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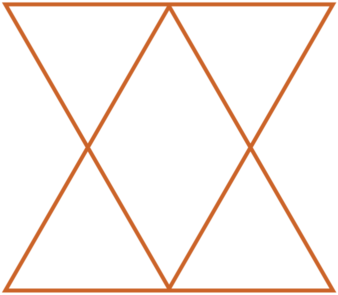

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Self-Awareness

HBR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE SERIES

1

The First Component of Emotional Intelligence

By Daniel Goleman

Self-awareness is the first component of emotional intelligence—which makes sense when one considers that the Delphic oracle gave the advice to “know thyself” thousands of years ago. Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. People with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather, they are honest—with themselves and with others.

People who have a high degree of self-awareness recognize how their feelings affect them, other people, and their job performance. Thus, a self-aware person who knows that tight deadlines bring out the worst in him plans his time carefully and gets his work done well in advance. Another person with high self-awareness will be able to work with a demanding client. She will understand the client's impact on her moods and the deeper reasons for her frustration. "Their trivial demands take us away from the real work that needs to be done," she might explain. And she will go one step further and turn her anger into something constructive.

Self-awareness extends to a person's understanding of his or her values and goals. Someone who is highly self-aware knows where he is headed and why; so, for example, he will be able to be firm in turning down a job offer that is tempting financially but does not fit with his principles or long-term goals. A person who lacks self-awareness is apt to make decisions that bring on inner turmoil by treading on buried values. "The money looked good so I signed on," someone might say two years into a job, "but the work means so little to me that I'm constantly bored.” The decisions of self-aware people mesh with their values; consequently, they often find work to be energizing.

How can one recognize self-awareness? First and foremost, it shows itself as candor and an ability to assess oneself realistically. People with high self-awareness are able to speak accurately and openly—although not necessarily effusively or confessionally—about their emotions and the impact they have on their work. For instance, one manager I know of was skeptical about a new personal-shopper service that her company, a major department-store chain, was about to introduce. Without prompting from her team or her boss, she offered them an explanation: “It’s hard for me to get behind the rollout of this service,” she admitted, “because I really wanted to run the project, but I wasn’t selected. Bear with me while I deal with that.” The manager did indeed examine her feelings; a week later, she was supporting the project fully.

Such self-knowledge often shows itself in the hiring process. Ask a candidate to describe a time he got carried away by his feelings and did something he later regretted. Self-aware candidates will be frank in admitting to failure—and will often tell their tales with a smile. One of the hallmarks of self-awareness is a self-deprecating sense of humor.

Self-awareness can also be identified during performance reviews. Self-aware people know—and are comfortable talking about—their limitations and strengths, and they often demonstrate a thirst for constructive criticism. By contrast, people with low self-awareness interpret the message that they need to improve as a threat or a sign of failure.

Self-aware people can also be recognized by their self-confidence. They have a firm grasp of their capabilities and are less likely to set themselves up to fail by, for example, overstretching on assignments. They know, too, when to ask for help. And the risks they take on the job are calculated. They won't ask for a challenge that they know they can't handle alone. They'll play to their strengths.

Consider the actions of a midlevel employee who was invited to sit in on a strategy meeting with her company's top executives. Although she was the most junior person in the room, she did not sit there quietly, listening in awestruck or fearful silence. She knew she had a head for clear logic and the skill to present ideas persuasively, and she offered cogent suggestions about the company's strategy. At the same time, her self-awareness stopped her from wandering into territory where she knew she was weak.

Despite the value of having self-aware people in the workplace, my research indicates that senior executives don't often give self-awareness the credit it deserves when they look for potential leaders. Many executives mistake candor about feelings for "wimpiness" and fail to give due respect to employees who openly acknowledge their shortcomings. Such people

WHAT MAKES A LEADER?

What distinguishes great leaders from merely good ones? It isn't IQ or technical skills, says Daniel Goleman. It's emotional intelligence: a group of five skills that enable the best leaders to maximize their own *and* their followers' performance. When senior managers at one company had a critical mass of emotional intelligence (EI) capabilities, their divisions outperformed yearly earnings goals by 20%.

The EI skills are:

- *Self-awareness:* knowing one's strengths, weaknesses, drives, values, and impact on others

are too readily dismissed as "not tough enough" to lead others.

In fact, the opposite is true. In the first place, people generally admire and respect candor. Furthermore, leaders are constantly required to make judgment

- *Self-regulation:* controlling or redirecting disruptive impulses and moods
- *Motivation:* relishing achievement for its own sake
- *Empathy:* understanding other people's emotional makeup
- *Social skill:* building rapport with others to move them in desired directions

We're each born with certain levels of EI skills. But we can strengthen these abilities through persistence, practice, and feedback from colleagues or coaches.

calls that require a candid assessment of capabilities—their own and those of others. Do we have the management expertise to acquire a competitor? Can we launch a new product within six months? People who assess themselves honestly—that is, self-aware people—are well suited to do the same for the organizations they run.

DANIEL GOLEMAN is codirector of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations at Rutgers University, coauthor of *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, and author of *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights*, *Leadership: Selected Writings* and *A Force for Good: The Dalai Lama's Vision for Our World*. His latest book is *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*.

Excerpted from "What Makes a Leader?" in *Harvard Business Review*, January 2004 (product #RO401H).

2

What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)

By Tasha Eurich

Self-awareness seems to have become the latest management buzzword—and for good reason. Research suggests that when we see ourselves clearly, we are more confident and more creative.[1] We make sounder decisions, build stronger relationships, and communicate more effectively.[2] We're less likely to lie, cheat, and steal.[3] We are better workers who get more promotions.[4] And we're more effective leaders with more satisfied employees and more profitable companies.[5]

As an organizational psychologist and executive coach, I've had a ringside seat to the power of leadership self-awareness for nearly 15 years. I've also seen how attainable this skill is. Yet, when I first began to delve into the research on self-awareness, I was surprised by the striking gap between the science and the practice of self-awareness. All things considered, we knew surprisingly little about improving this critical skill.

Four years ago, my team of researchers and I embarked on a large-scale scientific study of self-awareness. In 10 separate investigations with nearly 5,000 participants, we examined what self-awareness really is, why we need it, and how we can increase it.

Our research revealed many surprising roadblocks, myths, and truths about what self-awareness is and what it takes to improve it. We've found that even though most people *believe* they are self-aware, self-awareness is a truly rare quality: We estimate that only 10%–15% of the people we studied actually fit the criteria. Three findings in particular stood out, and are helping us develop practical guidance for how leaders can learn to see themselves more clearly.

ABOUT OUR RESEARCH

The major components of our research included:

- Analyzing the results of nearly 800 existing scientific studies to understand how previous researchers defined self-awareness, unearthing themes and trends, and identifying the limitations of these investigations.
- Surveying thousands of people across countries and industries to explore the relationship between self-awareness and several key attitudes and behaviors, like job satisfaction, empathy, happiness, and stress. We also surveyed those who knew these people well to determine the relationship between self ratings and other ratings of self-awareness.
- Developing and validating a *seven-factor, multi-rater assessment of self-awareness*, because our review of the research didn't identify

(Continued)

ABOUT OUR RESEARCH

any strong, well-validated, comprehensive measures.

- Conducting in-depth interviews with 50 people who had dramatically improved their self-awareness to learn about the key actions that helped them get there, as well as their beliefs and practices. Our interviewees included entrepreneurs, professionals, executives, and even a *Fortune* 100 CEO. (To be included in our study, participants had to clear four hurdles: (1) they had to see themselves as highly self-aware, which we measured using our validated assessment, (2) using that same assessment, someone who knew them well had to agree, (3) they had to believe they'd experienced an upward trend of self-awareness over the course of their life. Each participant was asked to recall their level of self-awareness at different stages of their life up to their current (for example, early adulthood: ages 19–24, adulthood: ages 25–34, midlife: ages 35–49, mature adulthood: ages 50–80), and (4) the person rating them had to agree with the participants' recollections.)

- Surveying hundreds of managers and their employees to learn more about the relationship between leadership self-awareness and employee attitudes like commitment, leadership effectiveness, and job satisfaction.

Coauthors of this work are Haley M. Woznyj, Longwood University; Phoenix Van Wagoner, Leeds School of Business, University of Colorado; Eric D. Heggestad, University of North Carolina, Charlotte; and Apryl Brodersen, Metropolitan State University of Denver. We want to thank Dr. Stefanie Johnson for her contributions to our study as well.

#1: There are two types of self-awareness

For the last 50 years, researchers have used varying definitions of self-awareness. For example, some see it as the ability to monitor our inner world, whereas others label it as a temporary state of self-consciousness.[6] Still others describe it as the difference between how we see ourselves and how others see us.[7]

So before we could focus on how to improve self-awareness, we needed to synthesize these findings and create an overarching definition.

Across the studies we examined, two broad categories of self-awareness kept emerging. The first, which we dubbed *internal self-awareness*, represents how clearly we see our own values, passions, aspirations, fit with our environment, reactions (including thoughts, feelings, behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses), and impact on others. We've found that internal self-awareness is associated with higher job and relationship satisfaction, personal and social control, and happiness; it is negatively related to anxiety, stress, and depression.

The second category, *external self-awareness*, means understanding how other people view us, in terms of those same factors listed above. Our research shows that people who know how others see them are more skilled at showing empathy and taking others' perspectives. For leaders who see themselves as their employees do, their employees tend to have a better relationship with them, feel more satisfied with them, and see them as more effective in general.

It's easy to assume that being high on one type of awareness would mean being high on the other. But our research has found virtually no relationship between them. As a result, we identify four leadership archetypes, each with a different set of opportunities to improve, as seen in figure 1.

FIGURE 1

The four self-awareness archetypes

This 2 × 2 maps internal self-awareness (how well you know yourself) against external self-awareness (how well you understand how others see you).

