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Self-awareness: An essential tool for effective leadership

I started writing this article, 37000 feet above sea level, midflight. While trying to contextualize self-awareness as a leadership skill, I realized that it pretty much follows the same principle of "Place your mask on before helping others" air-travel safety announcement, i.e., "Help yourself first before you help others." Self-awareness is developing into an informed individual aware of one's strengths, weaknesses, personality, and preferences. A leader has to constructively engage with others, draw out the expertise within the team, and balance the team to function at an optimum-level. Developing and maintaining this balance is perhaps one of the most crucial challenges for a leader. Being self-aware allows the leader to first identify one's own strengths, weaknesses, and therefore be perceptive to one's response towards challenging situations. A self-aware leader can appreciate the work and effort of the team members, appreciate and respect diversity, and encourage the different perspectives offered by the different-personality types, all of which ultimately enriches a project.

Thoughtful awareness of a leader allows her/him to be tuned to the team dynamics and therefore have the vision to maximize her/his team's potential. For example, a leader who is self-aware of her/his time management, may recognize a conflict situation that may arise between two team members who have opposite work habits. One might be highly productive when working last-minute, while the other may have a more methodical and planned approach to meeting goals. In such a scenario, the leader's alertness and timely responsiveness may motivate both the team-members to negotiate agreeable work deliverables. Here I outline a few approaches one may start with to inculcate self-awareness.

Assess your own value: What can you contribute to workplace and how can you cultivate your own value?

Reward yourself for your achievements: Learn to reward yourself for what you are able to achieve, while being cognizant of your own shortcomings. Be at peace with the thought that it is okay to not have all the answers.

Nurture emotional intelligence: Allow yourself to delve on your emotions and develop habits of articulating your emotions.

Conflict-resolution: Do you resolve conflicts by dealing with them actively or with a passive perspective?

Fit the jigsaw: Exercise mind-mapping to see how each piece in your team fits, i.e., how can you utilize the skillset of the team members to maximize the productivity of your team.

Reaction versus response: Assess whether you react or respond to situations. Reactions often carry a negative connotation while responses tend to be more balanced.

Too much awareness? Self-awareness can lead to self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and perfectionism, which may hinder work-progress. In such difficult situations, seek the support of peers and mentors to help you refocus on your strengths.

Personality tests: Many resources are available online like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® and Strength Finder Awareness® which may help identify our own personality and other personality types we may work well with or not.

While not exhaustive or authoritative in any way, my goal is to initiate these conversations at our workplaces. Irrespective of the career phases we may find ourselves in, cultivating self-awareness empowers us to be better leaders, team-members, and collaborators.

Thoughts reflected are personal and do not represent the University of Arizona.