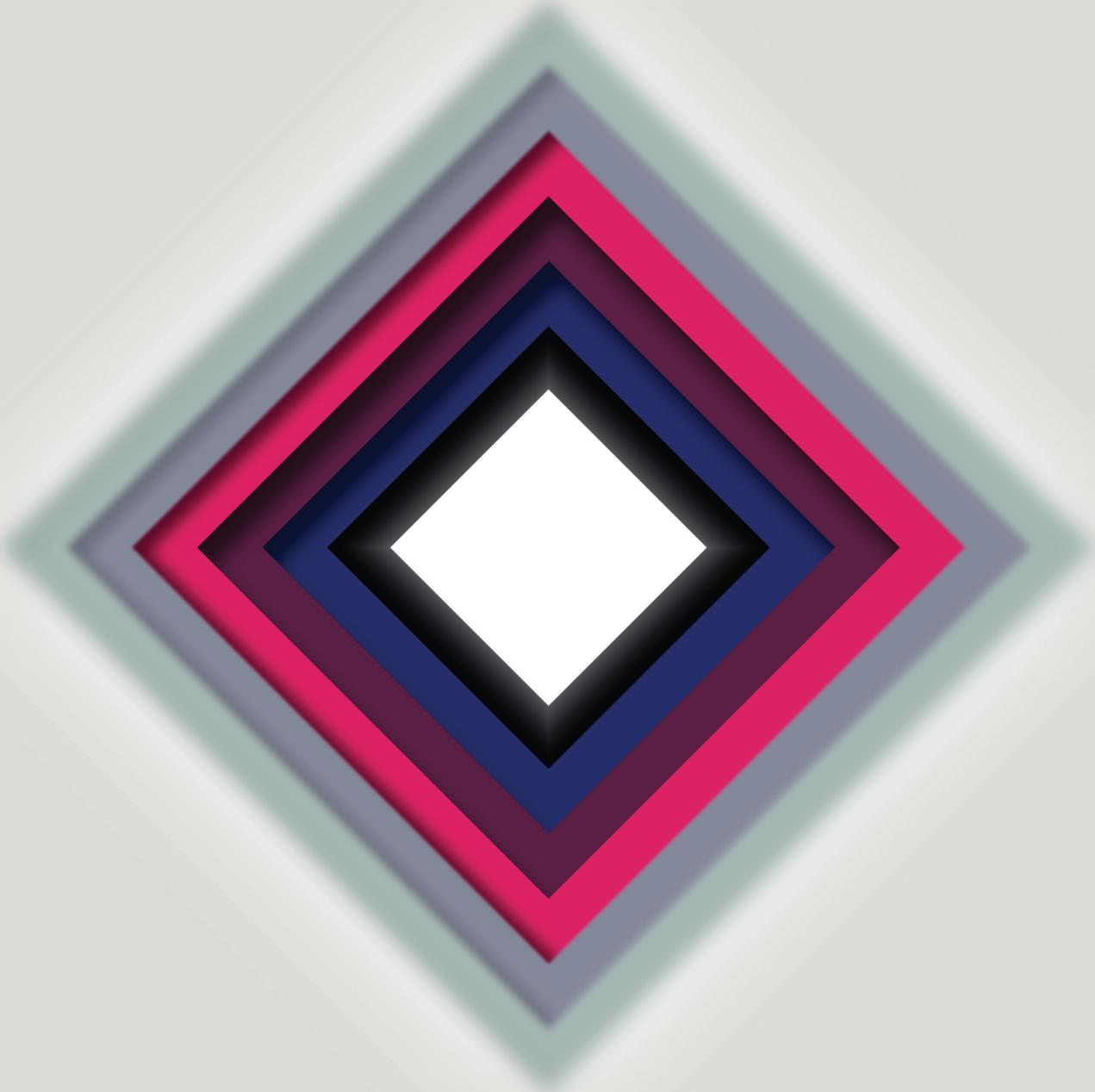


# The Power of Self-Awareness



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We've all had experience with leaders who possess strong business intuition, but lack relational intuition. These are the kinds of leaders that are prone to having a fit of anger in a meeting, or for disappearing from the office, when a personnel conflict arises. Though these kinds of leaders can still excel at juggling the constant stream of demands placed upon their resources, when it comes to engaging with interpersonal dynamics, they often fail to deliver, and their employees, are always the first to notice. So what's the linchpin separating these otherwise good leaders from becoming great ones? It's not IQ, it's self-awareness.

Studies have shown that increased self-awareness contributes positively towards managing stress, effective decision-making, accessing creativity, and practicing 'the pause' in the face of chaos. But as the demands on our time, attention, and energy grow, often the first thing to be cut from our priorities is the cultivation self-awareness. Part of the problem is that self-awareness requires a different skill set than many leaders have naturally tucked away in their tool kits. It requires the patience for stillness instead of movement; the humility for reflection instead of continual action; and it requires the courage to see ourselves clearly, both for our positive, and for our negative, qualities.

## So what is it?

Self-awareness is the ability to accurately and consistently pay attention to ourselves. This process occurs both internally and externally. Quality self-awareness directs attention to what we think, feel, and experience internally while simultaneously paying attention to how we impact those around us. Accurately identifying these internal patterns of relating and how these patterns impact others is the essence of self-awareness, and in this way, self-awareness becomes foundational to our relational awareness.

