

Self-Aware Leadership

THE FIRST PILLAR OF LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

Manbir Kaur

Executive & Leadership Coach



Photo by [Sasha](#) • [Stories on Unsplash](#)

Contents

What is Self-Awareness?.....	3
What do studies and research say about self-awareness?	4
A Study by Cornell and Green Peak Partners.....	4
Research by Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux	4
How do you know if you are self-aware?	5
Why self-awareness is important for a leader?	6
Steps to improve self-awareness.....	7
Know your strengths and challenges.....	7
Take feedback	8
Be conscious and observe your triggers.....	8
The perfect “perfection”	10
Pause – in a day	10
Summary	10

“If your emotional abilities aren't in hand, if you don't have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can't have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far.”

Daniel Goleman

What is Self-Awareness?

The dictionary meaning of 'Self-Awareness' is 'conscious knowledge of one's own character and feelings'.

Self-awareness is the ability to understand yourself, your abilities, circumstances, inclinations, challenges, beliefs etc. It is an ability to be aware of the facts and data points internally. It is the ability that gives us the capacity to evaluate our own actions, beliefs and understand the potential impact on others around us.

In the parlance of Leadership this term will mean many things:

- Awareness of your strengths and challenges
- Awareness of your likes and dislikes
- Awareness of your biases
- Awareness of your limitations
- Awareness of your limiting beliefs
- Awareness of your fears etc.
- Awareness of where are you right now and where would you like to go?
- Having an ability to recognize your emotions



Knowing these aspects about yourself gives you a distinct advantage. It gives you the ability to look at your own thoughts from a distance and understand how you are contributing to the reality of your situation. This is one ability that will help you make right decisions, every time.

What do studies and research say about self-awareness?

There are multiple research and enough statistics on self-awareness. Here are a few-

A STUDY BY CORNELL AND GREEN PEAK PARTNERS

The study was conducted in 2010 by Green Peak Partners and Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Their study, "What Predicts Executive Success?", studied the leadership styles, backgrounds and track records of 72 senior executives at public, venture-backed and private-equity sponsored companies with annual revenues ranging 50M\$ to 5B\$.

The study showed that harsh, hard-driving, "results-at-all-costs" executives actually diminish the bottom line, while self-aware leaders with strong interpersonal skills deliver better financial performance.

"Our findings directly challenge the conventional view that 'drive for results at all costs' is the right approach. The executives most likely to deliver good bottom line results are actually self-aware leaders who are especially good at working with individuals and in teams," said J.P. Flaum, Managing Partner at Green Peak Partners.

The research examined a number of executive interpersonal traits, and some of the relevant findings are as below:

- *"Leadership searches gives short shrift to "self-awareness," which should actually be a top criterion."*
- *"A high self-awareness score was the strongest predictor of overall success."*
- *"Executives who are aware of their weaknesses are often better able to hire subordinates who perform well in areas in which the leader lacks acumen."*
- *"These leaders are also more able to entertain the idea that someone on their team may have an idea that is even better than their own."*
- The study also pointed out that *"leader's lack of self-awareness can potentially alienate others, through misunderstanding the impact of leader's actions on them".*

RESEARCH BY GINKA TOEGEL AND JEAN-LOUIS BARSOUX

As published in MIT Sloan Management Review, the study focused on "How to become a better leader". The study claimed that good leaders make it look as work is easy, but they have been working hard in the background to overcome some of their own career limiting traits. That, in order to succeed, one has to be aware of one's strongest tendencies and develop the capabilities to manage them.

"In fact, a survey of 75 members of the Stanford Graduate School of Business Advisory Council rated self-awareness as the most important capability for leaders to develop. Executives need to know where their natural inclinations lie in order to boost them or compensate for them. Self-awareness is about identifying personal idiosyncrasies — the characteristics that executives take to be the norm but actually represent the exception."

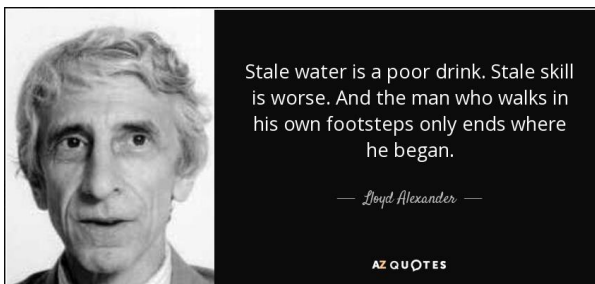
They came up with five key leadership pitfalls as below:

- Need for Stability (One could become “Too Composed” or “Too Impatient”)
- Extraversion (One could become “Too Assertive” or “Too Introspective”)
- Openness (One could become “Too Innovative or “Too Conventional”)
- Agreeableness (One could become “Too Competitive” or “Too Considerate”)
- Conscientiousness (One could become “Too Thorough” or “Too Quick to Decide”)

As you see above, each of these have opposite extremes and based on your qualities and role you may fall into a trap.

As leaders grow into bigger roles, they may find that a strength that brought them up the current level may turn to be a challenge. Without self-awareness it may not even be possible to discover a problem, let alone taking corrective course of action.

How do you know if you are self-aware?



Change is the only “Constant”. So, all you have to do is look at your own record to understand if you are self-aware or not. Have you changed anything in past six months? Or have you been working on some change that you believe will make you better? Have you asked for feedback in the recent times?

“Guess the simple point is that you are self-aware if you recognize that there is a scope for improvement, you are actively engaged in looking for ways to improve and have an environment where there exist opportunities and others from whom you can learn.”

