



When is a “Happy Blind Spot” Not So Happy After All?

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When I’m preparing to lead an ExPI insights conversation, I always take a long look at how the leader’s self-ratings align—or not—with the ratings of others. While the quantitative scores on the ExPI are interesting and helpful, I usually find it far more valuable to focus on the *relative* ratings of self vs. others. Which five facets were rated highest in the eyes of the leader, and which were the five lowest in the self-ratings? And how do those perceptions compare to how others perceive these leadership behaviors?

Naturally, the leader is going to focus on blind spots--ratings where the self-ratings are relatively high, while everyone else rates the facet among the lowest. This tendency is only human nature, and there is much to be gained from exploring those development themes.

But what are we to do when a leader ranks a facet very low while others apparently perceive it as a strength? These are facets that we like to call “happy blind spots.” I have to admit that my perspective on this have evolved considerably on this point over the last year—and only after I had completed over 200 ExPI insights conversations.

Prior to that, I had a simplistic view of these happy blind spots. If you asked me to explain them, I would have said, “These are areas where a leader is significantly underrating himself or herself in the realm of executive presence. By making them aware of this gap, we often can liberate leaders from anxieties they may have about this facet, and we can encourage them to focus their energy on some other facet that deserves more developmental attention.”

And you know what? That statement is probably true more often than not. In many cases, leaders may underrate themselves on a facet for a variety of reasons:

- The behaviors come so naturally and easily to them that they take them for granted.
- If a leader is low in Resonance, that may indicate that they just aren’t that aware of how others perceive them on many facets—including their true strengths.
- The leader may rate themselves on how they show up in all situations-both personal and professional—while the raters are rating them purely on what they see at work.

Given that one of the above is often the case, my tendency for a long while was simply to make the leader aware of the happy blind spot and encourage them to feel good about it before moving them on to focus on lower-rated facets. But I now have a more nuanced view, thanks to the following cases that I will redact and share.



The Case of Malinda Garrett-Isaacs

One of my most challenging and instructive insights calls I had in 2017 was with a leader I'll call "Malinda Garrett-Isaacs," a high-potential leader who is a Vice President of Workforce Strategy for a large, privately owned firm. This is new role and group for her organization, so when I played back her business context, I described her as being "rather like the ambassador of a relatively new nation: You need to build awareness of who you are as a function, what you do, and how you're going to get things done in collaboration with your internal customers."

Here's what her constellation looked like:

| CHARACTER | SUBSTANCE | STYLE |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|
| Authenticity | Practical Wisdom | Appearance |
| Integrity | Confidence | Intentionality |
| Concern | Composure | Inclusiveness |
| Restraint | Resonance | Interactivity |
| Humility | Vision | Assertiveness |

It looks pretty straightforward, doesn't it? She's got strengths almost across the Character dimension, so there's a good basis for trust. But those red flags in Style gave me—and her—reason for concern when she thought about how she was going to collaborate with her internal customers to get things done.

As you'd expect, we reviewed her strengths, and I noted that Restraint was a happy blind spot, mentioning that she had rated it tied for second lowest of her 15 facets with a 3.67 score; everyone else had her at a 4.50, which made it her third highest-rated facet in the eyes of others. "I was surprised by that," she said. We talked about it a bit, and I told her that one model of personality is that we all can be classified loosely as "cat" or "dog" (more introverted and hard to read versus more expressive) as well as "hot" or "cool" (more high strung and intense versus more easy going and relaxed). I speculated that she may be a "hot cat"—someone who is more intense than others realized. She chuckled and agreed, and I said that she should realize that Restraint is actually a strength in the eyes of others. Then we moved on to the development themes.



But when we started digging into her development themes, I felt like we weren't really getting anywhere. She was unsurprised by the Inclusiveness rating. She chalked it up to her company's culture, where there was a huge emphasis on reaching consensus on decisions. This meant that it was a very "nice" culture, but it tested Malinda's patience—particularly given her strength in Confidence.

Likewise, Interactivity didn't yield much insight. "With my Peer group, God forbid that you don't touch base with someone. Everyone wants to have a say in everything. I do try to give people opportunities to contribute, but, as a culture, we go way overboard with that."

Based on many conversations with other leaders at her company, I agreed with her assessment of the situation. So what to do? Malinda is a very smart, quick-thinking woman, and she really started to challenge me: What was she supposed to do about all of this? To her, it seemed impossible.

We finally had a breakthrough when discussing the Appearance facet. I got her to dig into a specific situation that led her to be seen as having voice tone, mannerisms, and nonverbal messages that didn't match the situation. In her open-ended comments, people noted that she would be looking out the window or doodling during meetings. This surprised me, and I told her so, asking her to tell me a story about this.

"At a recent meeting, we were talking about the same topic that we had discussed in four previous meetings. We go round and round, and it never goes anywhere. People are absolutely right when they say that I look out the window, doodle, and seem like I'm not paying attention. If I don't do that, I think I would just explode. People don't realize that I'm like a volcano inside!"

This led to an exciting realization: Although Restraint was rated highly by others, she definitely needed to work on it—maybe more than anything else! I started talking about Restraint and her need to create more time between a stimulus and a response... anticipating what will trigger her emotionally and going into these meetings with a plan of what to say, and so on.

Her interest perked up dramatically. Restraint was hard for her. I asked her what she could say in that type of meeting to leverage her high Authenticity by calling out what was happening. She was stumped, so I gave her some suggested language: "I just want to make an observation here: I've noticed that there is a great deal of interest and energy in this topic—so much so that we've revisited it over several meetings. While it's been helpful to share ideas about it, I'm wondering if we talk about how we can get to the finish line on this topic. What outcomes are we looking for here, and can we agree on a deadline for moving things forward?"

