

LEADING

7 attributes of very successful leaders

Decisiveness

Authenticity

Emotional
Intelligence

Self-
Awareness

Integrity

Respect

WELL

David Pich and
Ann Messenger

Ability to Inspire

institute of
**MANAGERS
AND LEADERS**
australia | new zealand

LEADING WELL

David Pich and Ann Messenger



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Chapter 6

SELF- AWARENESS

Margot Smith

Everything that irritates us about others can
lead us to an understanding of ourselves.

C.G. Jung

Author note

One of the undoubted highlights of the Institute's first bestselling book – Leadership Matters – 7 skills of very successful leaders, the prequel to Leading Well – was Margot Smith's chapter 'Networking is Working'. It was certainly one of the chapters that I received most feedback about.

Margot returns here with an equally absorbing consideration of what I believe is fast-becoming the 'new frontier' in management and leadership development: Self-awareness.

Over the last decade or so, self-awareness has made its way from the lecture halls of university psychology departments to take centre stage in HR departments and play a leading part in their approach to culture transformation.

Leaders today are expected to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, but it's more than that. Successful leaders are expected to be open to the personal change process that lies at the heart of self-awareness. Knowing yourself isn't enough – striving to better yourself is increasingly what differentiates great leadership from good leadership.

In this chapter, Margot describes the journey that is self-awareness. She describes this journey as a journey of change for a leader – a journey of change that is at the same time incredibly challenging and immensely rewarding.

SELF-AWARENESS IS the first step towards becoming a successful leader. I know that the authors of other chapters of this book argue that their specific attribute is the hallmark of a successful leader, but I agree with the leading emotional intelligence expert and prominent American psychologist, Daniel Goleman, who says that, *'If your emotional abilities aren't in hand – if you don't have self-awareness – then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far.'*¹

Successful leaders are self-aware. Having a strong understanding of who you are and what impact you are having on those around you is crucial to being effective in your leadership role, and in your life.

In this chapter, I explore the pivotal role that self-awareness plays in sound leadership. Of course, I will acknowledge that self-awareness alone is not enough to be a successful leader. It is not enough to think or say, *'I know that I'm blunt (or aggressive or overly passive).'* Self-awareness lies at the beginning of the process, but without action – and, of course, change – it is relatively useless.

In that sense, I present self-awareness as part of the leadership journey. My view is that it is *the* crucial part, the route planner, the Google Maps. Self-awareness is the foundation on which good leadership is built. It is the leadership attribute that provides the light for the other six attributes covered in this book to shine.

THE BEATING HEART OF SELF-AWARENESS

Authenticity is a key part of self-awareness. So it makes sense that this chapter follows on from Allison Keogh's authenticity chapter (Chapter 5) and I recommend you read them sequentially.

There is no doubt that people will catch on if you are ‘faking it’ as a leader. When I first started performance-managing staff, I absolutely dreaded it. To manage my dread, I would prepare copious notes and have these in front of me as an actor has her script when she is rehearsing for a play. During one of these particularly memorable early performance discussions with a team member, I sat there with a long list of typed bullet points, reading monotonously through my very one-sided script. On the odd occasion, I would look up, but I was so focused on ‘getting through’ the pre-prepared script that I didn’t see or hear the responses of the staff member. It was a performance conversation, and my own performance was terrible!

Time and practice (and increased self-awareness!) have taught me that the very best performance-management discussions are those where I am completely in the moment with my staff members. These days, I rarely use notes because I know my staff well and I am fully across their performance. I ensure that I maintain eye contact and connection during the meeting, and I adapt to where the conversation is going.

I had to get through the clunky, rehearsed discussions to grow and learn as a leader. Being an authentic leader and being aware of how you work and how you best communicate is essential.

Another example from my own experiences is how I need to work on my presentation skills and work-related speeches. These had been my Achilles heel for some time. Around two years ago, my leader brought this to my attention after a presentation to the board. At my manager’s prompting I attended a presentation skills course and I practised and practised. I also realised that I needed to change the way I approached presenting. I needed

to prepare thoroughly, rather than simply thinking that I could stand at the front, read from prepared notes and hope I got through the next 45 minutes without totally freezing up.

