

Self-aware leaders and why they matter

Author: Tatenda Sayenda . March 2021

In today's global environment for one to be an effective leader, it requires several traits. One major trait which is key and universal when being considered an effective leader is that of self-awareness. The global environment has become so complex and demanding, it requires a leader who can cope and adapt to the ever-changing environment.

What is Self-awareness?

Merriam-Webster defines self-awareness as “an awareness of one's personality or individuality,” Cam Caldwell, PhD, an author and professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, says, “Self-awareness is an effort. It's a conscious effort to invest in understanding who we are, who others are, our universal rules that [we] apply in life and our commitment to the future.”

Self-awareness is one of the key elements of emotional intelligence (EI), a term coined by psychologist Michael Beldoch and widely popularized by Daniel Goleman that refers to a person's ability to identify and manage their emotions and identify and influence others' emotions. Often, developing self-awareness as a leader is also the first step in developing EI — which has proven particularly valuable in leadership. In research involving nearly 5000 participants, Tasha Eurich (organisational psychologist, executive coach and author of *Insight*) and colleagues found that most people believed they were self-aware. Only 10-15% of their sample fit the criteria, meaning a large number of managers or leaders lack self-awareness. “The people who work for such managers,” Eurich said, “they may not like them, they may not trust them.”

In an article by Forbes Magazine, it was cited that women in executive-level management positions tend to exhibit more self-awareness than men in the same positions. In a study of 17,000 individuals worldwide, the Hay Group Research found that 19% of female executives interviewed exhibited self-awareness as compared to 4% of their male counterparts.

The Four Self-Awareness Archetypes

This 2x2 maps internal self-awareness (how well you know yourself) against external self-awareness (how well you understand how others see you).

	Low external self-awareness	High external self-awareness
High internal self-awareness	<p>INTROSPECTORS</p> <p>They're clear on who they are but don't challenge their own views or search for blind spots by getting feedback from others. This can harm their relationships and limit their success.</p>	<p>AWARE</p> <p>They know who they are, what they want to accomplish, and seek out and value others' opinions. This is where leaders begin to fully realize the true benefits of self-awareness.</p>
Low internal self-awareness	<p>SEEKERS</p> <p>They don't yet know who they are, what they stand for, or how their teams see them. As a result, they might feel stuck or frustrated with their performance and relationships.</p>	<p>PLEASERS</p> <p>They can be so focused on appearing a certain way to others that they could be overlooking what matters to them. Over time, they tend to make choices that aren't in service of their own success and fulfillment.</p>

SOURCE DR. TASHA EURICH

© HBR.ORG

Why is it important for a leader to be self-aware?

Self-awareness has been cited as the most important capability for leaders to develop, according to the authors of *“How To Become a Better Leader,”* which was published in the MIT Sloan Management Review. According to the Academy of Leadership Coaching and NLP, Self-awareness allows leaders to identify the gaps in their management skills and uncover the areas in which they are most effective as well as areas that need additional work. These understandings aid them in making discerning decisions and help them be more effective in motivating employees towards positive outcomes. An article by keynote speaker and author Brent Gleeson highlights the importance of EI in leaders: “The ability to be perceptively in tune with yourself and your emotions, as well as having sound situational awareness can be a powerful tool for leading a team.” So, not only does self-awareness work to make leaders more cognizant of their actions, emotions and biases, it helps them develop greater emotional intelligence in the process. Developing self-awareness as a leader will strengthen not only individual performance but organizational performance as well (Gallo, 2019).

National statistics consistently show that around 70% of employees are disengaged, or not emotionally committed to the organizations they work for, a productivity drain and a failure of management which to some extent is tied at least partly to self-awareness issues (Lipman, 2020). Research suggests that when we see ourselves clearly, we are more confident and more creative. We make sounder decisions, build stronger relationships, and communicate more effectively. We're less likely to lie, cheat, and steal. We are better workers who get more promotions. And we're more-effective leaders with more-satisfied employees and more-profitable companies. Furthermore, a study also found that self-awareness impacts

companies' bottom line. In a study of the stock performance of 486 publicly traded companies, Korn/Ferry International found that companies with strong financial performance tend to have employees with higher levels of self-awareness than poorly performing companies. Additionally, a culture of self-awareness advances learning and development (L&D) by promoting the value of continuous growth and development.

