

## **The Role of Self-Awareness**

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Are you self-aware? Are you able to observe your own behavior objectively and see yourself as others see you? If so, can you accurately identify your strengths and weaknesses? Will others agree with your assessment?

According to many experts, your level of self-awareness may be the most important factor in predicting your success in business. As Bill George, Professor of Management at Harvard Business School, says, “The key to effective leadership development comes down to self-awareness.”

So, what exactly is self-awareness and how do you get it or improve it if you don't already have it?

Self-awareness is the ability to objectively see yourself as others see you. For example, you may think you are assertive. If others see you as assertive, your self-awareness about assertiveness is accurate. If, on the other hand, others see you as unassertive—or as assertive in personal situations but reticent in professional situations—your self-awareness could improve.

Of course, assertiveness is just one of the many attributes we use to describe each other. Your level of self-awareness is based on your perceptions of how others see the whole list of qualities that describe you. In other words, self-awareness is the ability to see yourself as others do across all dimensions of who you are.

One benefit of being self-aware is the potential to learn from constructive feedback. If you are self-aware, you're much more likely to see and accept areas in need of improvement in your own behavior. Self-awareness combined with arrogance or defensiveness may cripple this type of improvement, but self-awareness coupled with an openness to change is the shortest path to taking corrective action.

A second benefit of being self-aware is improved interaction with others. Just about everyone prefers agreement over disagreement. Self-awareness makes it easier for people to agree about personal attributes. So, if you see yourself as confident and others see you as confident, the degree of agreement is high, as is the potential for interacting positively.

This second benefit may seem trivial, but consider this challenge: Think about someone who is frustrating or irritating. Is the frustration based on a difference in the way you see the person and the way she sees herself? Frequently, the core of your frustration with other people is their failure to recognize what impact their behavior is having because of poor self-awareness. Don't we all have colleagues who think they are good at something when they are not (in everyone else's eyes)?

A third benefit of self-awareness is openness to turning over tasks that call for skills and

interests that are not your strengths. Indeed, accurately knowing your strengths and weaknesses allows you to leverage your strengths and plug in the help of others with complementary strengths to make up for deficits. No one person can be the best at everything. Exceptional leaders capitalize on their strengths and turn to others for help in areas of weakness. This is not possible without self-awareness.

What's the best way to get and build self-awareness? The answer is to practice analyzing your own behavior and then asking others for feedback. Specifically: 1) reflect on how you behaved in a given situation; 2) analyze what you did well and what you could have done better; 3) ask for feedback from others; and 4) compare your analysis with the feedback.

Of course, the more consistency between your own analysis and the feedback you get from others, the greater your self-awareness (for that particular behavior).

A few warnings: Self-reflection, or thinking about and carefully considering your behavior, is a necessary ingredient for increasing self-awareness. When done right, it usually takes time...and uninterrupted time, at that. The warning is: You may anger your boss if you're spending too much time reflecting while at work. An alternative is to wait until you get home and have a quiet moment.

Ask for feedback carefully. Being open to feedback is important, but so is choosing your feedback source wisely. Pick someone whose judgment you think is sound and who you trust to look out for you. This does not mean to pick someone who's not going to give you honest feedback that may be tough to hear. It just means that if they are giving you feedback, it's with your best interests in mind.

You might participate in a peer group. Indeed, participating in the "right" peer group is an incredibly powerful strategy for increasing self-awareness. The idea is to form a group that will take the time to establish trust in each other's feedback and then to use each other as a resource for checking out the accuracy of members' self-awareness. This idea can be used at all levels in a company—with incredible results.

Increasing self-awareness may not catapult you into the upper levels of your organization overnight, but it should help you avoid obstacles that might otherwise stand in your way. How many times have you seen obstacles in front of others that they didn't seem to see? Those are the people with low self-awareness. Don't be one of them.