	Low external self-awareness	High external self-awareness
High internal self-awareness	**INTROSPECTORS** They're clear on who they are but don't challenge their own views or search for blind spots by getting feedback from others. This can harm their relationships and limit their success.	**AWARE** They know who they are, what they want to accomplish, and seek out and value others' opinions. This is where leaders begin to fully realize the true benefits of self-awareness.
Low internal self-awareness	**SEEKERS** They don't yet know who they are, what they stand for, or how their teams see them. As a result, they might feel stuck or frustrated with their performance and relationships.	**PLEASERS** They can be so focused on appearing a certain way to others that they could be overlooking what matters to them. Over time, they tend to make choices that aren't in service of their own success and fulfillment.

When it comes to internal and external self-awareness, it's tempting to value one over the other. But leaders must actively work on both seeing themselves clearly *and* getting feedback to understand how others see them. The highly self-aware people we interviewed were actively focused on balancing the scale.

Take Jeremiah, a marketing manager. Early in his career, he focused primarily on internal self-awareness—for example, deciding to leave his career in accounting to pursue his passion for marketing. But when he had the chance to get candid feedback during a company training, he realized that he wasn't focused enough on how he was showing up. Jeremiah has since placed an equal importance on both types of self-awareness, which he believes has helped him reach a new level of success and fulfillment.

The bottom line is that self-awareness isn't one truth. It's a delicate balance of two distinct, even competing, viewpoints. (If you're interested in learning where you stand in each category, you can take a free shortened version of our multi-rater self-awareness assessment at insight-quiz.com).

#2: Experience and power hinder self-awareness

Contrary to popular belief, studies have shown that people do not always learn from experience, that expertise does not help people root out false information, and that seeing ourselves as highly experienced can keep us from doing our homework, seeking disconfirming evidence, and questioning our assumptions.[8]

And just as experience can lead to a false sense of confidence about our performance, it can also make us overconfident about our level of self-knowledge. For example, one study found that more experienced managers were less accurate in assessing their leadership effectiveness compared with less experienced managers.[9]

Similarly, the more power a leader holds, the more likely they are to overestimate their skills and abilities. One study of more than 3,600 leaders across a variety of roles and industries found that, relative to lower-level leaders, higher-level leaders more significantly overvalued their skills (compared with others' perceptions).[10] In fact, this pattern existed for 19 out of the 20 competencies the researchers measured, including emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, empathy, trustworthiness, and leadership performance.

Researchers have proposed two primary explanations for this phenomenon.[11] First, by virtue of their level, senior leaders simply have fewer people above them who can provide candid feedback. Second, the more power a leader wields, the less comfortable people will be to give them constructive feedback, for fear it will hurt their careers. Business professor James O'Toole has added that, as one's power grows, one's willingness to listen shrinks, either because they think they know more than their employees or because seeking feedback will come at a cost.[12]

But this doesn't have to be the case. One analysis showed that the most successful leaders, as rated by 360-degree reviews of leadership effectiveness, counteract this tendency by seeking frequent critical feedback (from bosses, peers, employees, their board, and so on).[13] They become more self-aware in the process and come to be seen as more effective by others.[14]

Likewise, in our interviews, we found that people who improved their external self-awareness did so by seeking out feedback from *loving critics*—that is, people who have their best interests in mind *and* are willing to tell them the truth. To ensure they don't overreact or overcorrect based on one person's opinion, they also gut-check difficult or surprising feedback with others.

#3: Introspection doesn't always improve self-awareness

It is also widely assumed that introspection—examining the causes of our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—improves self-awareness. After all, what better way to know ourselves than by reflecting on why we are the way we are?

Yet one of the most surprising findings of our research is that people who introspect are *less* self-aware and report worse job satisfaction and well-being. Other research has shown similar patterns.[15]

The problem with introspection isn't that it is categorically ineffective—it's that most people are doing it incorrectly. To understand this, let's look at arguably the most common introspective question: "Why?" We ask this when trying to understand our emotions (*Why do I like employee A so much more than employee B?*), or our behavior (*Why did I fly* *off the handle with that employee?*), or our attitudes (*Why am I so against this deal?*).

As it turns out, "why" is a surprisingly ineffective self-awareness question. Research has shown that we simply do not have access to many of the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and motives we're searching for.[16] And because so much is trapped outside of our conscious awareness, we tend to invent answers that *feel* true but are often wrong.[17] For example, after an uncharacteristic outburst at an employee, a new manager may jump to the conclusion that it happened because she isn't cut out for management, when the real reason was a bad case of low blood sugar.

Consequently, the problem with asking *why* isn't just how wrong we are, but how confident we are that we are right.[18] The human mind rarely operates in a rational fashion, and our judgments are seldom free from bias. We tend to pounce on whatever insights we find without questioning their validity or value, we ignore contradictory evidence, and we force our thoughts to conform to our initial explanations.

Another negative consequence of asking *why*—especially when trying to explain an undesired outcome—is that it invites unproductive negative thoughts.[19] In our research, we've found that people who are very introspective are also more likely to get caught in ruminative patterns. For example, if an employee who receives a bad performance review asks *Why did I get such a bad rating?*, they're likely to land on an explanation focused on their fears, shortcomings, or insecurities, rather than a rational assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. (For this reason, frequent self-analyzers are more depressed and anxious and experience poorer well-being.[20])

So if *why* isn't the right introspective question, is there a better one? My research team scoured hundreds of pages of interview transcripts with highly self-aware people to see if they approached introspection differently. Indeed, there was a clear pattern: Although the word "why" appeared fewer than 150 times, the word "what" appeared more than 1,000 times.

Therefore, to increase productive self-insight and decrease unproductive rumination, we should ask *what*, not *why*.[21] "What" questions help us stay objective, future-focused, and empowered to act on our new insights.

For example, consider Jose, an entertainment industry veteran we interviewed, who hated his job. Where many would have gotten stuck thinking "Why do I feel so terrible?" he asked, "What are the situations that make me feel terrible, and what do they have in common?" He realized that he'd never be happy in that career, and it gave him the courage to pursue a new and far more fulfilling one in wealth management.

Similarly, Robin, a customer service leader who was new to her job, needed to understand a piece of negative feedback she'd gotten from an employee. Instead of asking "Why did you say this about me?" Robin inquired, "What are the steps I need to take in the future to do a better job?" This helped them move to solutions rather than focusing on the unproductive patterns of the past.

A final case is Paul, who told us about learning that the business he'd recently purchased was no longer profitable. At first, all he could ask himself was "Why wasn't I able to turn things around?" But he quickly realized that he didn't have the time or energy to beat himself up—he had to figure out what to do next. He started asking, "What do I need to do to move forward in a way that minimizes the impact to our customers and employees?" He created a plan and was able to find creative ways to do as much good for others as possible while winding down the business. When all that was over, he challenged himself to articulate what he learned from the experience—his answer both helped him avoid similar mistakes in the future and helped others learn from them, too.[22]

These qualitative findings have been bolstered by others' quantitative research. In one study, psychologists J. Gregory Hixon and William Swann gave a group of undergraduates negative feedback on a test of their “sociability, likability, and interestingness.”[23] Some were given time to think about *why* they were the kind of person they were, while others were asked to think about *what* kind of person they were. When the researchers had them evaluate the accuracy of the feedback, the “why” students spent their energy rationalizing and denying what they’d learned, and the “what” students were more open to this new information and how they might learn from it. Hixon and Swann’s rather bold conclusion was that “thinking about why one is the way one is may be no better than not thinking about one’s self at all.”

All of this brings us to conclude: Leaders who focus on building both internal and external self-awareness, who seek honest feedback from loving critics, and who ask *what* instead of *why* can learn to see themselves more clearly—and reap the many rewards that increased self-knowledge delivers. And no matter how much progress we make, there’s always more to learn. That's one of the things that makes the journey to self-awareness so exciting.

TASHA EURICH, PhD, is an organizational psychologist, researcher, and *New York Times*–bestselling author. She is the principal of The Eurich Group, a boutique executive development firm that helps companies—from startups to the *Fortune* 100—succeed by improving the effectiveness of their leaders and teams. Her newest book, *Insight*, delves into the connection between self-awareness and success in the workplace.

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3

Successful Leaders Know What Made Them Who They Are

By Bernie Swain

Can you identify the one person, event, or influence that made you who you are as a leader and a person? Over the past 10 years, I've put that question to 100 of the eminent people I represented as chairman of the Washington Speakers Bureau: Madeleine Albright, Tom Brokaw, Colin Powell, Terry Bradshaw, Condoleezza Rice, and many others. I was curious to find out what they felt were the turning points in their lives—the defining moments and influences from which they draw motivation and inspiration.

Identifying the foundational moments of our success allows us to maximize our potential, uncover our own passions, and become better leaders. In my case, the defining moment in my life was the realization that I was never going to enjoy working for other people—a recognition that paradoxically came to me right at the moment when I was on the verge of being offered my dream job (which I eventually turned down to become an entrepreneur). The realization helped fuel me even during periods of uncertainty by reinforcing my will to succeed and comforting me that I was on the right trajectory. Everyone has such an event and can usually identify it after some reflection. Among my interviewees, turning points fell into three broad categories.

People

Forty-five of those interviewees identified a person as the single most enduring influence on their lives. For Madeleine Albright, the former U.S. secretary of state, it was her father, a serious man with far-ranging intellect whose career as a Czechoslovak diplomat was short-circuited twice: by the German occupation in World War II and by the Communist takeover after the war. After the family moved to the United States, he became a professor living in cramped faculty housing—quite a step down from an ambassador's residence—but worked at his job cheerfully and diligently. She says that being secretary of state was challenging, but she never had any trouble staying focused: "I just had to picture my father in his flooded basement study, working away with his feet up on bricks."

For Tom Brokaw, who had been student body president and a three-sport athlete in high school, but who then dropped out of college twice, it was a strict and caring political science professor. For legendary basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, it was his mother, who had only an eighth-grade education. Her homespun advice to always "get on the right bus . . . filled with good people" became the moral cornerstone of "Coach K's" life and career.

