The Big Lie That's Hindering Your Agility

By Ben Baran, Ph.D.,
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I've seen it in almost every work-related team—both those in which I've been a member, and those I've coached or led.

It's a blind spot that we all have. **It's a big lie we all tell ourselves.**

It makes us feel good, secure, worthy. It's psychologically soothing; it's comfortable.

But it's blocking our access to the truth. It's hurting our ability to make optimal decisions. And it's certainly keeping us from sensing and responding rapidly to change, which is the essence of being an agile leader.

This big lie that we all tell ourselves is as follows:

> *My team would be extraordinary if only my teammates changed the way they act. It's not my fault; I'm doing great. It's about them—they need to communicate better, work harder, hold themselves more accountable.*

If that's the lie, then what's the truth?

The truth is that being an agile leader demands honesty and humility about ourselves. We must have the strength to reflect on what's going on—especially in the face of failure or underperformance—and look in the mirror. We must ask ourselves:

- What can I do differently to bring out the best in others?
- What are those things that I'm just not great at doing, and have I told my team about them?
- How must I adapt my communication, my routines, my style to match the situation?
- Am I wrong?
- Do I really know what I think I know?

Because without such humility, we delude ourselves. We might be able to get away with it for a while when the situation is routine and predictable, when everything is a "known known." But this arrogance—when deployed in environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA)—will lead to failure.

In the face of VUCA, humility and transparency must reign supreme. And that starts with each of us being honest about ourselves.

Our tendency to overlook our own faults and to believe that failure originates from anything other than ourselves is natural. It's also natural for us to attribute success to ourselves—isn't that convenient? But in addition to becoming a blind spot that can hurt our ability to perform at a high level with others in a VUCA environment, overlooking our own role in underperforming teams or failure hurts our credibility. Namely, by refusing to recognize my own faults, it's difficult for others to take me seriously when I provide feedback to them.

Such behavior isn't agile leadership. It's hypocritical leadership.

To get a better handle on what you're doing that could be hindering your team's productivity, I suggest asking for feedback from those around you. Keep in mind, however, that most of us are also predisposed to lie to each other about such matters. Most of us don't like making other people feel bad, so we tend to gloss over negative feedback. That's not necessarily a bad thing; it's complicated. And I'm not advocating recklessly brutal honesty.

But in requesting honest feedback from people about your own behavior, you need to realize that people need to feel safe to do so. One way to do this is through a multirater (commonly known as a "360") assessment, in which people can provide feedback anonymously (assuming the group is large enough). Such a step can be a good start.

Beyond that, however, it's about creating a team culture in which everyone knows where the team is heading and in which everyone truly knows in their guts that tough love is sometimes required to get the best out of each other—regardless of titles, age, experience level, and so forth.

How do you create that feeling of safety and freedom to provide honest feedback?
A lot of it has to do with the idea of psychological safety, which Amy Edmonson introduced in her seminal 1999 article in Administrative Science Quarterly. In that research, she found that psychological safety was associated with team learning behavior—characterized by behaviors such as open discussion of different opinions, testing assumptions, and experimentation—which was in turn associated with team performance. To create psychological safety in a team, Edmonson's data suggested, leaders must:

- Provide a compelling team vision and goals
- Ensure the team has adequate resources, information, and rewards,
- Adopt a supportive, coaching-oriented leadership style, and
- Respond to questions and challenges in a non-defensive manner.

Going hand-in-hand with all of these is a posture of humility. No leader knows everything, so when we're acting as a leader, we should openly acknowledge this reality.

Of course, the most likely case is that in most teams, everyone could be doing something a bit differently to support the team's objectives. But instead of starting with the issues that we have with each other, it's better to start with ourselves.

After all, over whom do we really have the most control?

It's ourselves.

So let's open ourselves to the possibility that being a humble leader may actually increase our strength, making the teams we lead better able to cope with VUCA and thrive.

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