





## Why expand our consciousness by developing self-awareness?

A useful starting place for developing practical self-awareness is to consider: *What is it and how might it benefit me, others, my work, my vocation and the wider world?*

Spending time understanding ourselves; reflecting on our own thoughts, feelings and behaviours can sometimes seem like an indulgence we cannot afford; there are too many important and practical things to be done. Exploring our interior world is a journey that we do not always want to take; we are unsure of what we might find and where it might end, and we may be ambivalent about the potential 'return on investment'. For some people, this interior journey brings a sense of excitement and challenge, it is their equivalent of climbing Everest. For others it brings fear and defence, it is something to be avoided at all costs. Many of us are somewhere in between these two; self-awareness is great if not too costly or painful.

Let us begin with what it might be.

In those initial questions you will be working with your own understanding of what self-awareness is but let us also look at what some 'experts' might say. Our first port of call is some research published in the Harvard Business Review. Tasha Eurich, (An organisational psychologist, researcher, and *New York Times* bestselling author) identified two different aspects of self-awareness: Internal and External self-awareness.

1. **Internal self-awareness** is concerned with how clearly we:
  - See our own values, passions and aspirations,
  - Sense how well we fit with our environments,
  - Know our own reactions (including thoughts, feelings, behaviours, strengths, and weaknesses),
  - Understand our impact on others.
2. **External self-awareness** is about understanding how other people view us. What do they see as our values, passions, and aspirations, how well do they see us fit with our environments, how do they experience our reactions (including thoughts, feelings, behaviours, strengths, and weaknesses), and finally what do they see as our impacts on others?

(Eurich, 2018)

## We choose to be as we are!

Another way of looking at this is that awareness is a form of experience; loosely defined as being in touch with one's existence. A person who is aware of one's existence knows *what* they do, *how* they do it and they *know* they have alternatives. This view of awareness which comes from Gestalt (a humanistic approach to coaching and therapy) asserts that *we choose to be as we are*. (Yontef, 1993)

If we think about this last statement a little more, we realise how strong it is, it speaks of the personal responsibility that comes with awareness. Maybe that is one of the reasons we sometimes avoid being self-aware, it comes with great personal choice and responsibility. *We choose to be as we are!*

Many of us use coaching to support and develop others and at its heart coaching has a meeting of this awareness with responsibility. John Whitmore (one of many parents of work-based coaching) identifies these two key elements as crucial for people to develop; the coach works with the client to raise their awareness and responsibility in areas of their work life, recognising that these will impact in their wider life. (Whitmore, 2011)

In coaching the aim is to actively raise a person's awareness by focusing their attention on what is happening and in what context. By asking specific questions the person being coached becomes more self-aware which is key; knowing what is happening in and around you is instrumental for a person developing and improving their performance.

From this awareness comes an understanding of what a person can do differently and what they can change. We start to see that one of the benefits of self-awareness is that it increases our choices and encourages us to take responsibility.

*When we truly accept, choose or take responsibility for our thoughts and our actions, our commitment to them rises and so does our performance* (Whitmore, 2011, p. 31)

Now we have looked at some working definitions of self-awareness, pause and think how these might inform your own self-awareness.

- When do I avoid taking responsibility?
- What are my blind spots that I could understand better?
- How could I get feedback that will deepen my self-awareness?

## The return on investment from self-awareness

Great...we can become more self-aware both internally and externally; be more of aware of what and how we do things, but what does this lead to?

There are layers of the impact of self-awareness; the first is often about the feelings that we might experience through being self-aware, the second about our relationships with others and the third about how self-awareness improves personal and team effectiveness.