Events

Forty of my one hundred interviewees identified an event—a failure, an injury, a death, or the like—as the turning point in their lives.

What defined former secretary of labor Robert Reich, at first, was his height. "I am 4'11" and have always been short," said Reich. Starting in kindergarten, he was teased and bullied, and he learned to find someone bigger who could act as a protector. One of those who watched out for him was an older kid named Michael Schwerner. Years later, in 1964, Mickey Schwerner and two other young civil rights workers were brutally murdered in Neshoba County, Mississippi, by the Ku Klux Klan—a crime that shocked the country and horrified Reich, who had just graduated from high school. The event galvanized Reich, setting him on a lifelong course of public service and commitment to social justice. “Mickey protected me,” said Reich, now a professor at UC Berkeley. “I, in turn, feel a responsibility to protect others.”

For Tony Blair, a rebellious troublemaker in school, it was his father’s stroke, cutting short the elder Blair’s promising political career and evoking in Tony the discipline and diligence that would eventually make him prime minister of Great Britain.

Debbi Fields, founder of Mrs. Fields Cookies, found the drive and passion to succeed as her unpretentious self when a boorish social superior threw a dictionary in her lap because she had misused a word in conversation.

Environments

Fifteen of my interviewees considered environments—such as a place, a time, or an enveloping experience—as the most powerful influence in their lives. For Condoleezza Rice, it was the love of reading and education that was passed down through her family, beginning with her paternal great-grandmother, Julia Head, who learned to read as a slave on an Alabama cotton plantation. Rice's grandfather, born in 1892 to Julia and her sharecropper husband, was determined to go to college and went on to become a Presbyterian minister. One day he brought home nine leather-bound, gold-embossed books—the works of Shakespeare, Hugo, and others—which cost $90, a huge sum at the time.

"My grandfather believed in having books in the home," Rice told me, "and, more important, he believed in having his children read them." Rice's father earned two master's degrees, and her aunt Theresa got a PhD in Victorian literature. In 1981, when Rice received her PhD in political science, her father gave her the five remaining books from her grandfather's set. They sit now on her mantelpiece.

For Chris Matthews, it was his stint in the Peace Corps in Swaziland that took him off his path to academia and sent him toward a life of engagement in politics and journalism.

Colin Powell's enduring influence comes from a neighborhood in the South Bronx called Banana Kelley, where he grew up among caring family members and a multilingual, nurturing community of hardworking people. "I owe whatever success I've had to . . . Banana Kelley," he says.

Successful leaders are self-aware. That's the overriding lesson I've learned from working and talking with some the world's most accomplished people over the past 36 years. For some, like Powell or Albright, identifying and owning the turning points in their lives comes easily. But for many people, it can be difficult. It took three increasingly painful conversations for Terry Bradshaw to fully get at his: As the number-one pick in the NFL draft by the Pittsburgh Steelers, he paid little heed to his coaches, goofed off in practice, and exhibited a bravado that masked his deep insecurity as a southern country boy in a big northern city. But as the losses piled up on the field and the boos rained down from the stands, he could no longer sustain his devil-may-care façade. One night he broke down crying in his apartment, prayed, and heard a gentle voice telling him to get real. "I went to practice the next day," he said to me, "and I set out cultivating a new attitude." He went on to become one of only three quarterbacks to have won four Super Bowls.

Highly accomplished people have an inner voice and pay attention to it. They understand the defining moments of their lives and thereby better understand their own strengths, biases, and weaknesses as leaders. And that understanding provides them with a deep well of energy and passion that they draw on throughout their lives. We may not all have careers that match the 100 people I interviewed, but we can all share their ability to grasp—and harness—the turning points of our lives and careers.

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4

Two Ways to Clarify Your Professional Passions

By Robert Steven Kaplan

Have you ever noticed that highly effective people almost always say they love what they do? If you ask them about their good career fortune, they're likely to advise that you have to love what you do in order to perform at a high level of effectiveness. They will talk about the critical importance of having a long-term perspective and real passion in pursuing a career. Numerous studies of highly effective people point to a strong correlation between believing in the mission, enjoying the job, and performing at a high level.

So why is it that people are often skeptical of the notion that passion and career should be integrally linked? Why do people often struggle to discern their passions and then connect those passions to a viable career path? When people hear the testimony of a seemingly happy and fulfilled person, they often say, “That’s easy for them to say *now*. They’ve made it. It’s not so easy to follow this advice when you’re sitting where I’m sitting!” What they don’t fully realize is that connecting their passions to their work was a big part of how these people eventually made it.

Passion is about excitement. It has more to do with your heart than your head. It’s critical because reaching your full potential requires a combination of your heart *and* your head. In my experience, your intellectual capability and skills will take you only so far.

Regardless of your talent, you will have rough days, months, and years. You may get stuck with a lousy boss. You may get discouraged and feel like giving up. What pulls you through these difficult periods? The answer is *your passion*: It is the essential rocket fuel that helps you overcome difficulties and work through dark times. Passion emanates from a belief in a cause or the enjoyment you feel from performing certain tasks. It helps you hang in there so that you can improve your skills, overcome adversity, and find meaning in your work and in your life.

In talking to more experienced people, I often have to get them to mentally set aside their financial obligations, their role in the community, and the expectations of friends, family, and loved ones. It can be particularly difficult for midcareer professionals to understand their passions because, in many cases, the breakage cost of changing jobs or careers feels so huge to them that it's not even worth considering. As a result, they try not to think too deeply about whether they like what they're doing.

The problem for many midcareer people is that they're experiencing a plateau that is beginning to alarm them and diminish their career prospects. This plateau is often a by-product of lack of passion for the job. It may be that the nature of the job has changed or the world has changed, and the mission and tasks of their career no longer arouse their passions. In other cases, nothing has changed except the people themselves. They simply want more meaning from their lives and professional careers.

Of course, these questions are never fully resolved. Why? It's because there are many variables in play, and we can't control all of them. The challenge is to be self-aware.

That's difficult, because most of our professional days are chaotic. In fact, life is chaotic, and, sadly, we can't usually predict the future. It feels as if there's no time to reflect. So how are you supposed to get perspective on these questions?

I suggest that you try several exercises. These exercises may help you increase your self-awareness and develop your abilities to better understand your passions. They also encourage you to pay closer attention to and be more aware of the tasks and subjects you truly find interesting and enjoyable.

Your best self

This exercise involves thinking back to a time when you were at your best. You were great! You did a superb job, and you really enjoyed it. You loved what you were doing while you were doing it, and you received substantial positive reinforcement.

Remember the situation. Write down the details. What were you doing? What tasks were you performing? What were the key elements of the environment, the mission, and the nature of the impact you were making? Did you have a boss, or were you self-directed? Sketch out the complete picture. What did you love about it? What were the factors that made it enjoyable and helped you shine?

If you're like most people, it may take you some time to recall such a situation. It's not that you haven't had these experiences; rather, you have gotten out of the habit of thinking about a time when you were at your best and enjoying what you were doing.

After sketching out the situation, think about what you can learn from this recollection. What are your insights regarding the nature of your enjoyment, the critical environmental factors, the types of tasks you took pleasure in performing, and so on? What does this recollection tell you about what you might enjoy now? Write down your thoughts.

Mental models

Another approach to helping you think about your desires and passions is to use mental models. That is, assume *xyz*, and then tell me what you would do—and why. Here are examples of these models:

- If you had one year left to live, how would you spend it? What does that tell you about what you enjoy and what you have a passion for?
- If you had enough money to do whatever you wanted, what job or career would you pursue?

- If you knew you were going to be highly successful in your career, what job would you pursue today?
- What would you like to tell your children and grandchildren about what you accomplished in your career? How will you explain to them what career you chose?
- If you were a third party giving advice to yourself, what would you suggest regarding a career choice?

Although these mental models may seem a bit silly or whimsical, I urge you to take the time to try them, consider your answers, and write them down. You're likely to be surprised by what you learn. Each of them attempts to help you let go of fears, insecurities, and worries about the opinions of others—and focus on what you truly believe and desire.

Passion is critical in reaching your potential. Getting in touch with your passions may require you to give your fears and insecurities a rest and focus more on your hopes and dreams. You don't need to immediately decide what action to take or assess whether your dream is realistic. There is an element of brainstorming in this effort: You don't want to kill ideas before you've considered them. Again, allow yourself to focus on the *what* before you worry about the *how*. These exercises are about self-awareness, first and foremost. It is uncanny how much more likely you are to recognize opportunities if you're aware of what you're looking for.

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5

Emotional Agility

By Susan David and Christina Congleton

Sixteen thousand—that's how many words we speak, on average, each day. So imagine how many unspoken ones course through our minds. Most of them are not facts but evaluations and judgments entwined with emotions—some positive and helpful (*I've worked hard and I can ace this presentation; This issue is worth speaking up about; The new VP seems approachable*), others negative and less so (*He's purposely ignoring me; I'm going to make a fool of myself; I'm a fake*).

The prevailing wisdom says that difficult thoughts and feelings have no place at the office: Executives, and particularly leaders, should be either stoic or cheerful; they must project confidence and damp down any negativity bubbling up inside them. But that goes against basic biology. All healthy human beings have an inner stream of thoughts and feelings that include criticism, doubt, and fear. That's just our minds doing the job they were designed to do: trying to anticipate and solve problems and avoid potential pitfalls.

In our people-strategy consulting practice advising companies around the world, we see leaders stumble not because they *have* undesirable thoughts and feelings—that's inevitable—but because they get *hooked* by them, like fish caught on a line. This happens in one of two ways. They buy into the thoughts, treating them like facts (*It was the same in my last job . . . I've been a failure my whole career*), and avoid situations that evoke them (*I'm not going to take on that new challenge*). Or, usually at the behest of their supporters, they challenge the existence of the thoughts and try to rationalize them away (*I shouldn't* *have thoughts like this . . . I know I'm not a total failure*), and perhaps force themselves into similar situations, even when those go against their core values and goals (*Take on that new assignment—you've got to get over this*). In either case, they are paying too much attention to their internal chatter and allowing it to sap important cognitive resources that could be put to better use.

