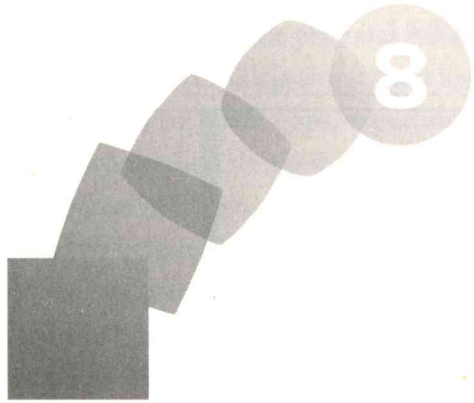


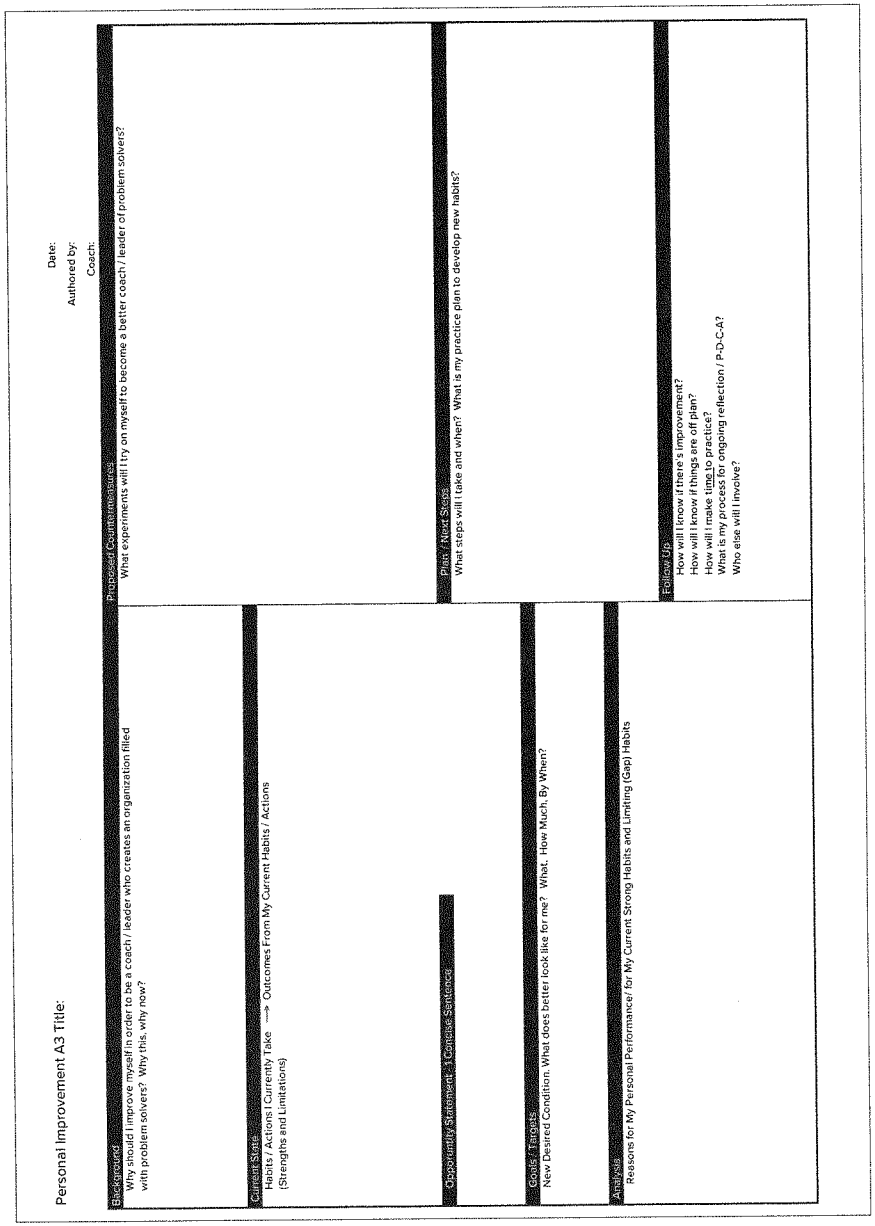
The Personal A3

Throughout this book, we have highlighted the power of the personal A3 to help leaders identify and focus on behavioral changes they need to make. It is the first step in a leader's personal transformation. Figure 8.1 (see next page) is a sample (blank) A3 Personal Improvement form; this is also available as a download at catalysis.org/personal-A3.

Before we go into detail about how to use a personal A3, however, we should clear up one misconception. The personal A3 is not a problem-solving tool like the standard A3. A leader's behavior is not a problem to be solved.

