



Self-awareness is a pre-requisite for success as a leader

By Hilary Sayers on 30th August 2013

Great leadership depends on a number of attributes including intelligence, motivation, experience and the ability to get things done. Whilst these may be the fundamental building blocks of a leadership career, self-awareness is a critical differentiator in leadership performance and long-term career success.

The well-known quote from Aristotle “Knowing your self is the beginning of all wisdom” shows that the significance of self-awareness has been recognised for centuries. What we know in business today is that an accurate understanding of one’s strengths and limitations is essential to advance as a leader.

In 2012, Lominger International studied the results of ProSpective, an online evaluation of a person’s level of self-awareness. It asks each executive to choose the skills he or she is best and worst at, and then request similar input from colleagues.

It was found that 79 percent of the 2,750 executives studied had at least one blind spot – a skill the person rated as a strength, but others said was a weakness. A further finding from participants in Lominger’s Voices 360-degree surveys showed that people have on average 3.4 blind spots.

These results should provide a warning. Blind spots can negatively impact a career when a skill that wasn’t important before suddenly matters in a new job or business situation. Knowing one’s weaknesses is power because they can be overcome or worked around. The danger lies in not knowing.

Another barrier to self-awareness is underestimating strengths. This can lead to lost opportunities when a leader simply doesn’t exercise a critical skill. The Johari window, named after Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, is a simple four-box grid to enhance self-awareness by comparing what we know about ourselves with what others know about us.

Dr. Robert Hogan, the American psychologist and international authority on leadership, has coined the term ‘strategic self-awareness’ to describe understanding one’s own strengths and weaknesses and, importantly, how they compare with those of others.

Hogan says that strategic self-awareness cannot be mastered through self-reflection alone; it depends on continuous performance feedback from others. Yet, feedback is not always forthcoming and must be sought out.

Successful executives have been found to be proactive in generating feedback on their impact and effectiveness. In his book *High Flyers*, Morgan McCall points out that they also create a setting in which other people willingly play a constructive role in their learning.

The desire to learn, grow and adapt is at the core of Lominger’s construct of learning agility, a capability defined as the ability and willingness to learn from experience and subsequently apply that learning in new and different situations.

Dr. Robert Eichinger and Dr. Michael Lombardo, world-recognised experts in leadership development, found that learning agility determines as much as 25 percent of success at top management and executive levels. Their work led to the creating of the Learning Agility Architect™, a set of tools used to develop flexible and adaptable leaders.

Self-awareness is one of the five factors of learning agility and Lominger says it is fueled by a desire to continuously improve oneself. For individuals who are highly self-aware, investing time and energy in personal growth is a given. They see themselves as a work in progress and are committed to a journey of personal development.

Given the extent of change in business today driven by market conditions, economic forces, political uncertainty and technology advances, self-awareness has never been more important for leaders. They must be attuned to ways they need to adapt and the role that their motivation and decision-making style plays in their success. A true understanding of self is liberating in the face of these challenges.

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