This is a common problem, often perpetuated by popular self-management strategies. We regularly see executives with recurring emotional challenges at work—anxiety about priorities, jealousy of others' success, fear of rejection, distress over perceived slights—who have devised techniques to "fix" them: positive affirmations, prioritized to-do lists, immersion in certain tasks. But when we ask how long the challenges have persisted, the answer might be 10 years, 20 years, or since childhood.

Clearly, those techniques don't work—in fact, ample research shows that attempting to minimize or ignore thoughts and emotions serves only to amplify them. In a famous study led by the late Daniel Wegner, a Harvard professor, participants who were told to avoid thinking about white bears had trouble doing so; later, when the ban was lifted, they thought about white bears much more than the control group did. Anyone who has dreamed of chocolate cake and french fries while following a strict diet understands this phenomenon.

Effective leaders don't buy into *or* try to suppress their inner experiences. Instead they approach them in a mindful, values-driven, and productive way—developing what we call *emotional agility*. In our complex, fast-changing knowledge economy, this ability to manage one's thoughts and feelings is essential to business success. Numerous studies, from the University of London professor Frank Bond and others, show that emotional agility can help people alleviate stress, reduce errors, become more innovative, and improve job performance.

We've worked with leaders in various industries to build this critical skill, and here we offer four practices—adapted from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), originally developed by the University of Nevada psychologist Steven C. Hayes—that are designed to help you do the same: Recognize your patterns; label your thoughts and emotions; accept them; and act on your values.

Fish on a line

Let's start with two case studies. Cynthia is a senior corporate lawyer with two young children. She used to feel intense guilt about missed opportunities—both at the office, where her peers worked 80 hours a week while she worked 50, and at home, where she was often too distracted or tired to fully engage with her husband and children. One nagging voice in her head told her she'd have to be a better employee or risk career failure; another told her to be a better mother or risk neglecting her family. Cynthia wished that at least one of the voices would shut up. But neither would, and in response she failed to put up her hand for exciting new prospects at the office and compulsively checked messages on her phone during family dinners.

Jeffrey, a rising-star executive at a leading consumer goods company, had a different problem. Intelligent, talented, and ambitious, he was often angry—at bosses who disregarded his views, subordinates who didn't follow orders, or colleagues who didn't pull their weight. He had lost his temper several times at work and been warned to get it under control. But when he tried, he felt that he was shutting off a core part of his personality, and he became even angrier and more upset.

These smart, successful leaders were hooked by their negative thoughts and emotions. Cynthia was absorbed by guilt; Jeffrey was exploding with anger.

Cynthia told the voices to go away; Jeffrey bottled his frustration. Both were trying to avoid the discomfort they felt. They were being controlled by their inner experience, attempting to control it, or switching between the two.

Getting unhooked

Fortunately, both Cynthia and Jeffrey realized that they couldn't go on—at least not successfully and happily—without more-effective inner strategies. We coached them to adopt the four practices:

Recognize your patterns

The first step in developing emotional agility is to notice when you've been hooked by your thoughts and feelings. That's hard to do, but there are certain telltale signs. One is that your thinking becomes rigid and repetitive. For example, Cynthia began to see that her self-recriminations played like a broken record, repeating the same messages over and over again. Another is that the story your mind is telling seems old, like a rerun of some past experience. Jeffrey noticed that his attitude toward certain colleagues (*He's incompetent; There's no way I'm letting anyone speak to me like that*) was quite familiar. In fact, he had experienced something similar in his previous job—and in the one before that. The source of trouble was not just Jeffrey's environment but his own patterns of thought and feeling. You have to realize that you're stuck before you can initiate change.

Label your thoughts and emotions

When you're hooked, the attention you give your thoughts and feelings crowds your mind; there's no room to examine them. One strategy that may help you consider your situation more objectively is the simple act of labeling. Just as you call a spade a spade, call a thought a thought and an emotion an emotion. *I'm not doing enough at work or at home* becomes *I'm having the thought that I'm not doing enough at work or at home.* Similarly, *My coworker is wrong—he makes me so angry* becomes *I'm having the thought that my coworker is wrong, and I'm feeling anger.* Labeling allows you to see your thoughts and feelings for what they are: transient sources of data that may or may not prove helpful. Humans are psychologically able to take this helicopter view of private experiences, and mounting scientific evidence shows that simple, straightforward mindfulness practice like this not only improves behavior and well-being but also promotes beneficial biological changes in the brain and at the cellular level. As Cynthia started to slow down and label her thoughts, the criticisms that had once pressed in on her like a dense fog became more like clouds passing through a blue sky.

Accept them

The opposite of control is acceptance: not acting on every thought or resigning yourself to negativity but responding to your ideas and emotions with an open attitude, paying attention to them and letting yourself experience them. Take 10 deep breaths, and notice what's happening in the moment. This can bring relief, but it won't necessarily make you feel good. In fact, you may realize just how upset you really are. The important thing is to show yourself (and others) some compassion and examine the reality of the situation. What's going on—both internally and externally? When Jeffrey acknowledged and made room for his feelings of frustration and anger rather than rejecting them, quashing them, or taking them out on others, he began to notice their energetic quality. They were a signal that something important was at stake and that he needed to take productive action. Instead of yelling at people, he could make a clear request of a colleague or move swiftly on a press-ing issue. The more Jeffrey accepted his anger and brought his curiosity to it, the more it seemed to support rather than undermine his leadership.

Act on your values

When you unhook yourself from your difficult thoughts and emotions, you expand your choices. You can decide to act in a way that aligns with your values. We encourage leaders to focus on the concept of *workability*: Is your response going to serve you and your organization in the long term as well as the short term? Will it help you steer others in a direction that furthers your collective purpose? Are you taking a step toward being the leader you most want to be and living the life you most want to live? The mind's thought stream flows endlessly, and emotions change like the weather, but values can be called on at any time, in any situation.

When Cynthia considered her values, she recognized how deeply committed she was to both her

WHAT ARE YOUR VALUES?

This list is drawn from the Personal Values Card Sort (2001), developed by W. R. Miller, J. C’de Baca, D. B. Matthews, and P. L. Wilbourne, of the University of New Mexico. You can use it to quickly identify the values you hold that might inform a challenging situation at work. When you next make a decision, ask yourself whether it is consistent with these values.

Accuracy
Achievement
Authority
Autonomy
Caring
Challenge
Comfort
Compassion
Contribution
Cooperation
Courtesy
Creativity
Dependability
Duty
Family
Forgiveness
Friendship
Fun
Generosity
Genuineness
Growth
Health
Helpfulness
Honesty
Humility
Humor
Justice
Knowledge
Leisure
Mastery
Moderation
Nonconformity
Openness
Order
Passion
Popularity
Power
Purpose
Rationality
Realism
Responsibility
Risk
Safety
Self-knowledge
Service
Simplicity
Stability
Tolerance
Tradition
Wealth

family and her work. She loved being with her children, but she also cared passionately about the pursuit of justice. Unhooked from her distracting and discouraging feelings of guilt, she resolved to be guided by her principles. She recognized how important it was to get home for dinner with her family every evening and to resist work interruptions during that time. But she also undertook to make a number of important business trips, some of which coincided with school events that she would have preferred to attend. Confident that her values—not solely her emotions—were guiding her, Cynthia finally found peace and fulfillment.

It's impossible to block out difficult thoughts and emotions. Effective leaders are mindful of their inner experiences but not caught in them. They know how to free up their internal resources and commit to actions that align with their values. Developing emotional agility is no quick fix. Even those who, like Cynthia and Jeffrey, regularly practice the steps we've outlined here will often find themselves hooked. But over time, leaders who become increasingly adept at it are the ones most likely to thrive.

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6

Why You Should Make Time for Self-Reflection (Even if You Hate Doing It)

By Jennifer Porter

When people find out I'm an executive coach, they often ask who my toughest clients are. Inexperienced leaders? Senior leaders who think they know everything? Leaders who bully and belittle others? Leaders who shirk responsibility?

The answer is none of the above. The hardest leaders to coach are those who won't reflect—particularly leaders who won't reflect on *themselves*.

At its simplest, reflection is about careful thought. But the kind of reflection that is really valuable to leaders is more nuanced than that. The most useful reflection involves the conscious consideration and analysis of beliefs and actions for the purpose of learning. Reflection gives the brain an opportunity to pause amid the chaos, untangle and sort through observations and experiences, consider multiple possible interpretations, and create meaning. This meaning becomes learning, which can then inform future mind-sets and actions. For leaders, this "meaning making" is crucial to their ongoing growth and development.

Research by Giada Di Stefano, Francesca Gino, Gary Pisano, and Bradley Staats in call centers demonstrated that employees who spent 15 minutes at the end of the day reflecting about lessons learned performed 23% better after 10 days than those who did not reflect.[1] A study of U.K. commuters found a similar result when those who were prompted to use their commute to think about and plan for their day were happier, more productive, and less burned-out than people who didn't.[2]

So, if reflection is so helpful, why don't many leaders do it? Leaders often:

- *Don't understand the process.* Many leaders don't know how to reflect. One executive I work with, Ken, shared recently that he had yet again not met his commitment to spend an hour on Sunday mornings reflecting. To help him get over this barrier, I suggested he take the next 30 minutes of our two-hour session and just quietly reflect and then we'd debrief it. After five minutes of silence, he said, "I guess I don't really know what you want me to do. Maybe that's why I haven't been doing it."
- *Don't like the process.* Reflection requires leaders to do a number of things they typically don't like to do: slow down, adopt a mind-set of not knowing and curiosity, tolerate messiness and inefficiency, and take personal responsibility. The process can lead to valuable insights and

even breakthroughs—and it can also lead to feelings of discomfort, vulnerability, defensiveness, and irritation.

