



TUNED IN TO LEAD

Not everyone is self-aware, but to be a truly effective leader, self-awareness is crucial. Alyson Garrido looks at why a readiness to learn and staying open to new ideas and experiences are a leader's greatest assets.

Self-awareness is a popular topic of conversation of late. It is typically very easy to spot someone who is not self-aware, but can you as easily recognise someone who does possess this quality?

And how can one build one's own self-awareness? Cultivating this skill is essential for effective leadership. New leaders, in particular, have an opportunity to increase self-awareness

through work on understanding their own values and motivation, as well as through their image and reputation. Openness to learning about oneself and the impact of one's behaviour on others is an essential part of this journey.

KNOWING YOURSELF

Self-awareness starts with knowing your motivators, your behavioural tendencies in different situations and how your history has affected your responses. In a leadership role, you must be able to understand and lead yourself before you can command the respect of others.

Consistency and trust are the building blocks of great leadership and are greatly influenced by how the leader understands their own motivations and drivers.

An easy first step in building self-awareness is to incorporate some form of a mindfulness practice into your daily routine. Mindfulness may mean different things to different people and many dismiss the idea because it conjures images of a meditation practice or hours of journaling.

While those practices may be right for some, for the purpose of this discussion, we will think of mindfulness as simply recognising your responses to varying stimuli.

When your emotions are heightened, in any way, positive or negative, take time to notice what is happening with

your thoughts and how your body reacts in response to the heightened emotion. Do your eyes well up with tears? Do you stifle a laugh? Show a shocked expression? Shake your head?

Some of us have more awareness of our reactions than others and it is essential to know your reactions, both internal and external, to see how they affect your work and relationships.

Consider the root of these reactions. You may have picked up on the person's word choice, tone or demeanour. You may have made an assumption or let a past experience influence your future interactions. Do a gut check to see whether your initial reaction to a person or statement was appropriate or if you jumped to an unwarranted conclusion?

Practising this mindfulness and reflection can help you recognise the behaviours you would like to repeat and those that are not serving you well.

Determine the image you would like to portray and whether or not your behaviours are aligned with that image. Having a personal mission statement can help you identify your goals and act as an anchor in identifying the right opportunities and appropriate behaviours in any given situation.

To create your personal mission statement, brainstorm what you do, who you do it for and how you do it. It can be aspirational or you may already be living

your mission statement.

Prioritisation and time management are struggles for many. Knowing if you are a person who prefers instant or delayed gratification is a strong tool in determining how you prioritise your workload.

Another powerful concept, first outlined in the book *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, is prioritisation through the four Ds of do, defer, delegate and delete. Leaders have competing priorities and dividing your tasks into these categories can help to determine where your priorities lie.

A further valuable tool to become more self-aware is to assess your strengths and areas of opportunity. You can assess your strengths in a number of ways. The StrengthsFinder assessment and book by Tom Rath is a favourite of mine. It helps you to identify not only your top five strengths, but also the types of environments and jobs that suit those strengths as well as common pitfalls for each of them.

Analysis of your strengths can help you grow what is going well and recognise what it looks like when you truly flex those muscles. The same individual strengths, and combinations of those strengths, may look very different for different individuals.

Like any assessment, it is important to take time to look beyond surface level

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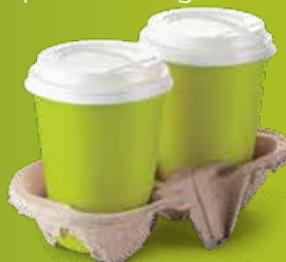
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and create a plan of action around the information you have received.

You can also identify your strengths through reflection. Ask yourself the following questions to determine your strengths and patterns. What comes naturally or has been very easy to learn? What value do I bring to a team? What makes me feel energised? What tasks would I volunteer to do? What activities make me lose track of time?

While the answers may not come to you right away, as these questions stay at the forefront of your mind, you will notice the answers emerge over time.

Another impactful way to learn about your drivers is to take a moment at the end of every day or week to reflect on the tasks that were particularly satisfying or draining. In other words, what lifted you up and what brought you down?

You can then look for ways to find more of the things that built you up and determine if you can delegate the things that bring you down. Ideally, your self-awareness will help you build a team of people with complementary strengths where one person's chore is another's joy.

Document goals and the necessary steps to reach those goals. In doing so, you will become cognisant of your progress and best practices to achieve the outcomes you desire. You will realise the places where you thrive and move quickly as well as the times when you feel unmotivated to continue or procrastinate.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Oftentimes you can learn a great deal about yourself and your impact by looking outside of yourself. The support of others can have a great impact on a leader's journey. You can turn to trusted colleagues or friends for support or look to their behaviours as examples to follow.

Look to your mentors and role models and ask yourself if they are self-aware. If so, how do you know? Consider asking them about their efforts to increase their self-awareness and their impressions of yours.

When you are starting out in a new leadership role it can be effective to put yourself in the shoes of someone you admire and ask yourself how they might handle a situation. What would they

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notice about themselves or others and how could you emulate their behaviours and practices?

Past performance reviews, particularly 360-degree reviews, hold a wealth of information about how one is perceived. While there is a natural tendency to treat these as stand-alone exercises and forget about the information following the meeting with your boss, looking back at your past performance reviews will tell a valuable story of your career progression.

If these documents are thorough and thoughtful, you will see a story of how you're perceived by others, how well you've met your goals and objectives and the obstacles that you have overcome.

This can be a valuable tool in understanding your career progression. It can be very useful to know where you have been in order to determine where you're going and how you would like to lead.

Regular feedback is an essential part of building your self-awareness. Help others help you by asking for specific and timely feedback and always thanking the person who provides feedback. Giving feedback, after all, can be more difficult than receiving it, so make it easy for people to share their concerns about how your behaviour has affected them, whether it be positive or negative.

If you are not sure how to ask for feedback, or if the feedback you are receiving is too general, use the KISS model for eliciting feedback, asking what behaviours you should keep, improve, start and stop.

Tune in to how others react to the ways in which you speak and behave.

This is where empathy will help you build your self-awareness. Notice those around you and their behaviours. Are they leaning in when you speak to show interest? Are your team members relaxed and jovial? Do gatherings feel tense? Do you notice concerned expressions?

Put yourself in the shoes of your team members and co-workers. How could your behaviours be affecting those reactions? You may need to adjust your behaviour, clarify intent or ask questions to ensure that your message is being heard in the manner in which you intend.

Find a peer group or colleague that will support you in this journey. Agree that they will point out the things that you may not see in yourself and challenge your way of thinking. These colleagues can objectively see the impact that your behaviour has on others and relay information about the mood and desires of your team.

This kind of accountability buddy system can keep you on track with goals and idea generation well beyond your journey of self-awareness.

Self-awareness is like having antennae. If your antennae are too short, you won't feel anything or know what is happening outside of your immediate vicinity. Very long antennae, on the other hand, may mean that you feel more than necessary, getting caught up in others' reactions, misinterpreting interactions and overemphasising the impact you have on others.

Realising that state of balance will have ebbs and flows and getting it right at any given moment will not guarantee future success. The essential components of self-awareness are openness and readiness to learn.

You will never run out of opportunities to learn about yourself and others. Staying open to new ideas, perspectives and experiences will be your greatest assets in achieving and maintaining self-awareness. **ET**



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