
The Powerful Drivers and Blockers of Leadership



By Ian C. Woodward , INSEAD Professor of Management Practice

Exploring the hidden forces that motivate and hinder you can make you a better leader.

When Olivia, a global marketing head, received peer feedback that she continuously monopolised work conversations, she readily recognised her problem. However, all past efforts to restrain herself had failed.

Immersing herself in a leadership development programme to explore her personal drivers and blockers helped Olivia to become more self-aware and confront her challenges. She now knows that specific beliefs impair her ability to stop controlling the dialogue. For instance, deep down, she thinks that *“if you want to get ahead and make your mark, you must always be heard”* – which is a blocker. Yet on the bright side, Olivia explored her strong value for teamwork and is greatly motivated by constant learning. With this in mind, it made absolute sense for her to give more “airtime” to her colleagues in conversation. She identified ‘listening for learning’ as a driver. So, she has asked two of her colleagues to send her a clear signal – a yellow card of sorts – if she talks too much in meetings.

Self-awareness at the heart of effective change

In my experience teaching leadership development programmes at INSEAD, I observe that common self-improvement objectives include becoming an active listener, taming micro-managing or gaining better emotional control. Other executives wish to expand their networking or communication skills. There are hundreds of other objectives. Every leader is unique, and so are the ways they might want to improve.

All this development work is easier said than done, but one thing is clear: To face these challenges, you must deepen your self-awareness. A successful way to achieve this is to explore the inner forces that are likely to either support or obstruct your self-improvement efforts. This is the central argument of the recent book, *Exploring Leadership Drivers and Blockers*, I have co-written with Samah Shaffakat (Liverpool Business School) and [Vincent H. Dominé](#), INSEAD Adjunct Professor of Leadership.

Exploring both conscious and unconscious drivers and blockers increases a person's level of self-awareness and assists with creating a leadership development action plan. Drawing upon academic research, executive development practice and field studies, our book includes a discovery tool that allows people's various drivers and blockers to surface. These can be worldviews, emotions, personality traits, as well as the values and motivators that either promote or impede efforts to change. This exploration is especially relevant for coaches and leadership development professionals attempting to help leaders examine self-awareness in a deep fashion.

Using a detailed, systematic and dynamic questionnaire split into 14 progressive steps encompassing personalised exploration, commitments and actions, our drivers and blockers tool has been used by more than 2,000 executives so far. The personalised process includes a range of questions, including:

- What type of leader do you aspire to be? What is the specific development objective you want to achieve to support this?
- What are the specific behaviours that are preventing you from being such a leader and achieving your development goal?
- Consider the absolute radical opposite of those behaviours. What concerns and fears do you experience when imagining yourself exhibiting these opposite behaviours?

- What positive emotions, feelings or thoughts are you be likely to experience if you achieved the development goal you are seeking?
- What personal characteristics or experiences could explain why you would feel either the positive or negative ways?

An unknown war

Drivers are those “assumptions” and “forces” that give an individual the impetus to act. Blockers, on the other hand, are the “assumptions” and “forces” that stand in the way of change, even when individuals rationally desire to adopt new behaviours. When we humans try to change ourselves, we are waging an unknown war – essentially a competition between our conscious and unconscious facets – both positive and negative.

Surfacing the blockers tends to yield extremely profound insights. Participants using our discovery tool explore blockers first – to set a baseline of what they need to confront. The drivers are considered second. Participants find surfacing their drivers to be a great source of self-affirmation, and these provide a wonderful springboard when it is time to craft and implement the actions for their development plan.

Interestingly, participants often derive so many insights from using the tool itself that their original development objectives evolve along the way. Such fine-tuning, on the basis on a deeper self-knowledge, allows them to be even more targeted with their action plan.

Harnessing the forces

With a clear vision of your leadership drivers and blockers, the resulting insights can help you develop a much more comprehensive, practical set of intended actions. Change is always difficult. Leveraging consciousness to shed light on both positive and negative psychological forces at play greatly increases your odds of success. However, our research shows that exploring drivers and blockers should be one part of a well-designed and integrated leadership development process – to maximise the connection of these insights to reflection and feedback.

Olivia has received much positive feedback on her progress since completing her programme. She has now decided to work with an experienced mentor. Her next steps include pursuing a renewed understanding of her underlying self-confidence – a blocker which she identified as a root cause for her

counterproductive behaviours – and celebrating her thirst for learning – a driver.

The strong desire to become a better leader is rarely enough to create long-lasting change. As researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey emphasised in their book *[Immunity to Change](#)*, “Desire and motivation aren’t enough: even when it’s literally a matter of life or death, the ability to change remains maddeningly elusive.” Our research into drivers and blockers and the tool we created builds directly on Kegan and Lahey’s ground-breaking understanding of the blockers to change, combined with positive psychology and other leadership development research for a holistic view of what concrete change could be.

Greater self-awareness of what brews below the surface should be part of an integrated development programme or coaching process. It is a transformative power. Unleashing your drivers and overcoming your blockers can turn your intention to change into reality.

***Ian C. Woodward** is Professor of Management Practice in Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, specialising in Leadership and Communication. He is the Director of the [Advanced Management Programme](#), an INSEAD Executive Education Programme.*

Learn more about Exploring Leadership Drivers and Blockers on the publisher’s [website](#).

Professor Woodward provides further information about the drivers and blockers concept and a copy of the exploration tool, at www.driversandblockers.com.

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About the author(s)

Ian C. Woodward is an Emeritus Professor of Management Practice in Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.