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Self Awareness and the Effective Leader

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Organizations benefit more from leaders who take responsibility for what they don't know than from leaders who pretend to know it all.

Although it is probably one of the least discussed leadership competencies, self-awareness is possibly one of the most valuable. Self-awareness is being conscious of what you're good at while acknowledging what you still have yet to learn. This includes admitting when you don't have the answer and owning up to mistakes.

In our highly competitive culture, this can seem counterintuitive. In fact, many of us operate on the belief that we must appear as though we know everything all the time or else people will question our abilities, diminishing our effectiveness as leaders.

If you're honest with yourself, you'll admit that really the opposite is true. Because whether you acknowledge your weaknesses or not, everyone still sees them. So rather than conceal them, the person who tries to hide weaknesses actually highlights them, creating the perception of a lack of integrity and self-awareness.

The Benefits of Self-awareness

It's easy to see how pretending to know everything when you don't can create situations that can be problematic for your entire organization. On the other hand, when you take responsibility for what you don't know, you benefit both yourself and your organization.

On an interpersonal level, self-awareness of your strengths and weaknesses can net you the trust of others and increase your credibility -- both of which will increase your leadership effectiveness.

On an organizational level, the benefits are even greater. When you acknowledge what you have yet to learn, you're modeling that in your organization it's okay to admit you don't have all the answers, to make mistakes and most importantly, to ask for help. These

are all characteristics of an organization that is constantly learning and springboards to innovation and agility -- two hallmarks of high performing organizations.

Know When Strength Might Be Played Out

Most likely, your strengths are what got you to this point in your career. As your role in your organization changes, you must be careful not to overplay a former strength to the point that it actually becomes a weakness.

For example, let's say you're great with detail and have done good things for your organization as an individual contributor and get rewarded with a management role. Continuing to delve in the details once you're responsible for projects and people will cause you to lose ground with 1) your reports, who will feel unnecessary; and 2) your superiors, who may rethink your readiness for managerial responsibility.

Acknowledging the need to become better at anything is only the beginning, and it's often the most difficult step in the whole process. In many cases, individuals successfully come to the realization that something's not working but have no clue how to change it into something that works.

This difficulty to see in yourself what others see so easily is what makes the path to self-awareness so challenging. One way to get started is by soliciting and listening to feedback from those who work with you.

Solicit Feedback

There are several ways you can get feedback about your work performance. Formally, you can get it through 360 multi-rater assessments. In a 360, peers, superiors and reports anonymously provide feedback on all aspects of your behavior.

Informally, you can make time once a day to reflect on the day's events, e.g. how people reacted to you, how fluidly you were able to work with or manage others, etc. To do this effectively on your own requires a high degree of emotional intelligence. Emotional Intelligence, or EQ as it's often called, is defined as awareness of your own and others' emotions, and how they are impacted by situations. Some people are simply born with a high EQ but with diligent introspection it can be cultivated to a degree in everyone.

If you fall into the latter category, another more practical method that falls somewhere in between the formality of a 360 and the informality of quiet daily reflection is to get in the habit of doing regular post-mortems on every project in which you are involved. In order to do this effectively however, you must learn to do two things: ask good questions, and listen without justifying or defending your actions.

Ask Good Questions

The skill of asking good questions can be invaluable to you and your organization. When the question is about your own performance however, it can be harder to be objective about negative feedback. When you show that you are equally open to all types of feedback, you demonstrate self-awareness and the willingness to learn.

Plus, asking questions models a solid, transparent approach to problem-solving and decision-making that benefits everyone in an organization. But perhaps most importantly, it models that it's okay not to know everything, which encourages everyone that it's okay to be constantly learning.

By modeling habits of good self-awareness you help to create a more self-aware organization. An organization that is self-aware is open to learning and better equipped to adjust quickly to changes as the marketplace dictates. This ability is the defining characteristic of a learning organization and possibly the most compelling reason all managers at all levels should include self-awareness in their development goals.

Listen without Justifying

Once you've solicited feedback it's crucial that you listen without justifying your actions or people will stop giving you feedback. Moreover, when you are busy defending your actions, you miss what the person is trying to tell you.

If on the other hand you listen and accept feedback without defending yourself, you're more likely to hear what you need to hear, increasing your credibility with the person giving you feedback and creating a trust bond that will enable them to continue providing useful feedback in the future.

So how self-aware are you?

No doubt most of us would answer with confidence that we are pretty darn self-aware. Before you take self-awareness off your development radar screen, consider this: According to research* on management styles, you're more likely to be *unaware* of your behavior and how it impacts others if normally tend to operate at the extremes.

For example, at one extreme are the "Originators." Originators tend to be quick decision-makers who aren't afraid of confrontation or taking risks. On the other end of the spectrum you'll find "Conservers." Conservers are much more rule-bound and conflict- and change-averse. Most people fall somewhere in between these two extremes and are aptly labeled as "Pragmatists." Pragmatists don't either seek out or avoid confrontation. More practical and flexible, they tend to focus on issues in the order in which they need to be resolved.

So if you identify more with the descriptions of the Originator or Conserver, this may be an indicator that you are not as self-aware as you think you are. No matter where you fall

on the spectrum of management styles, the benefits of greater self-awareness should be incentive enough to consistently seek (and listen to) as much feedback as possible on your performance at work.

Conclusion

When you pretend to know it all and never admit mistakes, you model behavior that can have negative consequences for yourself and your entire organization. Conversely, when you are self-aware enough to openly admit missteps and concede that you still have plenty to learn, you turn mistakes are learning opportunities and give people permission to be collaborative without fear of appearing unqualified.

To begin to increase your self-awareness, seek feedback on your performance from others by asking good questions and listening without justifying or defending your actions. Remember, organizations benefit far more from leaders who take responsibility for what they don't know than from leaders who pretend to know it all.

* Based on the responses of 41,000 managers to The Change Style Indicator® over the past two decades.

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