

# Self-awareness

“There is no cure and no improving of the world that does not begin with the individual himself.” – Carl Jung

This notion of self-development, as defined by Carl Jung, is predicated on the premise that an awareness of self is the basis for all positive human endeavour and interaction. It relates back to the saying documented throughout history ‘nosce teipsum’ aka ‘know thyself’; but what does it actually mean to know oneself, what is the definition of one’s ‘self’?

This question and the concept of understanding what it means to be ‘conscious’ of oneself as a human being remains the subject of endless debate amongst the scientific and philosophical communities. Whilst this paper will not focus on such debates, it will aim to briefly cover the following areas of research:

- The conceptualisation, development and measurement of self-awareness
- General everyday benefits of being more self-aware
- Emotional intelligence and the link to self-awareness
- Self-awareness in the workplace and leadership



## What is self-awareness?

As previously alluded to, there is a distinct lack of consensus amongst researchers regarding an operational definition of the term 'self'. Despite this, there seems to be a certain level of understanding on two points, firstly, that we may never be able to scientifically know or understand the self as a complete entity. Secondly, that simply possessing conscious awareness of one's self does not equate to self-awareness, as by this definition all animals would possess a certain level of self-awareness; rather this process of acknowledging the self, i.e. actually knowing you exist, refers to 'consciousness' (Colman, 2008). What distinguishes self-awareness from this, and thus differentiates humans from all other animals, is the practice of reflective and evaluative processes during individual experiences (Crook, 1980; Morin 2011). These processes enable an individual to not only understand their own strengths and weaknesses (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001) but also understand how others perceive them (Baumeister, 2005; Taylor, 2010). This two-component conceptualisation of self-awareness is outlined by Baumeister (2005) who suggests that self-awareness is about

*"Anticipating how others perceive you, evaluating yourself and your actions according to collective beliefs and values, and caring about how others evaluate you" (p.7).*

The anticipation of how others perceive you is often referred to as other awareness (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Mayer and colleagues (2004) contend that this understanding of how our behaviours impact others, and vice versa, how others behaviours impact one's 'self' can be used to inform our own self-awareness.

## How does self-awareness develop?

After around the first six months of life humans develop the ability to distinguish themselves as independent objective entities (Brownell, Zerwas & Ramani, 2007), through the recognition of self in mirrors, self-referential pointing and the expression of self-conscious emotions (Bullock & Lutkenhaus, 1990; Lewis & Ramsay, 2004). Thereafter, the child begins to develop an awareness that their sensational 'inner' experience of the self is not what everyone else sees as their external 'objective' self. This alludes to the very first notion by William James (1890), regarding the objective and subjective self and reiterates the point previously made, that the self is comprised of physical and psychological aspects.

This discrepancy between what is experienced subjectively and how others objectively view oneself, can be heightened during public events when one is consciously aware that others attention is directed towards them. Fenigstein (1987) suggested that there are two forms of self-awareness: private and public. Private self-awareness refers to an understanding of our mental states which are invisible to others, such as thoughts, emotions, perceptions and goals, to name a few. In contrast, public self-awareness refers to an awareness of self when another's attention is directed towards us, and often involves an awareness of visible characteristics, for example, mannerisms, behaviours and physical appearance (Fenigstein, 1987; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). These visible aspects are merely an expression of our external identity to the world and we can often feel compelled to alter how we appear to others due to the desire to conform to perceived societal norms, or for fear of being judged harshly (Craig, George, & Snook, 2015). Alternatively, one may consciously or subconsciously alter their external representation of their 'self' in order to conceal the parts of themselves which they do not want to be seen; their vulnerabilities, shadows and blind

spots. Ironically, this form of protection of one's true self is counterproductive, as people can often 'see through it' and realise the incongruence with one's authentic self and how they are actually appearing. Feedback from others can be a useful way to convey this information and highlight this discrepancy to individuals, which can result in a behaviour change in some way (Gallwey, 2000).

It is imperative to highlight the continual process that is self-awareness, the authors here defer to Avolio and Gardner (2005) for their eloquent description of the self-awareness process,

*"Self-awareness is not a destination point, but rather an emerging process where one continually comes to understand his or her unique talents, strengths, sense of purpose, core values, beliefs and desires" (p.324).*

As human beings we are constantly experiencing change, as the old adage springs to mind, "nothing is forever", and with change come new experiences, encounters with new people and perhaps new jobs. All of these expose us to an arena for continually learning about our strengths and weaknesses, our beliefs, attitudes and emotions, which inform our levels of self-awareness and thus influence our desire for becoming better and more authentic individuals. It is likely, therefore, that an individual's personality will alter throughout their lifespan to reflect "biologically based intrinsic maturation" of the psyche (Roberts et al, 2006, p.29) or changes in the rank-order consistency of traits (Aske et al, 2007).