**“Explore thyself. Herein  
are demanded the eye  
and the nerve.”**

**- Henry David Thoreau**



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The foundational nature of self-awareness has been recognized by Emotional Intelligence researcher and author, Daniel Goleman. Goleman notes that self-awareness is the least visible of the emotional intelligence competencies, and yet, individuals who test high in self-awareness also demonstrate the overwhelming majority of emotional intelligence competencies. Basically, if you cultivate the soil of self-awareness, the odds are in your favor that you will harvest self-awareness along with emotional regulation, empathy, and inspirational leadership, all of which are the cornerstones of strong emotional intelligence<sup>1</sup>.

For leaders with a broad scope of interactions and responsibilities, self-awareness possesses extensive value because it cuts across all interpersonal interactions. In these interactions, it helps correct for the bad while simultaneously augmenting the good. Once cultivated, increased awareness can be utilized positively in every interaction you are involved in.

## Cultivating Self-Awareness

Unfortunately, quality self-awareness is a scarce commodity. The first barrier to self-awareness is that the overwhelming majority of people believe *they already have it*. Sasha Eurich notes this in her book *Insight*. By believing that we already possess a critical amount of self-awareness, we cease to be curious about how to grow in this area. Second, like most commodities, you must devote resources in order to acquire it. In light of these two obstacles, we must recognize that we are prone to think we have self-awareness when we do not and, as a result, we devote insufficient resources to cultivating it. Despite these potential challenges, Eurich highlights the good news of self-awareness: it is a trait that can be actively developed<sup>2</sup>.

Self-awareness is a lot like a muscle. We need a baseline of strength and health followed by routines and practices that maintain good functioning. This maintenance rarely provides dramatic returns in the moment; rather, the returns on the investment in self-awareness compound over time. If we can recognize the value, and the need, we can then take steps to cultivate deeper, more reliable self-awareness.



## Strategies for Cultivation

1. Listen--To others and to yourself. There is no substitute for paying attention and being willing to listen to what is unfolding in and around you. Listen, and listen well.
2. Personal Reflection--Practices like journaling, meditation, mindfulness serve to engage your inner world.
3. Feedback from others--This can include asking direct reports for points of frustration or things they appreciate about you. The same can be asked of colleagues and board members.
4. 360 Review--For a more formal version of feedback, consider engaging with a 360 review from a professional coach. These reviews offer quality information because they are conducted thoroughly and by an independent party.
5. Trusted Friends--Self-awareness is cultivated by having multiple vantage points to see ourselves from different perspectives. The longevity and trust present in our closest friendships offers an invaluable entry point into self-awareness.
6. Therapy--A good therapist can go a long way towards helping us understand the things that shape us and drive us.
7. Coaching--Similar skills of a therapist but pointed at specific applications within your life or work.
8. Mentoring--A trusted mentor can be another valuable angle to see yourself from with the added benefit of having familiarity with the roads you are walking down.
9. Reading--Read books and articles that consistently feed your curiosity about who you are and how you operate.

## Applications for Self-Awareness

- Being aware of your tendencies allows you to make informed decisions about where to put your energy.
- Find your blind spots and correct for them. This takes work and a willingness to accept our limitations. But once located, you have the opportunity to surround yourself with people and systems that correct for your blind spots.
- Recognize your emotional and relational defaults. Once identified, implement a strategy to address these default patterns. These patterns can in-

Ray Dalio, head of one of today's most successful hedge funds has a bold and thought-provoking perspective on this topic. A perspective we all can learn from. Not only does he highlight the importance of self-awareness in his book *Principles*<sup>3</sup> but, he recently identified meditation as the *single greatest contributor* to his success. Meditation serves as a fantastic vehicle to cultivate more awareness of our inner world.



clude anger in the face of conflict, fear in the face of decisions, paralysis in the midst of chaos. You may default toward action or inaction. There is not a right or wrong set of defaults. There is only awareness and willingness to find solutions that match how you operate.

- Utilize self-awareness to aim for intentional interactions and not reactive responses. Because the best laid business plans, even those with every chance for success, can be derailed by our relational blind spots.
- Actively remind yourself of the importance of self-awareness during conflict.
- Recognize the value of self-awareness to regulate high-pressure meetings.
- Speak openly and vulnerably about this process for yourself. In doing so, you will inject this value into your organization from the top down.
- Utilize this openness and vulnerability to build trust within your organization. In his book *Trust Factor*<sup>4</sup>, researcher Paul Zak noted the positive benefits of vulnerability to increase organizational trust.
- Remember: Self-awareness is a key differentiator between a good leader and a great leader. Cultivate this differentiator by deploying your relational resources into building a strong sense of self-awareness.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence

<sup>2</sup> Sasha Eurich, Insight

<sup>3</sup> Ray Dalio, Principles

<sup>4</sup> Paul Zak, Trust Factor

“To be aware of a single shortcoming within one-self is more useful than to be aware of a thousand in somebody else.”

– Dalai Lama



**San Francisco**

201 Mission Street, Suite 2350  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
investments@builders.vc

**Chicago**

1165 N. Clark Street, Suite 501  
Chicago, IL 60610  
investments@builders.vc

[www.builders.vc](http://www.builders.vc)



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