While I know I'm never going to be the next Simon Sinek – ad-libbing and delivering lengthy speeches – I do have my own style now and I get much better feedback about that style than I once did. These days I can even adapt my script mid-presentation or ad-lib when needed or when I'm asked a tricky question.

Like the change in my approach to performance-management conversations with staff, this change began with self-awareness. I realised that I was falling short and that I wasn't being my true, authentic self. I realised that I was selling myself short and letting myself (and my team and my audience) down. I needed to make a change – and I resolved to make that change. Self-awareness is often found at the very beginning of the change process. It is where insight intersects with a desire to take action.

If there is an area of your leadership style or an aspect of how you lead that requires work or development it is absolutely crucial to take input from others, to observe what they do well and what they do differently to you; to picture role models who do 'it' well and think about how they perform in given situations. Of course, this isn't about trying to overlay someone else's style on top of yours. It's about asking, observing and learning. It's then about adding your own unique style, your own stories and your own approach.

The process begins with the realisation and acceptance that change is required; that is the beating heart of self-awareness.

THE JOHARI WINDOW MODEL OF SELF-AWARENESS

The Johari Window is a theory of consciousness, but it does offer a practical way to think about your own level of self-awareness. If a particular skill or attribute is known to others and known to you, it's 'open' or public knowledge. For example, this might be your fantastic attention to detail or inability to multi-task. Individuals can build trust between themselves by sharing information with others and learning about others from the details they share about themselves.

Interestingly, the underlying assumption of the Johari Window model is that the effectiveness of our personal communication increases as this window – this openness – becomes larger.²

The model shown in Figure 6.1 below illustrates that there may be things that are unknown to you but that are known to others; these are referred to as 'blind spots'. It might be that you are incredibly thoughtful and that this has been observed by others as a particular strength. However, you may not actually realise this about yourself.

Your ability to work on a blind spot is of course inhibited if you are not actually aware that the blind spot exists. How do you know that people regard you as incredibly thoughtful?

Blind spots are typically realised through feedback. It is important to ask for feedback, both formally with surveys or during performance discussions (yours and your team's), as well as informally. For example, you might seek informal feedback in the kitchen at work or after a meeting that went particularly well or particularly badly.

SELF-AWARENESS

Figure 6.1 – The Johari Window of Self-awareness model

	<i>Known to self</i>	<i>Unknown to self</i>
<i>Known to others</i>	OPEN Public knowledge <i>What I show to you</i>	BLIND Feedback <i>Your gift to me</i>
<i>Unknown to others</i>	HIDDEN Private <i>Mine to share if I trust you</i>	UNCONSCIOUS Unknown <i>New awareness can emerge</i>

Seeking and receiving feedback is at the core of the Johari Window model and is key to why the model is so powerful in terms of increasing self-awareness. It's worth pointing out straight away that seeking, receiving and indeed giving feedback takes courage. It is absolutely critical that you ensure that those you ask for feedback feel as safe as possible sharing their observations. Ultimately, you will benefit from the feedback and the potential exposure of blind spots, so as a leader you must ensure that all feedback is gratefully received.

In soliciting feedback from others, you open yourself up to the possibility that aspects of yourself and your behaviour might move from 'unconscious' or 'unknown' to 'known'. Feedback allows for the possibility that you might overcome some of the areas that may have been inhibiting your leadership style and your leadership development.

The bottom left quadrant of the Johari Window is the ‘hidden’ area. There are aspects of you and your behaviour that are known to you and yet remain unknown – or hidden – to others. For example, you might have a rather jealous streak and be quite resentful of one of your colleagues who is in the process of getting a promotion, but you are not comfortable sharing these feelings with others.

Lastly, the ‘unconscious’ parts of you are both unknown to you and also unknown to others. You might, for example, have a morbid fear of snakes which, until you see an actual snake, you are unaware of. Or you might be great at assessing risks in an organisation, but until you have to prepare a risk management plan, you won’t be aware of this and it will remain an untapped skill.

The Johari Window in practice

Blind spots can be uncovered. Indeed, self-awareness is the journey that identifies, acknowledges and tackles blind spots.

