

Who Sees What You Cannot See?

– on blind spots, hidden commitments and the value of a co-pilot

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Every leader has blind spots. Not because they lack intelligence or experience, but because we all see the world through glasses we cannot see ourselves.

In 2013 I wrote about personal, leadership and organisational blind spots. Since then I have become increasingly convinced that the problem is not that we have them. The problem is that we rarely have anyone around us with the mandate and the courage to point them out.

This article is about the three levels of blind spots, why they are so costly when a strategy has to be executed – and how a co-pilot culture can make the invisible visible.

You cannot see your own glasses

When we as human beings want to change something, it starts with ourselves: how we see the world and ourselves through the glasses each of us carries around. But however sharp the lenses, there are almost always blind spots.

Blind spots can lock us into very fundamental assumptions about how things fit together. Perhaps because we fear the unknown alternative. Or because we do not dare ask ourselves the question: What would it give me if I escaped the dynamic standstill that so conveniently protects me and makes me immune to change?

I have spent more than 20 years trying to understand these mechanisms in people and in the organisations they are part of – including myself. And it was relatively late that I found enough humility to take a real interest in my own. A few years ago I was with a client in Odense who wanted something completely different with leadership and customers than anything I had experienced before. My first reaction was: “I KNOW how to lead so that it works in practice.” The next was more uncomfortable: “Or do I?” I had to admit that I had contributed to some of the very buzzwords I liked to criticise.

The point is that it is very hard to see your blind spots without help, precisely because you keep looking at yourself through the same glasses. And if it is hard for the individual, it is even harder in the systems we are part of.

Three levels of blind spots

Blind spots occur at three levels that reinforce each other. That is why they are so hard to address with a single course or a single feedback conversation.

The three levels:

- **Personal:** Our own assumptions about ourselves, our reaction patterns under pressure and the strengths that, in certain situations, become weaknesses.
- **Leadership:** The leadership team's shared assumptions – what is never discussed, the decisions nobody challenges and the leader nobody dares contradict.
- **Organisational:** Hidden commitments to “the way we do things here” that pull in the opposite direction of what management has officially decided.

Let us take them one at a time – starting with the level where it all begins: the leader him- or herself.

Personal blind spots – when perfection gets in the way

Many leaders are trained not to make mistakes. The concrete engineer has to get the calculations right – otherwise the bridge collapses. That is an entirely reasonable professional standard. The unfortunate side effect is that it easily rubs off on the personality: We must not be imperfect. And then it becomes hard to learn anything new, because if you are perfect, ignorance equals zero.

When we cannot listen to ourselves and recognise our own untapped potential, we cannot truly listen to others either. Not to colleagues when work processes need improving, and certainly not to customers when they try to tell us what they really value.

The paradox is that accepting we are not perfect is precisely the key. Because if we are not perfect, there is great untapped potential waiting. It takes humility to listen to yourself first – but that is also where development begins.

I call the opposite a narrow leadership radar. When a small red dot appears on the horizon – a signal that does not fit the picture – the typical reaction is to dismiss it as a temporary error. Errors are uncomfortable, after all. But it is often in exactly those signals that the most important information is hidden.

The personal radar becomes even narrower, however, when it is linked to other people's. Because in a leadership team, blind spots can become shared – and then they become almost invisible.

Leadership blind spots – the myth of the lonely captain

Aviation learned a hard lesson in the 1970s. After a series of air accidents, investigations showed that it was often not the technology that failed. The co-pilots had seen the problem – but they had not told the captain clearly enough. Authority paralysed. The answer was Crew Resource Management (CRM): systematic training in communication, role allocation and the duty to speak up.

In leadership teams I see exactly the same pattern. Many leaders still carry the idea that they must be the captain who knows most, sees furthest and makes decisions alone. And around them a culture develops in which concerns are phrased so cautiously that they are never heard: “It might be that we should perhaps consider ...”

One exercise I often use with executive teams is to play through an important strategic decision with the roles swapped. The CFO argues as the commercial director, the HR director as head of operations – and the CEO has to stay silent and observe. It is often the first time the team sees how much of the conversation is normally shaped by the captain’s authority rather than by the best arguments.

In a cockpit nobody says “that looks a bit odd”. They say “check altitude” or “go around”. Precise, short and without drama. The question for every leadership team is therefore: Have we agreed how we speak up when it really matters – and does everyone have the mandate to do so?