The research from the Harvard Business Review speaks to the first two layers; **inner self-awareness** was often associated with higher levels of job and relationship satisfaction, personal and social control, and happiness. The research also suggested that lack of this internal self-awareness was potentially related to anxiety, stress, and depression. Leaders with good **external self-awareness**, who see themselves as their employees do tend to have better relationships with employees and their teams feel more satisfied with them. (Eurich, 2018)

When working at the third layer its useful to consider the notion of; *We choose to be as we are*. We start to understand that some of the dynamics and challenges we experience in the workplace may be created by us. A common example I see in the workplace is leaders bemoaning the fact that staff will not take responsibility for their own actions, work, and performance. Often a deeper observation of the leaders' actions highlights that they like to be in control, micro-manage, advise, and tell others how to do things. In doing this they 'steal' responsibility and ownership from others. *Why would I take responsibility if someone else is going to tell me what to do and how and when to do it, they might as well do it themselves?*

In this example the leader is willing to spend some time developing both inner and external awareness, they would understand the impact they are having on others; begin to see they are helping create the very dynamic that frustrates them; they would begin to see other choices and how different behaviours would enable others to take more responsibility. They may even find that their own workload lessens as they stop taking unnecessary responsibility for others. If we were to be brave, we might suggest that when I have a team that does not take responsibility (or any other way of behaving) it is that way because on some level, I choose it, or invite it through the way that I behave.

It seems that this third level brings great reward. According to a study of 486 publicly traded companies with strong financial performance all tended to have employees with higher levels of self-awareness than poorly performing companies. (Esimai, 2018)

**Find someone who you trust and begin to explore some of the dynamics that you might be creating in your team.**

## Ways to develop self-awareness.

So, we should be starting to see what self-awareness is and what the returns might be for individuals and business. One of the challenges is, how do we develop a useful level of self-awareness? In the research cited in the Harvard Business Review, it is estimated that only 10%–15% of the people they studied fitted the criteria of being self-aware, however a much larger proportion said they thought they were self-aware. Seems like there might be a gap between perception and reality!

There is also a suggested 'gender gap'; women in executive-level management positions tend to exhibit more self-awareness than men in the same positions. In a study of 17,000 individuals worldwide, Hay Group Research found that 19 percent of women executives interviewed exhibited self-awareness as compared to 4 percent of their male counterparts (Business Wire, 2012).

So, is it that it is not really that important, the return on investment is just not enough? Or is it that it is quite difficult, risky, and challenging to do?

Let us look at some ways in which we might become more self-aware.

## The Experiential Learning Cycle

Consider an experience from your life and take a structured way to reflect on this experiencing using the cycle above. The table below will help.

<p><b>Experience</b>  What happened?  (Could be listening to a podcast, a conversation, something that happened to you, a dynamic in a relationship, something you read)</p>	
<p><b>Review</b>  What happened?  (This could include facts and feelings)</p>	
<p><b>Conclusions</b>  What have I learnt?  (This could include statements such as <i>when this... happens I react in this way...</i>)</p>	
<p><b>New steps</b>  What will I do differently and how do I expect this to impact me and others?  (This could include, actions, behaviours, new ways of thinking)</p>	

Experiment with using this table and approach a few times a week, maybe after a meeting or a task, or a situation where something did not go as anticipated.

## Personal Journaling (individual reflection)

A journal is usually a free-flowing process; just write. It can often help you make sense of your feelings, thoughts and learning.

If you struggle to find a starting place the list below may provide a suitable starting place

- ✓ How are you feeling?
- ✓ How are you changing?
- ✓ What questions do you have about your own approaches?
- ✓ What questions do you have about how you relate to others?

In the Artists Way at Work Mark Bryan and Julia Cameron write about what they call morning pages a structured approach to Journaling. (Mark Bryan, 1999)

- *The inner self has a variety of voices. In doing morning pages, you will experience some of them.*
- *The pages are written on three pages, one side each of eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch paper.*
- *There is no wrong way to do pages. Simply do them longhand and keep your hand moving across the page. Write down anything that comes to mind. Continue for three sides and then stop. Repeat this exercise daily.*
- *The three-page quota is carefully chosen. We have found that writing less that keeps your burners on low heat. More than that turns the fire up too high and may send you into a level of introspection that makes it difficult to return to normal functioning for the day.*
- *The pages are never to be shown to anyone else. They are your private place to dream, to fantasize, to complain, to exult. Keep them private.*
- *They are not generally to be reread or mulled over. Write them and move on.*



Start writing a daily journal, see what it brings.

## Walking and talking with a thinking partner (paired reflection)

While you are walking talk about what you are learning, thinking and feeling about yourself as a leader and a human. Your listening partners' role is to listen and to ask questions to prompt you to reflect more deeply about yourself as a leader.