Yet, all of us can improve. Our hypothesis is that leadership behavior is a condition in the workplace. This means that it must be considered as a factor in operations, and therefore, it is open to improvement. Because this is sensitive territory, we obviously cannot set up a team to study the issue and propose solutions.

FIGURE 8.1 **A3 Personal Improvement**



Instead, we have leaders use the personal A3 as a method to encourage evidence-based thinking about their leadership. It is a framework for identifying goals, gaps, experiments, and plans for intentional follow-through. It has the same sections as a regular A3 and is iterative in its use.

It is designed to help leaders focus on their strengths and opportunities, to create personal responsibility, and to gauge progress toward their goals. And really, everyone in this work has the same goal: to create an organization filled with problem solvers.

Those who adopt an intentional practice with the personal A3 begin by acknowledging two facts. Leadership behavior has an outsized impact on the motivation and attitudes of people in the organization, intentionally or not. And nobody has a perfect understanding of the effect they have on others. In doing the work of a personal A3, leaders learn to see more clearly how they are facilitating change—toward becoming that organization of problem solvers—and how they are getting in the way.

We are all doing a little of both.

Developed by Margie Hagene[1] and based upon John Shook's book *Managing to Learn*, the personal A3's power is in the way that it draws a clear connection from individual behavior to organizational goals, even while keeping the work of individual growth very personal. It has proven so useful over about a decade since its introduction that we begin all leadership coaching relationships with it.

Please note that we draw a clear distinction between a person's traits and behaviors. A trait is defined as a summary of a person's qualities. For instance, we might call a person *bold*.

1. A former global internal consultant for Ford Motor Co. focused on transformation and organizational effectiveness, Margie Hagene is now on faculty at Catalysis and the Lean Enterprise Institute where she coaches leaders in a variety of fields.

A behavior is the specific evidence of that trait, such as outspokenness for the bold. So, when we talk about behaviors, we are focused on what can be shown by the evidence. Instead of saying a leader is or is not humble, we are interested in seeing evidence of humility when working through a personal A3.

In the following pages, we will step through each section of the personal A3 as a coach would—asking questions, warning of pitfalls. While every person and situation is different, there are enough commonalities, we believe, for this to be useful.

TITLE

The title of an A3 should not be an afterthought. You are about to devote some significant time and personal energy to this endeavor. What are you trying to accomplish? The title should tell us—and remind you—what will be the focus of your thinking.

It can be as simple as "My Improvement Plan," or "Becoming a Better Leader for Problem Solvers."

A title can also provide a clear indication that you are heading in the wrong direction, particularly when the title focuses more on the organization than the individual. Titles such as "Getting Physicians Engaged in Improvement" or "Creating More Productive Meetings" are clear indications that a leader is moving the focus away from the self and onto the organization.

Certainly, physician engagement and more productive meetings are worthy of an A3 in many organizations. But those are problem-solving A3s. This is a personal A3, and we need to focus here on personal gaps and strengths in order to get at the root of more subtle issues.

If you have titled your personal A3 with an organizational goal—or skipped that part—and come back to these words later, this is an opportunity to reset. Dig a little deeper. Why are you putting in the time for yourself?

This may also be time to find a coach, a person whose job it is to help you pay attention to how you approach this work. Over the past decade, we have found that nearly everyone needs a person like a coach or facilitator to bounce ideas off of and to challenge the usual ways of thinking. We need to be encouraged to push beyond our initial instincts and to stay personal, to be willing to change ourselves instead of trying to change others or our organizational structures.

DATE

Write down a fresh date every time you do another iteration of work on your personal A3. No more than one or two months should pass between sessions, particularly during your early practice with the personal A3. There will be new assessments to make, changes to be noted. If more than three months have gone by, more current evidence of what is working and what is not will be lost.

AUTHOR

That's you.

COACH

This is usually an outside professional or a trusted colleague with experience in the discipline of keeping the work personal, intentional, and respectful.

BACKGROUND

What is the nature of this issue?

Perhaps you have noticed that nurses do not linger when you stop to chat. You explain this away by saying that people are busy, that your leadership position makes a lot of people shy. Still, you wonder about the pattern.

Maybe you are annoyed with the way meetings go. Resolutions are elusive. Your fellow leaders continue lobbying for a particular solution or point of view long after the official meeting breaks up. The conversations seem endless, and yet the executive team is not having the kind of honest, fierce discussions that you need.

Or, maybe you haven't seen the surface of your desk in two years and it seems like the tasks pile up much faster than anyone could handle.

These are good starting points when thinking about the background of your personal A3. Everyone has these vague, indistinct issues. Investigating these patterns is how we identify our gaps.