Everyone is self-aware to some degree, some less than others. You may be sufficiently self-aware, if you

- Are aware of one or more habits you need to change
- Are aware of one or more behaviors that need to change
- Reflect on a meeting and think on what you could have changed to make it better
- Take criticism positively and try to understand what it means to you
- Believe that you are not always right
- Believe that you still have scope to become better
- See something good in others and make an endeavor to adopt it
- And so on...

Why self-awareness is important for a leader?

For a leader, nothing comes before “Self-Awareness”. It connects you with your own self and others. It helps you channelize your resources and other’s skillset in a better way. It is the first and the foremost element of development. It makes sure that you do not become a hurdle in your own path to success.

If you are not self-aware, you may end up not using part of your strengths that you are not able to discover or overcome some limitations that you are not aware of.

Self-awareness will ensure that you never stagnate and are always fresh and clear as flowing water.

Steps to improve self-awareness

KNOW YOUR STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Each one of us possesses strengths and challenges. Your challenges may hold you back and deprive you of great opportunities. While if you are unaware of your strengths, you may not be using all your capabilities to achieve more and reach your goals. It is great to be aware of them so that you can be better prepared.

You may answer the following questions for you to understand yourself better-

Question	Answer
What strengths have made you successful so far?	
What are the strengths that others acknowledge in you?	
What do you think your three biggest strengths are?	
What do you think your challenges are?	
If you had the required time and the other resources, what areas of development would you focus on?	
What was the least successful project you have ever tackled and what tripped you up?	
When faced with an overwhelming obstacle, what's most likely to cause you to give up?	
When working on a project, what roles do you avoid that may be important to your goals?	

When you answer the questions above, keep yourself in the context and record your observations accordingly. This simple exercise may take less than 30 minutes but will really help you to become aware of your strengths and challenges. You may then choose to use more of your strengths and seek other people to team up with, those who can complement you on your challenges. And you can also choose to work on your challenge areas.

TAKE FEEDBACK



Talk to others and get some genuine feedback. Based on the success you want to achieve, identify the key stakeholders.

Key stakeholders could be your team members, your peers, your seniors etc. Don't only go to people you are comfortable talking to. Do stretch yourself and also take feedback from somebody you may not have great rapport with.

Have an open-mind and listen unconditionally when you take feedback.

The few guiding questions when you take feedback are-

- What do you think my strengths are?
- When did you see me applying these? Please seek some projects or scenarios or experiences.
- What are the areas you suggest me to develop on? Again, it will be good you seek some projects or experiences where the development need was felt.
- Any ideas how to develop (if appropriate)

You must take some time to evaluate the feedback and plan your actions in regard to the feedback.

BE CONSCIOUS AND OBSERVE YOUR TRIGGERS

You must have noticed that different topics or different discussions evoke different emotions in you at different times. Some might make you angry, guilty, sad, frustrated, happy etc.

What is an emotional trigger – Is any discussion, words or topics that makes us feel uncomfortable. It varies for each person. These topics can cause anger, frustrations etc. These triggers can lead us to take wrong decisions, say something which we don't intend to say or we should not be saying, taking action which we shouldn't be taking.

Don't judge or fear your emotions. Emotions are natural. If the emotions are related to fear, anger, insecurity, sadness etc., it is good to know what triggers them.

The following list includes some of the most common emotional triggers, meaning you react when you feel as though you aren't getting or will not get one of these needs met.

acceptance	respect	be liked
be understood	be needed	be valued
be in control	be right	be treated fairly
attention	comfort	freedom
peacefulness	balance	consistency
order	predictability	love
safety	feel included	autonomy
fun	new challenges	independence

Being self-aware also means that being aware of these triggers i.e. knowing your push buttons.

At the end of the day or anytime you prefer to make a note of triggers for the day, you can use the following format -

Trigger	What was the feeling?	Behavior/Reaction	What is something you could have done to react better?

This will help you identify key triggers. Once you start recognizing the trigger, you may be able to control your emotional reaction to it. Once you are more in control you will be able to get the best out of any situation.

THE PERFECT “PERFECTION”

Sometimes, you may want things to be just perfect, in the sense that you want them exactly as you like them. You may believe that it is the best way and the only way to do things. You may have developed that method over time and may genuinely believe in it. But if you leave no scope for others to improvise you may end up limiting their creativity and any chances for improvement.

You should keep a look out for this perfection seeking behavior. If you are asking for a change, do think once, if this makes any substantial difference or is it just because you like it that way. You must become aware of your need to do things just one specific way. Once you open up to alternatives it will give you a chance to evaluate and adopt new things.

PAUSE – IN A DAY

It is important to pause during the day and reflect how is it going for you? Just take some time to think through things as they have happened in the day, think of your interactions and what feelings they evoked in you. These feelings will tell you how much you have been aware of yourself and how much just happened inadvertently. These reflections help you to identify ways and means to become more aware.

Summary

Self-awareness is very important for the leaders and it is entirely up to the leader to become more self-aware.

These simple techniques can help you start your journey to be more self-aware.

Self-aware leaders continuously increase their effectiveness. They continue to expand the possibilities and achieve much more than others. They are not just good for themselves, they are good for the team, department as well as the company. In the long run, the self-aware leaders win all races.

They are loved and admired by the people who work for them and are cherished forever.

Self-aware leaders are always learning.

Self-awareness is not the end of the journey for a leader, but it is where you begin the journey.