Early in my management and leadership career, I received feedback from my manager that I really needed to work on my empathy. She told me that she observed that I sometimes struggled to understand what people in my team were going through, and empathy was a crucial leadership attribute.

This feedback was incredibly powerful. It had quite a profound effect on me. Sometimes when you need to develop a skill or an aspect of your leadership style it’s because actually you don’t value it. If you don’t put too much importance on being punctual, for example, you won’t make a conscious effort to be on time for meetings or engagements. So, you can imagine the soul searching I went through when I was told that I was effectively not an empathetic leader!

Self-awareness is about this type of soul searching. I first had to acknowledge that this observation from my manager was in fact true. For a period of time, if I'm being completely honest, I did convince myself that she was wrong; I was totally empathetic and she simply didn't know me. I didn't agree with this feedback, because *I saw myself* as an empathetic person. My friends thought I was empathetic, my image and understanding of my character was that I was an empathetic person. But since I was in my late twenties and had all the answers, I wasn't bringing my whole self to work. I thought the 'work me' was meant to be different from the 'home me'. The truth was that I wasn't being what Allison describes in Chapter 5 as an authentic leader.

I was very fortunate that my manager suggested I participate in an emerging leaders' development program. This program was a huge learning curve for me. It proved to make the difference between me forging a leadership path of self-awareness or a path of self-destruction.

Of course, I'm not saying that I'm now a perfectly empathetic leader – far from it. I am saying that the tools and insights I gained in that program were career-changing. They caused me to ask myself some tough questions and to start on the path towards conscious competence as a leader.

What exactly did I learn about empathy on the emerging leaders' development program?

I learnt something extremely valuable. I learnt that my apparent lack of empathy in my early days as a new manager stemmed from my own leadership journey. It's true that I haven't had a smooth or speedy road to success. I worked hard to get my first leadership role. I saw myself as very busy and perfectly able to

deal with whatever work threw at me. Unfortunately, this led me at times to feel that others were not able to cope – I questioned why they couldn't push through things in the same way I was able to. When my manager said that I wasn't empathetic, it felt to me as if I was being punished for being productive, effective and resilient. If someone in the team couldn't meet a deadline or was struggling to cope, why should I put up with that? Or worse, why should I be the one to take on the work? After all, I was coping!

Of course, this was all the very definition of lacking empathy! As I said, the emerging leaders' development course was really quite confronting for me.

At the time – and quite rightly – this realisation was both horrifying and a bit embarrassing. I had some people around me going through some challenging issues, but I didn't have the maturity, empathy or compassion to stop and truly appreciate that. Irrespective of the impact on me and my workload, their wellbeing or confidence or whatever, was, or at least should have been, paramount.

Fortunately, self-awareness opens up the pathway to change. Following the development program, I set about thinking through the ways that I could tackle this part of my leadership style (of me!) that I hadn't known existed. How could I become more empathetic?

One practical way was to start doing voluntary charity work. I felt that this would give me real insight into what others were going through and the different journeys that people were on in their lives. I also felt that I really needed to tackle this idea that I hadn't 'had it easy'. Perhaps the truth was that I had.

I started to volunteer, and this really opened my eyes and my mind to the life situations of others. I volunteered with a charity taking clients with a disability on outings (picture yourself commentating on intimate movie scenes to a vision impaired person!). I was also involved for about six years with a charity that offers respite to HIV+ kids through activity camps. The camps were held twice a year and they were always a highlight for me. They allowed me to give back – but also offered me incredible insight into how blessed my journey has been and my own life actually is.

In parallel to this I actively made a few very simple changes. I made a conscious effort to engage in active listening at work. Rather than judging and comparing situations to my own life experience, I started to see that people's stories were their own.

