Great Leadership Starts with Self-Awareness

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*. Successful leaders know where their natural inclinations lie and use this knowledge to boost those inclinations or compensate for them.

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.

Yet self-awareness seems to be in short supply among leaders. While women in executive-level management positions tend to exhibit more self-awareness than men in the same positions, the overall percentages suggest there is much opportunity for growth in this area. In a study of 17,000 individuals worldwide, the Hay Group Research found that 19 percent of women executives interviewed exhibited self-awareness as compared to 4 percent of their male counterparts. Here are some tips on how to be more self-aware:

Knowing You

The one constant factor in all your endeavours is you; understanding yourself is therefore paramount.

Dr. Travis Bradberry, author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, describes self-awareness as one of the core components of emotional intelligence. He defines emotional intelligence as your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behaviour and relationships.

Self-awareness is empowering because it arms you with knowledge and enables you to make better choices — to change or grow. Here are four strategies to increase your self-awareness:

Identify External Factors

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?

Gather Trusted Feedback

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.

Consider the Circumstances

Think about when to utilize a personality trait to your advantage and when it's best to leave it on the side-lines. According to the MIT study, most self-aware CEOs learned to identify their "outlier tendencies" and adjusted their behaviour in order 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." The executives considered which business or social situations required their personality traits (for example, extraversion or openness) and which did not.

Assess Behaviours in Light of Your Values and Priorities

Do you observe patterns in your behaviours? Assess those patterns in light of what is important to you, what drives you, and who you want to be. Be honest in assessing competing priorities. Are there tendencies that you'd like to change? Are there factors you'd like to add to the equation? The best outcome of self-awareness is to figure out what makes you great and be more of it. Continually add to that list, refine it, and build on it. Conversely, seek to be less of what negatively impacts you, those around you, and your desired outcomes.

Stay Curious

Our inclinations, fuelled by our culture, backgrounds, and experiences, influence who we are, but we are responsible for who we continually become. New circumstances can also create new triggers or lead to different reactions. Stay curious, and don't stop seeking to understand yourself.

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Forbes, 2018