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Self-Awareness and Professional Success

How did you feel when you came in to work today? Annoyed? Contented? Concerned? Happy? And how do you feel right now?

When we are tuned in to our emotions at any given moment, we're better able to gauge what actions are appropriate at that moment. Self-awareness can mean the difference between responding to a potentially stressful encounter with explosive anger or level-headed calm.

Self-awareness is key to leadership development and is a skill for handling stress, reports the Center for Creative Leadership. The more we can identify and monitor our emotional upsets, the faster we can recover, the report states.¹

Self-awareness

"Self-awareness is the foundation of most of the published emotional intelligence (EQ) models, says Cliff Lansley, MD of Paul Ekman International PLC/ Emotional Intelligence Academy. "It is the ability to perceive, appraise and identify our own emotions, and evaluate the appropriateness of thoughts or actions that may follow our emotional impulses. Self-management is what we choose to do in light of that evaluation." (See model, page 2)

"Emotions are unbidden," Lansley continues. "They happen to us to help us deal with matters of importance to our welfare, without thought."



Self-awareness can help us handle stress. When we're attentive to emotional upsets, the faster we can recover from them.

Author Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., CEO of Emotional Intelligence Services, calls self-awareness "the vital foundation skill for three emotional competencies." The three competencies, Goleman writes, are emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment and self-confidence.²

Barriers to self-awareness

Attentiveness, bias and context can affect our levels of self-awareness.

Bodily sensations start to occur within 500 milliseconds of emotions being triggered, Lansley explains. "Each of these triggers activates its own 'affect program' (Tomkins and Izard - 1965) which leads to an impulse—an orchestrated, coordinated set of psychological and physiological changes in the body to deal with the trigger."

"If we can be attentive to those sensations early in an emotional episode, then this can give us more time to make choices about the actions that might follow," Lansley says.

"John Kabat-Zinn (2004) refers to this kind of focus as mindfulness; he says it involves paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, as if your life depended on it, without judgment."

Next, there's bias. "Bias contaminates our view of self," Lansley says. "We may close down feedback channels due to prejudice, stereotypes,

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"Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves."

- Carl Gustav Jung



¹ Center for Creative Leadership, "Leadership Skills and Emotional Intelligence," (2003).

² Daniel Goleman, "Working with Emotional Intelligence," (1998) p. 54

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partiality, partisanship, favoritism, beliefs, unfairness and perspective. Power can be a barrier. As professionals climb the corporate ladder, the

gap increases between self-awareness and the feedback from those around them.” (Sala - 2003)

Another bias is the tendency for inflated self-assessment, or the “above-

average effect,” Lansley says. One study, for example, reported that 94 percent of college professors claimed they did above-average work. (Cross - 1977). Managers and leaders tend to have this bias too. (Larwood and Whittaker - 1977).

Self-awareness requires that we consider context. “Context is everything,” Lansley says. “Nothing happens in a vacuum. The appraisal and evaluation components of self-awareness have to consider temporal, spatial and interpersonal factors before decisions are made around self-management. It may be appropriate to not interfere with anger as a parent when protecting our child who is being attacked in order to ward off that threat. Though it may be inappropriate to show disgust in front of a grandparent who has lovingly served a dish to us that is not to our liking.”

Getting beyond barriers

Lansley suggests three ways to move beyond the barriers into greater self-awareness.

1. Meditate. The benefits of meditation to increased self-awareness are now being evidenced in good research. (Davis and Hayes - 2011).

2. Be attentive, in the present moment, to our body and thoughts, and to reactions of others which can alert us to our emotional state.—to self and others.

3. Take a third position “above” the scene where you, or you and others, are. Consider the past and future for an instant and then go quickly back to step 2.

“The most fundamental aggression to ourselves, the most fundamental harm we can do to ourselves, is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently.”

- Pema Chödrön



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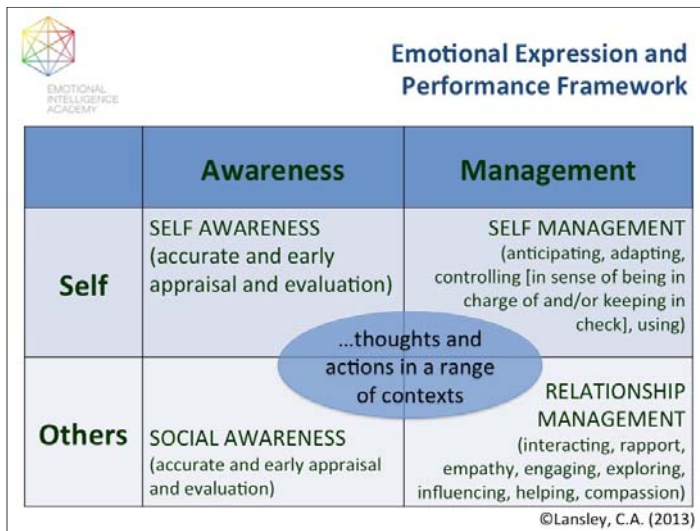
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Resources:

- Research on Emotions <http://www.ekmaninternational.com>
- The Business Case for Emotional Intelligence http://www.eiconsortium.org/reports/business_case_for_ei.html
- Cleveland Clinic Empathy Video: <http://health.clevelandclinic.org/2013/03/empathy-exploring-human-connection-video/>
- 19 cases linking emotional awareness to performance/success: http://www.eiconsortium.org/reports/business_case_for_ei.html
- Fabio Sala. "Executive Blindspots: Discrepancies Between Self-Other Ratings," *Journal of Consulting Psychology: Research and Practice* 54, no 4 (2003):222-29
- Larwood and Whittaker. "Managerial Myopia: Self-Serving Biases in Organisational Planning." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 62 (1977): 194-98.

Mindfulness: Is there an app for that?

“In our culture today, we often don’t have scarcity of food or gadgets or knowledge. The scarcity has shifted to mindfulness.” That’s the thought of Jasprit Singh, a professor of electrical engineering and computer science at the University of Michigan. Singh has challenged his students to design smartphone applications to help users set and meet wellness milestones. “Technology can be a great behavior changer,” Singh says. “We may know we should do something, but we are not always able to do it. The goal of this course was to bring harmony between what we know and what we do.”

One of the apps that shows promise is a “mindfulness mentor” of sorts. So instead of smartphones serving as distractions, they might soon be tools to alert users to be “in the moment.”