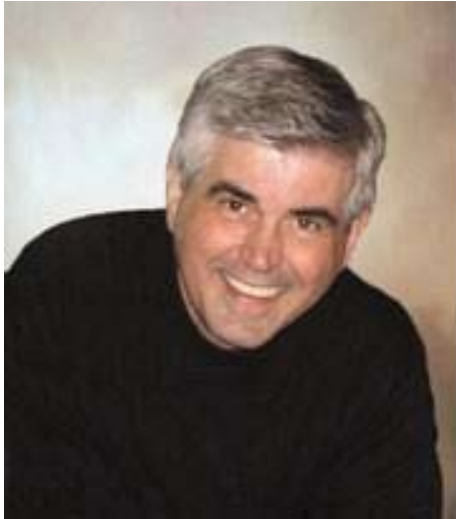


The Hidden Self

By Ron Crossland

The late, wonderfully gifted, management theorist and



pundit of practical ideas, Peter Ferdinand Drucker had a steadfast idea that permeated much of his last twenty years of commentary. He promoted the view that the knowledge worker era organizations are built on trust, not force. From this idea he suggested many provocative and insightful ideas concerning how organizations should view, develop, and deploy trust, commitment, ideas, and knowledge worker skills. At the center of this idea he recommended that the best knowledge workers would inform their colleagues and fellow knowledge workers exactly what they could offer in terms of ability, values, commitment to results, and the strengths they could bring to bear to organizational tasks. He repeatedly suggested individuals and organizations spend too much time working on deficiencies (individual lack

of competency, organizational attention to problems rather than opportunities) rather than strengths.

I agree in large part with this legacy view. But how do leaders understand what they are good at? Can you honestly and accurately say what your values, strengths, and abilities truly are? To what degree are you fully acquainted with your biases, preferences, strengths, inattentions, conscious acts, unconscious motives, and true self?

Timothy D. Wilson, the Sherrell J. Aston Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, suggests in his book, "[Strangers to Ourselves](#)", "When people describe their own personalities, they are often reporting their conscious theories and constructions that may or may not correspond to the dispositions and motives of their adaptive unconscious." What he and many others suggest is that we construct a conscious, coherent story or theory of ourselves that we report to ourselves as well as to others; but there is another part of who we are that is part of our adaptive unconscious. This part of ourselves is normally hidden from our conscious review but plays an automatic and often large role in our judgments, feelings, and behaviors. Our self descriptions - our stories of ourselves - are often incomplete, as they do not include information about this "*hidden self*."

Organizations frequently

ask managers to assess themselves, and much of the assessment concerns competency-based feedback. This can be informative and effective in its intent and results, but competency measures only behavior and often focuses on the deficiencies, not the strengths. Managerial behavior is public behavior, and when direct reports, colleagues, supervisors, and others provide feedback concerning this behavior, it tends to reinforce an individual's image of his or her conscious self. While the data may reveal behavioral deficiencies in a certain competency, often competency-based feedback does not surprise the manager. They may or may not like the data, but the data seldom totally surprises the individual. These behavioral updates are wonderful in that they allow an individual to calibrate their behavior and publicly commit to corrective actions concerning their deficiencies, but this is only part of their coherent self-story.

In the February, 2006, issue of [Harvard Business Review](#), authors Brousseau, Driver, Hourihan, and Larsson investigated a behavioral database of 120,000 managers in their report on executive decision making. Their research led them to develop the idea there are four decision-making styles. What intrigued me about their article was the following statement: "...people don't lead the way they think. The decision process is different in front of a crowd than it is in front of the mirror." The

article provided several case examples in which individuals did not know they did this until informed from feedback. Some individuals were able to take in the new information and alter their decision-making style to ones more suited to their role in the organization and increased their effectiveness. Others were unable to absorb the information and change their style.

I think this research, in part, reveals that individuals do have the ability to develop greater skills and change their self-story, but only when the part of them that is hidden is brought into view and acted upon. It follows Wilson's line of thought, "when people describe their own personalities, they are often reporting their conscious theories and constructions that may or may not correspond to the dispositions and motives of their adaptive unconscious."

Research concerning the hidden self, the adaptive unconscious, the automatic self (call it what you will) suggests our incomplete self-stories reveal themselves in a wide range of behavior, including decision making. Wilson provides a simple illustration. "The quick, spontaneous decision of whether to argue with a coworker is likely to be under the control of one's nonconscious needs for power and affiliation. A more thoughtful decision about whether to invite a coworker over for dinner is more likely to be under the control of one's conscious, self-attributed motives." I suggest that the

behavior in the family dining room will likely be discounted as "rare, infrequent, situationally dependent, applicable only to certain contexts, due to stress" or other such convenient explanations, rather than seen as an ongoing process that influences the person's behavior in many contexts and over longer periods of time. Moreover, when these two coworkers rate each other on a 360 degree competency that they will consciously discount the dinner meeting and focus only on what is observed in the workplace. They will likely make this decision in a noble attempt to be "fair" concerning evaluating the behavior. Their intentions are correct, but that doesn't change the fact that hidden, adaptive unconscious processes are at work. They may go unreported. And even when reported, they may not be acted upon.

Wilson's work on how to uncover your adaptive unconscious suggests that individuals must become biographers of their lives, taking in all kinds of data and then seriously assessing how the data should *inform* their self-story, not whether or not the data *conforms* to their self-story. This role of biographer means that managers must be willing to conduct their own personal archeological dig into their motives, behaviors, personality, and competency, which further suggests that competency-based feedback may be insufficient to complete a full biography. Individuals must also receive narrative feedback

from others concerning their strengths as well as information concerning personality, motives, decision making, and other arenas of their cognitive and emotional lives.

Which brings me to posit a conclusion: Uncovering your hidden self requires a lot of hard work. According to Brousseau, et. al., some of us are up to the work and some of us aren't. Just in terms of decision making, their research indicates that successful senior executives evolve their decision-making style to suit larger organizational roles. They report that "decision-making styles do a complete flip over the course of a career: That is, that the decision making style of a successful CEO is the opposite of a successful first-line supervisor." Some make the flip and some don't. The case studies reported by Brousseau don't provide all details, but they suggest that managers that didn't make the flip gained feedback from competency based evidence, as well as narrative commentary and coaching.

I suggest that there's more than purely strategic intellectual capacity at work here. I suggest that some managers do not address their hidden self and fail to update their conscious stories of who they are and who they are becoming. This inability to incorporate feedback and be willing to reveal what is not seen holds managers back from developing to fullest extent of their possibilities.