COACHING *for* LEADERS

Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think

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Dave's Reading Highlights

While a precise definition is more complex than it first seems, self-awareness is, at its core, the ability to see ourselves clearly—to understand who we are, how others see us, and how we fit into the world.

After so many years of researching the subject, I would go so far as to say that self-awareness is the meta-skill of the twenty-first century. As you'll read in the pages ahead, the qualities most critical for success in today's world —things like emotional intelligence, empathy, influence, persuasion, communication, and collaboration—all stem from self-awareness. To put it another way, our self-awareness sets the upper limit for the skills that make us stronger team players, superior leaders, and better relationship builders. And here, even small gains in self-awareness can have a big payoff.

The least competent people are usually the most confident in their abilities.

Internal self-awareness has to do with seeing yourself clearly. It's an inward understanding of your values, passions, aspirations, ideal environment, patterns, reactions, and impact on others.

External self-awareness is about understanding yourself from the outside in—that is, knowing how other people see you.

Now, it's easy to assume that someone who is internally self-aware would also be externally self-aware—that being in touch with our feelings and emotions helps us tune in to how we're seen. But strangely, research (mine and others') has often shown no relationship between them—and some studies have even shown an inverse one! You probably know someone who loves to gaze at their own navel but has precious little understanding of the way they're coming across. The other side of the coin is also dangerous. Being too fixated on how we appear to others can prevent us from making choices in service of our own happiness and success. The bottom line is that to become truly self-aware, you have to understand yourself and how others see you—and what's more, the path to get there is very, very different than what most people believe. But if this sounds intimidating or untenable, there is good news. My research has shown that self-awareness is a surprisingly developable skill.

We learned that self-aware people possessed seven distinct types of insight that unaware people didn't. They understood their values (the principles that guide them), passions (what they love to do), aspirations (what they want to experience and achieve), fit (the environment they require to be happy, energized, and engaged), patterns (consistent ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving), reactions (the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that reveal their strengths and weaknesses), and impact (the effect they have on others).

The key skill we must develop to read our impact is perspective-taking, or the ability to imagine what others are thinking and feeling (this is different from empathy, which involves actually experiencing others' emotions).

Let’s pretend that internal and external self-awareness are hydrogen and oxygen, two of the most well-known elements on the periodic table. On its own, hydrogen is dangerous because it spontaneously ignites. (Remember the Hindenburg?) And though oxygen is not flammable by itself, in excess, it causes many things to burn more easily. But when you combine hydrogen and oxygen in the right proportions, the two elements unite to create life-sustaining water. Self-awareness is a bit like that: when we couple a clear perspective on ourselves with the ability to abandon that perspective and see ourselves as others do, this magical combination is a tremendous force for good.

One common assumption is that self-awareness is only earned through dramatic, earth-shattering events—but this couldn’t be further from the truth. Surprisingly, by a margin of two to one, our unicorns reported having gained the most insight from more mundane situations. They mentioned instances when they suddenly saw their behavior in a new light, whether it was through an overheard conversation, an offhand comment, or even a bit of unexpected recognition. Others cited developmental experiences at work, like leadership programs, 360 reviews, and so on. Some unicorns even found “aha” moments in the midst of the most ordinary, even boring, daily activities, like exercising or cleaning.

Seven Pillars of Insight: Values: The principles that guide us Passions: What we love to do Aspirations: What we want to experience and achieve Fit: The environment we require to be happy, energized, and engaged Patterns: Our consistent ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving Reactions: The thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that reveal our strengths and weaknesses Impact: The effect we have on others Perspective-taking: The ability to imagine what other people are thinking and feeling Tool: Zoom In, Zoom Out Alarm clock events: Situations and events that open our eyes to new self-insights. New roles or rules: (things that stretch us outside our comfort zone) Earthquake events: (acute events that shake us to our core) Everyday insights: (seeing our behaviors in a new light)

According to behavioral economist and Nobel Prize laureate Daniel Kahneman, human beings possess an “almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance.” Research suggests that we tend to think we’re smarter, funnier, thinner, better-looking, more socially skilled, more gifted at sports, superior students, and better drivers than we objectively are.

Making matters worse, the least competent people tend to be the most confident in their abilities, a finding first reported by Stanford psychology professor David Dunning and then-graduate student Justin Kruger. Their research revealed that participants who performed the worst on tests of humor, grammar, and logic were the most likely to overestimate their abilities. Those who scored in the 12th percentile, for example, believed on average that their ability fell in the 62nd. This phenomenon came to be known as the Dunning-Kruger Effect, and it’s been replicated with dozens of other skills like driving, academic performance, and job performance.