If we were to attack these issues with a traditional A3, we would probably end up focusing on the nurses, or on the other executives, or the way work is distributed as the source of the problem. What is wrong with them? How can we change the process that is causing this problem?

The personal A3 opens up the possibility that your behavior is helping to create these situations. For instance, maybe you tend to pontificate instead of asking questions and that makes people less inclined to open a conversation with you. Or maybe you have a tendency to impatiently cut off debate too soon in team meetings. Do you prefer to do the work yourself rather than teaching and coaching others?

Two more important questions to consider: Why is change needed? What would be the consequences or risks of not participating in the change? If you do not articulate for yourself the reasons for self-improvement and the probable repercussions of inaction, it will be too easy to remain in stasis.

The personal A3 will help you identify the root of the issues, but only if you let it. Therefore, begin broad with the nature of the possible problem. And then be clear about why you seek improvement and what the consequences might be of ignoring it. We need these personal reminders as to why the work is important.

CURRENT STATE

Begin this section by listing the specific actions you have already taken to commit to this exploration and the outcomes of those actions.

Perhaps you have talked with colleagues about the impact of your behaviors, or—hopefully—you have completed a radar chart to assess your strengths and limitations. (See Chapter 9 for a deep dive into radar charts.) Review the specific evidence collected thus far.

Data collection remains an important part of the A3 work, but it looks different here. Questions and answers from personal reflection are important data points. A radar chart is also valuable data. A lunchtime conversation with a trusted insider can be a rich vein of information and insight.

An excellent source of data is to do a poll of peers, bosses, and subordinates asking that they identify your strengths and stumbles. Good questions on such a poll might be:

- What have you observed in my behavior that unleashes creativity in others?

- What specific behaviors of mine have shut the team down?

Many people will be tempted to use annual performance reviews as data inputs. This should be avoided. In most organizations, performance reviews are little more than the opinions of one person crammed into a check-the-box format. They are required pieces of paperwork and usually lacking in generous insight. The performance review does not ask how a person could improve; it asks if the person is good enough to do the job at hand. It is the wrong question.

The critical takeaway here is that you need to collect evidence of how other people view your actions and note those alongside your own thinking. Do they connect? Are you focusing on the right issues?

Remember, the work here is to identify your strengths as well as your limiting behaviors.

OPPORTUNITY STATEMENT

The opportunity statement is a product of your own deep reflection; nobody else can suggest one for you. For those of us who avoid deep reflection, this can be uncomfortable. It would be far more efficient to select one from a list of prompts, right? Pick the opportunity that sounds most achievable and move on.

But this could only offer a vague and probably meaningless direction. Nobody wants to spend months chasing a vague and meaningless direction. Only you will recognize the grains of truth in the feedback you get from colleagues.

For instance, when Al Pilong Jr. was first introduced to this work, he was prepared to undertake some real action. Al was

comfortable with action. But the CEO of Munson Medical Center and COO of the newly compiled Munson Healthcare got feedback that he was already doing a lot. Too much, perhaps. His opportunity statement was a simple realization: I would rather *do* than coach others to do.

For Mr. Dube in South Africa, feedback from colleagues made him see that most people only saw him in firefighting mode. Deeper reflection led him to realize that he was not that comfortable being out at the front line without an immediate job. His opportunity: Go see in order to understand. (As opposed to go see in order to fix.)

Note that, in each case, the opportunity was personal. This is where it is particularly tempting to shift focus to the organization. That's where the problem is, right?

Focus on this as an opportunity for you.

GOALS/TARGETS

The goal is not perfection. You, a human being, are aiming for better, not perfect.

The first step toward defining this better state is personal reflection. You probably know what better would feel like. Now, you need to translate those feelings into actions—into observable, measurable behaviors.

This is often the moment where people need to go back and reassess the current state, because the goal also needs to be meaningful to the situation and to the people that will be most affected. It needs to stay personal.

For instance, Al's target state was one in which he coached others to solve problems instead of taking tasks from others. But coaching was not the only goal. Al wanted to be an *effective*

coach and to instill problem-solving capabilities in people throughout the organization.

So here, in his reflection on his target state, Al was also thinking about how he could measure his coaching effectiveness, such as tracking how many problems got solved before they hit his desk.

Mr. Dube's goal was to find ways to be comfortable at gemba—observing, listening—when there were no fires to fight or tasks to accomplish. That means he needed to work through some discomfort, which was a sign he was heading in the right direction. Discomfort almost always points toward a gap to be addressed.

Like a great many CEOs, Mr. Dube was more comfortable in his office—where people came to him—than at gemba. Working in this way, the conversation about the problem was almost always being held far away from the work itself. It was not ideal.