- *Don't like the results.* When a leader takes time to reflect, she typically sees ways she was effective as well as things she could have done better. Most leaders quickly dismiss the noted strengths and dislike the noted weaknesses. Some become so defensive in the process that they don't learn anything, so the results are not helpful.
- *Have a bias toward action.* Like soccer goalies, many leaders have a bias toward action. A study of professional soccer goalies defending penalty kicks found that goalies who stay in the center of the goal, instead of lunging left or right, have a 33% chance of stopping the goal, and yet these goalies only stay in the center 6% of the time. The goalies just feel better when they "do

something." The same is true of many leaders. Reflection can feel like staying in the center of the goal and missing the action.

- *Can't see a good ROI.* From early roles, leaders are taught to invest where they can generate a positive ROI—results that indicate the contribution of time, talent, or money paid off. Sometimes it's hard to see an immediate ROI on reflection, particularly when compared with other uses of a leader's time.

If you have found yourself making these same excuses, you can become more reflective by practicing a few simple steps.

- *Identify some important questions.* But don't answer them yet. Here are some possibilities:
  - What are you avoiding?
  - How are you helping your colleagues achieve their goals?

  - How are you *not* helping or even hindering their progress?
  - How might you be contributing to your least enjoyable relationship at work?
  - How could you have been more effective in a recent meeting?

- *Select a reflection process that matches your preferences.* Many people reflect by writing in a journal. If that sounds terrible but talking with a colleague sounds better consider that. As long as you're reflecting and not just chatting about the latest sporting event or complaining about a colleague, your approach is up to you. You can sit, walk, bike, or stand, alone or with a partner, writing, talking, or thinking.
- *Schedule time.* Most leaders are driven by their calendars. So, schedule your reflection time and

then commit to keep it. And if you find yourself trying to skip it or avoid it, reflect on that!

- *Start small.* If an hour of reflection seems like too much, try 10 minutes. Teresa Amabile and her colleagues found that the most significant driver of positive emotions and motivation at work was making progress on the tasks at hand. Set yourself up to make progress, even if it feels small.[3]
- *Do it.* Go back to your list of questions and explore them. Be still. Think. Consider multiple perspectives. Look at the opposite of what you initially believe. Brainstorm. You don't have to like or agree with all of your thoughts—just think and examine your thinking.
- *Ask for help.* For most leaders, a lack of desire, time, experience, or skill can get in the way of reflection. Consider working with a colleague,

therapist, or coach to help you make the time, listen carefully, be a thought partner, and hold you accountable.

Despite the challenges to reflection, the impact is clear. As Peter Drucker said: “Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action.”

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Notes

1. Giada Di Stefano, Francesca Gino, Gary P. Pisano, and Bradley R. Staats, “Making Experience Count: The Role of Reflection in Individual Learning,” working paper 14-093, Harvard Business School, 2014.
2. Jon M. Jachimowicz et al., “Commuting as Role Transitions: How Trait Self-Control and Work-Related Prospec-

tion Offset Negative Effects of Lengthy Commutes," working paper 16-077, Harvard Business School, 2016.

3. Teresa Amabile and Steven J. Kramer, "The Power of Small Wins," *Harvard Business Review*, May 2011.

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7

You, By the Numbers

By H. James Wilson

A few years ago entrepreneur and scientist Stephen Wolfram wrote a blog post titled "The Personal Analytics of My Life."[1] In it, he mapped data about his email usage, time spent in meetings, even the number of keystrokes he's logged—*for 22 years*. The resulting charts and graphs are mesmerizing, and somewhat instructive. Wolfram has documented that he's a man of routine who likes to work alone late at night. He knows that although his scheduled telephone calls usually start on time, his in-person meetings are less predictable—and that he's hitting the backspace key 7% of the time he's on the keyboard.

This “effort at self-awareness,” as Wolfram described it, makes him a trailblazer in the growing discipline of *auto-analytics*—the practice of voluntarily collecting and analyzing data about oneself in order to improve. Athletes have long used visual and advanced statistical analysis to ratchet up their performance. Now auto-analytics is flourishing in the workplace, too. With wearables, mobile devices and apps, sophisticated data visualization, and AI, it has become fairly easy to monitor our office activity—and any factors that might affect it—and to use that information to make better choices about where to focus our time and energy.

This heralds an important shift in how we think about tracking work performance and even career planning. Employees have long been measured, but managers have traditionally chosen the tools and the metrics—and, more important, decided how to interpret the findings. With auto-analytics, individuals take control. They can run autonomous experiments to pinpoint which tasks and techniques make them most productive and satisfied—and then implement changes accordingly.

Wolfram's insight was that his "shockingly regular" routine liberated him to be "energetic—and spontaneous—about intellectual and other things." But he did not use the data to discover ways to improve his performance, and in that way his blog post is as much cautionary as it is pioneering, for it highlights the pitfalls of embracing auto-analytics without first adopting a plan. Lacking a clear goal at the outset, Wolfram took two decades to synthesize his vast collection of data. Even then he stopped at observation rather than progressing to analysis and intervention. What improvements could he have made on the basis of his findings? Would it have been more useful to map, say, project time lines against stress levels—or, given that he runs his company remotely, moods against time spent with others?

If these kinds of questions are not tackled up front, auto-analytics runs the risk of becoming a promising concept that's poorly applied and then dismissed as just another tech fad. To do it right, you need to understand the tools and develop an approach. The aim is not merely to increase self-awareness but to become better at your job and more satisfied with your life.

The tools

There are two broad types of auto-analytics tools. The first are *trackers*, which reveal patterns and help you set goals. They allow you to document routines and physical responses such as sleep hours, heart rate, and food consumed or calories burned—information you can use to learn, for example, how your caffeine and sugar consumption affects your work output or which office interactions spike your blood pressure. Trackers are best used longitudinally (over days, weeks, or longer) and iteratively, to test interventions and their results until the right balance is struck. You gather a baseline of personal data and then run cycles of data collection and analysis.

That analysis readies you for the second type of tools, *nudgers*, which guide you toward your goals by asking questions or prompting action on the basis of the data they've received. Nudgers are often apps or online tools that might tell you to work out, to stop drinking coffee, or to slow down during a presentation. They usually require some up-front investment to make the algorithms "know" how and when to ping you.

The analysis

What exactly can you measure? Using successful cases and research, I have developed a framework that includes three arenas where auto-analytics can be useful: the physical self, the thinking self, and the emotional self (body, mind, and spirit).

The physical self

Your physical condition affects your work. We've known this roughly since the Industrial Revolution, when Frederick Taylor's famous time and motion studies showed that an iron-plant worker's movements, such as shoveling pig iron into a cart, could be measured and improved. Likewise, the sleep patterns, stress levels, and exercise regimens of knowledge workers have been shown to affect productivity, creativity, and overall job performance. Today these workers can choose from a variety of mobile apps, wearable sensors, or desktop tools that autonomously collect rich data about their bodies' movements and physiological systems.

Business consultant Sacha Chua wanted to understand the relationship between her sleep schedule and achieving her professional priorities, so she has tested several tools for this purpose. Using a sleep-tracking app, she monitored her bedtimes, wake-up times,

SELF-MEASUREMENT AT A GLANCE

Tools in the field of auto-analytics often employ behavior-based algorithms to make recommendations to users. The analyzed data may be collected by wearable devices with sensors and visualized on mobile devices or computers. Most tools focus on one of three personal domains.

The physical self

Tools that measure and monitor physical movements and body functions help you make better decisions about professional effectiveness and well-being. Sleep trackers may gather data on sleep quantity and quality, enabling you to understand why you feel alert (or lethargic) on certain workdays and how to optimize the relationship between rest and performance. Movement or fitness trackers may count the

(Continued)

SELF-MEASUREMENT AT A GLANCE

number of steps you've taken or nudge you to get up when you've been sitting still for too long.

The thinking self

Tools focused on the thinking self gather data related to the routines, habits, and productivity of knowledge work. Browser-based attention trackers visualize patterns that reflect where and how much your attention flows across categories while on the web during a workday.

amount of sleep per night, and sleep quality over several weeks. (See the sidebar "Self-Measurement at a Glance.") With this baseline and a hypothesis that she was sleeping later than she should, she then tried waking up earlier—at 5:40 rather than 8:30 a.m.

Chua discovered, to her surprise, that she was getting *more* and better sleep with the new wake-up

The emotional self

Tools that measure emotions increase users' awareness of how professional decisions, situations, and actions correlate with mood. A mood-tracking app may prompt you with occasional simple questions to track your state of mind over time. Then it can make recommendations, derived from clinical practice insights and research data, about how you can improve job performance and satisfaction.

time, which improved her engagement and performance at work. It seemed to be forcing her to eschew unimportant late-night activities, such as browsing the web, so that she could go to bed earlier. Instead of squandering much of her morning in low-quality sleep while hitting the snooze button over and over, she could spend the time writing and programming.

This exercise was nominally about sleep, but the data provided a more rigorous way for Chua to explore, prioritize, and act on what really mattered to her personally and professionally.

The thinking self

In the 1960s Peter Drucker legitimized quantifying the thinking self into units of knowledge work. Although knowledge work has remained notoriously tough to measure rigorously or directly while it is being performed, its output is still tracked with approximations like billable hours, reports filed, or lines of code written. Such measures can inform managers and financial systems, but they do little to guide individuals who want to learn how to get better at their jobs. Auto-analytics can help by gathering data as you perform cognitive tasks, such as client research on your smartphone or statistical analysis in Excel.

Google engineer Bob Evans used both trackers and nudgers to investigate the relationship between his attention and his productivity. He explains, “As engineers, we load up our heads with all these variables, the intellectual pieces of the systems we are building. If we get distracted, we lose that thread in our heads.”

