

How Self-Awareness Pays Off

What Makes a Leader? Emotional and Social Intelligence

Carol and her team were faced with constant deadlines and complicated demands. Over time, the stress made her increasingly anxious, and her worrying made it difficult to complete her work and get along with her team. Eventually, she asked to be transferred even though it meant taking a pay cut and losing a possible promotion. Her story might have played out differently had she seen her stress as a problem she could manage better and found ways to find more balance. Perhaps she could have streamlined her work, delegated more, or addressed procedural hold-ups with other teams to alleviate pressure. She may have stayed on and even gotten that promotion. The simple act of *recognizing her emotional reactions* would have created the space she needed to do creative problem-solving – leading to improved performance for herself and her team.

Self-Awareness is the First Step. It is the ability to recognize and understand our emotional reactions; it underlies many of the other competencies. Being aware of your emotional state is necessary for developing skills related to self-control, for instance. Self-awareness is also necessary for exercising empathy, because we can only understand the emotional tendencies and triggers of others if we understand our own. Self-awareness involves taking a look at what is below the surface at the same time you become aware of what the surface – that other people see (your blind self) – actually *looks like*.

Self-Awareness is indispensable in leadership, allowing leaders to harness their own Competencies for the greatest positive impact on others.

Practical Applications of Self-Awareness. It leads to practical payoffs. This can be as simple as recognizing that you're feeling distraught about a relationship and reminding yourself not to project these feelings on colleagues at work. Those with self-awareness tend to be better at communication because it helps them attune to their own feelings and express them in a way that resonates with and motivates others. Understanding our emotional drivers and limitations also allows us to choose fulfilling careers that fit our capabilities and values. And, when we're at home, being in tune with how we feel helps us strengthen our bonds with the people we love.

How to Develop Self-Awareness. Like other EQ/EI competencies, self-awareness can be improved with regular practice. One of the most effective methods is mindfulness meditation, which actually reshapes the brain circuitry involved in emotion recognition and regulation. The research shows strong evidence that mindfulness:

- Lessens amygdala reactivity (our trigger for fight/flight/freeze)
- Increases calmness under stress
- Improves concentration and lessens mind wandering
- Cultivates greater awareness of mind wandering

Other techniques that can develop self-awareness include monitoring our bodies for physical sensations related to different emotional states and then journaling (emotional record-keeping), which can help us understand ourselves better. Example: you have a particularly heated interaction with a coworker; this practice allows you to notice that your throat feels tight, your stomach uneasy, or your ears hot. These are the physiological results of your emotional state, and pausing to notice them is a way of being self-aware. Such a practice helps you to “buy time” and to reconnect with your intentions and the real needs of the situation.



STRESSED		
Phys.	Emot.	Beh.
Distract	Deflect	Disorient

Buy Time

Try to create a daily or weekly habit of a “personal check-in” where you assess how you are feeling and why those feelings might be coming up. Maybe assess your overall level of stress, and create a list of potential ways to reduce that in order to feel more emotional balance. Also, getting feedback from others who know you well can broaden your self-awareness in context, and help you to see more clearly what behaviors you are exhibiting.