These days I am a much better leader because of these things. While I shudder to think of how hard and cold I was in the early days, I must take heart in the fact that I was also a product of my circumstances – and I was willing to change. I was willing to accept that what I was doing just wasn't serving me well anymore; and it certainly wasn't serving those around me. I'm thankful that I learnt this lesson at twenty-something, but I firmly believe that improving self-awareness is a process that is just as applicable at sixty-something.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

My own journey of self-awareness is personal and might bear little resemblance to yours, but one thing is constant: managers and leaders need to seek out leadership development opportunities. These include mentoring, coaching, reading management and leadership books, blogs and publications, formal study and

qualifications, and of course joining industry bodies such as the Institute of Managers and Leaders (IML).

Insight about yourself and about your impact on others can come from many different sources, but if you aren't 'plugged in' to these sources you're left with few external feeds to rely on. As in my own example, I thought that I was the most empathetic leader around. It was only when I was told otherwise that I began to question my leadership style.

That's the thing about leadership: you are never 'done'. It is your responsibility to seek out ways and means to develop yourself. Self-awareness isn't an end point or a destination, it's a pathway. It's the key to unlocking your true potential.

ANALYTICS AND SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness and reflection go hand-in-hand. In recent years, the access to tools that can facilitate reflection has grown significantly. Where once there was Myers–Briggs and very little else, today Myers–Briggs and a plethora of other analytical tools are widely available. These analytical tools can be incredibly valuable in enabling you to both self-assess and gather feedback from peers, managers, your team, family and business and non-business networks. If you are keen to understand yourself and to use the views of others as a platform on which to build self-awareness, then there are plenty of tools available to help you do this.

However, one option stands out from the crowd. In my view and from my own experience as a leader (and in the view of the IML), it's the option that lies at the very heart of self-awareness analysis – the 360-degree feedback tool.

It was David Pich, the CEO of the Institute, who said at a national conference of HR leaders, *'If you're not doing 360-degree feedback yourself and with your team it's close to impossible to claim that you're a self-aware leader'*.

The 360-degree feedback process helps you and your team to identify strengths, discover weaknesses, face challenges and uncover areas that you need to develop. It is, by equal measure, challenging and rewarding. It certainly isn't easy. In fact, in my experience, I would say that it requires something akin to a leap of faith, but it is absolutely fundamental to understanding yourself and to understanding how you are perceived by others. Only when these two perspectives are known can change and personal growth follow.

The IML 360 Analytical Tool – a catalyst for change

The IML 360 tool is one of the most popular self-awareness focused analytical products available to organisations to assist in creating better managers and leaders for a better society.

IML 360 is based on the IML Competency Framework and ultimately by the same framework that supports the globally prestigious Chartered Manager designation (CMgr). It measures leaders on how they:

- Manage and lead self;
- Manage and lead others; and
- Manage and lead the business.

It surveys respondents who are asked to rate the participant on the frequency of demonstrated behaviours that are fully aligned to the competency framework.

The Institute's research that underpins the design of the IML 360 tool offers fascinating insight into the top five strengths and the top five weaknesses of leaders, as well as the most common blind spots.

Top five strengths of leaders

According to leaders/participants	Area	Score (out of 5)
Provide governance	Manage business	4.9
Manage and value diversity	Manage others	4.8
Promote equality of opportunity, diversity and inclusion	Manage business	4.6
Manage financial resources	Manage business	4.5
Manage human resources	Manage business	4.5

According to observers	Area	Score (out of 5)
Provide governance	Manage business	4.7
Manage and value diversity	Manage others	4.6
Promote equality of opportunity, diversity and inclusion	Manage business	4.5
Manage financial resources	Manage business	4.4
Recruit, select, induct and retain people	Manage others	4.4

Top five areas of weakness/need for development

According to leaders/participants	Area	Score (out of 5)
Develop creative and innovative thinking	Manage self	3.7
Develop individuals	Manage others	3.9
Manage conflict	Manage others	4.0
Influence and negotiation skills	Manage others	4.0
Develop decision-making and problem-solving skills	Manage self	4.1

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According to observers	Area	Score (out of 5)
Develop creative and innovative thinking	Manage self	3.9
Develop individuals	Manage others	3.9
Manage conflict	Manage others	4.0
Develop decision-making and problem-solving skills	Manage self	4.1
Influence and negotiation skills	Manage others	4.1

Blind spots (gap in leader vs observer scores)

