

Self-awareness

It's the cornerstone of effective leadership, says **James Flanagan**

Greater self-awareness has a transformational effect on leadership. The traditional view of leadership, one in which leaders have followers, is dangerous: if only certain people are leaders, everyone else must be a follower. In that model, people become drained of personal responsibility.

Greater self-awareness fuels creativity and innovation. By developing self-awareness, a leader begins to rid himself of ingrained dysfunctional habits. Combining the works of Hogan¹ and Lowney² on leadership gives a high-level explanation of the transformational benefits of greater self-awareness and its role in developing leadership. Hogan identifies the dysfunctional dispositions that cause leaders to derail and Lowney explains how self-awareness and the willingness to self-manage can lead to personal transformation.

Leadership is not a trait limited to a few but one that is sown within everyone and constantly seeks the opportunity to blossom. It does so not just at work but in the ordinary activities of one's life. It is about 'who I am' as much as 'what I do'. Leadership is a way of living and is defined not by the scale of the opportunity but by the quality of the response to it; it is unlikely we will all become prime minister but we can change how we approach what we do.

Our current drought of leadership comes from both a narrow definition of it and our approach to developing leaders. Leaders are defined as those who are in charge of others or those who make a transformational impact and do so in short order. The faster they do it, the more transforming it is; the more people affected, the bigger the score they register on the short-term leadership scale – 'short-termism'. Currently, leaders are developed to do or deliver what we think they should do: establish direction, align people and motivate them. Rather than developing leaders according to lists of what we want them to do, we will

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receive greater benefit if we focus attention on our definition of leaders and who they are.

A more ebullient definition identifies leaders as people who are very self-aware: they know who they are, what they believe in and what they want to achieve. Grounded by their principles, they respond to life's challenges with a consistent and unswerving outlook. Like the good chef, they know what they have in the larder and can transform those resources into a banquet. The effective leader knows his personal resources – strengths and weaknesses – and uses these to meet the opportunities presented. He has an internal compass that directs him and allows him to respond to the changing external environment. Once this internal foundation has been laid, leadership behaviour grows; but if we want a rich harvest, the growth must be nurtured and regularly tended.

Leaders are always teaching and learning and, in so doing, they mould brilliant and eminent people. They persevere and energise themselves by the sheer ambition of their goals. They innovate by approaching their challenges in a way their predecessors never imagined. Devoting themselves to excellence, they remain open to new ideas even in old age.

Leadership is not just about getting the job done; it is about how the job is done. This means influencing, visioning, persevering, energising, innovating and teaching.

References

- 1 Hogan Development Survey www.hoganassessments.com
- 2 Lowney C *Heroic Leadership* Loyola University Press (2005)



References

- 3 Hogan R, Curphy G J, Hogan J "What we know about leadership, effectiveness and personality" *The American Psychologist* (June 1994)
- 4 Bentz V J "Research findings from personality assessments of executives" *Personality Assessment in Organizations* (Eds. Bernadin J H, Bownas D A) Praeger (1985)

Studies by Hogan, Curphy and Hogan³ noticed that there was little agreement on what makes a good leader but there was considerable agreement on the characteristics of managerial incompetence. It is by looking at these characteristics and developing strategies to overcome them that we can transform leadership.

Bentz⁴ identified leadership styles associated with managerial derailment: playing politics, moodiness and dishonesty. Researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership and at Personal Decisions International conclude that managers who are technically competent but who fail are variously perceived as arrogant, vindictive, untrustworthy, selfish, emotional, compulsive, over-controlling, insensitive, abrasive, aloof, too ambitious or unable to delegate.

These dispositions usually come to the fore when people are either stressed or overly relaxed. When they do, people who work with them feel uncomfortable and threatened; these behaviours damage respect and reduce the constituency of support leaders need when they are in pursuit of their agendas. People who operate like this get by but are probably gradually failing, or at least not achieving their potential, and it is very likely they have no idea why.