As we dug into the reasons for his discomfort, it became clear that Mr. Dube's gap was that he had not clearly identified his purpose at gemba. He needed to arm himself with humble questions and to reflect on what he wanted to learn from others. Soon, he was enjoying his time at gemba, where he felt more effective than he had in his office.

With these two examples, you can see how goals are tied to opportunity statements without being overly reactive. The target state does not expect organization-wide changes; it does not expect others to necessarily change their behavior.

Instead, we create personal goals that can be observed by others, intentionally monitored by us, and reflected upon in order to better understand how individual behavior effects the whole organization.

ANALYSIS

Why are you acting this way?

We do not want to go down a rabbit hole of childhood disappointments or Freudian analysis here, but this is an important moment of reflection on root cause. You need to ask why and how you began to blurt the "right" answer or try to control situations or whatever the issue is. Only when we understand why we behave in a certain way will we see how to make intentional changes in a way that make us feel comfortable and valued.

Many clinicians can trace some of their undesirable behaviors to medical school, where they were taught to make clear decisions, inform the team, and maintain control of the situation. Or maybe you came up through the leadership ranks based on your knowledge and good ideas. After years of getting good notice and promotions based on your ability to come up with solutions, it is natural to have difficulty giving up this role.

Understanding why you act the way you do will help illuminate your gaps and, from there, guide you to the next steps and experiments.

Al Pilong, for instance, knew that he felt good when he solved problems for others. He felt like an asset to the organization. How could he feel valued without doing that?

In his target state, Al envisioned a future where he taught others and coached them as they solved problems. This was another way to help people and be an asset to the organization, he knew. A root cause contributing to the gap was that he did not feel entirely comfortable becoming a teacher. Like many people, he had not acquired the teaching/coaching skill set.

Analysis leads to the plan.

PROPOSED COUNTERMEASURES

This is a simple list of experiments to try in order to become a better coach and leader. Maybe you want to learn to ask better questions. A countermeasure might be taking a list of effective questions (see Figure 9.2 in Chapter 9) with you to gemba and check off the questions you asked. It might be taking a colleague to lunch and practicing asking those questions naturally.

This is simply a list of actions that directly relate to your opportunity statement and your gaps.

PLAN/NEXT STEPS

Like a problem-solving A3, this step in the process has many parts: identifying experiments, developing a plan, checking the results of those experiments, and making adjustments based on outcomes. Add to this a practice plan, which is simply a detailed plan for practicing new behaviors every day.

For a leader who needs to better understand frontline operations, or who needs to learn to observe without offering opinions, the practice plan might be a regular series of gemba visits with a coach or colleague to observe.

For someone like Al, who needed to teach and coach others, the plan would include acquiring some teaching skills and then adding regular coaching sessions into his schedule.

To stay on track with the personal nature of this work, we advise people to stick to "I" statements when describing their plans. This should be familiar territory for anyone who has undergone interpersonal communication training. For instance:

- "I will go to gemba and ask only open-ended questions."
- "I will talk less and listen more."
- "I will learn how to ask open-ended questions."
- "I will update my radar chart monthly."

Create a clear start date for the experiment being run and list exactly what you will do and when. Make sure it is clear how you will know that the experiment is being run.

FOLLOW UP

After creating a plan and schedule, ask how you will know if you are improving.

Most people build time into their schedule for personal reflection, to ask if they are doing the work and whether they are noticing a difference. Maybe people are responding to you more openly? How do you know that? Note specific instances.

You need specific feedback from others, such as a coach or trusted colleague. Also, ask for opinions from the people in your regular huddle or committee meeting. It can be unnerving to be so vulnerable, but this is also an excellent example for others. A CEO who goes into a meeting and announces that she is working on her listening skills and asks for the group's help by raising a hand if she interrupts or runs over someone will have a roomful of helpers. And she will be living evidence of the seriousness of behavior change and her commitment to this work.

Another type of feedback we regularly employ involves one-on-one interviews with just one or two scripted questions. In this exercise, the leader might say, "I am working on my own personal improvement, and I would like your help in evaluating my progress for my A3. Can you take a minute to answer two questions for me?"

Take notes either while people reply or just after this interview in order to freshly capture their words. Many of us emphasize either the positive or the negative so strongly, it can be difficult to remember nuances of what another person says.

Once the evidence begins to show that your behavior is indeed changing, it will be time to return to the section on current conditions. Has your behavior change achieved the desired effect? If it has, how will you continue this practice? If not, what are the new experiments you will try?

Do not forget self-reflection. We are our own best critics; reflection is the path to improvement.

Which is why—up next—the radar chart is so powerful.