Top five strengths	Area	Gap
Develop creative and innovative thinking	Manage self	0.1
Recruit, select, induct and retain people	Manage others	0.1
Influence and negotiation skills	Manage others	0.1
Cultivate business acumen – seeing the bigger picture	Manage self	0.1
Delegate effectively	Manage others	0.0

Top five areas of weakness/need for development	Area	Gap
Develop and implement your organisation's vision, values and culture	Manage business	-0.3
Provide governance	Manage business	-0.2
Manage and value diversity	Manage others	-0.2
Manage human resources	Manage business	-0.2
Manage financial resources	Manage business	-0.2

It's interesting to note that governance and diversity score highly among both leaders themselves and observers. This could be because these areas are more black and white. Compliance with the HR processes when hiring or applying fairness across the diverse members of the team are typically 'yes' or 'no' responses, and thankfully seem to be strong.

However, when it comes to creativity, conflict and influencing skills, the picture is not so rosy. These traits are harder and undoubtedly more difficult to attain. The results indicate that leaders have considerable work to do in the following areas:

- Developing creative and innovative thinking
- Developing individuals
- Managing conflict
- Developing decision-making and problem-solving skills
- Influence and negotiation skills.

The IML 360 tool also focuses on leadership blind spots. It is intriguing to note that, given governance, HR, finance and diversity all appear as the top five strengths, they are also viewed as blind spots. It is certainly the case that a leader can be strong in a specific area and yet there can still be a gap between how good they think they are in this area and how strong they are perceived to be by others.

Tools like the IML 360 are designed to help you to recognise your blind spots, but also to reinforce your strengths or development areas. They are an invaluable resource for managers and leaders seeking to become more self-aware and ultimately to be better managers and leaders.

SELF-AWARENESS AND GENDER

It's time now for me to tackle an important topic that has become more important since in recent months the #metoo movement has reverberated around the world and throughout the workplace.

As a woman in the workplace I learnt an important lesson in self-awareness a number of years ago. When I moved into my early management and leadership roles, I increasingly found that I needed to check myself when I was asked to do certain things by the people I worked for – or even by my colleagues. On more than one occasion (many more than one!) I was asked to get the coffee or to write the minutes in meetings. Unfortunately, in the first few years, I did these things without questioning why it always seemed to be me who was being asked. I saw it as being helpful or even worse, a sign that I was needed.

Over time, as I became more confident and more aware of my position (and the fact that it was always me who was being asked!), I began to feel that it shouldn't always be me. Of course, that's not to say I *never* get the water and glasses for a meeting or offer to grab the coffees or take the minutes. I do. In fact, I ensure that I often offer to do these things. But I frequently and actively stop and think – are they asking because I am a woman, because they never ask the man sitting next to me, or are they asking because I am a person and an equal to all the others in the room?

I'm not saying, don't take the minutes or offer to get the coffees. But think, why are *you* doing it? Or why is someone asking *you* to do it?

In the same way, this form of self-awareness applies to all forms of diversity and inclusion. It's critical to understand that self-awareness is about recognising that you don't always know what it's like to walk in someone else's shoes. As such, it's important to ensure that you don't speak on behalf of others ('mansplaining' is an absolute no-no, of course) and don't read too much into body language because this is a notoriously poor indicator of anything.

Self-awareness is about asking questions, listening to the answers and offering people a platform to speak, contribute and be heard.

SELF-AWARENESS – BEING YOUR VERY BEST SELF

Gaining and improving self-awareness is tough. Behavioural change is hard work, and behavioural change that is focused on areas that perhaps you didn't know needed to change is even tougher. That's what self-awareness is all about. If it's any consolation, the alternative is actually even tougher. Leading in a bubble or a vacuum and leaving leadership destruction in your wake is no fun at all. It's worth remembering that people typically leave bosses not workplaces.

The 2018 IML National Salary Survey found that 25.8% of surveyed organisations stated '*conflict with staff/manager*' was a main reason for staff leaving the organisation. Gallup has an even more staggering statistic – it purports that around half of the employees they surveyed left a job to '*get away from their manager*'.³

We all have a responsibility to be the best boss and work colleague we can be.

