



Positive Leadership

Chapter 1: Self-Awareness

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“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.” - Aristotle

An Introduction to Self-Awareness

Self-awareness – the conscious understanding of oneself, including our emotions, strengths, weaknesses, values, and its impact on others – is a cornerstone of effective leadership.



In the public sector, where leaders navigate complex challenges and serve diverse, and sometimes competing, internal and external communities, cultivating self-awareness is essential for fostering trust, making informed decisions, and leading with integrity.

Thought-provoking research by organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich (2018) emphasizes that self-awareness encompasses two primary dimensions:

- **Internal self-awareness:** This entails how clearly we understand ourselves, including our values, aspirations, strengths and weaknesses, and our reactions (including thoughts, feelings, behaviors) and their impact on others.
- **External self-awareness:** This relates to how accurately we can discern how others experience us, based on the same dimensions outlined above. The more accurate our understanding, the higher our external self-awareness.

While it may seem logical to assume that being high on one type of self-awareness leads to being high in the other, this is not the case. Eurich outlines four different leadership archetypes.

Introspectors (High internal; Low external)	Aware (High internal; High external)
Seekers (Low internal; Low external)	Pleasers (Low internal; Low external)

This table is powerful not just because it's based in research, but because it's easy to understand and immediately useful. It clearly shows the problems that come with having blind spots in either kind of self-awareness—and why the most effective leaders score high on both.

The Business Case for Self-Aware Leadership

Research from diverse sources shows the power of self-awareness. Some of the most common benefits include¹:

- Better decision-making
- Creativity
- Higher emotional self-regulation
- Decreased stress
- Increased happiness
- Higher self-confidence
- Greater influence
- Improved communication
- Stronger relationships with others

Clearly, each of the areas above significantly impacts one's ability to be an effective leader as well as how well one functions in their personal life.



A note of caution and an opportunity for self-reflection.

It's important to pause here and ask an important question before we can proceed to the next section about practical ways to enhance our self-awareness. How many of you are tempted to skip to the next chapter or are only reading to see what *other* people need to do to raise their self-awareness? Based on the available research, I estimate the vast majority of you.

Although this may feel like a personal attack or judgment, it's not. There is considerable research supporting the Dunning-Kruger Effect²; the tendency to evaluate ourselves in an overly positive way. Independent studies have found this exists in every domain of our lives; both personal and professional.

¹ Sutton A. (2016) Measuring the Effects of Self-Awareness: Construction of the Self-Awareness Outcomes Questionnaire. *European Journal of Psychology*. 12(4):645-658; London, M., Sessa, V., Shelley, L. (2022). Developing Self-Awareness: Learning Processes for Self- and Interpersonal Growth. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. 10(1) 261-288; Eurich, T. (2018). What self-awareness really is (and how to cultivate it). *Harvard Business Review*, 4.

² Dunning-Kruger Effect, *Psychology Today*.

One of my favourite examples is that research consistently finds that the majority of people rate themselves as above average on interpersonal skills, despite the fact that this is statistically impossible. The Dunning-Kruger effect has been found in ethical decision-making/integrity, romantic relationships. You name it, the Dunning-Kruger Effect is there.

To further support this reality, multiple scientific studies repeatedly find that self-awareness is incredibly rare. Recall the groundbreaking work conducted by Eurich (2018) I discussed earlier on. She estimates that only 10-15% of people possess a reasonable level of self-awareness.

This information is not shared to shame or insult. It is to draw attention to the fact that every single one of us is at risk of falling victim to this effect, which threatens to undermine our personal and professional effectiveness. Being aware of this potential blind spot is critical to our journey to become a more positive and impactful leader.

Practical Strategies to Enhance Self-Awareness

Public sector leaders can adopt the following strategies to develop and enhance self-awareness.

1. Journaling

Considerable evidence supports the emotional, psychological and even physiological benefits of journalling³. One intriguing study noted these effects were realized regardless of whether the participants felt comfortable journalling or whether they journalled frequently⁴.

One important caveat: the most effective type of journalling combines [our emotions and our thoughts](#). When people only focus on writing about feelings or rumination, the effects can be negative. Embracing the analytical and emotional elements of the process foster the greatest positive impact.

For example, instead of only writing “I felt anxious during the meeting,” a more constructive entry might be: “I felt anxious during the meeting because I wasn’t sure how my ideas would be received. Next time, I can prepare more thoroughly and ask for feedback early on.” This kind of balanced reflection promotes clarity, growth, and emotional regulation.

2. Stop asking “why?” and start asking “what?”

While most people may assume that being introspective enhances our self-awareness, the available evidence discredits this idea. In fact, Dr. Eurich noted that one of the most surprising findings in her research is that people who introspect were less self-aware and report lower levels of job satisfaction and well-being. A thought-provoking and valuable insight from her investigation is that the primary reason introspection has limited, if not negative effects is because of how most of us approach it.

