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MANAGING YOURSELF

What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)

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Self-awareness seems to have become the latest management buzzword — and for good reason. 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.

As an organizational psychologist and executive coach, I've had a ringside seat to the power of leadership self-awareness for nearly 15 years. I've also seen how attainable this skill is. Yet, when I first began to delve into the research on self-awareness, I was surprised by the striking gap

between the science and the practice of self-awareness. All things considered, we knew surprisingly little about improving this critical skill.

Four years ago, my team of researchers and I embarked on a large-scale scientific study of self-awareness. In 10 separate investigations with nearly 5,000 participants, we examined what self-awareness really is, why we need it, and how we can increase it. (We are currently writing up our results for submission to an academic journal.)

About Our Research

The major components of our research included:

- Analyzing the results of nearly 800 existing scientific studies to understand how previous researchers defined self-awareness, unearth themes and trends, and identify the limitations of these investigations.
- Surveying thousands of people across countries and industries to explore the relationship between self-awareness and several key attitudes and behaviors, like job satisfaction, empathy, happiness, and stress. We also surveyed those who knew these people well to determine the relationship between self and other ratings of self-awareness.
- Developing and validating **a seven factor, multi-rater assessment of self-awareness**, because our review of the research didn't identify any strong, well-validated, comprehensive measures.
- Conducting in depth interviews with 50 people who'd dramatically improved their self-awareness to learn about the key actions that helped them get there, as well as their beliefs and practices. Our interviewees included entrepreneurs, professionals,

Our research revealed many surprising roadblocks, myths, and truths about what self-awareness is and what it takes to improve it. We've found that even though most people *believe* they are self-aware, self-awareness is a truly rare quality: We estimate that only 10%-15% of the people we studied actually fit the criteria. Three findings in particular stood out, and are helping us develop practical guidance for how leaders can learn to see themselves more clearly.

#1: There Are Two Types of Self-Awareness

For the last 50 years, researchers have used varying definitions of self-awareness. For example, some see it as the ability to monitor our inner world, whereas others label it as a temporary state of self-consciousness. Still others describe it as the difference between how we see ourselves and how others see us.

So before we could focus on how to improve self-awareness, we needed to synthesize these findings and create an overarching definition.

executives and even a Fortune 10 CEO. (To be included in our study, participants had to clear four hurdles: 1) they had to see themselves as highly self-aware, which we measured using our validated assessment, 2) using that same assessment, someone who knew them well had to agree, 3) they had to believe they'd experienced an upward trend of self-awareness over the course of their life. Each participant was asked to recall their level of self-awareness at different stages of their life up until the age they were currently (e.g., early adulthood: ages 19-24, adulthood: ages 25-34, mid-life: ages 35-49, mature adulthood: ages 50-80), and 4) the person rating them had to agree with the participants' recollections.)

- **Surveying hundreds of managers and their employees** to learn more about the relationship between leadership self-awareness and employee attitudes like commitment, leadership effectiveness, and job satisfaction.