Successful leaders make themselves and others feel comfortable in a changing and sometimes stressful world. They know who they are and how they operate in different situations; they have tested, and know, their personalities. This self-awareness allows them to explore new ideas, approaches and cultures rather than shrink defensively from what lurks around life's next corner.

The quest for self-awareness helps to lift the self-defeating boulders. It removes the parochialism and the blind spots. This gives the opportunity to look at things differently and be creative. It transforms how we think and what we think, and therefore gives the opportunity to transform behaviour. We identify our limiting self-thoughts. We see how we react when we are put under pressure and we become aware of our dysfunctional dispositions.

Self-aware people overcome obstacles in their own lives thus giving them the ability to lead others to success. Effective leaders are relationship-focused, based on a profound respect for self and others. The effective leadership of others starts with the leadership of self. Good leadership is not control or influence but allowing others to develop, blossom and grow. The ability to read, know and understand one's own emotions builds the foundations for doing the same for others, or at least to understand them.



A state of mind marked by the absence of negative emotions, such as grief, anger and anxiety, and the presence of positive emotions, such as joy, is a tranquil mind. A tranquil mind is achieved by cultivating a kind of calm indifference towards one's circumstances and the outcomes of any actions or decisions taken. Cultivating this 'indifference' gives leaders the ability to adapt confidently and turn the changes they encounter into opportunities. This ability is achieved by turning towards negative emotions and studying them closely.

Nothing outside one's mind can be described as positive or negative. Perturbations come only from the opinion that is within. Judgments are in



our power, emotions are determined by judgments. *Is it other people that bother me or the judgments I make about other people? Is the cause of my anger the belief that people should behave differently?* When we know our emotions, we can make better choices.

It is not about being positive, it is about being rational. Positive thinking and goal-setting can be brittle, fleeting, even disappointing. We have very little influence over how things unfold; the only thing in our control is our judgment. It is our judgments that cause distress. To become upset is an error of judgment. Reacting with fury against a situation over which you have no control is irrational. The worst thing about any event is one's exaggerated belief in its horror. We can choose not

to be stressed by events, even if we can't choose the events themselves. One's thoughts and emotions need not dictate one's actions. Thoughts and emotions about whatever one is procrastinating about is passing weather. One can coexist with it and act anyway. It is possible to accomplish certain tasks irrespective of one's mood.

Self-awareness allows uncertainty. Uncertainty is where things happen. It is the very condition that impels man to unfold his power. By becoming more comfortable with uncertainty and exploring the potential within it, we can feel better in the present and more secure in the future. The ability to tolerate insecurity means one must have a feeling of comfort with it. It is never about



conditions or having the right feelings; it is about making the most of what you have where you are. Seeking security is removing yourself from life.

Greater security leads to fear and less happiness. Striving for security in relationships stifles them. Flourishing depends on a certain degree of not being protected, of being open to the positive *and* the negative. When we are vulnerable, we are able to experience the full range of our reactions to the world around us. A child will never walk unless he lets go and tries to stand up.

Wanting to be secure leads to the ego being built up but these fortifications develop the feeling of insecurity. Castles were built as fortifications but their very walls were what people attacked.

A leader must rid himself of dysfunctional ingrained habits, prejudices, cultural preferences and the 'we have always done it this way' attitude: the baggage that blocks rapid, adaptive responses. Core beliefs and values are non-negotiable and generate the anchoring that allows for purposeful change as opposed to aimless drifting on moving currents.

Leaders thrive by understanding who they are and what they value and by becoming aware of unhealthy blind spots or weaknesses that can derail them. Only those who can pinpoint their own weaknesses can conquer them.

Personal leadership is not a final destination. For the weak or narrow-minded, however, it may seem so; for them it is a chore with, at best, the attractive prospect of arriving at some imaginary plateau where one coasts and enjoys the status: *I will do this course and everything will be all right*. Personal leadership is a never-ending work in progress that draws on a continually maturing self-understanding.