How can self-awareness be measured?

Due to the inherent complexities of self-awareness previously mentioned, we cannot directly scientifically measure or quantify the benefits of self-awareness. However, one intuitively knows that it is good for so many outcomes and it must be agreed that some measurement is better than nothing at all. Multisource feedback assessments, also known

as 360-degree or multi-rater assessments, are commonly used across private and public sector organisations for developmental purposes, as a method of measuring an individual's level of self-awareness (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Church, 1997, 2000; Church & Bracken, 1997; Fletcher, 1997; Fletcher & Bailey, 2003; Fletcher & Baldry, 2000; London, 2003; Yammarino, 2003). In such instances, individuals rate themselves and are rated by others on a variety of competencies. The scores from others are generally aggregated and compared to the self-rating scores and the degree to which an individual is self-aware depends upon the congruence between these scores. The feedback provided by others can help an individual to understand how others perceive them which can help inform a more accurate self-view (Ashford, 1989) and influence future decisions and behaviours (Day et al., 2014). Research suggests that individuals with high levels of self-awareness, i.e. when there is congruence between self-other ratings, have good working relationships (Wexley et al., 1980) and enhanced performance across a variety of contexts (e.g. Bass and Yammarino, 1991; Furnham and Stringfield, 1994). More recent evidence regarding the effect of self-other congruence is discussed in relation to leadership effectiveness later on and it is intuitive that these benefits are applicable for followers who also have high levels of self-awareness. An interesting point worth mentioning, it's that the majority of 360 assessments tend to focus on the assessment of competencies rather than the behaviours of others, or how they appear in the workplace. This point is referenced towards the end in relation to the offerings Insights provides. Neuroscience and neuropsychology measure self-awareness in relation to various cognitive processes involved in the concept of self-knowledge, such as self-referencing (Kelley et al., 2002), self-representation (Farb et al., 2007), and self-regulation (Heatherton, 2011). This research suggests that there is no specific "self-spot of the brain" (Heatherton et al, 2007, p.4) as an individual's sense of self is distributed throughout the brain with contributions

from multiple sub components within different regions of the brain, (Turk, Heatherton, Macrae, Kelley & Gazzaniga, 2003), including areas which are known for self-evaluative and self-reflective processes (Beer et al., 2003; Stuss & Levine, 2002).

## General everyday life benefits of self-awareness

*“Our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world as being able to remake ourselves.” – Gandhi*

This quote emphasises the ability we have as human beings to alter our behaviours, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs to become better individuals. For this alteration to occur a certain level of awareness must be present. Indeed, self-awareness underpins a variety of cognitive-behavioural processes which occur in everyday life. For example, Morin (2011) suggests that self-awareness encapsulates a multitude of ‘corollaries’ such as self-esteem, self-evaluation, self-regulation, self-conscious emotions, self-efficacy, sense of agency, theory of mind and self-talk. Although not scientifically evidenced, the author argues that, for example self-regulation, i.e. the changes in one’s behaviour, resisting temptation, or the filtering of irrelevant information (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003), is dependent on self-awareness. We need to be aware of what self-aspects need changing in order to bring about those cognitive-behavioural changes (Mikulas, 1986). A real life example would be receiving feedback from a family member that you have a tendency to talk over people and not listen when others are speaking. This has heightened your levels of self-awareness and you can now consciously regulate your behaviour so that you refrain from talking over others. The author also alludes to the research discussion around the complex and poorly understood concept of Theory of Mind (ToM) and how it is important for self-awareness. Theory of Mind refers to one’s ability to attribute mental

states, for example goal intentions, desires, thoughts and feelings, to others (Gallagher & Frith, 2003). Thus it is intuitive that there is an inherent link to self-awareness; however, the debate ensues regarding whether self-awareness or ToM is developed first (Carruthers, 2009; Gallup, 1982; Keenan, Gallup, & Falk, 2003). In reference to this debate, Morin (2011) argues that in order to be able to conceive what others are experiencing, we first need to develop an awareness of our own mental states. Thus, in order to be able to relate to or empathise with others we first need to be aware of our own perceptions, behaviours and feelings. Through introspection and self-reflection we can increase our self-awareness and thus knowledge and understanding of how we may react in certain situations. This can help guide us to understand why others may react in a certain way.

## Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence has been identified as an important component of self-awareness (Ashkanasy & Dasborough, 2003) and vice versa, self-awareness has been explicitly identified as a key component of emotional intelligence (Gill, Ramsey & Leberman, 2005; Goleman 2001). Emotional intelligence can be defined as the individual’s “ability to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulses and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope” (Goleman, 1995, p. 34). Whilst there exist numerous theories of emotional intelligence, most prominent within the organisational literature is the work by Daniel Goleman who states that emotional intelligence is comprised of four essential dimensions which can be subdivided into twenty competencies, the four dimensions being: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management and relationship management (Boyatzis et al., 2000; Goleman, 2001). The self-awareness dimension includes emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment and self-confidence. Goleman (2001)

contends that all of these competencies are the basis for outstanding performance at work. This interdependence of self-awareness and emotional intelligence is explicit within research, for example, in a recent qualitative examination on the perspectives of emotional intelligence trainers, two trainers commented that their work is about:

“... helping people see differently. I think the most important thing [in EI training] is self-awareness, of having the ability to step back and ask the question “what’s it like to be on the receiving end of me?””  
(Gill, Ramsey & Leberman, 2005, p.578)

Thus, becoming more self-aware through increased awareness of how we are perceived by others is important for our emotional development. For example, it allows us to reflect upon the emotional impact our behaviours may have on others and can enable us to change our behaviours and regulate our emotions more efficiently. This transcends into the workplace where emotional intelligence is important for job performance (Lopes, Grewal, Kadis, Gall, & Salovey, 2006), constructive conflict management (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001) and enabling leaders to effectively manage their emotions in order to cope with organisational changes and adjust accordingly (Lopes et al., 2006). Many individuals within organisations undergo emotional intelligence training (Druskat, Mount & Sala, 2013) as it is strongly and positively associated with job performance (O’Boyle et al., 2011).

## Self-awareness and leadership

“The most important part of being a leader is maintaining the desire to keep on learning. That means learning about yourself, about your peers, and about the people you serve.” – Brian Koval

This quote provides a useful narrative for understanding leader effectiveness, placing self-awareness as the basis for its development. Indeed, researchers today contend that self-awareness is a crucial component of effective leadership (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm & McKee, 2014; Hernandez, Luthanen, Ramsel, Osatuke, 2015) and encompasses both the awareness of self-resources, such as individual strengths and weakness (Avolio, 2005), core values, and motivations, as well as how the leader is perceived by others (Taylor, 2010). It is intuitive that this increased awareness can lead to a multitude of outcomes, for example, if a leader possesses awareness of their core values it can act as a guide for decision making and thus influence their behaviour (Kark & Dijk, 2007; Thomas, Dickson, & Bliese, 2001). Furthermore, if a leader understands their strengths and weaknesses they may seek to develop areas of weakness through consulting with others and drawing on their expertise (Golman, 2000).

The process of enhancing a leader’s self-awareness has primarily been achieved through the use of 360 degree feedback. This includes collating data on leader effectiveness and behaviours from a variety of sources and identifying where information is overlapping or conflicting (Hoffman, Lance, Bynum, & Gentry, 2010). This process can assist leaders to “understand systematically the impact of their behaviour on others” (Day et al., 2014 p.70). Furthermore, the use of self-other ratings has been consistently used within research as a measure of leader effectiveness with specifically an agreement

approach adopted (Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm, 2010) whereby individuals are assigned to over-estimators, under-estimators or in-agreement, depending on the level of congruence between self and others ratings. Such studies examine various leader performance outcomes such as affective components of leader-follower relationships (Godshalk & Sosik, 2000; Sosik, 2001) or supervisor evaluations (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Bass & Yammarino, 1991; Sosik, 2001). Although on the whole research suggests that when self and other ratings are congruent, leader effectiveness is enhanced (Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino, & Fleenor; Atwater & Yammarino, 1992), there may be specific contexts when either underrating or overrating oneself as a leader, compared to other's rating may be effective (Fleener et al., 2010).

Evidence suggesting leaders with high levels of self-awareness (i.e. have high levels of measured self-other agreement) are:

- Better able to understand their strengths and weaknesses (Avolio, 2005)
- More aware of emotions and understanding of their impact on others, use emotional awareness for problem solving and less rigid decision making (George, 2000).
- Able to instil trust and cooperation in followers (George, 2000).
- Important for the success of the leader and organisation (Goleman, 1995) as well as follower success/satisfaction (Muenjohn, 2011)
- Seen as more effective (Avolio, Gardner & May, 2004; Klenke, 2007).
- Able to more accurately recognise emotions, realise the impact they have on their behaviour which allows better follower relationships (Diggins, 2004)
- Able to recognise mistakes (Atwater et al., 2005)
- More effective decision makers (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997)

Why might leaders with increased levels of self-awareness influence these outcomes outlined above? One explanation could be down to the type of style the leader adopts. There exist a multitude of leadership styles and therefore theories; however here the focus will be on authentic and transformational leadership and how they are linked to leaders' self-awareness and perhaps follower self-awareness.

