Jim's Profit Accelerator 14:
Avoiding the Trouble in Your Blind Spots

Every experienced driver knows it's not enough to make a cursory glance in the side view mirror before changing lanes. The mirror has a blind spot, and woe to those who forget it. If only the rules for leading and managing a business were as simple and memorable as those for driving a car. Our businesses have blind spots too, and woe to those of us who forget it.

Our research confirms that business blind spots are everywhere, and they have to power to destroy our momentum, creativity, and purpose. Blind spots are business killers, and for that reason, yours must be uncovered and managed.

Do any of these common organizational blind spots sound familiar?
- Tuning out changes in customers, suppliers, and employees.
- "My two key people and I have done this for years. We know what to do, and a budget or a plan won't help us much."
- Overinvesting in machines; underinvesting in people.
- Overusing overtime to avoid hiring.
- Cutting too soon and too much when sales slump, instead of balancing cuts and getting additional cash to get through the slump. Deep cuts destroy much of a firm's competitive advantage and recovery can take years.
- Leaving loyal people in jobs they can't do any more.
- Ruling out outside expert help as "expensive and unnecessary."
- Trying to improve too many things at once.
- Telling employees as little as possible, "so competition or the union won't hurt us."
- Confusing technical knowledge with leadership ability.

The Danger You Don't See
Just as the unseen vehicle in your blind spot will cause an accident, so will the things you can't see in your daily business operations. Here is the danger involved in overlooking your blind spots:
- Missing problem-solving essentials such as facts, critical concerns, and root cause.
- Corrupting employee commitment: "It doesn't matter; she can't see it anyway."
- Preventing excellence.
- Creating huge waste, including missed opportunities and poor processes.
- Driving away customers with poor service and weak answers.
- Shrinking profit.

Learning to Look Over Your Shoulder

Fortunately, you aren't limited to a side view mirror. You can train yourself and those around you to look for blind spots and avoid danger. Here are some simple ideas that yield great results. You can use these in your leadership team and throughout your organization:

1. **Blind Spot Finder:** This helps teams make blind spots okay to talk about, which is the first step in eliminating blind spots. Give each team member one piece of paper for each team member (e.g., for a team of five, each person receives five sheets of paper). Each person should put one team member's name at the top of each page. On each person's page, list one to three blind spots for that person. After the lists are complete, each person reviews his or her own blind spot sheets, picks three blind spots to work on, and posts each to his or her personal blind spot list.
2. **Wingman:** Pair off into accountability teams. Share each other's blind spot lists. The wingman will be the prime person to point out a blind spot action when it occurs.
3. **Team Blind Spot Light-up:** At every meeting, each person writes his or her three blind spots on the white board so that team members can help identify them when they happen.
4. **One-on-One:** Review progress in one-on-one meetings.
5. **Company Flashlight:** Shine the light on blind spots company-wide.
6. **Quick Blind Spot Check:** Review your latest customer ratings in a management team meeting. Where the ratings are poor, make a note when you decide that it's "an isolated instance." Then dig a bit; it might be a blind spot!

Blind spots can be difficult to talk about. The value of opening the issue in teams and addressing it on a continuing basis is that it creates an environment that allows for the exchange of this kind of information and doesn't require defensiveness. That's the key. We can't see blind spots on our own; we all need a lookout — a wingman. Once everyone learns that blind spots are just a fact and not a flaw, then they are free to ask a wingman for help in seeing and addressing them. And the way to sustain such an open environment is to remember to say thank you to the wingman for offering such valuable insight and help.

The Benefits of Looking

One of the companies I worked with, a substantial 20-year-old firm, increased sales 47 percent year over year by erasing blind spots in one area. The key: Daily quick order review by the heads of production, engineering, supply chain, and sales. That simple, everyday process provided an opportunity for someone to see issues and answers that the others had missed.

Eliminating blind spots has the power to turn performance around. As a leader, a big part of your job is to know what's really going on. You wouldn't drive with your eyes shut (unless you're 16); why would you try to lead that way?

Executive Summary
1. Every leader and every organization has blind spots.

2. Ignoring blind spots is like changing lanes without looking over your shoulder: an invitation to disaster.
3. A wingman is the most enduring way to cut the power of blind spots.
4. Talk about blind spots. They'll shrink.
5. Light up blind spots to ramp up everyone's performance.

Call me.

For more information, visit www.grewco.com.

Jim Grew is an expert in CEO-level strategy and executive leadership whose clients refer to him as the Business Defogger and Accelerator. Jim helps leaders swiftly discover the hidden opportunities within their businesses and exploit them for dramatic results. Nearly three decades of success as a COO and CEO coupled with his experience running nine thriving businesses provide the foundation for his consulting work as president of the Grew Company. He presents regularly to industry groups, mentors business leaders, and shares insights on his blog, BizBursts.com: http://bizbursts.com/. He holds BA and MBA degrees from Stanford University.