The most expensive mistakes are rarely made because nobody knew. They are made because the person who knew did not say it.

When silence is allowed to persist long enough, it stops being a leadership problem. It becomes part of the organisation’s structure.

Organisational blind spots – hidden commitments

Organisations often have hidden commitments to the way things have always been done. They pull in the opposite direction of what management has officially decided, and they are rarely ill will. They are protection.

The American developmental psychologists Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey have described the phenomenon as “immunity to change”. The point is that people and organisations can be genuinely committed to a change while at the same time – unconsciously – being committed to something that works against it. For example, the wish to keep control, avoid conflict or protect a professional identity. The result is a kind of organisational immune system, which I have also described in my article on [change management and organisational culture](#).

A typical example: A leadership team decides that the future requires far more collaboration across departments. Everyone agrees. But budgets, KPIs and rewards still measure each department’s own results, and the middle managers feel – with good reason – committed to protecting their own team. Nobody sabotages the decision. It simply never becomes reality.

That is why hidden commitments cannot be argued away. You cannot solve problems with the same mindset that created them – and an organism cannot disrupt itself. The commitments have to be brought into the open, put into words and turned into something the group can take a position on.

But who is going to bring them into the open when everyone in the system looks through the same glasses? The answer is the same at all three levels: You need someone who sees what you cannot see.

The co-pilot – the one who sees what you cannot

In aviation, the co-pilot is not an assistant. The co-pilot is an equal capacity. One pilot flies, the other monitors – and the roles switch along the way. Both keep watch, both speak up and both have a duty to intervene.

A co-pilot in leadership is likewise a deliberately chosen ally and challenger who asks the difficult questions, challenges your assumptions, keeps an eye on the “instruments” – data, culture and mood – and speaks up when something seems wrong. It may be a fellow director, an HR partner, a chair of the board, a key employee or an external sparring partner. The point is not the title, but the function.

A co-pilot relationship rests on three things: equality in dialogue, even when you are not equal in the hierarchy; the right to challenge without personal consequences; and a shared mission in which the safety of the aircraft comes before ego.

So choose your co-pilot deliberately. It should be someone who knows your goals, whom you trust – and whom you have explicitly given permission to say “stop”. A co-pilot who never disagrees with you is not a co-pilot, but a passenger.

Sometimes the most important co-pilots come from an unexpected direction. The people we find hardest to put up with are often our best training partners – precisely because they hit what we cannot see ourselves.

How blind spots become visible in practice:

- **Feedback from several directions:** From employees, peers and management – including about what works.
- **Buddy sparring:** A regular partner between modules who knows your goals and asks how it is going.
- **One-to-one coaching:** A confidential space where assumptions can be challenged without an audience.
- **Agreed language in the leadership team:** Clear phrases for how and when to speak up – as in the cockpit.

From mechanism to habit

That is why feedback, coaching and a buddy system are not luxuries in a leadership programme. They are the very mechanism that makes development possible. In our programmes at, for example, [Jobindex](#) and Christiansen & Essenbæk, leaders have worked in buddy pairs between modules with assignments and a personal development plan, and they have been coached one-to-one – often at their own workplace, where the blind spots actually show up.

But the mechanism has to be repeated before it becomes habit. That takes training – just as pilots train in the simulator again and again until speaking up becomes a natural part of working together. In a leadership team, it means continuously practising inviting dissent, listening to the end and distinguishing between the best argument and the loudest voice.

That is the thinking behind our work with [leadership team development](#) and [executive coaching](#): creating a space where the invisible can be said out loud – before it becomes expensive.

Conclusion – humility is a leadership competence

Blind spots never disappear completely. They move as we take on new roles, new colleagues and new strategies. The question is therefore not whether you have them, but whether there is someone around you who can see them – and who is allowed to say so.

It takes leaders humble enough to invite others into the cockpit, leadership teams with an agreed language for speaking up, and organisations that dare to bring their hidden commitments into the open.

So the question for you is simple: Who is your co-pilot?

This article builds on “On personal, leadership and organisational blind spots”, which I wrote in 2013, and my LinkedIn article “Who is your co-pilot?” from 2026.

Want to make the blind spots visible in your leadership team?

Cronquist Consult ApS works with leadership team development, executive coaching and leadership programmes with feedback, buddy sparring and one-to-one coaching. Read more here:

<https://cronquist.dk/en/leadership-team-development>

<https://cronquist.dk/en/executive-coaching>