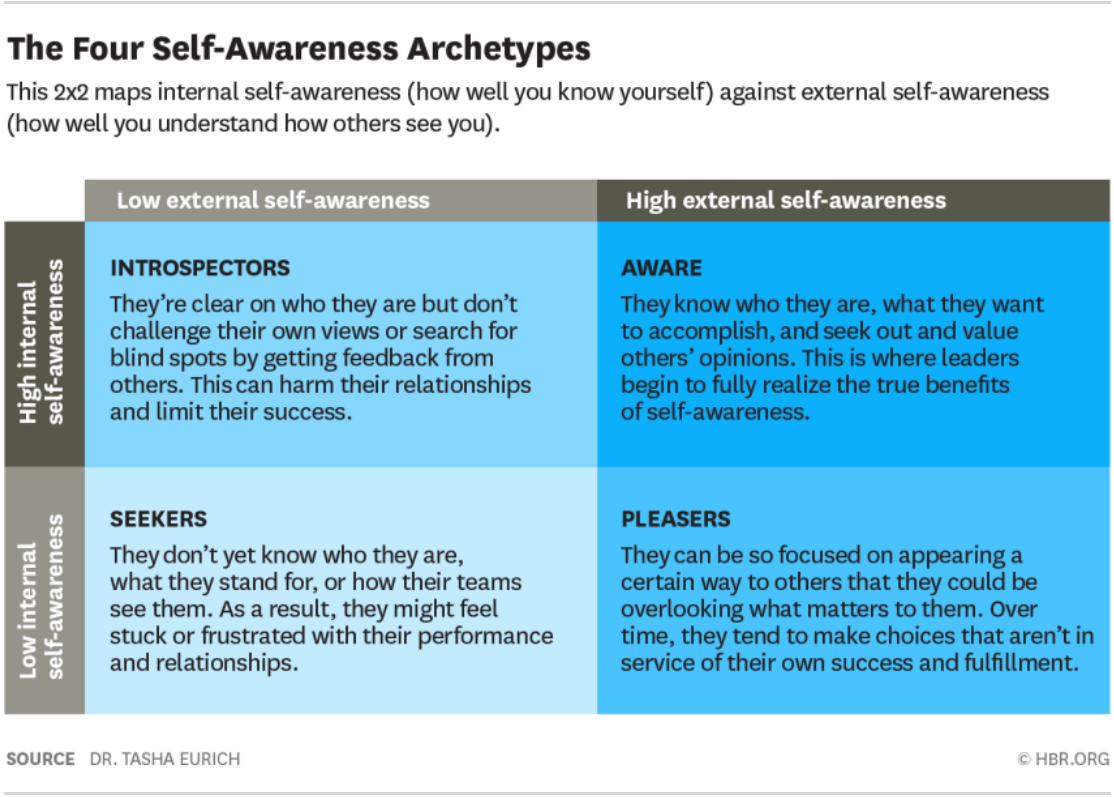
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Across the studies we examined, two broad categories of self-awareness kept emerging. The first, which we dubbed *internal self-awareness*, represents how clearly we see our own values, passions, aspirations, fit with our environment, reactions (including thoughts, feelings, behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses), and impact on others. We've found that internal self-awareness is associated with higher job and relationship satisfaction, personal and social control, and happiness; it is negatively related to anxiety, stress, and depression.

The second category, *external self-awareness*, means understanding how other people view us, in terms of those same factors listed above. Our research shows that people who know how others see them are more skilled at showing empathy and taking others' perspectives. For leaders who see themselves as their employees do, their employees tend to have a better relationship with them, feel more satisfied with them, and see them as more effective in general.

It's easy to assume that being high on one type of awareness would mean being high on the other. But our research has found virtually no relationship between them. As a result, we identify four leadership archetypes, each with a different set of opportunities to improve:



When it comes to internal and external self-awareness, it's tempting to value one over the other. But leaders must actively work on both seeing themselves clearly *and* getting feedback to understand how others see them. The highly self-aware people we interviewed were actively focused on balancing the scale.

Take Jeremiah, a marketing manager. Early in his career, he focused primarily on internal self-awareness – for example, deciding to leave his career in accounting to pursue his passion for marketing. But when he had the chance to get candid feedback during a company training, he realized that he wasn't focused enough on how he was showing up. Jeremiah has since placed an equal importance on both types of self-awareness, which he believes has helped him reach a new level of success and fulfillment.

The bottom line is that self-awareness isn't one truth. It's a delicate balance of two distinct, even competing, viewpoints. (If you're interested in learning where you stand in each category, a free shortened version of our multi-rater self-awareness assessment is available here.)

#2: Experience and Power Hinder Self-Awareness

Contrary to popular belief, studies have shown that people do not always learn from experience, that expertise does not help people root out false information, and that seeing ourselves as highly experienced can keep us from doing our homework, seeking disconfirming evidence, and questioning our assumptions.

And just as experience can lead to a false sense of confidence about our performance, it can also make us overconfident about our level of self-knowledge. For example, one study found that more-experienced managers were less accurate in assessing their leadership effectiveness

compared with less experienced managers.

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Similarly, the more power a leader holds, the more likely they are to overestimate their skills and abilities. One study of more than 3,600 leaders across a variety of roles and industries found that, relative to lower-level leaders, higher-level leaders more significantly overvalued their skills (compared with others' perceptions). In fact, this pattern existed for 19 out of the 20 competencies the researchers measured, including emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, empathy, trustworthiness, and leadership performance.

Researchers have proposed two primary explanations for this phenomenon. First, by virtue of their level, senior leaders simply have fewer people above them who can provide candid feedback. Second, the more power a leader wields, the less comfortable people will be to give them constructive feedback, for fear it will hurt their careers. Business professor James O'Toole has added that, as one's power grows, one's willingness to listen shrinks, either because they think they know more than their employees or because seeking feedback will come at a cost.

But this doesn't have to be the case. One analysis showed that the most successful leaders, as rated by 360-degree reviews of leadership effectiveness, counteract this tendency by seeking frequent critical feedback (from bosses, peers, employees, their board, and so on). They become more self-aware in the process and come to be seen as more effective by others.