Our external environment evolves and personal circumstances change, as do personal priorities. Strengths erode and opportunities arise to develop others. The strong leader relishes the opportunity to continue learning about self and the world and looks forward to new discoveries and interests. Each person must decide what personal leadership legacy he wants to leave behind. **As our leadership role is continually unfolding, we will be making that decision more than once.**

Deep self-awareness and understanding enables the pinpointing of flaws with greater maturity and accuracy, coupled with the ability to appreciate oneself as a uniquely dignified and gifted person. This greater sense of purpose and direction serves as a personal compass.

The person who knows what he wants can pursue it energetically. No one becomes great by accident. Only those who know their weaknesses can deal with them. Those who have identified



what moves them to wholehearted engagement have little trouble staying motivated.

All leadership begins with self leadership and self leadership begins with knowing oneself. The foundation comes first: goals and values, an understanding of personal strengths and obstacles, and an outlook on the world.

Self-awareness is the ability to recognise and understand one's moods, emotions and drives. Self-regulation is the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods: the propensity to suspend judgment – to think before acting.

People derail because they never fully understand their weaknesses, which typically revolve around risk taking, interacting with others, the dysfunctional habits that come to the fore when situations become stressful.

Self-awareness allows us to exorcise ourselves of disordered affections. It is the taking stock of 'who I am, where I want to go and what is holding me back'. We need to understand our attachments. We do this by having the courage to overturn our personal rocks to see what crawls out. We need to identify the internal fears, drives and attachments that can control decisions and actions. When we do this, we create the conditions for creativity and innovation. This inspires the confidence that the solutions are out there and, with imaginative out-of-the-box thinking, solutions are uncovered.



Creativity is the ability to innovate, to absorb new perspectives, to respond quickly to opportunities or threats, to let go of strategies that no longer work and embrace new ones. It is the willingness to work without a script and dream up imaginative new approaches to problems. It is the embracing of new ideas. It inspires the confident optimism that the solutions are out there and blossoms when it is linked to the personal freedom to pursue opportunities.

The three aspects of self-awareness essential for pursuing personal creativity are indifference, knowledge of personal non-negotiables and fears and prejudices. Indifference is the inspired freedom from unhealthy attachments. Knowledge of personal non-negotiables includes our values, goals, ways of working and internal drivers. Fears and prejudices are what prevents flexibility and openness, they cripple innovative thought – fear of falling out of favour with managers, fear of taking risks, fear of looking foolish in front of others.

Paralysis and incoherent lurching indicate the problem of a lack of core values and principles. The time to hack these out is not when faced with a problem. Attaining indifference and knowing non-negotiables are only preludes to what brings real creativity.

Key to identifying self-awareness is identifying our dysfunctional habits and ridding ourselves

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of them. This encourages the embracing of new approaches, strategies, ideas and cultures. Self-awareness and indifference are intimately linked; they are an integrated way of living.

Self-awareness roots and nourishes the virtue of leadership. The person who figures out what he wants has taken the first step towards developing his leadership skills. Those who have pinpointed, and begun to remove, their weaknesses and unhealthy attachments are building the indifference essential to creativity and the ability to take action. This disposes people to live outside the box: indifference is vital because it banishes parochialism. By freeing themselves, they become poised to pounce imaginatively on new opportunities. It is the opening of the fridge to see what ingredients are available and knowing one has the skills to turn them into a feast.

Leaders take time to undertake a process of probing self-enquiry but they do so while on the run. They continuously dig deep beneath the busy surface of their daily lives and refocus on their core values and principles. These principles act as a springboard for shrewd, pragmatic, politically-astute action. They craft an authentic and strong identity based on their own, rather than someone else's, understanding of what is right.

Self-awareness is the foundation for creativity and indifference; it generates the confidence to take the necessary action when new opportunities are presented. When we become self-aware, we come more understanding of others and it is this understanding that generates effective communication.

Leadership, moulded in this way, creates the conditions that encourage people to take risks and communicate more effectively with others, and builds an environment conducive to managing and sustaining change. **TJ**

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