With a tool that interacts with online calendars, Evans analyzed how frequently he was shifting between solitary thinking and collegial interaction across his days and weeks—and then mapped that against his work output. The data showed him that he needs about four straight hours to get anything ambitious done, so he’s now focusing on his most challenging tasks when he has that kind of time, not during days when lots of meetings disrupt his mental flow.

Evans also uses a mobile app that randomly pings him three times a day, asking, “Have you been working in the past two hours?” If he hasn’t, he’s prodded to refocus. If he clicks yes, the app asks more questions: “What was your primary work activity?” and “What was your secondary work activity?” This data-gathering approach, developed by psychologist

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is called the experience sampling method, or ESM. Just over a week into Evans's three-week experiment, the ESM data began to show that he was responding to work emails too frequently, which distracted him from more important tasks. So he began to answer email just twice a day to see whether that increased his productivity. It did. In the third week, every time the app pinged him, he was in the midst of his core programming work. (Notably, one of Evans's colleagues set the app to check in with him *eight* times a day. He grew so frustrated that he abandoned the experiment.)

The emotional self

Daniel Goleman famously asserted that nearly 90% of the difference between outstanding and average leaders is attributable to emotional factors, not intellectual acumen. Indeed, many professionals are intrigued by the role emotions play in their careers, and they aspire to become more aware of their own emotional states and their ability to manage them. Yet assessment tools and coaches focusing on emotional intelligence are expensive, intrusive, and often reserved for select members of the C-suite.

Auto-analytics tools don't measure emotional intelligence per se, but they provide an easier way to gain insight into emotions and use data to enhance our predictions of what will make us happy in our daily work and careers. Many apps and tools track moods by prompting the user: "How do you feel right now?" If you use one on a GPS-enabled mobile phone, you can discover correlations between your emotions and your location. Are you happiest working at home, at Starbucks, or at the office? Are you less happy at certain client sites or when you travel? Or, using a tool that crunches textual data—such as the types of words in your email communications or journal entries—you can quantify feelings about a particular assignment or job opportunity.

These tools are no substitute for personal reflection, but they can facilitate the process. A case in point is that of Marie Dupuch, a branding strategist who had long envied people who “could recognize their mood and know exactly what put them in it.” Realizing she wasn’t that intuitive, she instead tried a quantitative approach to understanding her emotions.

With college graduation looming, and the pressure to “reflect and figure things out” before entering the job market, she began tracking her moods. During her three-month final semester, she used a beta version of a tracker app that asked her to rate her mood on a five-point scale three times a day. At first, the findings were predictable: Talking to friends and family on Skype enhanced her mood; riding on public transportation depressed it. But one data point stood out: Thursdays were her happiest days, which surprised her given that they were also her busiest.

On Thursdays Dupuch drove from her college campus to the city for a course on advertising that featured guest lecturers and required interaction with advertising executives and other creative types. She hypothesized that it was the exposure to the advertising world in an urban location that made her hardest day her happiest. So she decided to test her theory: She scheduled six informational interviews over five days with ad agencies in Manhattan and measured her mood the whole time. She reflects, “Through this test I was able to see with real data that advertising was a good bet, that this was the kind of career that would make me happy.” Today she is working happily and productively in the advertising industry in New York.

Of course, effectively tracking your emotions presupposes that you can take an analytical—even a clinical—view of your mood when data are being gathered. That’s quite different from tracking hours of sleep or number of emails sent. Dupuch is among many I’ve spoken to who say that the process is unnatural at first but that it gets easier with practice and eventually improves your ability to sense and react to how you’re feeling.

The future

It's still early days for auto-analytics. Nevertheless, important new streams of research, based in cognitive and behavioral science, are currently being conducted at universities and by private enterprises. A project called Quantified Self is hosting opportunities for individuals to try out auto-analytics tools and experimental methods. In addition, new field-based insights on data visualization and algorithm innovation from the field of business analytics have direct application for auto-analytics practitioners and toolmakers.

Two other trends are also emerging. First, the tools will become more sophisticated. Some will be smarter, with machine-learning algorithms that make the nudging function more nuanced so that, for example, the technology knows better when and how to ping you. They may also allow for more accuracy, gathering more types of data related to diet and physical activity at a faster rate. Some tools will become less visible—woven into clothing to capture physical data, for instance, or embedded in professional tools such as spreadsheets and word processing apps. Second, a more holistic approach to auto-analytics will develop. Applications will consolidate many kinds of measurements in a single dashboard and allow us to analyze ourselves across ever more complex dimensions.

Some tools already combine tracking and nudging—and can add a social dimension. They ask you to create a goal, such as increasing your number of sales calls or conversations with direct reports each week, and then use digital displays to help you analyze your daily progress toward achieving it. To increase your motivation, they use nudges or even levy small financial penalties when you veer off track. And they can be used socially so that people—even strangers—working toward the same goal can share data and encourage one another, as people do in a weight-loss club.

Tech entrepreneur Nick Winter has used this methodology to great success. When he felt he was on a productivity plateau and sensed that his new business was in jeopardy, he began gathering data on his work activities and output. Over a 10-month period, Winter tested four distinct approaches to being more productive, from spreadsheet tracking to nudger tools. He settled on an auto-analytics technique called "percentile feedback graphing" to help him see trends clearly. He has now assembled an online group of like-minded colleagues who compare—and compete on—their metrics.

Another example of data consolidation is Personal Analytics Companion (PACO), an open-source mobile app designed by Google's Bob Evans, whose story appeared earlier. "Instead of having all these vertical apps, from mood trackers to meeting trackers, this is one place where you . . . can mash all your data together and compare," Evans says. "You can see trends, distributions, relationships."

Imagine the auto-analytics app that helps a manager reschedule his innovation session because it knows he didn't sleep well, his extra-long commute created stress, and he has a dull budget meeting right before the session. Or consider the knowledge worker who arms herself before a performance review with personal benchmark data that will support or counter her manager's assessment.

That's where auto-analytics is heading. When analysis reveals higher performance on noncore tasks, auto-analytics can even become the impetus for a full-on career switch. Think of how much less anxiety that life-altering decision would cause if you had data to support it.

Applied the right way, auto-analytics can provide hard evidence in situations where traditionally we've relied on intuition and anecdotal feedback. Quantifying yourself is a revelatory experience—and perhaps the best thing you can do to improve your career and your life.

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Note

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8

How Are You Perceived at Work? Here's an Exercise to Find Out

By Kristi Hedges

It's not easy to understand how other people perceive us. We are often uncertain, confused, or even completely unaware of what we project. And this lack of self-awareness can be career-limiting.

Consider a former client of mine who was angling for the C-suite but had received feedback that his colleagues considered him negative and difficult. He was stunned; he thought of himself as analytical and thorough and assumed everyone understood that he pushed back in order to get to the best answer. He was also unaware that he had a habit of grimacing while processing information, which looked to others like annoyance.

My client was suffering from what psychologists call the *transparency illusion*—the belief that we're all open books and that what we intend is what people see. But there can be a wide gap between intent and impact. People are often unaware of their facial expressions, especially when deep in thought. (As a colleague of mine says, "Thinking faces aren't pretty.") And particular emotions can be confusing to interpret. Frustration and slight discomfort, for example, can easily be mistaken for each another.

Knowing that most of us don't clearly project what we intend doesn't stop us from confidently forming impressions based on the *impact* we feel. And in organizations, these impressions are often crowdsourced (a kind of offline Yelp for people) and a common narrative can emerge. These narratives get shared as advice (*Just started reporting to Ana? Here's the best way to work with her*) or spread as malicious gossip (*Claude's jockeying for power again*).

Tapping into this collective impression can give us valuable information on what's working for us and where we may need to adjust our style. Even if we get frequent feedback at work, it's typically about our functional performance. You may be told that your sales skills need sharpening, but not that people see you as self-interested. Which one has more of an impact on your career?

In *The Power of Presence*, I outline a straightforward presence audit to determine how others perceive you. It only takes a couple well-worded questions to a few key people to get the information you need. (If you've ever conducted a 360-degree evaluation, you've seen how quickly impressions start repeating.)

While this exercise won't take a lot of time, it may be psychically intensive. So keep in mind that there's never a comfortable time to do this and assume now is the exact right time.

Use this process as a guide:

- *Select five people.* Choose colleagues who see you repeatedly in relevant work situations:

bosses, executives, direct reports, peers, or even former colleagues. Influential coworkers who have their ears to the ground make great sources. If they know you in more than one aspect of your work or life, even better. While it's important that you have trusted people in your group, make sure to choose people who will tell it to you straight.

- *Ask for a face-to-face meeting.* Be clear that you'll keep whatever the person tells you confidential, which will encourage honesty, and that you'll be collecting feedback from several people to find themes, which lessens the burden for any one individual. Make the request in person if you can. People are more likely to consent to participate if they can see you. A phone call can work too if you can't be physically in front of someone. If you have to make the request via email, offer to answer any questions ahead of the meeting.

- *Ask two questions.* In the meeting, ask these two simple questions designed to tap into the collective wisdom:

    1. *What's the general perception of me?*
    2. *What could I do differently that would have the greatest impact on my success?*

    Depending on the person, you'll hear responses ranging from eye-opening and helpful to vague and confusing. If the person is uncomfortable, they may rely on job- or project-specific feedback. In that case, clarify:

    > *I appreciate that feedback. May I go up a level now and ask about the general perception of me as a leader/colleague/person?*

- *Manage your reaction.* Resist the temptation to explain yourself, defend your actions, or reveal disappointment. Your interviewees will be looking to see what effect their feedback

> has on you in real time. The quality of your feedback will only be as good as your ability to remain comfortable while receiving it. Ask for details or examples if you need them. And end with a sincere thank-you.

When you've finished the interviews, look for themes and repetitive points (it's OK to shed outliers as long as you're sure they don't contain valuable information). If the perceptions of you are in line with what you intend, great. If not, it's time to change your behaviors and begin to shift perception.