Some questions you could consider as you start.

- *When do you lead?*
- *When do you follow?*
- *When do speak out?*
- *When do you withhold?*
- *What patterns are you noticing about your behaviours that could impact your leadership of others?*

Take 20mins each to support your partner. **NB** This is not a coaching session, the focus is about what is happening within your learning. Sometimes moving to *what am I going to do differently?* too quickly means we avoid deeper

## Johns' current model of structured reflection (Individual or paired reflection)

I don't know if it is just me but at times my own reflecting can become really unstructured, I can drift and lose focus. This adapted version of Johns' model draws on five different types of questions that we can use to bring structure to our reflections, they take us through a process that can deepen our reflections and self-awareness.

<p><b>Aesthetics</b>  <i>'things perceptible by the senses, as opposed to things thinkable or immaterial'</i> (Shorter Oxford Dictionary)</p> <p>The questions under this heading encourage you to focus on concrete actions and happenings– what happened in the here and now?</p>	<p><b>Personal</b>            These questions invite you to look inwards, and identify your own reactions and drivers</p>
<p><b>Ethics</b>  <i>'The science of morals... The science of human duty in its widest extent...'</i> (meaning 4) (Shorter Oxford Dictionary)</p> <p>These questions are about whether your actions were consistent with how you think or want to act, and if not, why not.</p>	<p><b>Empirics</b>  <i>Empirical: 'based on, or guided by, the results of observation and experiment only'</i> (meaning 1) (Shorter Oxford Dictionary)</p> <p>These questions ask you to pinpoint what previous learning and experiences led to you making the choices you did in this situation.</p>
<p><b>Reflexive</b>            These are questions that bring the reflection back to you, what is you learning, what change is potential in you?</p>	

Some statements and questions to guide you through reflecting on an experience that you have had.

Start by bringing the mind home- calm your mind down – take some deep breathes	Personal
Focus on a description of an experience that seems significant in some way (this is what happened)	Aesthetics
What issues are significant to pay attention to?	Aesthetics
How were people feeling, and why did they feel that way? (empathic inquiry)	Aesthetics
How was I feeling, and what made me feel that way?	Personal
What was I trying to achieve, and did I respond effectively?	Aesthetics
What were consequences of my actions on the client, others and myself?	Aesthetics
What factors influence the way I was/am feeling, thinking and responding to this situation?	Personal
What knowledge informed me or might have informed me?	Empirics
To what extent did I act for the best and in tune with my values?	Ethics
How does this situation connect with previous experiences?	Reflexive
How might I respond more effectively given this situation again?	Reflexive
What would be the consequences of alternative actions for the client, others and myself?	Reflexive
What factors might constrain my responding in new ways?	Personal
How do I NOW feel about this experience?	Personal
How am I better able to support myself and others because of my learning?	Reflexive
What insights have I gained through this reflection? (framing perspectives)	Reflexive

(Essay Writing Service , 2021)

Reflect on a particular situation in your workplace and use the Johns model to help you reflect and deepen your awareness

## Mind mapping (Individual reflection)

Mind mapping can be a creative way of exploring your learning of deepening an understanding of yourself. The mind map can have a particular incident or experience as its focus or an aspect of development or challenge e.g. Inspiring others, managing conflict, delegating etc.

The rules for producing Mind Maps are very simple and can be adapted to suit your personal preference. Mind maps can be developed using words or images or a mixture of both. Do not get caught up with the idea that because you may not be 'artistic' that you are not creative. We all can be creative in our thinking and reflection.

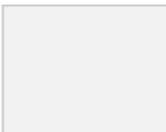
Some introductory rules for creating mind-maps. (International, 2002)

1. Take a blank piece of paper and draw the shape of your choice in the centre of the page.
2. Inside the shape write the name of the topic that you want to mind map, if you are using images then instead of your central shape and word draw your central image that represents your topic.
3. As each major idea or theme emerges from your brain draw a line radiating from the rectangle. Write the name of the major idea above each line

It is best to write in neat hand writing and the creators of mind maps (Buzan, 2006) suggest that you experiment with using different colours and different size text to display levels of importance of ideas and allows the words to describe and capture deeper meaning than just the spelt word.

