me as his source of confidence on the way to the top!

Confidence makes a difference in who leads and who follows.
The Need to Balance Confidence with Doubt

The role played by blindspots is to mediate between self-confidence and self-doubt. A leader with too many blindspots can be overconfident, often arrogant, to the point of being vulnerable due to a range of risks that are being ignored or discounted. A leader with too few blindspots may be less visionary and more likely to be overwhelmed by obstacles and setbacks. The goal is to understand how blindspots operate in the ongoing battle between these two extremes—and then lead more effectively with that knowledge. Robert Sutton, who teaches at Stanford, describes this as leaders being confident enough to convince people that they are in charge, and worthy of being followed, but also humble enough to realize that they are often going to be wrong. He views the ability to balance self-confidence with self-doubt as a hallmark of the best leaders.

This balancing act is complex because confidence and doubt are often adversaries, each seeking to defeat the other. Moreover, the right balance between confidence and doubt varies across situations and the specific demands they pose for a leader. Psychologists, however, have found there are benefits to being slightly more confident than one should be. In other words, it helps to believe that you are better than you are and to be more optimistic about your business than an objective analysis would suggest. An optimal margin of illusion occurs when individuals have a small, positive distortion about themselves. This results in an advantage over those who are more realistic. A positive bias is useful because it increases an individual’s motivation to move forward in risky situations and persevere in difficult situations. As noted previously, it also means that others are more likely to follow you. In contrast, too much self-doubt can erode a leader’s confidence to the point that he or she is less effective. Consider the leader of a consumer products company who was suffering through several resignations from his group and complaints about his leadership style. He saw the turnover of staff and low morale within his team as a personal shortcoming and agonized over what he saw as his own responsibility for the departures. His anxiety began to affect his way of managing his team. In particular, during meetings he would apologize to his team about the problems in the organization. At a time when people wanted to be reassured, his uncertainty made those in his group think he was overwhelmed by the challenges they faced as a group. He thought he was helping his team by being upfront about his doubts and the mistakes of the past. He didn’t realize that his behavior was causing his team members to become even more anxious and unsure about his ability to lead.

For many leaders, the greatest danger is being overconfident and not seeing weaknesses that have the potential to harm them. In this regard, they move into the hazardous area that exists just beyond the optimal margin of illusion. Leaders who are smart and self-assured are often very skillful at justifying their thinking and behavior—to the point of being in denial about their weaknesses and the threats they face. In this regard, their intelligence can work against them when they convince themselves, and others, that they are right even when they are wrong. Take the case of a charismatic and brilliant corporate leader who, early in his career, was trained as an engineer. His style was to confront others and their ideas with the zeal of one who knew his analytical capabilities were superior to others. He also immersed himself in a wide variety of operating details because of his training as an engineer. These traits served him well as he moved up into general manager roles and executed his projects at a high level. But these same traits were debilitating once he became CEO. He was told that he needed to change his management style—delegate more and balance his confrontation style with an ability to inspire others. He intellectually understood the feedback but didn’t alter his behavior. As a result, a majority of his team, a group of talented and experienced executives, felt the he was micromanaging them and continually attacking their ideas. Rather than change his approach, the leader believed he was a force for change in a company that was stuck in the past. He believed that he wasn’t the problem—others were the problem. His blindspot was not seeing the impact of his behavior and how it undermined what he was trying to achieve. This oversight eventually cost him his job. The firm’s board
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concluded that he lacked the leadership skills needed to run a large corporation.

**Living with Our Blindspots**

Managing blindspots is learning to accept them as inevitable and, in some respects, positive, because they force you to remain vigilant. The greatest risk is failing to recognize your own potential for blindness. In contrast, knowing you have blindspots forces you to look more carefully and deeply at your own behavior and situation, increasing the likelihood that you will surface weaknesses and threats that need to be addressed. Yann Martel’s novel *The Life of Pi* offers insight into how blindspots work. It tells the tale of a young Indian man who becomes stranded at sea in a large lifeboat with a Bengal tiger—as a result of the sinking of a massive container ship on which he and a collection of zoo animals were traveling. At first, Pi Patel doesn’t see the tiger because it is hidden beneath a tarp that covers half of the lifeboat. He knows he is in trouble but doesn’t realize how much trouble. The tiger suddenly appears from under the tarp and kills the other surviving animal, a hyena, that made it off the sinking container ship and onto the lifeboat. The novel shows how Pi learns to adapt to the danger he is now facing in sharing a small boat with an animal fixated on his demise. He learns how to keep the tiger in check through various forms of observation and control. He finds, in short, a way for them to coexist. However, as the weeks and then months pass at sea, Pi comes to realize that the tiger is keeping him focused and alive in a vast and unpredictable ocean. Without the tiger and the threat he poses, Pi believes he would perish due to complacency. Pi comes to see his adversary, one that can turn on him at any moment, is also that which propels him forward.