



*Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise*

## **Watch Your Blind Side**

"Blind Side" the movie is based on the true story of Michael Oher, now with the Baltimore Ravens, who earlier in life was befriended by a school friend's mother, played by Academy Award-winning actress Sandra Bullock. Oher plays offensive tackle for his school's team and does a truly impressive job protecting his quarterback's blind side. There's another kind of blind side worthy of our attention: "blind sides" that are responsible for the demise of leaders and their institutions, families and friends, communities and economies - like blind sides that contributed to the latest recession, our worst in decades. It's pretty frightening to hear the likes of Alan Greenspan, past and current secretaries of our treasury and the heads of world-wide banks - no doubt pretty smart people in many respects - admit that they were blind to the forces at play that triggered the collapse of world-wide real estate and financial markets and that nearly took down our economy. There are other kinds of unfortunate blind sides too - blindness to our own or our organization's strengths or vulnerabilities, to others' contributions or limitations, to the impact of our behavior or decisions on others, to "bad news" or our inability to hear it, and myriad other realities important for our lives and organizations that we are blind to.

We've heard a lot about the merits of "authentic" leaders, organizations, experiences and people. Authenticity means being real, and an important part of that is for leaders, organizations, experiences and people to be in reality what they claim or present themselves to be. Another important part of being real is the capacity to face and articulate reality - something apparently in very short supply when CEOs, investment bankers and government officials missed or ignored warning signs of the market's collapse leading up to 2008. The signs were surely there; Michael Lewis' new book, The Big Short\*, chronicles the work of Michael Burry, one investor who correctly read the signs. Mr. Burry studiously read all of the real estate investment descriptions laced with legal language and strange acronyms; he paid attention to the increasing ease for homeowners of acquiring credit, and noticed by 2005 that lending standards had hit bottom. Adding it all up, Burry bet that millions of dollars worth of securities would lose money by "short-selling" them; he made a fortune.

Why did Michael Burry see what was happening when so many others didn't? He jokes about how it might be due to seeing things differently since the childhood loss of one eye; whether that's true or not, certainly "seeing things differently" is one way to protect our "blind side." A way to do that just on our own is to simply adopt different perspectives and see things from as many different angles as we can; examples include "playing devil's advocate," waiting a day to see things in a different light, or changing locations or going on a retreat to gain perspective. An even better way is to seek and use the

input of others, and the more and more different the perspectives, usually the better; here's a case where there is truly strength in numbers.

The road to failure is paved with blind sides, including organizations and entire industries blind to market or competitive dynamics. After dominating the auto market, Henry Ford lost significant market share to General Motors early in the twentieth century because he was blind to shifting consumer tastes; demand for "basic transportation" gave way to preferences for different models with more features and more colors. The entire American automotive industry was blind to Japanese auto makers' inroads, eventually losing nearly half of their collective market share. IBM was thrown off balance in the 1970s and 80s, blind to the possibility that small personal computers, and Apple in particular, would amount to much. Sometimes rapid growth, success or size contributes to blind sides, as was apparently true with giant organizations in 2008 believed to be "too big to fail." Richard Tedlow does an excellent job of documenting classic cases of denial, a close cousin of blind sides, in his new book [Denial](#).\*

A scary thing about blind sides is that whatever they're obscuring is still there, with potential for impacting our lives and organizations whether we're aware of it or not; that's why they're called "blind sides!" Blind sides can obscure not only potentially bad news, but our best strengths and opportunities, causing us to fall far short of our potential. Unfortunately, sometimes we learn about blind sides when it's too late - after a crisis, traumatic losses, missed opportunities or digging a hole that's too big to escape. I know that I've been blind to reality at times when a better understanding of what was blocking my view would have paid many dividends. Things "just not going our way" again and again or finding ourselves falling into the same predicaments consistently are usually signs of blind sides and our inability or unwillingness to face certain truths. These are times when we need to take some time for serious reflection, seek feedback that we really attend to, and open ourselves up or seek experiences to help us see things from a different perspective; valid personality surveys, skills inventories or "360°" surveys for individuals, especially when accompanied by coaching, can help here. Perhaps at times like these we need what the Buddhists refer to as a *Kalyana mitra*, or "noble friend," who as John O'Donahue tells us in [Anam Cara](#)\* "will not accept pretension but will gently and firmly confront you with your own blindness." Organizations and teams can be blind to their strengths and vulnerabilities as well; here again periodic organization assessments, especially accompanied by skillful interpretation by a consultant, can significantly reduce dangerous blind spots.\*\*

We all likely have sufficiently serious personal, professional, organizational and community challenges to resolve without being handicapped by blind spots.

*Are there any indicators that blind spots may be impacting your life or work; how could you find out? What are some steps you could take to compensate for potential blind spots?*

*What important realities might others around you - perhaps acquaintances, your organization, industry or community - not be aware of? How could you call attention to them and reduce their impact?*

\* Michael Lewis' [The Big Short](#), Richard Tedlow's [Denial](#) and John O'Donohue's [Anam Cara](#) are all available at the [inTEgro Bookstore](#).

\*\* Visit [inTEgro Surveys](#) for personality inventories, "360" assessments and organization or team survey tools.

It isn't what we don't know that gets us into trouble, it's what we know for sure that just ain't so.

*Mark Twain*

Seeing the world through the largest number of lenses makes it unlikely that some new reality will appear without being aware of it at all.

*Robert Theobald*

Ninety percent of the world's woes come from people not knowing themselves, their abilities, their frailties, and even their real virtues.

*Sydney Harris*

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