

How Self-Aware Am I?

DOES IT REALLY MATTER? WHY SHOULD I WANT TO BE SELF-AWARE ANYWAY?

BY PAMELA COSTAKIS, M.S.ED.

Self-awareness is a fairly new buzzword. I hadn't thought much about this topic until this past summer when I attended a family birthday party. My brother and sister-in-law, who is a marriage and family therapist, were in town from California. She was talking with two of my cousins whom she had only met a few times, many years ago. On the ride home that night, she shared that they both were very good listeners, very authentic, and really tuned in to what she was saying. She then said, "They are very self-aware." Here it was, something I wanted to claim for myself! Am I self-aware? I knew I had to learn more about this.

As I began to research self-awareness, I learned that [one study](#) estimates that only 10-15% of people are truly self-aware; however, it is a trait that can be cultivated, so the rest of us, in the 85-90% majority, have hope.

[One article](#) noted that self-awareness is positively correlated with higher overall happiness. It also is related to higher levels of job satisfaction, improved relationships with colleagues, and is helpful in managing emotions.

How many times have I wished I could keep my emotions in check? How many times have my emotions interfered with making decisions? Would I be a better leader if I was more self-aware? How would that impact my team and my leadership?

A DEFINITION OF SELF-AWARENESS

[Self-awareness](#) is the ability to focus on yourself and how your actions, thoughts, or emotions do or don't align with your internal standards. If you're highly self-aware, you can objectively evaluate yourself, manage your emotions, align your behavior with your values, and understand correctly how others perceive you. Self-awareness is a fundamental tool for self-control.

CATEGORIES OF SELF-AWARENESS: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

[Internal self-awareness](#) is understanding how well your standards match your environment. Am I in the best workplace for me? Does it match my values and passions?

[External self-awareness](#) is the ability to see how other people see you. As a leader, you must recognize how others view you and understand how you make others feel.

Psychologists [Shelly Duval and Robert Wicklund noted](#), “When we focus our attention on ourselves, we evaluate and compare our current behavior to our internal standards and values. We become self-conscious as objective evaluators of ourselves.” In other words, when you focus on yourself rather than your environment, you compare yourself with your standards of correctness. These standards of correctness specify how you *ought* to think, feel, and behave. They are, essentially, your values and beliefs, also known as your ideals.

You may feel pride or dissatisfaction depending on how well your behavior matches your standards of correctness. If you are dissatisfied, you might change your behavior to better align with your standards. For instance, you might note feelings of discontent in your current role and recognize that you value creativity but don’t have the opportunity to exercise that passion. That dissatisfaction could lead you to pursue other creative outlets, changing your behavior to fit your standards.

TAKE A SELF-AWARENESS QUIZ

This [self-awareness quiz](#) will help you evaluate your hidden opportunities for growth and success in your work. In addition, the information provided by Mike Bundrant, the co-founder at the iNLP Center, will give you tips for self-reflection.

SELF-AWARENESS AND THE ROLE OF PROGRAM LEADERS

Are you in the 10-15% of people who are already highly self-aware, or are you, like me, part of the majority who need to think and do something to improve your self-awareness? Even if you are in the 10-15%, you also can learn to be more self-aware.

I wish I had known more about self-awareness when I was a leader of an early childhood program. At that time, I did know that introspection was important for teachers. I remember having the zero-to-three teachers reflect on their own early childhood experiences and their impact. How were they raised? How were they disciplined? How do they view the nature of children? What is the role of a teacher of very young children? How do the answers to these questions impact their teaching decisions? I was asking them to reflect and, in a sense, become self-aware.

How can the same sort of exercise and introspection be helpful to program leaders? How should we reflect on our own view of leadership? How do those views influence the way we lead? How does a leader’s previous experience shape leadership decisions?

At the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, we have developed the [Whole Leadership Framework](#) in order to clarify the concept of early childhood leadership. One of the domains is leadership essentials which are foundational competencies and individual qualities necessary for leading people, that

are expressed in personal leadership styles and dispositions. Included in this is the personal attribute of self-efficacy and the tool of awareness of self and others.

The Stanford University Business Advisory Council cited Showry and Manasa in [identifying self-awareness](#) as “the superior competency that leaders must develop.” Daniel Goleman’s 1995 book, [Emotional Intelligence](#), declared that self-awareness is the keystone of emotional intelligence. Frank Richards noted that without [self-awareness](#), leaders are unable to demonstrate empathy for others. Goleman notes that self-awareness requires “a deep understanding of one’s emotions, as well as one’s strengths and limitations and one’s values and motives.” [Karl Albrecht](#) found that the degree to which leaders are self-aware enables them to select the most effective response for working with others.

HOW DO I INCREASE MY SELF-AWARENESS?

The following strategies will help leaders use self-awareness in their daily interactions with others to strengthen program communication.

- **Reflect.** Leaders can reflect in many ways. Journaling, meditation, or yoga can all be beneficial. Carve out solitude. Avoid digital distractions. Focus on the ways self-awareness can help you lead.
- **Become a good listener.** Check your biases. Be open to others and what they are telling you.
- **Seek feedback.** Ask for feedback from a trusted source. Talk to a variety of people to develop a comprehensive view of yourself. Ask what they see as your best qualities. How would they describe you to others?
- **Check on your values and standards.** Does your workplace reflect your values? Do your standards align with those around you?
- **Continue learning about self-awareness.** Read helpful self-awareness resources. For example, look for [articles online](#) that connect self-awareness and leadership.

As a leader, the work begins with you, but you can take your staff on the journey with you by incorporating the strategies above into your work together. What other strategies can you use to incorporate self-awareness in your leadership practices? How can you build this into your workplace culture? The change begins with you.

***Pamela Costakis, M.S.Ed.,** is the Quality Assessment Manager for the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University (NLU), where she manages the two state assessment teams that conduct classroom and program assessments throughout the state of Illinois. Pam holds a baccalaureate degree in psychology from Bradley University and a graduate degree in early childhood education from Northern Illinois University. She also has a certificate from Erikson Institute in Infant Specialist Studies. Prior to joining the McCormick Center, Pam was a nursery school teacher, an early childhood special education teacher, family childcare network coordinator, state pre-K director of a large child care center, center director of a therapeutic preschool, center director of a child care center for*

women in treatment, and a master teacher in a Head Start center. The majority of her work has been with underserved populations.