In fact, when it comes to self-awareness, there's actually more to it than that. Surely, we all want to be our very best self? And, surely, we want to look back on our work and on our workplaces and think we had an impact and made a contribution – however large or small – and that we developed ourselves and others along the way.

To be clear, this doesn't mean that we need to go 'all Zen' and start hanging crystals around the office! It also doesn't mean

that we won't be impacted by the feedback we seek and receive; we will. Feedback does have an impact. It's supposed to have. Our role as self-aware leaders is to do our very best to receive it with grace and to accept it and act on it.

How do you move towards being your best self?

Here are my top five tips:

1. Use the tools at your disposal to understand what a successful leader looks and acts like – and work towards it. See the self-awareness checklist or action plan later in the chapter for some tips to move into action mode.
2. Keep in mind you won't develop all the time. There will be ebbs and flows; times when you are working hard on developing. Perhaps you are developing financial acumen and being mentored by your finance manager, doing a course, or reading up on financial management, and the result is you've increased your knowledge and skills.
3. It's OK to have a break from professional growth to dedicate time to friends or family because you and they need some quality time. Then you might tackle procrastination. Actually, it's best to put that one off... (sorry, that's a very old and well used self-awareness joke).
4. Consider the circumstances in which you are your best self. Are there certain circumstances that stop you in your tracks and put you in a positive frame of mind?
5. Write down the changes you want to make. I know this sounds a bit like pop psychology, but the truth is that writing things down and reviewing them regularly has a funny way of holding us to account.

There's lazy and then there's lazy! The paradox of the lazy leader

Ian Mathieson FIML argues that there's a strong case for the right type of laziness in leading

The notion that laziness among leaders is not necessarily a bad thing was first attributed to General Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the German General Staff between 1857 and 1887. The General had observed that, in some cases, the leaders who were most often described as being lazy were typically those who applied themselves and ultimately delivered the very best value to the organisation. In other words, perhaps what was observed as laziness was actually not laziness at all, but the ultimate in business efficiency. This observation and the theory that grew from it was originally applied to the military, but arguably it can be applied equally to the workplace.

At its simplest, the notion of the lazy leader is about self-awareness and efficiency at work. General von Moltke had noticed that the leaders who were often labelled as lazy had attracted this label because they tended to focus their attention and action on a small number of things and, in parallel, they tended to delegate most of the other tasks outside of the few they focused on. Interestingly, the tasks they chose to focus on were those that they were well aware they were good at, whereas they delegated those tasks they recognised they didn't excel at themselves, or which others could deliver more effectively.

As such, from a leadership perspective, the lazy leaders were actually the leaders who were focused on doing those things only they could do, and could do well. They recruited and attracted the right staff who would focus on the other things that needed doing, and doing well. As such, the organisation as a whole tended to perform better. The paradox was that so-called lazy leaders created organisations where the best and brightest wanted to work.

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While this was observed by others as being a sign of laziness, it was actually the ultimate in self-awareness and efficiency. From the leader's perspective, they knew themselves well enough to realise what they could deliver well and when they needed help. The lazy leaders tended to have absolutely no issues in saying that they couldn't do something or saying that they needed help. In fact, they frequently asked for help! This may have been viewed by others as a sign of weakness (or laziness), but the performance of the team tended to improve with each call for help.

Characteristics of a lazy leader

They treat strategy as live and dynamic.

- Strategy is not an annual process.
- It requires constant awareness, readiness and flexibility to review strategies when the environment changes in ways that impact the organisation.
- Significant change doesn't restrict itself to an annual cycle, neither should strategy.
- A lazy leader will nurture this awareness among their senior team and throughout the organisation.

They only do the things they are really good at, or have to do.

- This requires clarity about which roles the person will exercise and those they won't.
- It requires considerable reflection, discipline, personal insight and personal mastery.
- It requires careful selection, especially of the direct reports.
- The lazy leader needs to select the right direct reports, trust them and keep in touch with them about what they are doing.
- There's a lot of trust in this – informed trust, not blind trust.

They coach their people.

