

More Competency Craziness Who Blinked?

By Lorne R. Armstrong

In May 2007¹, I wrote about some of the problems when organizations try to describe leadership competencies – one the favorite corporate flavors of the month that unfortunately still isn't past its "best before" date.

I must apologize for misleading you. It is way, way worse than I thought at the time. Now I'm definitely a little late getting to this but I just finished reading *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell². His insights into the unconscious mind seriously undermine a fundamental basis on which competencies rest: consulting experts to determine what they do and how they do it.

Gladwell cites an example of Vic Braden, one of the world's top tennis coaches. Braden, he says, hasn't found a single pro tennis player in the world who is consistent in "knowing and explaining exactly what he does." All the pros say that they use their wrist to roll their racquet over the ball. Amazingly, when you slow down the high speed action and examine it in minute detail – that is not what they do. A digitized analysis of Andre Agassi's swing, for example, shows that he doesn't move his wrist until long after the ball has been hit.

Now this is significant for a couple of reasons. First, when we're talking with a pro about his or her tennis swing it is something physical – something that can be observed, recorded, slowed down and analyzed. And the analysis shows they don't actually know what they are doing. They know the effect they create but they do not actually know what they are doing that creates that effect.

Now take something like leadership. Leadership does not happen on the outside, it happens on the inside. From the outside, leadership looks like any other human interaction. There is some talking, there is some listening and there is some silence. Sometimes the talking and listening is in big groups, sometimes small groups, sometime one on one. What's the big deal? Talking and listening.

But what's going on inside the leader: what is the leader thinking about; how are they thinking about it; why are they thinking about these things and not others? How do they determine who to talk with, who to talk with first, next, next? One at a time, in small groups or as a large group? How often – once certainly won't be enough. How do they determine

¹ You can find this on our website: www.armstrongresults.com/article_may.php

² Gladwell, Malcolm. *Blink: the power of thinking without thinking*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007.

who to encourage and who to disrupt? When to take a hard line or when to take some more time? And all these considerations – plus many more – are just a thin slice in time and most of the choices occur on an unconscious level.

While the evidence of leadership shows up in what gets accomplished there is scant evidence available about how the leader orients to the world inside her and the world outside her. What is really going on – the myriad choices and decisions – is completely invisible to the high speed cameras that could actually tell us whether she is rolling her wrist before or after the shot.

Not only is there no evidence available to the external observer; we do not even have reliable access to our own thinking. Gladwell describes an experiment by the psychologist Norman Maier in which the subjects needed to solve a problem by swinging a rope back and forth. There were three other solutions but swinging the ropes wasn't obvious. None of the subjects discovered this solution on their own. At some point the experimenter would walk past one of the ropes in a way that created a very subtle movement in the rope. After that, most people suddenly came up with the solution of swinging one of the ropes. The most interesting part is that when they were asked how they came up with the solution only one person could say that they were helped by the subtle hint provided by the experimenter when he walked past the rope. Everyone else came up with some explanation – and some of them very elaborate explanations – *that were not true!*

So now we have an interesting situation. The experts we would want to rely on as our best examples to emulate are unreliable for describing what they do or how they do it. However, either because of the way our human brains work or the culture we live in; or perhaps some combination of both, we seem to be compelled to offer explanations. It's just that those explanations cannot be relied on as true!

So here's the short version of the story. Find people who are very good at what they do but don't worry that they won't know what they actually do, how they do it or why they do it. Go ahead and ask them to describe it anyway. They will do their best to provide a plausible description and explanation. Then use this description and explanation – which may in fact be the opposite of what they actually do – as the basis for training others and in some cases paying others. Smart! Why didn't I think of that!

It's no wonder that despite all the latest and greatest ideas of the month, fads and apparent short cuts to success that things don't improve or that any improvements are unsustainable.

It really does pay to get at what's fundamental: fundamental strengths; the first principles of communication and what really fuels accomplishment.