

Building a Professional Environment for Self-Awareness¹

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Introduction

Recognizing our own strengths and weaknesses can be challenging in both daily life and the workplace. This is where self-awareness comes in. Self-awareness is the ability to identify, process, and reflect on information about oneself (Morin, 2011). Developing this skill benefits not only the individual but also those around them and their organization. Importantly, self-awareness does not have to be developed alone; it can also be developed through collaboration with others, especially in group settings or professional environments. We are often not accurate when it comes to assessing our own capabilities, resulting in a weak relationship between self-evaluations and objective assessment (Dierdorff & Rubin, 2015). Creating spaces that encourage self-awareness is essential for personal growth and for fostering a stronger, more effective team.

This publication will explain how individuals can build a professional environment that facilitates self-awareness. These strategies can be used by a wide range of individuals, such as leaders and team members in the workplace, teachers in a classroom, and Extension professionals working with communities.

What Is Self-Awareness?

There are several aspects to self-awareness, which include internal self-awareness, external self-awareness, and internal and external integration (London et al., 2023).

- Internal awareness is how we perceive ourselves and the impact we have on others. For example, an individual may know that when they are stressed, they tend to become short-tempered, which can create tension in the workplace.
- External awareness is how others perceive us. Building off the previous example, coworkers might notice the individual's stress through their tone or body language and feel hesitant to approach them, even if the individual did not intend to create distance.
- Integration requires feedback and communication. Coworkers can share this observation in a constructive way, allowing the individual to take steps to manage stress more effectively.

Signs that reflect self-awareness among individuals include active listening, reflection, and adaptation. Individuals will actively listen to feedback from those around them, reflect on the feedback, and attempt to make a change. In the workplace, self-awareness is shown through consistent communication, openness, and growth as an individual but also as a team. The culture of the workplace should prioritize growth and open communication.

Tools to Build an Environment of Self-Awareness

Different tools can assist in the building of an environment that fosters self-awareness. All members, including the leader or head of the company, should participate and lead by example. The first step is for the individual to learn about themselves personally. A few tools to facilitate this first step are listed below.

- **Personality tests:** Personality tests allow you to see your personal preferences and understand emotional intelligence and behaviors (OPM, n.d.). Every person has a different personality, which allows you to understand who you are working with. Individuals can take a personality test such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, understand their results, and then discuss their personalities with the team. As a group, discuss strengths and weaknesses of each personality type. The insights can help determine which people would work well together in projects. Personality tests can be helpful in team building. Personality tests should be conducted with a trained facilitator and should never be used in hiring or firing.
- **Johari Window:** Through this, you can choose five to six adjectives that you feel best describe you, then allow others to choose the five to six adjectives they feel best describe you. This assessment will directly allow those you work with to show you what they feel are your strengths. The results fall into four windows:
 - Open area (known to you and others around you).
 - Blind spot (known to those around you but unknown to you).
 - Hidden area (known to you but unknown to others).
 - Unknown (unknown to you and others).

- **CliftonStrengths:** CliftonStrengths is a test that shows each person their five dominant talents, which refer to patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This will allow you to be aware of your strengths based on the questions asked and to understand how your five strengths can maximize performance and work together.
- **Leadership Practices Inventory:** Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) is a test used in the workplace that is focused on these five practices: Model the Way; Inspire a Vision; Challenge the Process; Enable Others to Act; and Encourage the Heart (The Leadership Challenge, n.d.). In this process, you complete an individual test, then have observers (i.e., others you work with) fill it out. Afterward, you will receive your report. It allows you to receive a 360-degree view of how you perceive yourself, and how others view your leadership strengths and areas of improvement.

The next steps to building a self-awareness environment are outlined below. They rely more on the group and involve vulnerability.

- **Discuss the results:** After completing the test, your results should not be kept to yourself. Discussing these results with the team will allow them to understand you at a personal level and allow you to hear their thoughts on your results. It also humanizes team members and promotes transparency about shared desires to improve. The discussion should include all leaders because they set an example for the employees around them. When the leader participates, the leader demonstrates a similar desire to grow and improve.
 - **Allow continuous feedback:** Feedback should be provided throughout all stages of projects and work challenges. Feedback should not be treated as a one-time phenomenon because individuals always have room to grow. Giving constructive feedback allows you to help the team members grow and helps increase trust and productivity within the group.
- **Safe space for discussing areas of growth:** Constructive criticism can feel like a personal critique, but self-awareness allows you to view constructive criticism as an opportunity for growth. Individuals will be able to give you feedback on ways you can improve personally and professionally. As individual members become more self-aware, the group can work together and support each other in their ongoing self-awareness journeys.
 - **Increase in productivity:** Individuals may learn and understand more about themselves and their strengths and weaknesses, leading them to increase productivity within the workplace. The group can assign projects to the people they see as the best fit based on their unique strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, if the leader wants to challenge the individual, the leader can assign a task that allows the team member to work on their weaknesses. Awareness of group members' strengths and weaknesses can allow an individual to ask for help from others if that member needs the assistance of someone else with a specific strength.
 - **Increase in authenticity and trust:** Self-awareness is necessary to become more authentic and to lead with authenticity. Authentic leadership is acting on your beliefs, seeking out opinions that challenge your personal views, and asking for feedback to improve interpersonal interactions (Laschinger et al., 2012). Authentic communication and living can occur when you consider your personal views and beliefs. Self-awareness allows you to align your actions with who you are, which can lead to authenticity with those around you. Individuals value authenticity in the people they surround themselves with.
 - **Self-confidence and identity:** By identifying your strengths, you can stand confidently in them while also viewing your weaknesses as opportunities for growth rather than as limitations. This awareness helps you appreciate the differences in others and understand how you are perceived, therefore deepening your self-awareness and personal development.

The Importance of Building a Professional Environment

Building an environment that fosters self-awareness will affect you and those around you. Potential impacts of such an environment include the following.

- **Openness within the group:** Whether it is in a professional or academic environment, open communication among peers can be difficult to establish. Establishing openness is important for increasing team dynamics and working together. It allows individuals to understand the people they are working with and the ways they operate to determine the needs of the group or project at hand.

Conclusion

Developing an environment for self-awareness is important for individuals and organizations. Self-awareness can be a difficult task because it involves vulnerability and feedback from those around you. Environments that promote self-awareness foster growth, authenticity, and collaboration, therefore developing stronger individuals and effective teams.

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