- Lazy leaders encourage a coaching culture throughout the organisation.
- They see coaching is an investment, not a sunk cost.

In an interview, Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, said that one of his important roles was coaching his direct reports (who were very senior and highly-paid executives). He said that he encouraged a two-way coaching relationship with his team, that he had things to learn from them.

They admit their mistakes.

- There's nowhere to hide when there's a stuff-up.
- Eventually if not quickly, stuff-ups by a leader join the Worst-Kept-Secret Club.
- Denying a stuff-up most likely perpetuates the problem and increases the damage.
- Early acknowledgement helps the team to focus on solutions and remedies.

They assess performance holistically and not just on numbers.

- Numbers are important, but they often camouflage efforts, inputs and achievements that warrant identification and analysis.
- Achieving an easy target is different to achieving a target that confronted serious challenges. This warrants more than a tick.
- Evaluating key relationships – customers, suppliers, regulators, others of significance – is important. Assessing performance in these contexts sometimes is numeric, sometimes it's not.
- It requires courage and clarity to go beyond numbers.

They observe and actively participate as little as possible.

- Staying out of the game most of the time opens up opportunities for fresh insight from others.
- Open dialogue provides opportunities among the staff for growth.
- They are only decisive when it is essential. Mostly the direct reports and their reports have excellent information and will make good decisions.

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They embrace complexity and debate real alternatives.

- Being decisive is the last resort. Lazy leaders encourage debate; often the decision that emerges is the one the lazy leader would have made but the process creates more buy-in than a handed-down decision.
- As with strategy, constant awareness, readiness and flexibility encourage the best in others.
- Synthesis is the fifth discipline espoused by Peter Senge.⁴ It encompasses both left-brain and right-brain capacities.

They take a long-term view and reflect both personally and collectively with the team.

- Time to reflect is essential to a lazy leader; they ensure there's time for them to review and reflect. It's a key element in personal mastery.
- Reflecting includes opening up to enable left-field or subconscious thoughts to come into play.
- Reflection readily occurs in conversations, especially when the right conversation is led that way.
- The lazy leader ensures there's time to reflect with their direct reports and with other significant groups.
- Engaging with customers about where they are going and how they see the future can provide valuable reflection space.
- Reflective engagement with the team enhances team performance and collective team-learning.

They ensure that there is a line of sight to the customer throughout the organisation.

- The organisation benefits when everyone in it knows that customers are the core of the organisation's being. No matter how far from the coalface a staff member is, goods are produced and services provided for customers.
- Everyone, not just the sales and accounts departments, should have a line of sight to the customer.

- The lazy leader doesn't tolerate leaders and senior teams who are 'too busy' for customers or 'too focused on my stuff; leave that to marketing' to keep line of sight with customers.

They listen thoroughly and carefully across a wide spectrum of views and opinions.

- Lazy leaders are good and patient, attentive listeners.
- They hesitate to put views and offer opinions; they hesitate to be decisive.

I'm conscious that this might appear to be a heck of a list, but if we take the ten key elements of lazy leadership we end up with the following:

1. They treat strategy as live and dynamic.
2. They only do the things they are really good at, or have to do.
3. They coach their people.
4. They admit their mistakes.
5. They assess performance holistically and not just on numbers.
6. They observe and actively participate as little as possible.
7. They embrace complexity and debate real alternatives.
8. They take a long-term view and they reflect both personally and collectively with the team.
9. They ensure that there is a line of sight to the customer throughout the organisation.
10. They listen thoroughly and carefully across a wide spectrum of views and opinions.

It seems to me from this list that lazy leadership, far from being a negative archetype, is actually a formula for sound leadership.

So, treat this as a 'smorgasbord' – self-evaluate the points on the list and reflect. Complement insights with realistic evaluation of your strengths and weaknesses. Do any areas or focuses spring to mind for you to start your journey?

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Identify the goals you plan to achieve in those areas, then set targets for skills development. Plan support measures. Is there any helpful literature? Can you get some coaching or mentoring? Are there any relevant courses you could consider doing?

