Knowing yourself



01 June 2018

Jo Maughan explains why the key to your success is enhancing your self-knowledge

Key Points

What is the issue?

You may not really know what self-awareness is even if you think you do. This article explains what self-awareness is with anecdotes and what the benefits could be of enhancing yours.

What does it mean to me?

By reading the article you will likely pause for some reflection.

The article is relevant to tax professionals at all stages in their careers and in all walks of the tax profession.

What can I take away?

An increased understanding about what self-awareness is; inspiration; know what the benefits are of enhancing one's self-awareness; six steps to get started on enhancing your self-awareness, and some memorable anecdotes.

As you move up the career ladder, it's fairly common to be told you need to increase your self-awareness. Okay, you understand the words, but what does it actually mean? And why should you care? Let me explain with a story…

Andrew (not his real name) had been promoted into his first Head of Tax role. He'd previously been the number two so was the obvious successor when the Head of Tax retired. The CFO tasked him with transforming the tax department from one that reacted to the risks the business threw at it to being one that worked hand-in-hand with the business to proactively manage and report on tax risks. Andrew saw the future very clearly but didn't know how to get his team to do things differently. Everything he'd tried felt like pushing water uphill. In a light-bulb moment, Andrew realised he'd been trying to win over his team using logic, his preference, when what was needed was to respond to the preferences of his team. In that moment, Andrew grew his self-awareness and realised what new tactics he could try to get what he and the CFO wanted.

Self-awareness is defined as being the conscious knowledge of one's own character, feelings, motives, and desires.

A boss once said to me that self-awareness is to understand the impact we have on others. Yes, but first it's to understand the impact (positive and negative) that others have on us; we automatically better understand and are able to adjust how we impact on others once we've understood the impact other people and situations have on us, and have learned to broaden our own range of possible responses. As Aristotle said: 'Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.'

In a meeting in 2011, I said that the review we'd commissioned from a Big 4 firm had concluded that our process was 'behind the curve'. Although true, what I'd failed to anticipate was the impact this comment would have on others. They didn't like it. I was met with defensiveness, which did not land well with me. I, in turn, became defensive. I'd been 'triggered' and was unable to get the meeting back on track because I was caught up in defending myself. The meeting wasn't productive and was re-scheduled. At that point in my career, my level of self-awareness had not equipped me sufficiently to plan HOW I would communicate the findings of the review in a way that people would be able to hear. Had I known about it, I could have used a tool called Perceptual Positions to prepare. Had I known how to, I could have explored the developmental feedback I'd received about my tendency to get defensive when challenged. Then I'd have been able to catch myself becoming defensive and would have had a good chance of being able to act differently.

I'm guessing this all sounds rather vague so here's another real-life story.

I used Perceptual Positions with a client when he couldn't work out why his peers were not sharing information with him. We revisited an internal meeting where he'd had this experience. I asked him to set up the table and chairs in the room in which we were meeting to replicate the set-up of his internal meeting. He did. First, I invited him to sit where he'd sat which he did. I asked him to revisit in his mind's eye what he'd said, how he'd sat, how he'd felt, and what others had done and said in response. He did so (first position). Second, I invited him to choose one of the other seats to sit in. He sat in the seat occupied by the lead partner. I invited him to imagine himself in the partner's shoes and to look back at the seat where he'd been sat to see, hear and feel himself from the lead partner's perspective. He did so (second position), and saw himself as knowledgeable and persuasive. We repeated this for the seat of his peer: He sat in the relevant seat. He imagined himself into his peer's shoes, and saw, heard and felt how he'd been from his peer's perspective (second position). A-ha! He saw himself coming across as hugely competitive. In that moment, he grew his self-awareness and knew what to change. (Had we got on to it, I would have invited him to take on the role of a third party observer (third position) to see, hear and feel the meeting from that perspective.)

Self-awareness is part of emotional intelligence. For leadership positions, emotional intelligence competencies account for 85% of what sets outstanding managers apart from the average (Daniel Goleman in 'Working with Emotional Intelligence') so unless you want to be average, the case to grow your self-knowledge is clear.

So how do you know where to focus your efforts? My advice is to examine situations that come up in your everyday working life (and life outside work too) that you find challenging and/or ‘difficult’, AND that you wish were different. You may have received feedback that it’s a development area. You may have noticed that whenever one of these situations come up you generate stress, worry, or anger for yourself. You don’t think, feel or behave how you want to. You are stuck in a groove of repeating thoughts, feelings and behaviours that are unhelpful to you, others and your organisation.

To give you some ideas, here’s a non-exhaustive list of situations people can find challenging and often decide to change:

- You doubt yourself constantly and don’t speak up. When you do, you lack impact.
- You find a colleague ‘awkward’. You’d like to be able to work together more productively.
- You want to feel more confident delivering ‘difficult’ messages, handling conflict and performance conversations.
- You want to be able to confidently and empathetically handle being on the receiving end of strong emotions at work.
- You’re not enjoying your present role. It’s affecting your performance and that of your organisation but you go round and round in circles with possible solutions.
- You struggle to delegate because you worry others won’t do it as well. You know you’re viewed as a micro-manager but you don’t know how to change.
- You sense your team holds things back from you. How do you maintain a professional distance as the boss and at the same time remain approachable?
- You notice you get into arguments with colleagues to prove a point. You know it’s petty and is affecting your career progression but you can’t seem to stop.

People who have explored how they are in situations such as these and have changed, nearly always get more from the self-discovery process than they imagined: they become more their true selves, happier and more successful at work and in life.

So you’ve bought into the idea that developing your self-awareness is worthwhile. Now, you’re wondering what to do next? I suggest these six steps:

1. **Identify your triggers**

Get yourself a journal or notebook. As you live your life at work and at home, notice when you feel negative emotions of any kind – stress, anger, overwhelmed, irritation, fear, sadness etc. Notice what happened to trigger these emotions. Record these trigger moments in your notebook or journal – both generic and specific situations.

2. **Spot the themes**

When you have a list of 10-20 trigger situations, stand back and spot the themes. It's very likely there is a common theme to the situations. It is also very likely that it's that very theme you need to work on to grow as a professional and a leader.

3. **Decide what needs to change**

Decide what needs to change in you. Be honest and think big. What one thing would make the biggest difference? For example, to 100% believe in yourself; to stop being a perfectionist.

4. **Picture the benefit of changing**

Imagine how you will be and how situations will be when you've changed the one thing. Picture the future in your mind's eye. This will help motivate you.

5. **Decide HOW to be different and what you will do**

This is the hard bit. When we are used to thinking, feeling and behaving as we do, we don't know any different and even when we do, we are unlikely to know HOW to be different. This is where personal development books, videos, courses, mentors and coaches come in. They support you to discover what's getting in your way; to

broaden your perspectives and ways of being; and they teach tools to help you change.

Remember nothing changes without action: Decide what you will do. Decide for how long. Decide what you will do if you get stuck, e.g. engage a coach, speak with your mentor.

6. **Do and acknowledge**

Do whatever you've committed to and acknowledge yourself for your actions and your successes – large and small. Change is not easy, and a new habit takes at least 40 days to create, so acknowledge yourself to keep going.