For example a very unhappy afternoon could be shown as;

Or in a more descriptive manner which begins to capture more of a real essence;



Or this final one which starts to create a more factually based sense of what the *very unhappy afternoon* was about



4. As each idea materialises, quickly check whether the idea is an extension of an existing idea.

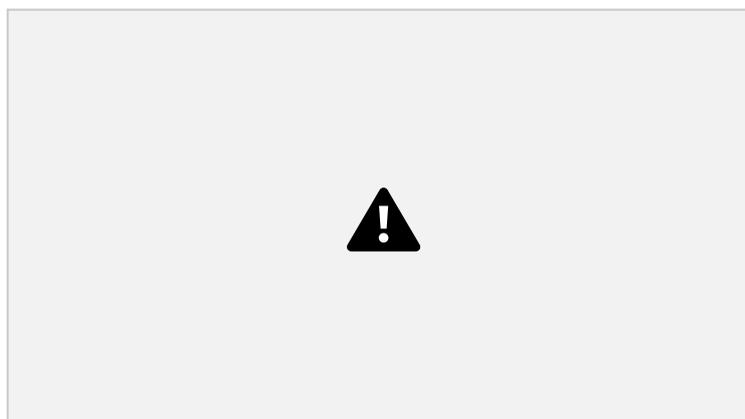
If it is, then just continue the line, If the idea is a variation of an existing idea then draw a branch off of the central line and label it. If the idea is something totally and utterly new, then draw a brand new line from the rectangle in the centre of the page.

5. Within a short space of time your Mind Map will begin to take shape. Don't be too alarmed if it looks as if a spider, with ink on its feet has crawled across the page. Mind Maps are personal records of thought processes and are normally PRIVATE.

6. Once you have finished generating ideas and constructing the Mind Map you can start analysing the information shown on the mind map.

Look for linkages - pieces of information at the end of a path that can be linked together in some way. Links can be shown by labelling the common points with letters, figures or by drawing a curve between two points.

Some people can experience mindmaps as works of art. Tony and Barry Buzan (2006) argue that this approach enhances the creative process.



This is an example of from *The Mindmap Book* of a mind map by a male chief executive of a multi- national organisation reconsidering his life and re-focussing upon his family. (Tony Buzan, 2006, p. 181)

## Mindfulness as a way to increase self-awareness.

Mindfulness is becoming more accepted as a useful practice that can enhance both personal and professional development. We seem to have moved beyond our suspicion of it being a spiritual and slightly mysterious practice to understanding that it makes sense at a cognitive and neuroscientific level.



Here are some useful introductions:

[Mindfulness: defeating distraction and amplifying awareness | Richard Chambers | TEDxUniMelb](#)

[How meditation can change your life and mind | Sam Harris, Jon Kabat-Zinn & more | Big Think](#)

There are many apps that can support workplace mindfulness a well-known one is [Headspace](#)

If you have never tried, maybe try it...!



## Bibliography

Business Wire. (2012, March 27). *Women Poised to Effectively Lead in Matrix Work Environments*. Retrieved from Business Wire:  
<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20120327005180/en>

Esimai, C. (2018, Feb 15th ). *Great Leadership Starts With Self-Awareness*. Retrieved from Forbes:  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ellevate/2018/02/15/self-awareness-being-more-of-what-makes-you-great/?sh=65f1795440dd>

Essay Writing Service . (2021, May 5th ). *Johns model of Reflection* . Retrieved from Essay Writing Service :  
<https://essaywritingserviceuk.co.uk/advice-and-guidance/johns-model-of-reflection>

Eurich, T. (2018, January 4th ). *What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)*. Retrieved from Harvard Business Review:  
<https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it#>

Mark Bryan, J. C. (1999). *The Artists Way at Work* . London: Pan books.

Tony Buzan, H. B. (2006). *The Mind Map Book*. London: BBC.

Whitmore, J. (2011). *Coaching for Performance*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Yontef, G. (1993). Awareness, Dialogue and Process. *Gestalt Journal* , 144-145.