## Authentic leadership

The concept of authenticity, "To thine own self be true" is rooted in Ancient Greek Philosophy and is central to the theory of authentic leadership whereby "authentic leaders are those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character" (Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004, p. 4). Indeed, heightened levels of self-awareness have been identified as a prerequisite for authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) with a specific focus on the self-resources aspect of leader self-awareness such as the leader's values, cognitions regarding identity, emotions and motives or goals, (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Ilies et al., 2005). The modelling of authentic leadership is posited to result in authentic follower behaviours (Ilies et al., 2005), enhanced leader and follower self-awareness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), increased levels of trust in the leader, individual engagement and sustainable performance (Gardner et al., 2005). Furthermore, research has found authentic leadership to be more effective for followers with low levels of psychological capital, i.e. low levels of hopefulness, optimism, resilience, and efficaciousness (Wang, Sui, Luthans, Wang, & Wu, 2014).

## Transformational leadership

Originally developed by Bass (1985), Transformational Leadership is conceptualised as a method of motivating and inspiring followers through the articulation of a compelling vision. It encompasses behaviours such as considering individuals' needs, effective role modelling of values and ideals, as well as stimulating and challenging followers to think differently. Put simply, transformational leaders aim to motivate followers to see the inherent value of a task beyond the extrinsic reward (Vroom & Jago, 2007). Correlational research has demonstrated it positively impacts on follower motivation, predominantly through increased social contact (Grant, 2012), as well as employees' feelings of cohesiveness, commitment and performance (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). The association between levels of self-awareness and perceived transformational leadership behaviours is apparent within research. For example in a study where levels of leader self-awareness, leadership effectiveness and satisfaction with management performance were measured by both the leader and followers within an IT company, results showed that more self-aware leaders demonstrated heightened levels of transformational leadership behaviours. Furthermore, a positive association between self-aware leaders and followers' levels of satisfaction was found (Sosik & Megerian, 1999). Research has further identified that heightened levels of self-awareness are related to four components of transformational leadership: inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and idealised influence (Barling, Slater & Kelloway, 2000). The authors argue that self-aware leaders can use their awareness of emotions and how they impact others, as a method to inspire, motivate and challenge followers. Furthermore, these studies suggest highly self-aware leaders are more likely to be perceived as effective.

## Insights applications of self-awareness

Having explored, at a high level, the wealth of information available on the subject of self-awareness you may be wondering what it all means and how it might be applied directly in an Insights context. In simple terms, Insights mobilises these constructs through the lens of Jungian typology as a foundation throughout their Insights Discovery offering. Using the Insights Discovery profile like a mirror, participants are provided with a description of how they appear in the world, (how they see themselves) and potentially how others may see them on good or bad days. This knowledge combined with the desire to understand more about yourself and others enables participants to increase their levels of self-awareness through reflection. Through the application of this increased awareness in the workplace, there is growing evidence that leaders better understand their strengths and weaknesses (Avolio, 2005) and become more aware of emotions and their impact on others (George, 2000). This in turn can lead to them being perceived as more effective and authentic in their role (Avolio Gardner & May, 2004; Klenke, 2007), something which Insights posits as just as true at an individual level. In our everyday lives this might translate to higher levels of understanding about self and others which can lead us to actionable and directed changes for better personal relationships. This is often identified in an Insights Discovery workshop as a greater understanding of our opposite types, of course this also applies to those with similar preferences to us also. Once an individual can understand why a person might act in the manner that they do, they can put into practice the hints and tips Insights provides on communication in order to create positive outcomes. In essence as our level of self-awareness increases the potential to grow our sphere of influence is widened.

Other tools that can be found within the Insights portfolio, such as our 360 Feedback tool Insights Discovery Full Circle, build upon this level of self-awareness and understanding of how others perceive you, by exploring how levels of self-awareness may impact the group dynamic. Unlike many other products on the market in this space Insights focuses on comparing perceptions of characteristics, not specific behaviours or competencies. For example many behavioural based 360 tools compare perceptions on how well someone communicates, or how often they communicate; Insights makes a key distinction and asks 'How do you appear while communicating?' In this sense we are able to dive right to the heart of how an individual appears to their colleagues whilst allowing individuals the space to reflect on, and develop their perceived weaknesses should they so desire and we are therefore not merely passing judgement on their capability to do so.

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