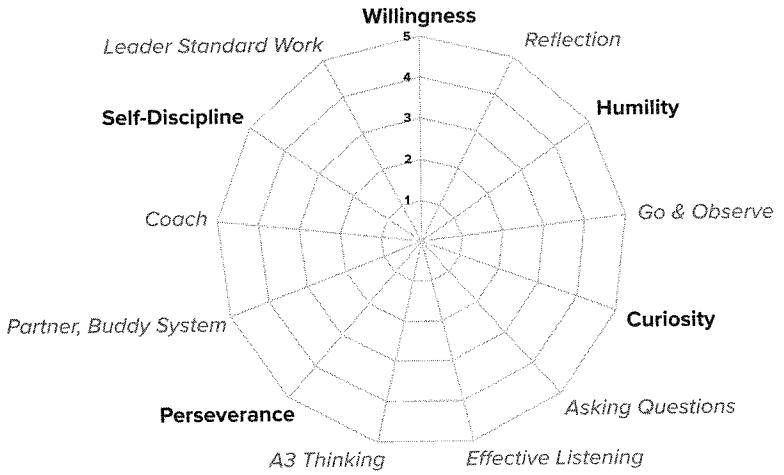
Your Radar Chart

The purpose of a radar chart is twofold. We use it to turn vague thoughts and feelings into measurable data and then to track progress toward a goal over time. Figure 9.1 (see next page) shows a sample radar chart; this is also available as a download at www.createvalue.org/radar-chart.

With periods of regular reflection in front of their radar charts, leaders are able to identify gaps and intentionally change specific behaviors. In this way, what can be a frustrating exercise—understanding our progress toward personal growth—becomes both visual and productive.

Kim has a good example of this from her own improvement work. Regular reflections in front of her radar chart made her notice that her score for curiosity was stubbornly low. She wanted to work on that and thought about the behaviors that show evidence of curiosity—especially asking questions and

FIGURE 9.1 **Radar Chart**



effective listening. While Kim knew she *was* curious, she realized that she often hesitated before asking questions because she wanted to be sure of her wording. Too often, the right moment for a question would pass by.

In her office, Kim had a large chart with a list of good, open-ended questions to ask at gemba (see Figure 9.2). Wouldn't it be nice if those were close at hand when she was at gemba? So, Kim took a picture of the questions with her phone and started taking a moment before she walked out on the floor to review the questions.

John likes to describe questions as gifts we offer to others. The right question at the right time can spark a whole new outlook on a situation, leaving the other person empowered to see problems in a new light. As Kim reviewed her list of questions, thinking about the people and the work she was about to see, she became more eager to find just the right one. Instead of asking a question to get information, Kim started thinking in terms of what the question could offer the other person. Not

FIGURE 9.2 **Sample Effective Questions**

1. What is the problem you are trying to solve?
2. How would you describe what is happening as opposed to what should be happening?
3. What have you looked at or heard about?
4. What makes you sure you have a cause/effect link?
5. What have you thought of trying?
6. What impact do you expect that countermeasure to have?
7. What makes that so important?
8. What might you do to figure out _____ about _____ (patient, customer, vendor etc.)?
9. How do you learn about that?
10. What process do we have to facilitate that discussion with _____?
11. Tell me more about what you mean when you say _____?
12. What would be an exception to that?
13. What is the definition of _____?
14. How do you set that up and present it?
15. What do you know about _____?
16. How do you know we're not doing that?
17. What does good look like today?
18. How do we know what they want?
19. How do you determine demand?
20. How do you know cause and effect?
21. Who have you spoken to about this?
22. What do you know about that?
23. Tell me one thing you think about that.
24. What evidence do you have so far?
25. What impact does that have on _____?
26. What improvements have occurred so far?

(continued)

FIGURE 9.2 **Sample Effective Questions** *continued*

27. Describe the obstacles to _____?
28. What was the outcome?
29. So where does it break down?
30. How could you show that visually in your A3?
31. That sounds like a solution—lets go back to the left side.
32. What have we learned from _____ about navigating that?
33. Who currently owns that process?
34. Who are the stakeholders?
35. How will you explain that to them?
36. What are the other scenarios that might happen if you deliver that message?
37. What factors contribute to this?
38. How was that decision made?
39. How do you know there is variation?

only did she begin asking more questions, more confidently, she felt better about the exchanges she was having.

In this way, the radar chart can be used to inspire improvement goals, as well as being a source of data for the current-state section on personal A3s.

USING THE RADAR CHART

Our radar chart always has the same five leadership traits and eight supporting behaviors. We have seen this chart work well for leaders and organizations from San Francisco to South Africa.