Likewise, in our interviews, we found that people who improved their external self-awareness did so by seeking out feedback from *loving critics* — that is, people who have their best interests in mind *and* are willing to tell them the truth. To ensure they don't overreact or overcorrect based on one person's opinion, they also gut-check difficult or surprising feedback with others.

#3: Introspection Doesn't Always Improve Self-Awareness

It is also widely assumed that introspection — examining the causes of our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors — improves self-awareness. After all, what better way to know ourselves than by reflecting on why we are the way we are?

Yet one of the most surprising findings of our research is that people who introspect are *less* self-aware and report worse job satisfaction and well-being. Other research has shown similar patterns.

The problem with introspection isn't that it is categorically ineffective — it's that most people are doing it incorrectly. To understand this, let's look at arguably the most common introspective question: "Why?" We ask this when trying to understand our emotions (*Why do I like employee A so much more than employee B?*), or our behavior (*Why did I fly off the handle with that employee?*), or our attitudes (*Why am I so against this deal?*).

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As it turns out, "why" is a surprisingly ineffective self-awareness question. Research has shown that we simply do not have access to many of the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and motives we're searching for. And because so much is trapped outside of our conscious awareness, we tend to invent answers that *feel* true but are often wrong. For example, after an uncharacteristic outburst at an employee, a new manager may jump to the conclusion that it happened because she isn't cut out for management, when the real reason was a bad case of low blood sugar.

Consequently, the problem with asking *why* isn't just how wrong we are, but how confident we are that we are right. The human mind rarely operates in a rational fashion, and our judgments are seldom free from bias. We tend to pounce on whatever "insights" we find without questioning their validity or value, we ignore contradictory evidence, and we force our thoughts to conform to our initial explanations.

Another negative consequence of asking *why* — especially when trying to explain an undesired outcome — is that it invites unproductive negative thoughts. In our research, we've found that people who are very introspective are also more likely to get caught in ruminative patterns. For example, if an employee who receives a bad performance review asks *Why did I get such a bad rating?*, they're likely to land on an explanation focused on their fears, shortcomings, or insecurities, rather than a rational assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. (For this reason, frequent self-analyzers are more depressed and anxious and experience poorer well-being.)

So if *why* isn't the right introspective question, is there a better one? My research team scoured hundreds of pages of interview transcripts with highly self-aware people to see if they approached introspection differently. Indeed, there was a clear pattern: Although the word "why" appeared fewer than 150 times, the word "what" appeared more than 1,000 times.

Therefore, to increase productive self-insight and decrease unproductive rumination, we should ask *what*, not *why*. "What" questions help us stay objective, future-focused, and empowered to act on our new insights.

For example, consider Jose, an entertainment industry veteran we interviewed, who hated his job. Where many would have gotten stuck thinking "Why do I feel so terrible?," he asked, "What are the situations that make me feel terrible, and what do they have in common?" He realized that he'd never be happy in that career, and it gave him the courage to pursue a new and far more fulfilling one in wealth management.

Similarly, Robin, a customer service leader who was new to her job, needed to understand a piece of negative feedback she'd gotten from an employee. Instead of asking "Why did you say this about me?," Robin inquired, "What are the steps I need to take in the future to do a better job?" This helped them move to solutions rather than focusing on the unproductive patterns of the past.

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A final case is Paul, who told us about learning that the business he'd recently purchased was no longer profitable. At first, all he could ask himself was "Why wasn't I able to turn things around?" But he quickly realized that he didn't have the time or energy to beat himself up — he had to figure out what to do next. He started asking, "What do I need to do to move forward in a way that minimizes the impact to our customers and employees?" He created a plan, and was able to find creative ways to do as much good for others as possible while winding down the business. When all that was over, he challenged himself to articulate what he learned from the experience — his answer both helped him avoid similar mistakes in the future and helped others learn from them, too.

These qualitative findings have been bolstered by others' quantitative research. In one study, psychologists J. Gregory Hixon and William Swann gave a group of undergraduates negative feedback on a test of their "sociability, likability and interestingness." Some were given time to think about *why* they were the kind of person they were, while others were asked to think about *what* kind of person they were. When the researchers had them evaluate the accuracy of the feedback, the "why" students spent their energy rationalizing and denying what they'd learned, and the "what" students were more open to this new information and how they might learn from it. Hixon and Swann's rather bold conclusion was that "Thinking about why one is the way one is may be no better than not thinking about one's self at all."

All of this brings us to conclude: 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. And no matter how much progress we make, there's always more to learn. That's one of the things that makes the journey to self-awareness so exciting.

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