One way we can question our assumptions is to get into the habit of comparing our past predictions with actual outcomes. Celebrated management professor Peter Drucker suggested a simple, practical process that he himself used for more than 20 years. Every time he would make an important decision, he would write down what he expected to happen. Then, he would compare what actually happened with what he had predicted.

We need colleagues, family members, and friends who will (lovingly) knock us down a peg when we’re getting too big for our britches. In the category of “amusing yet accurate observations,” Stanford researcher Hayagreeva Rao believes that leaders who have teenage children are less prone to overconfidence for this very reason. As anyone with a teenager knows, they are perpetually unimpressed and will never hesitate to tell you how great you aren’t. (And it’s true that surrounding yourself with people who disagree with you is one of the most fundamental building blocks of leadership success.)

If internal self-awareness means gaining insight by looking inward, external self-awareness means turning our gaze outward to

understand how we are seen. And no matter how hard we try, we simply cannot do this on our own. Unfortunately, though, learning how others see us is usually thwarted by one simple fact: even the people we're closest to are reluctant to share such information.

The saying that "feedback is a gift" is such a painful cliché that we often forget how true it really is. And we need this gift for one simple reason: other people generally see us more objectively than we see ourselves.

In fact, even complete strangers—that is, people we have never met face-to-face—can see us disconcertingly accurately. Researcher David Funder and his colleagues compared how undergraduates were rated by those who knew them well (parents, friends, and roommates), those who knew them casually (college and hometown acquaintances), and people they'd never met (strangers shown just a five-minute video of them) on roughly 70 personality traits. The three groups' ratings were astonishingly accurate: a match for all but three traits! The groups also tended to see similar qualities in the participants, regardless of how well they actually knew them. The surprising take-home is that even people you don't know well can be a valuable source of feedback.

To describe this tendency, Rosen and Tesser coined the term MUM Effect, which stands for keeping Mum about Undesirable Messages. Their findings—confirmed by many subsequent studies—show that when we're in possession of information that might make someone uncomfortable, we tend to choose the path of least resistance: we simply decide to say nothing.

Research shows that people are perfectly willing to tell white lies when they're easier than the cold, hard truth. In one clever study, researchers Bella DePaulo and Kathy Bell invited participants into their lab and asked them to evaluate a series of paintings. Afterward, the researchers brought in the artists who created them and asked participants to share the feedback they had just given. Lo and behold, they sugar-coated their true feelings, and many outright lied—especially when the artist said that a painting was personally

important. One participant tellingly went from exclaiming in private, “It’s ugly. Just ugly!” to saying to the artist, “I like it. It’s my secondfavorite of the group.”

The problem is, the higher up you are on the corporate food chain, the less likely you are to be self-aware, an affliction that’s been labeled CEO Disease. After all, who really wants to tell the boss that his management style is alienating people, or that her latest staffing choices are causing friction, or that his clients find him controlling?

If the first barrier to external self-awareness is other people’s reluctance to tell the truth, the second is our reluctance to ask for it. Most of us, at least intellectually, know we should be seeking more feedback than we are currently.

The good news is that pushing past the first excuse of the Ostrich Trinity is fairly simple: we must decide to pull our heads out of the sand and recognize that others’ opinions are just as important for insight as our own.

One study showed that 83 percent of top-performing leaders regularly solicit feedback, compared to just 17 percent of the worst-performing ones. If anything, we are socially and professionally rewarded for seeking critical feedback; leaders who do are seen as more effective, not just by their bosses, but by their peers and employees (those who seek primarily positive feedback are seen as less effective).

It was an astute question that illustrated an unfortunate truth about feedback: if we don’t understand the behavior we’re getting feedback about, we don’t yet have the power to make better choices. Luckily, I had a solution in my hip pocket.

When I first started studying our unicorns, I expected that they would report seeking feedback from everybody: their colleagues, their friends and neighbors, the person next to them in line at the grocery store. But to my amazement, they reported the opposite approach. One unicorn, a bright young customer-service manager in the

Philippines, noted, “I get feedback all the time, but not from all the people. I rely on a small, trusted group that I know will tell me the truth.” And as we’ll see, she’s not alone. In fact, as a group, our unicorns showed remarkable consistency in just how selective they were. They recognize that quality trumps quantity and that not all input creates true insight—which is why they always work to choose the right people.