To fill out the chart, take note of the indicators for each level. This is how you score your actions over time. Every level, 1 through 5, is defined by how frequently you engage in the behavior, how long you spend in the activity, and the intensity of your focus:

- Level 1: rare, undeveloped, indifferent
- Level 2: irregular, experimental, apparent
- Level 3: frequent, predictable, moderate
- Level 4: consistent, stable, persistent
- Level 5: uniform, mature, tenacious

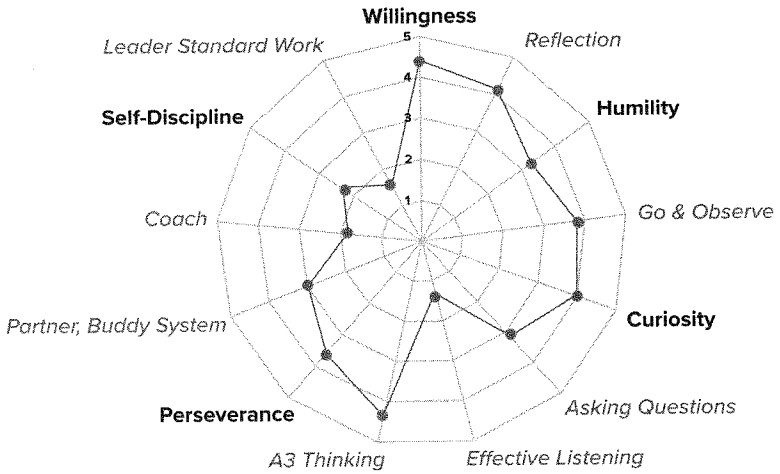
For Kim to reach Level 4 on her curiosity trait, for instance, she would need to judge her questions, answers, and A3 thinking as consistent, stable, and persistent. While her questions were irregular, experimental, and just barely apparent to others, she could not get past Level 2.

Every leader who completes a radar chart looks for where the line pulls in toward the center. This is the visual indicator of a gap—an area in which to focus improvement efforts. Figure 9.3 (see next page) shows an example. Here you can see that the leader scored high in "asking questions" and low in "effective listening." So, it is quite clear where a disconnect is occurring.

In three or six months, when you reassess and create a new radar chart, it will almost certainly look different. Maybe you will have improved in some areas but have not been able to get to gemba as much as you would like, or you recognize that responding to urgent situations has sent your leadership standard work schedule into disarray. Fluctuations in the chart are the result of paying attention to how you spend your time.

If you take notes during daily or weekly reflections, these can be very useful to review before updating your chart. And regular updates will help you see patterns over time.

FIGURE 9.3 **Radar Chart with Scores**



The real work here is deep, honest self-reflection. Take your improvement efforts where the evidence leads you.

DEFINING TRAITS AND BEHAVIORS

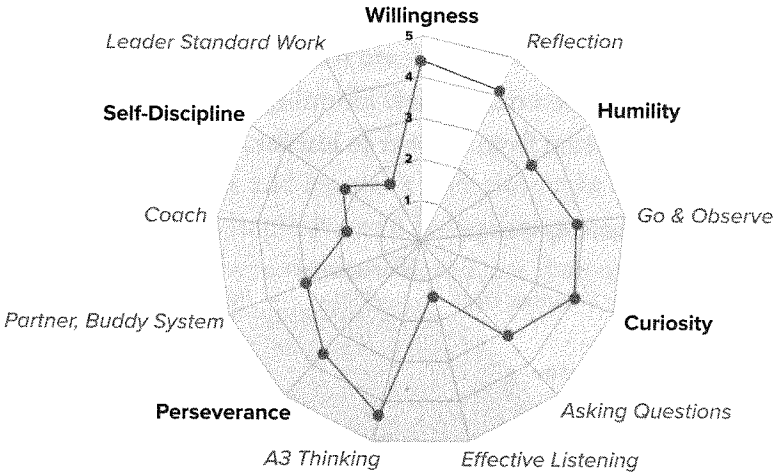
Following are explanations of the traits examined in a radar chart.

Willingness to Change

Willingness to change, highlighted in Figure 9.4, is at the top of the radar chart because transformation is only possible when leaders are willing to change. It is ground zero—or high noon—of the necessary traits. If we accept the premise that leaders model behavioral expectations for the organization, then

leaders must be willing to change, to learn, to think differently, and to behave differently.

