

NOVEMBER 2006

The why, what, and how of self-awareness.

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Most people recognize that it is important to be self-aware. Long before the ancient Greeks inscribed the phrase “know thyself” above one of their holiest sites at Delphi, it was accepted that, to be great, you must first understand your own strengths and limitations.

In today’s fast-paced business environment, however, there is little time available for self-reflection, and few are willing to risk ridicule or worse by prioritizing it above more ‘business-like’ concerns. Furthermore, while many recognize the

importance of self-awareness, how to go about becoming self-aware is something that is significantly harder to nail down.

Over the past ten years, we have helped over 1,000 Canadian executives develop greater self-awareness. Through our work we have arrived at a clear understanding of why self-awareness is so important, what it looks like, and the questions you need to be able to answer about yourself. This article is a brief summary of what we’ve learned.

THE BENEFITS OF SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness is a precondition to effective coaching and high performance. People who know and manage themselves stay calm and focused under pressure, handle ongoing stress, find satisfaction and joy in their work and personal life, and find more energy for work and life. In short, they are the people who will be high performers. Those lacking aware-

ness will always be prisoner to past successes, failures and hidden beliefs and to what is happening to them or what they are experiencing—especially in difficult, stressful, pressure-filled situations.

Self-awareness is strongly related to success at work. Research has shown that the best predictor of a positive performance appraisal is ‘seeing yourself as others see you’. On the other hand, the best predic-

tor of a weak appraisal is ‘overrating your skills’¹. Knowing your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and limits is key to continued high performance. Known weaknesses are less dangerous than ‘blind spots’ and known strengths can be used more effectively and consistently.

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ACTIVE AWARENESS: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-MANAGEMENT

Active awareness is a skill that helps you leverage self-awareness ‘in the moment’. It is the ability to take a step back and observe yourself objectively—even in stressful, challenging situations. From this point of observation, you can make a rational choice about what actions you should take next in order to move towards the desired outcome.

Understanding your weaknesses is important, but spending all of your time remedying weaknesses will not lead to high performance.

In a challenging meeting, for example, using the skill of active awareness can help to maintain objectivity in the face of a hostile question. Rather than letting anger or defensiveness dictate their response, the actively aware individual chooses to step back from their feelings, notice that they are angry and defensive, and decide on a response that will move the meeting forward rather than cloud the issue with emotion.

People who develop active awareness have the best chance at continuously improving performance, managing relationships, handling pressure, and balancing heavy workloads with family. This skill allows people to take an active role in their own development by choosing what to focus on and managing their reactions.

Everyone has this ability within themselves to some degree. How experienced they are depends on their early teachers and experiences. But the time when ‘others’ will direct your attention to your actions and behaviour generally ends with high school. Those who had astute parents, good teachers, and great coaches may have developed this ability to observe themselves and direct their behaviour well. Most people, however, received very poor training in this area. Their mentors relied on criticism or disapproval as the main method of modifying behaviour. These two methods have limited value in self-development. The capacity to objectively observe oneself and choose new behaviours is far more useful, motivational and satisfying.

AWARENESS LEADS TO DEVELOPMENT

Our experience is that most people are highly motivated to learn more about themselves and are able to put increased self-awareness to very good use. It gives them valuable information that sheds light on how they need to manage certain situations and themselves. It increases their competence in all areas of life. It gives them direction in how to direct their own ongoing development.

The vast majority of people want to continue to develop and improve. Many feel bored, tired, underutilized and/or underappreciated. Give them an authentic opportunity to grow and develop, to truly learn what will work for them, and they will jump at it. So the side benefit of increased awareness is a more inspired and energized person. People are generally grateful for the opportunity to learn about themselves and choose what it is they would like to develop, rather than being told “this is how you should be”. It is important that we give people the skills and the tools to see how they are; and then let them decide for themselves what they need to enhance, change or grow.

Obviously there are certain technical skills and competencies that must be learned and mastered—but allowing self-directed development will lead to better performance in areas that ‘mandated’ training would have never covered.

GREAT MANAGERS KNOW THEIR STRENGTHS

In our work, we approach self-awareness by first clarifying the flawed assumption that ‘strength’ is the opposite of ‘weakness’. Understanding your weaknesses is important, but spending all of your time remedying weaknesses will not lead to high performance. In his book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* Marcus Buckingham points out that “strengths have their own patterns. Finding, describing, applying and practicing your strengths will be key in allowing you to excel in what you do and finding greater satisfaction.”

Recently, the Gallup organization surveyed 198,000 employees working in 36 companies, asking them: “At work do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?” The results were depressing: only 20 percent of respondents felt their strengths were in play every day. More importantly, the 20 percent who felt their strengths were in play had higher productivity, lower turnover rates, and higher customer satisfaction ratings.

The implications for managers are striking. Buckingham’s research showed that the strongest managers operate under two assumptions:

- 1 Each person has unique strengths and talents
- 2 The greatest room for growth and achievement is within each person’s strengths

In order to capitalize on the wisdom of these assumptions, managers need a solid understanding of their own strengths and talents. From this position of strength they can begin capitalizing on the strengths of others.

GAINING AWARENESS: KEY QUESTIONS

There are four key questions individuals need to know the answers to in order to harness their strengths, and achieve high performance:

- 1 What are your greatest strengths?
- 2 How do you ensure that you leverage them fully?
- 3 Where can they take you?
- 4 Where / when will they create problems for you?

The ability to hold this knowledge and use it to inform decision making when under pressure is a fundamental of high performance. It is not easy, for a variety of reasons. The ability to manage yourself and your reaction to what is going on around you in a way that allows you to perform at your best while managing others in an inspiring and compassionate way represents a lifetime of work. And it isn’t done without consciousness. How do we help people become aware and conscious of the many choices they are making on a daily basis? It takes education, self-awareness and practice.

Performance Coaching’s [S.W.O.T. Yourself workshop](#) provides a platform of self-awareness for great managers to build on.

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