How can a leader be more self-aware?

Tasha Eurich, in an article on Harvard Business Review, alludes that “leaders who focus on building both internal and external self-awareness, who seek honest feedback from loving critics, and who ask what instead of why can learn to see themselves more clearly — and reap the many rewards that increased self-knowledge delivers”.

The Academy for Leadership seven ways for leaders to improve their level of self-awareness:

1. **Keep an open mind to other possibilities.** Successful leaders are curious. They are open to new ideas and welcome unique thoughts. This openness also makes others feel supported and accepted as valued team member.
2. **Be aware of strengths and weaknesses.** Self-aware leaders know the areas in which they are strong and those which need some work. Being honest about these strengths and shortcomings puts leaders in a position for improvement and growth.

Identify what factors, triggers, or indicators – both negative and positive – prompt others' behaviours toward you. Why do you do the things you do, and how do others respond? How do you respond in turn, and why do you react the way you do? What is the impact of culture on your perspective and others' perceptions?

1. **Keen awareness of the business environment.** As a leader, it is crucial to keep focus. There are a lot of things that vie for a leader's time. A self-aware executive will understand areas of distraction and steer clear of them so that they can concentrate on what they need to do to move forward.
2. **Understanding of limitations and definition of appropriate boundaries.** A successful leader knows their place. While it is important to make team members feel comfortable and supported, without a firm stance it is easy to get taken advantage of in these situations. Boundaries help leaders to know when to say “no” and will allow them to operate from a position of respect and integrity.
3. **Strong knowledge of hot-buttons.** Even the best leaders can become rattled in stressful situations. An emotionally aware leader can identify the situations that might cause them to have a strong reaction. It is okay to show emotion, however, it is important to have the ability to fully process these feelings before communicating with others.
4. **Connection to gut instincts.** People who are successful in business have a strong connection with their intuition. They trust their feelings and can make appropriate decisions.
5. **Maintain self-discipline.** A respected leader demonstrates discipline within their position as well as in their personal life. This level of discipline is tied closely to their integrity and moral

character and garners respect from those around them.

Furthermore, as a leader, it is important to solicit feedback. According to Forbes Magazine, feedback leads to empathy and helps you understand the impact of your actions on others. One of the key indicators of low self-awareness is being unaware of personal blind spots—traits or aspects that may limit the way you act, react, behave, or believe, and in turn, limit your effectiveness. “It has been shown consistently that leaders and people who ask for critical feedback are socially rewarded by their direct reports, by their peers, by their bosses—even by their customers.”-Tasha Eurich (Occupational Psychologist). One can make use of assessments such as the 360-degree assessment and regular check-ins with team members to gather feedback on their leadership. Once one is aware of their blind spots, they can adjust accordingly.

According to the MIT study, most self-aware CEOs learned to identify their “outlier tendencies” and adjusted their behaviour to change the way they were perceived. They didn’t undergo an entire personality overhaul; rather, they learned how to be themselves but “with more skill.” A leader can also consider taking Tasha Eurich’s free *Insight Quiz*. It’s a fourteen-question online survey you complete first and then have sent to a friend or colleague to complete on your behalf. You’ll receive suggestions via email for meaningful next steps based on your score.

“At its core, self-awareness offers leaders far more than another tool for success. It helps them remember why they wanted to become leaders in the first place. It helps them discover, and live, the impact they want to have, not just on their team members — or even on their organizations — but on the world. And, that is a leader worth following.” (Gallo, 2019)

Regardless of where you stand currently, no matter what you think you know about yourself and how you show up as a leader, there is always more yet to discover!

Tatenda Sayenda-Havire is a Business Consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd, a business management and human resources consulting firm.

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/self-aware-leaders-and-why-they-matter>