FIGURE 9.4 **Willingness Wedge**



Observable Behavior: Reflection

Reflection is the practice of giving serious thought or consideration to a specific topic in an intentional manner. Reflection assumes that a leader carves out time in a busy calendar and brings depth and purpose to this activity. Some people find that asking two simple questions at the end of every day is necessary to establish the habit. Reflection queries in this case are usually simple, such as:

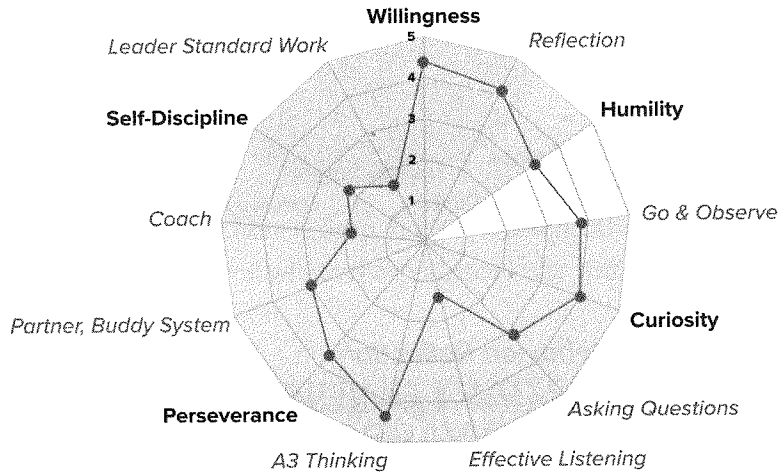
- What did I do that unleashed the creativity of my team?
- What did I do that shut my team down?

Other leaders can only manage one reflection a week. The key here is constancy. Setting aside time to think deeply about personal change is a clear indicator of willingness to change.

Humility

Humility, highlighted in Figure 9.5, can be defined as the condition of having awareness of your limits and, therefore, knowing that you do not know everything. Humility is an enabler for those who seek to learn the truth. Without humility, learning would be unnecessary. Humility assists us in shifting our self-perception from knower to learner.

FIGURE 9.5 **Humility Wedge**



Observable Behavior: Going to Gemba to See, Listen, and Learn

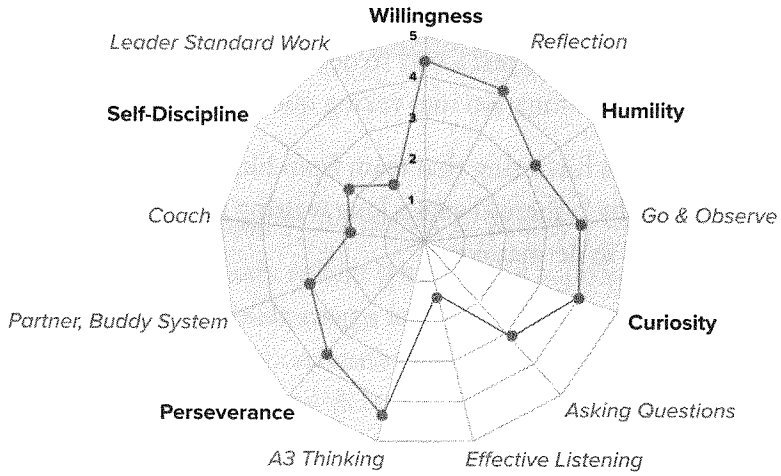
Go & observe is to publicly embrace the knowledge that you do not know—cannot know—everything. It is a way of telling your organization that knowledge is more important than authority. Those who go to gemba to pontificate, or to tell people the "right" way to complete a task, may feel the sugar high

of power, but they undermine the real purpose of the visit. You cannot learn while giving instructions.

Curiosity

Curiosity, highlighted in Figure 9.6, is defined as having a keen interest in how things work. It is the state of being inquisitive, of showing the desire to learn. Leaders who are curious ask great questions and regularly seek the views of other people. One positive implication of leadership curiosity is seeing solutions emerge from the front lines more than new programs launched from leadership offices.

FIGURE 9.6 **Curiosity Wedge**



Observable Behavior: Asking Questions

Asking questions is the art of drawing another person out. The persons on the receiving end of questions should feel valued,

safe to share their thoughts, and like a meaningful contributor to the organization. Do not ask questions to which you already know the answer. Do not try to guide others to the answer you have in mind. Other people almost always know your true intention.

Observable Behavior: Effective Listening

Effective listening is to give full and complete attention to another. Like the right question, it is a gift to give to another. By listening with empathy and without interruptions or solutions, you set the stage to allow others to find their own answers. Quietly preparing to say something during a conversation is not the same as listening.

Observable Behavior: A3 Thinking

A3 thinking is really just a way to describe organized curiosity. An A3 is an investigation into vexing questions such as:

- What is hindering that team from hitting their targets?
- Or, why is there always a long waiting list for appointments in dermatology?