Many times clients have come back to me after completing this exercise and said, "Why didn't anyone tell me this before? I can easily change that!"

This is precisely what happened with my client who was perceived as negative and difficult. After realizing that he was being misinterpreted, he made a commitment to state his intentions up front to foster transparency. He adjusted his style in meetings to ask open-ended questions to make clear he was interested in understanding the other person's position. And he worked hard to control his tendency to grimace and keep a neutral facial expression that connoted openness. Gradually he was able to change perceptions, and allow people to know the empathetic and caring person that he knew himself to be.

The transparency illusion is a common trap for managers at all levels. Fortunately, it's possible to close the gap between how people perceive you and how you want to be perceived. Gather reliable information and then make a commitment to change.

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9

How to Solicit Negative Feedback When Your Manager Doesn't Want to Give It

By Deborah Grayson Riegel

In my role as a leadership coach, I consistently hear my clients say that they crave negative feedback from their managers in order to improve in their jobs, grow their careers, and achieve better business results. However, when it comes to soliciting negative feedback, they find that their managers would rather dismiss, deny, or delay it rather than speak directly, truthfully, and immediately about what isn't working and what needs to change.

That makes sense when you consider what may be at risk when giving (and receiving) negative feedback. In her article, "How to Give Negative Feedback When Your Organization Is 'Nice,'" my colleague Jennifer

Porter cites barriers to giving negative feedback that include hurt feelings; a desire to maintain professionalism (rather than having things get “messy”); a lack of role models for giving negative feedback; the prospect of an emotional outburst; and not wanting to jeopardize the “nice” culture.[1]

Additional research from University of California professors Naomi Eisenberger and Matthew Lieberman, and Purdue University professor Kipling D. Williams, shows that negative feedback can be experienced as a form a social rejection (“You’re telling me I’m not good enough and that I don’t belong here” is one frequent interpretation), and that social rejection hurts emotionally *and* physically.[2] Few managers want to cause their direct reports pain and potentially risk an emotional outburst, loss of commitment, or even retaliation.

Nevertheless, when people don’t receive useful negative feedback, they can’t grow. According to authors Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman in their article, "Your Employees Want the Negative Feedback You Hate to Give," when asked what was most helpful in their careers, 72% of respondents attributed performance improvement to getting negative feedback from their managers.[3] The same study also showed that managers were reluctant to give negative feedback.

Bill Gates agrees: "We all need people who will give us feedback. That's how we improve."[4]

So what do you do if you know that negative feedback is what you need to succeed—and nobody's talking? Stop asking for negative feedback (you've already tried that, right?) and try one of these creative approaches instead:

- *Give yourself negative feedback first.* According to Wharton professor and author Adam Grant, "When people shy away from giving constructive feedback, it's often because they're afraid of hurting your feelings. But if they hear you talk about what you did wrong, the fear melts away." Start by saying something like, "I know that I tend to work quickly and sometimes overlook important details. I'd like to get better at that. Do you have any thoughts on how I could improve?" And then, once you have them talking, you can ask, "And is there anything else I could be working to improve right now?"[5]

- *Make self-improvement a personal commitment—and ask for help.* If directly soliciting negative feedback isn't working, tell your manager that you've made a commitment to yourself to improve in three areas this year, and that you'd like her feedback on what one or more of those should be. Ask, "Would you please help me keep the commitment I've made to myself?" That way, she can view her feedback as more about helping you make good on a promise and less about hurting your feelings.

- *Reframe negative feedback as a learning opportunity.* If your manager, colleague, or client is reticent to offer negative feedback directly, ask, "What is something you think I could learn from you?" It gives the other person a chance to reflect on their own talents and skills (which makes most people feel good), and share their thinking about where they could help you grow—in a nonthreatening context. (If you're really lucky, they might even ask you, "And what is something you think I could learn from you?" and then you get to give some gentle negative feedback, too.)
- *Preemptively minimize the impact of the negative feedback.* When people are willing to give negative feedback, they often couch it as "just one little thing—it's not a big deal" to minimize the impact. You can do that yourself by asking, "If I could change just one small habit, what

> should it be?" That signals to the other person that they don't have to minimize, apologize, or put negative feedback in context to make it palatable for you—you've done it already.

Managers should be able to give negative feedback, but even if they don't, you need to learn how to solicit it so that you get the information you need to grow in your job and career.

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Notes

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10

Find the Coaching in Criticism

By Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone

Feedback is crucial. That's obvious: It improves performance, develops talent, aligns expectations, solves problems, guides promotion and pay, and boosts the bottom line.

But it's equally obvious that in many organizations, feedback doesn't work. A glance at the stats tells the story: Only 36% of managers complete appraisals thoroughly and on time. In one recent survey, 55% of employees said their most recent performance review had been unfair or inaccurate, and one in four said they dread such evaluations more than anything else in their working lives. When senior HR executives were asked about their biggest performance management challenge, 63% cited managers' inability or unwillingness to have difficult feedback discussions. Coaching and mentoring? Uneven at best.

Most companies try to address these problems by training leaders to give feedback more effectively and more often. That's fine as far as it goes; everyone benefits when managers are better communicators. But improving the skills of the feedback giver won't accomplish much if the receiver isn't able to absorb what is said. It is the receiver who controls whether feedback is let in or kept out, who has to make sense of what he or she is hearing, and who decides whether or not to change. People need to stop treating feedback only as something that must be pushed and instead improve their ability to pull.

For the past 20 years we've coached executives on difficult conversations, and we've found that almost everyone, from new hires to C-suite veterans, struggles with receiving feedback. A critical performance review, a well-intended suggestion, or an oblique comment that may or may not even be feedback ("Well, your presentation was certainly interesting") can spark an emotional reaction, inject tension into the relationship, and bring communication to a halt. But there's good news, too: The skills needed to receive feedback well are distinct and learnable. They include being able to identify and manage the emotions triggered by the feedback and extract value from criticism even when it's poorly delivered.

Why feedback doesn't register

What makes receiving feedback so hard? The process strikes at the tension between two core human needs—the need to learn and grow, and the need to be accepted just the way you are. As a result, even a seemingly benign suggestion can leave you feeling angry, anxious, badly treated, or profoundly threatened. A hedge such as "Don't take this personally" does nothing to soften the blow.

Getting better at receiving feedback starts with understanding and managing those feelings. You might think there are a thousand ways in which feedback can push your buttons, but in fact there are only three.

Truth triggers are set off by the content of the feedback. When assessments or advice seem off base, unhelpful, or simply untrue, you feel indignant, wronged, and exasperated.

Relationship triggers are tripped by the person providing the feedback. Exchanges are often colored by what you believe about the giver (He's got no credibility on this topic!) and how you feel about your previous interactions (After all I've done for you, I get this petty criticism?). So you might reject coaching that you would accept on its merits if it came from someone else.

Identity triggers are all about your relationship with yourself. Whether the feedback is right or wrong, wise or witless, it can be devastating if it causes your sense of who you are to come undone. In such moments you'll struggle with feeling overwhelmed, defensive, or off balance.

All these responses are natural and reasonable; in some cases they are unavoidable. The solution isn't to pretend you don't have them. It's to recognize what's happening and learn how to derive benefit from feedback even when it sets off one or more of your triggers.

Six steps to becoming a better receiver

Taking feedback well is a process of sorting and filtering. You need to understand the other person's point of view, try on ideas that may at first seem a poor fit, and experiment with different ways of doing things. You also need to discard or shelve critiques that are genuinely misdirected or are not helpful right away.

But it's nearly impossible to do any of those things from inside a triggered response. Instead of ushering you into a nuanced conversation that will help you learn, your triggers prime you to reject, counterattack, or withdraw.

The six steps below will keep you from throwing valuable feedback onto the discard pile or—just as damaging—accepting and acting on comments that you would be better off disregarding. They are presented as advice to the receiver. But, of course, understanding the challenges of receiving feedback helps the giver be more effective, too.

1. Know your tendencies

You've been getting feedback all your life, so there are no doubt patterns in how you respond. Do you defend yourself on the facts ("This is plain wrong"), argue about the method of delivery ("You're really doing this by email?"), or strike back ("You, of all people?")? Do you smile on the outside but seethe on the inside? Do you get teary or filled with righteous indignation? And what role does the passage of time play? Do you tend to reject feedback in the moment and then step back and consider it over time? Do you accept it all immediately but later decide it's not valid? Do you agree with it intellectually but have trouble changing your behavior?

When Michael, an advertising executive, hears his boss make an offhand joke about his lack of professionalism, it hits him like a sledgehammer. "I'm flooded with shame," he told us, "and all my failings rush to mind, as if I'm Googling 'things wrong with me' and getting 1.2 million hits, with sponsored ads from my father and my ex. In this state it's hard to see the feedback at 'actual size.'" But now that Michael understands his standard operating procedure, he's able to make better choices about where to go from there: "I can reassure myself that I'm exaggerating, and usually after I sleep on it, I'm in a better place to figure out whether there's something I can learn."

2. Disentangle the "what" from the "who"

If the feedback is on target and the advice is wise, it shouldn't matter who delivers it. But it does. When a relationship trigger is activated, entwining the content of comments with your feelings about the giver (or about how, when, or where she delivered the comments), learning is short-circuited. To keep that from happening, you have to work to separate the message from the messenger, and then consider both.

Janet, a chemist and a team leader at a pharmaceutical company, received glowing comments from her peers and superiors during her 360-degree review but was surprised by the negative feedback she got from her direct reports. She immediately concluded that the problem was theirs: "I have high standards, and some of them can't handle that," she remembers thinking. "They aren't used to someone holding their feet to the fire." In this way, she changed the subject from her management style to her subordinates' competence, preventing her from learning something important about the impact she had on others.