It's a journey more than a destination. Persistence and dedication, supported by personal reflection, facilitate the journey.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

Now that you've decided to make a change, what can you expect to happen next? How do you translate awareness and intention into that all-important action that you and your team want to see so that you can be a better leader? These questions are especially pertinent if the behaviour you are working on has been a blind spot for you in the past.

Stephen Covey is famously quoted as saying, '*We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behaviour.*'⁵ This is an important sentiment to grasp because in order to show a noticeable change, you may need to really step up how you demonstrate the change you are trying to make. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and self-awareness is only powerful when it is illustrated by demonstrable change.

The first step in demonstrating change is often to share with your team that you are working on a particular area. If, for example, you have discovered a blind spot around active listening (from doing the IML 360!), you could start by telling your team that you have had some feedback that you need to develop in this area and you would like their help to identify when you could be doing this better.

This achieves two purposes: your team immediately sees that you are prepared to be honest and vulnerable with them, and

they see that you are actually interested in developing yourself – both great leadership qualities in themselves.

Once you have disclosed the area that you are committed to working on, you can then go a step further and ask for ways in which your team – or the people who gave you the feedback – can help you develop in that area. In the example of active listening, they might suggest that they will offer feedback to you when you are slipping into bad habits and not demonstrating active listening. Or they might offer to introduce you to someone they know who is really good at listening who can give you some tips over coffee. Or perhaps they might suggest a book that really helped them in this area.

Whatever the suggestion, by opening yourself up to the possibility of change and by allowing your team to play a part in the process, real action can take place.

Let's be clear here: when I say '*lights, camera, action*', I really do mean it. You need to be prepared for the fact that you will be in the spotlight. Once you have started the process of self-awareness, all eyes will be on you and on your behaviour. So, when you say you are going to work on your active listening skills, you need to remember that your team will be observing your behaviour not your intentions. The best intentions in the world are easily destroyed by actions that contradict them.

One tip here is to explain to your team that the change you are undertaking is likely to take some time and that there may be a few failures along the way. After all, the behaviour you are working on has likely been in place for many years.

Here is a checklist to consider some ways in which you might approach taking action to make a change.

A simple self-awareness checklist or action plan

- Is your manager or a colleague in your corner?
- Do you have a mentor or coach?
- Seek feedback – qualitative or quantitative, or both (via a survey or conversations).
- Engage with the feedback, acknowledge its truth.
- Identify two or three areas to develop and move into action mode.
- Ask for help (examples of where you have displayed x and how to get to y). Ask friends and colleagues/your boss to keep you honest and offer ideas and support.
- Read articles on development areas. Follow relevant LinkedIn or Facebook groups for tips, attend events on the subject, enrol in a webinar, etc.
- Seek out role models who are good at your gaps – think about what they would do.
- Check in on your progress after a while and seek more feedback on whether your trusted adviser has seen a change and adjust accordingly.
- Practise, practise, practise.

THE FINAL WORD ON SELF-AWARENESS

There is absolutely no doubt that increasing your self-awareness takes considerable courage. You are going to need to be prepared to ask yourself and those around you some very tough questions – and that's only the beginning. Once you have discovered the answers you are going to need to be prepared to do some hard work.

Self-awareness is so critical precisely because it is so hard. The fact is that many leaders aren't focused on self-awareness,

which is why the payback for a truly self-aware leader can be so high. You measure the payback not only in staff retention and engagement, but in the level of your own self-esteem and in the relationships you form with your team.

There is another way of looking at the subject of self-awareness, and it's this: why would you want to continue to do the same thing as a leader if some aspects of what you are doing are not doing you any favours? Surely, it's best to find out what these aspects are and change them – for your own development and for the benefit of your team.

Back when I was discovering that I had a blind spot around my ability to show empathy, my manager said to me that if I kept doing what I had been doing, I'd keep getting the results I'd been getting! It sounds so obvious now, but so many leaders will ignore the signs and markers or refuse to ask the questions that will ultimately lead to them becoming better leaders. They keep doing what they have always done. To focus on improving your self-awareness is to reject this cycle and to commit to self-improvement.

Self-awareness is the ultimate personal continual improvement process for a leader.

My advice is that leaders make the commitment to becoming more self-aware – now.