

What to Ask the Person in the Mirror

Every leader gets off track from time to time. As leaders rise through the ranks, they have fewer and fewer opportunities for honest and direct feedback. Their bosses are no longer monitoring their actions, and by the time management missteps have a negative impact on business results, it's usually too late to make course corrections that will set things right.

Therefore, it is wise to go through a self-assessment, to periodically step back from the bustle of running a business and ask some key questions of yourself.

Author Robert S. Kaplan, who during his 22-year career at Goldman Sachs chaired the firm's senior leadership training efforts and cochaired its partnership committee, identifies seven areas for self-reflection: vision and priorities, managing time, feedback, succession planning, evaluation and alignment, leading under pressure, and staying true to yourself.

The author sets out a series of questions in each of the areas, illustrating the impact of self-assessment through vivid accounts of real executives. Although the questions sound simple, people are often shocked--even horrified--by their own answers.

Executives are aware that they should be focusing on their most important priorities, but without stepping back to reflect, few actually know where they are allocating their time. Kaplan advocates writing down what you do every working hour for a week and checking how well your actions match up with your intentions. As for feedback, managers should ask themselves whether they're getting truthful evaluations from their subordinates. (In all likelihood, they aren't.) It takes time and discipline to persuade your employees to tell you about your failings.