So if we shouldn’t ask for feedback from unloving critics or uncritical lovers, who should we ask? The answer is loving critics: people who will be honest with us while still having our best interests at heart. But the ideal people for this job aren’t always the most obvious. It’s easy to assume that those we’re closest to—a spouse, a best friend, etc.—would make the best loving critics. But just because someone knows us best doesn’t mean they will serve us well in this role. There are a few additional factors you’ll want to consider. The first is a level of mutual trust. A loving critic doesn’t need to be someone who would help you bury a body or bail you out of jail at 2:00 a.m. (though hopefully you’d never need this kind of friend), but they should be someone you implicitly know has your best interests at heart.

However, when it comes to feedback, good intentions aren’t always enough. (You know what they say about the road to hell…) To produce truly useful insight, the person must also have sufficient exposure to the behavior you want feedback on and a clear picture of what success looks like.

The third and final factor in selecting a loving critic is whether they will be willing and able to be brutally honest with you. The best yardstick here is whether they’ve ever told you a tough truth.

The most important characteristic of the right questions is specificity. A good way to think about this is to look at the scientific method. When scientists—chemists, physicists, and yes, even psychologists—build theories, we test specific hypotheses about the phenomenon we’re studying. By the same token, if you can come up with a working hypothesis or two about how other people see you—for example, “I think I have a tendency to come across as timid and non-authoritative

when I meet with clients; is that your experience?"—it will give you a focused framework for the conversation and help you either confirm or deny your suspicion.

In general, it's a good idea to focus on just one or two working hypotheses at a time. As with most things, when you try to do too much at once, you can get overwhelmed—and defensive—pretty quickly. ("You mean not only is my makeup the wrong color, but I'm also seen as a misanthrope who makes everyone uncomfortable in meetings?!") In general, when it comes to self-awareness and self-improvement, I'm a big proponent of realism. You can't—and shouldn't—try to transform yourself overnight. And in fact, the people I've seen make the most dramatic improvements are usually the ones who were laser-focused on one thing at a time.

Once his children had finished, he told them about an exercise he'd been tinkering with for one of his communication classes. The topic, as it so happens, was self-awareness. Suddenly, Misner realized that the perfect opportunity to test the exercise was staring him in the face. After all, he couldn't think of anyone on this earth with whom he'd rather have more solid communication with than his children. And even though they were young, he figured he'd get some good data—kids have a knack for saying exactly what they're thinking. "Hey," he said, "Do you guys want to help me try out this new exercise?" "Sure, Daddy!" his seven-year-old son Parker and ten-year-old daughter Bella enthusiastically responded. "OK, great!" he smiled. "So...what bugs you the most about me?" Misner was concerned when they started squirming uncomfortably in their seats. "Um, you're good, Dad!" said Bella. "Yep, nothing bugs us about you, Dad!" echoed Parker. Misner loved being a father. He knew he was good at it. What could possibly be making them so uncomfortable? It can't be anything serious, he reassured himself. "Guys, I understand that you don't want to tell Daddy something mean, but you're not going to get in trouble. I really want to hear what you think. Tell me anything." A long, pregnant pause filled the car. "Dad," his seven-year-old weakly ventured, "I don't like it when you yell so much." Parker's voice was cracking. Misner glanced from the road to see tears welling up in his son's eyes. "It makes me feel like you don't love me anymore," he

continued, “and it makes me want to go hide in my room.” Misner was shattered. Desperately trying to control his expression, he looked at his daughter, who added, “I don’t like it when you get mad at me, either. It hurts me and makes me cry.” Painful as it was, Misner pressed on, determined to stick to the exercise that he had devised. He took a deep breath and started asking questions: “What do you hear me yelling about the most?” “What impact does it have on you?” “What can I do differently?” Then he listened to their answers without getting upset or defensive—though, as he recounts, it was not easy.

Here are Misner’s instructions: Contact a close friend, family member, or mentor—someone who knows you well and with whom you want to strengthen your relationship. Invite this person to a meal. During the meal, ask them to tell you the one thing that annoys them most about you. But first, tell the person why you’re doing this, that nothing is off-limits, and that you aren’t allowed to answer defensively—only to listen with an open heart and mind. As someone who has also tried this myself (let this be proof that there is nothing I will not do in the name of research), I can tell you that the answer isn’t easy to hear. I did it twice, and both times, I dreaded the conversation. Misner’s students generally react the same way. “As soon as I present the exercise,” Misner told me, “I can see the blood drain out of their faces.” He fully recognizes that it requires courage—but thousands have lived to tell the tale and are wiser for it.