Eventually the penny dropped, Janet says. "I came to see that whether it was their performance problem or my leadership problem, those were not mutually exclusive issues, and both were worth solving." She was able to disentangle the issues and talk to her team about both. Wisely, she began the conversation with their feedback to her, asking, "What am I doing that's making things tough? What would improve the situation?"

3. Sort toward coaching

Some feedback is evaluative ("Your rating is a 4"); some is coaching ("Here's how you can improve").

Everyone needs both. Evaluations tell you where you stand, what to expect, and what is expected of you. Coaching allows you to learn and improve and helps you play at a higher level.

It's not always easy to distinguish one from the other. When a board member phoned James to suggest that he start the next quarter's CFO presentation with analyst predictions rather than internal projections, was that intended as a helpful suggestion, or was it a veiled criticism of his usual approach? When in doubt, people tend to assume the worst and to put even well-intentioned coaching into the evaluation bin. Feeling judged is likely to set off your identity triggers, and the resulting anxiety can drown out the opportunity to learn. So whenever possible, sort toward coaching. Work to hear feedback as potentially valuable advice from a fresh perspective rather than as an indictment of how you've done things in the past. When James took that approach, "the suggestion became less emotionally loaded," he says. "I decided to hear it as simply an indication of how that board member might more easily digest quarterly information."

4. Unpack the feedback

Often it's not immediately clear whether feedback is valid and useful. So before you accept or reject it, do some analysis to better understand it.

Here's a hypothetical example. Kara, who's in sales, is told by Johann, an experienced colleague, that she needs to "be more assertive." Her reaction might be to reject his advice ("I think I'm pretty assertive already"). Or she might acquiesce ("I really do need to step it up"). But before she decides what to do, she needs to understand what he really means. Does he think she should speak up more often, or just with greater conviction? Should she smile more or less? Have the confidence to admit she doesn't know something or the confidence to pretend she does?

Even the simple advice to "be more assertive" comes from a complex set of observations and judgments that Johann has made while watching Kara in meetings and with customers. Kara needs to dig into the general suggestion and find out what in particular prompted it. What did Johann see her do or fail to do? What did he expect, and what is he worried about? In other words, where is the feedback coming from?

Kara also needs to know where the feedback is going—exactly what Johann wants her to do differently and why. After a clarifying discussion, she might agree that she is less assertive than others on the sales floor but disagree with the idea that she should change. If all her sales heroes are quiet, humble, and deeply curious about customers' needs, Kara's view of what it means to be good at sales might look and sound very different from Johann's *Glengarry Glen Ross* ideal.

When you set aside snap judgments and take time to explore where feedback is coming from and where it's going, you can enter into a rich, informative conversation about perceived best practices—whether you decide to take the advice or not.

5. Ask for just one thing

Feedback is less likely to set off your emotional triggers if you request it and direct it. So don't wait until your annual performance review. Find opportunities to get bite-size pieces of coaching from a variety of people throughout the year. Don't invite criticism with a big, unfocused question like "Do you have any feedback for me?" Make the process more manageable by asking a colleague, a boss, or a direct report, "What's one thing you see me doing (or failing to do) that holds me back?" That person may name the first behavior that comes to mind or the most important one on his or her list. Either way, you'll get concrete information and can tease out more specifics at your own pace.

Roberto, a fund manager at a financial services firm, found his 360-degree review process overwhelming and confusing. “Eighteen pages of charts and graphs and no ability to have follow-up conversations to clarify the feedback was frustrating,” he says, adding that it also left him feeling awkward around his colleagues.

Now Roberto taps two or three people each quarter to ask for one thing he might work on. “They don’t offer the same things, but over time I hear themes, and that gives me a good sense of where my growth edge lies,” he says. “And I have really good conversations—with my boss, with my team, even with peers where there’s some friction in the relationship. They’re happy to tell me one thing to change, and often they’re right. It does help us work more smoothly together.”

Research has shown that those who explicitly seek critical feedback (that is, who are not just fishing for praise) tend to get higher performance ratings. Why?

Mainly, we think, because someone who's asking for coaching is more likely to take what is said to heart and genuinely improve. But also because when you ask for feedback, you not only find out how others see you, you also *influence* how they see you. Soliciting constructive criticism communicates humility, respect, passion for excellence, and confidence, all in one go.

6. Engage in small experiments

After you've worked to solicit and understand feedback, it may still be hard to discern which bits of advice will help you and which ones won't. We suggest designing small experiments to find out. Even though you may doubt that a suggestion will be useful, if the downside risk is small and the upside potential is large, it's worth a try. James, the CFO we discussed earlier, decided to take the board member's advice for the next presentation and see what happened. Some directors were pleased with the change, but the shift in format prompted others to offer suggestions of their own. Today James reverse-engineers his presentations to meet board members' current top-of-mind concerns. He sends out an email a week beforehand asking for any burning questions and either front-loads his talk with answers to them or signals at the start that he will get to them later on. "It's a little more challenging to prepare for but actually much easier to give," he says. "I spend less time fielding unexpected questions, which was the hardest part of the job."

That's an example worth following. When someone gives you advice, test it out. If it works, great. If it doesn't, you can try again, tweak your approach, or decide to end the experiment. Criticism is never easy to take. Even when you know that it's essential to your development and you trust that the person delivering it wants you to succeed, it can activate psychological triggers. You might feel misjudged, ill-used, and sometimes threatened to your very core.

Your growth depends on your ability to pull value from criticism in spite of your natural responses and on your willingness to seek out even more advice and coaching from bosses, peers, and subordinates. They may be good or bad at providing it, or they may have little time for it—but you are the most important factor in your own development. If you're determined to learn from whatever feedback you get, no one can stop you.

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11

Shakespeare’s Characters Show Us How Personal Growth Should Happen

By Declan Fitzsimons

Norman Mailer once wrote that there is a cruel but just law of life that says we must change or pay an increasing cost for remaining the same.

As a leadership scholar teaching in a business school, I encounter leaders daily for whom this “law” is a very real and disquieting one. They know what will happen if they don’t make the changes to their businesses, but they are not so sure what *they* should do to support those changes. Is it about learning how to run more effective team meetings? Or how to be better listeners? Or adopting a different leadership style to bring about a shift in organizational culture?

While there is no formulaic answer to these questions, there are some fundamentals without which no amount of skills development is ever going to work. One source of insight into what these fundamentals might look like is the work of an author whose work has never been out of print for over 400 years: William Shakespeare.

In the opening chapter of his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom, who has taught Shakespeare at Yale for 30 years, suggests that before Shakespeare, characters in plays would *unfold* but not necessarily *develop*.

If a character merely unfolds, we intuit correctly that we already know all there is to know about them when they first appear onstage. Their authors have robbed them of the one quality that would make them interesting: the capacity for self-inquiry that might reveal something unexpected not only to us but also to themselves. They teach us little because they cannot surprise us, essentially because they cannot surprise themselves. This is the real-world equivalent of the manager who comes out of a feedback session and thinks, “Nothing new—the same feedback as I have heard before,” and then says to themselves, “I guess I am what I am!” or “I have my way of doing things, and some people like it and some people don’t.”

Shakespeare does not let us off the hook so easily. He shows us that we are not simply who we say we are, but instead are made up of many conflicting and unknown parts. As Bloom puts it, Shakespeare’s characters develop because they have the ability to *overhear* themselves talk, either to themselves or to others, and are thus able to *reconceive* themselves. By endowing his characters with complex inner worlds, Shakespeare treats us, 400 years before Freud, to virtuoso displays of what to the modern ear sounds very much like self-discovery. There is not one Hamlet but many. After learning of his father’s murder, he discovers in soliloquies of stunning intensity that he cannot bear to remain as he is. So tortured is he by his inner conflicts that he considers, in perhaps the most famous soliloquy in all literature, the pros and cons of suicide ("to be or not to be").

We are mesmerized—not simply through the beauty of the language, but because we realize that he is hearing these things *for the first time*. And no matter how many times we see the play, we never tire of it, because it is at such moments that Hamlet, while in real danger of unraveling, is at the same time exquisitely vulnerable and thus truly human.

Shakespeare shows us through Hamlet and other characters not only the *sine qua non* of human development—that in order to change ourselves, we must first discover ourselves—but also what that development sounds like, looks like, and feels like. He shows us that it is the moment when Hamlet is so close to falling apart that he is able to fall together. In like fashion, the young Prince Hal, in *Henry IV, Part 2*, on becoming king, shuns his former companions ("Presume not that I am the thing I was") and begins his extraordinary transformation from profligate prince to King Henry V, hero of Agincourt.

For us, far away from the dramatic intensity of fictional characters, the point is not that we can change only if we contemplate killing ourselves or turn our backs on our friends; change is rather about moving toward, rather than away from, the anxieties that powerful external challenges provoke in our internal worlds. Hamlet was able to face his own inertia and cowardice; Hal was able to confront and thus transcend his dissolute lifestyle and embrace a new identity fit for a king. But both were possible only after the characters became willing to discover what lay within.

Shakespeare teaches us moderns that in the face of an uncertain world, self-awareness—that much-vaunted leadership quality—is only worthy of the name when it is revelatory. And it can only be revelatory when we are willing to concede that we know ourselves only partially.

Development, then, is less about changing ourselves by learning new skills than about discovering ourselves by giving something up—including some of our most cherished notions of the person we think we are—in order to discover the person we could become.

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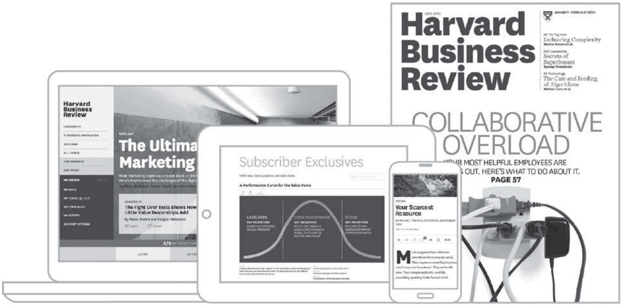
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