She loved the tone of that but worried that she would be too emotional to pull it off in the heat of the moment. I told her she would need to practice it but also remember that she's good at not coming across as emotional. The key would be time to slow down and think through her response in advance. If she could do that, she was bound to improve her low ratings in Inclusiveness, Interactivity, and certainly Assertiveness, which was also rated fairly low.



More Examples of Happy Blind Spots that Aren't So Happy

After that breakthrough with Malinda, I started noticing more and more situations in which a happy blind spot was masking a developmental need for a leader. “Sarah” is a high-potential leader who is incredibly accomplished despite being quite young. Not even 30 years old, she has already been tasked with building a business unit from scratch—hiring her team, building a new culture around accountability, flexibility, and problem solving, and basically heading up the product line in a key growth area for a manufacturing company.

For Sarah, Appearance was a happy blind spot. Everyone else was bowled over by her energy and drive, but they weren't aware of what was going on with Sarah internally. “I keep things bottled in,” she told me. “I try to not show the stress, though it does come out... and my situation has worn on me.”

Her “always available” mentality kept others from realizing that her high stress was affecting her preparedness and energy. But they *did* rate her low in areas such as Practical Wisdom and Vision. When we got talking about her low score in “Always seems to be a step or two ahead in thinking things through” in Practical Wisdom, she had an insight: “I need to have a preformulated plan to tackle obstacles instead of firefighting as they arise.” Her low self-ratings in several Appearance items made us both aware that she had work to do in that facet—regardless of how others were rating her.

Another example was with “Lenny,” a leader whose team provides key data, programs, and analytics for his company's retail partners. He had a happy blind spot in Practical Wisdom, and I found it interesting to look at how he perceived his gaps versus others' ratings. He gave himself much lower scores than most others on “Seems to always ask the right questions” as well as that “Always seems to be a step or two ahead” item. However, his sky-high scores were from his Manager and Direct Reports; his Peer scores were more aligned with his self-ratings.

He was trying to get better at Inclusiveness, particularly with Peers. “I think I don't always get peers to the table early on,” he said. “Maybe we have something tentatively planned, and I'll avoid sharing what we're doing with my peers.”

“What gets in the way of that happening with Peers?” I asked.

“Me!” he said. “Sometimes I think things get communicated too early. I guard information too much. And let's say a peer has an idea: If I don't even know if we can do something, I probably am not going to show them much enthusiasm. It happens when I don't have a comfort level with the group. This just flipped a few light switches for me!”

For Lenny, his happy blind spot masked the fact that he had a developmental opportunity in Practical Wisdom—but maybe only with his Peers. Perhaps that was why he had given himself a lower rating than most others in that facet: He had enough self-awareness to realize that this was not a consistent strength for him. Those who worked closely with him did not see that gap.



We talked about the impact of asking great questions and focusing more on downstream consequences with his Peers—thinking through how to get them meaningfully involved earlier in the process to create buy-in down the road. That seemed likely to help with Inclusiveness, but what really hit home was also appreciating that happy blind spot.

“You’re already good at asking great questions and thinking a step or two ahead,” I told him. “I think you’re just giving yourself a low grade because you know that you don’t do those things consistently with Peers. You saw something in those items that your Manager and Direct Reports didn’t see when it comes to Practical Wisdom!”

He chuckled. “All the answers are right there in front of me,” Lenny said. “I think I subconsciously knew this before I even got the report. But this process pulled it out of me.”

Final Thoughts on Dealing with Happy Blind Spots

When you’re looking at a leader’s scores, always pay attention to where there is alignment between self-perceptions and other raters as well as where there are blind spots. My usual practice is to use Excel to list the facets from highest to lowest for self-ratings versus overall. If there is alignment—whether in the highs or lows—I use a green highlight. Where the self-ratings are low and the overall is high—or vice-versa—I use a yellow highlight. Here’s what that looked like for Lenny, who we just discussed:

| Self | | Overall | |
|------------------|------|------------------|------|
| Integrity | 4.83 | Integrity | 4.53 |
| Confidence | 4.67 | Practical Wisdom | 4.45 |
| Concern | 4.50 | Concern | 4.43 |
| Vision | 4.50 | Restraint | 4.40 |
| Humility | 4.40 | Composure | 4.37 |
| Authenticity | 4.33 | Authenticity | 4.37 |
| Restraint | 4.33 | Humility | 4.36 |
| Composure | 4.33 | Vision | 4.36 |
| Resonance | 4.33 | Confidence | 4.35 |
| Inclusiveness | 4.17 | Appearance | 4.26 |
| Interactivity | 4.17 | Resonance | 4.21 |
| Intentionality | 4.00 | Assertiveness | 4.21 |
| Practical Wisdom | 3.83 | Inclusiveness | 4.17 |
| Appearance | 3.83 | Intentionality | 4.15 |
| Assertiveness | 3.83 | Interactivity | 4.12 |

When you see a facet that really pops like Practical Wisdom does here, go to the item-level view to see what’s going on. Are the gaps across the board, or are they with just one or two rater groups? When you look at the items where the gaps are largest, how does that seem to connect to facets that are rated lower? Is there something there worth discussing?

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In many cases, you may find that there are perfectly benign reasons for these gaps—just as I described back on page 1. Now and then, though, digging into a happy blind spot is like finding a missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle: When you get it in your hands, you may finally see the whole picture.