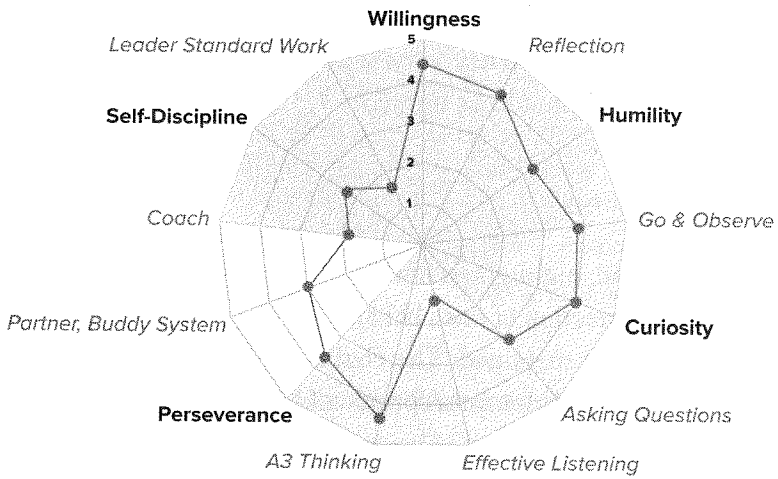
Done well, an A3 helps to create a space that encourages curiosity as people discover their own answers.

Perseverance

Perseverance, highlighted in Figure 9.7, is persistence in the face of difficulty. Perseverance is not allowing a bad day to get you down. You may be coming back to the same personal development issue time and again, but this allows for the search into deeper understanding and new insights. This is what is required for personal development over time. Perseverance demands

a certain psychological hardiness, but the good news is that practicing perseverance reinforces that same psychological resilience.

FIGURE 9.7 **Perseverance Wedge**



Observable Behavior: A Partner or Buddy

Partnering or a buddy system is a source of support when times get rough, when doubt creeps in or old habits resurface. Partnering is also an indication that you are willing to let others in, to share your journey. A buddy can be a trusted colleague, an outside mentor, or an internal PI facilitator, but it should be someone you trust. This will be the person who understands your development goals and creates a system of friendly responsibility.

Observable Behavior: A Coach

Having a coach, whether internal or external to your organization, work with you to create a leadership development plan and then challenge you, helps you create responsibility and acts as a

sounding board. Many executives already have coaches for other purposes. Only use the same person for this purpose if they are deeply experienced in organizational excellence. In most cases, you will need another person to guide and facilitate your path to personal growth. This should be a fairly short-term arrangement. Our coaching engagements usually last 13 to 15 months.

The learning journey lasts a lifetime, but the intensive coaching period should be limited.

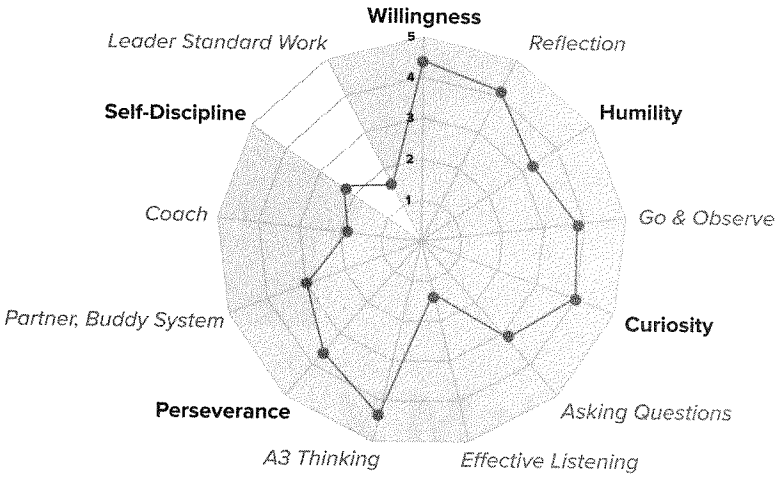
Self-Discipline

Self-discipline, highlighted in Figure 9.8, is the continual regulation and correction of one's behaviors. It is required if personal growth is to be sustained. The challenge for senior executives here is to move from conceptual understanding to personal practice of the important behaviors. Self-discipline is required to develop and reflect on the leader standard work necessary to keep you on track. Questions for this reflection include:

- How am I doing?
- Did I achieve the number of gemba visits I planned for the month?
- Did I get feedback from my buddy on the type of questions I asked at gemba?

Self-discipline is the trait necessary to keep consistent.

FIGURE 9.8 **Self-Discipline Wedge**



Observable Behavior: Leader Standard Work

Leader standard work establishes the platform upon which to practice and improve. It is a scientific fact that you cannot make improvements upon an unstable platform. Standard work provides the stable platform that allows people to truly assess their effectiveness, create experiments to change areas in which they are underperforming, and improve over time.

Leader standard work is personal. But there is also leadership *team* standard work. The following chapter describes how leaders will align and deploy strategy together. Spoiler alert: self-discipline is required.