³ Pennebaker, J.W. et Smyth, J.M. (2016). [Opening Up by Writing It Down](#), Greater Good Magazine.

⁴ K.M. Chan, K. Horneffer (2006). [Emotional expression and psychological symptoms: A comparison of writing and drawing](#), The Arts in Psychotherapy.

Generally speaking, we tend to introspect by asking, “Why?” For example, “Why did I do that? Why did I react that way? Why didn’t I notice how my employee was feeling?” Although this seems like a valid question, it is quite ineffective.

Dr. Eurich brilliantly summarizes this challenge:

“Research has shown that we simply do not have access to many of the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and motives we’re searching for. And because so much is trapped outside of our conscious awareness, we tend to invent answers that feel true but are often wrong. For example, after an uncharacteristic outburst at an employee, a new manager may jump to the conclusion that it happened because she isn’t cut out for management, when the real reason was a bad case of low blood sugar.”

This leads to a logical follow-up question: What is a better alternative? The answer is in that question.

Dr. Eurich’s team exhaustively reviewed the transcripts of the most highly self-aware. They realized that few of them used the word “why” when speaking on the topic of self-awareness (the word was only found 150 times across the transcripts). A much more common word found in the language of the most self-aware individuals was “what,” which appeared more than 1000 times.

The bottom line: the best way to enhance self-awareness is to limit our “why” questions and replace them with “what” questions. For example, instead of asking, “Why am I so stressed?” ask, “What situations tend to trigger my stress, and what can I do to respond differently next time?”

Shifting from “why” to “what” leads to more constructive insights and actionable clarity.

3. Utilize assessment tools

Personality assessments can reveal profound and important insights into our tendencies, style, interpersonal preferences, strengths, and developmental requirements. It essentially provides insight into how we show up in the world, how we communicate, and how other people may perceive us.

For example, when compared to the average person, how assertive are we? What is our proneness to anger, openness to experience, or level of conscientiousness?

It is important to recognize that not all assessments are created equal. For example, despite the widespread popularity of the Myers-Briggs (MBTI), there is very little scientific data to support it.

Indeed, bestselling author and top-rated Wharton professor Adam Grant wrote a compelling critique of the science (or lack thereof) surrounding the MBTI, which created quite a stir⁵.

Despite assessments' potential for delivering high value, the mantra “buyer beware” should be applied when it comes to identifying and utilizing any assessments. The wrong tool, at best, may not yield any particularly pertinent information. At worst, it could potentially negatively impact individual and organizational effectiveness.

One of the most powerful tools (and it is free) is PrinciplesYou, which was created by Ray Dalio (founder of Bridgewater Associates and bestselling author of *Principles*) in collaboration with two top organizational and personality psychologists, Adam Grant and Brian Little. The tool is designed to integrate the latest findings from the growing field of personality science to build a world-class assessment methodology⁶.

To maximize the value of the process, it is recommended to debrief the results with a trained and experienced practitioner. If this is not financially feasible, the report itself is quite comprehensive and provides detailed insights into how we prefer to think, engage with others, and apply ourselves⁷.

4. Engage in a 360° feedback process

While personality assessments measure traits, which are relatively stable indicators of our personality, 360° feedback focuses on assessing our behaviours.

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith – a widely renowned and award-winning executive coach, thought leader, and pioneer of the 360-degree feedback method – spearheaded a study examining how participating in a 360-degree feedback process impacted more than eleven thousand managers⁸. Convincingly, his results showed that almost 75% of participants had experienced some form of improvement following this exercise.

Despite these impressive results, a 360-degree feedback process can also cause harm to leaders and organizations alike if conducted incorrectly. Tales of nightmarish multi-rater feedback projects exist in many organizations. To avoid these potential pitfalls, the Appendix provides several scripts, exercises, and frameworks you can use to get the most out of this exercise.

Here are a couple of additional things to consider:

- a. Make sure the 360-degree feedback tool you choose includes a self-assessment: This allows you to compare your ratings with other raters. The reasons for this are two-fold: first,

⁵ Grant, Adam (2013). Goodbye to MBTI, the Fad That Won't Die, Psychology Today.

⁶ It should be noted that the vast majority of the tools used in the market today were developed at least 30 – 40 years ago.

⁷ An additional advantage of the tool is that it can be used for team development.

⁸ Goldsmith, Marshall, and Howard Morgan (2004). Leadership Is a Contact Sport: The 'Follow-up Factor' in Management Development, Strategy Business.

it allows you to identify any potential blind spots. For example, if I rate myself a six out of seven on approachability, while my colleagues give me an average rating of two, then I have a significant gap in my level of self-awareness. This provides an opportunity for exploration and growth.

A second and equally important benefit of including a self-assessment is that it affords the leader an opportunity to identify hidden strengths. This occurs when your self-ratings are much lower than your colleagues, which suggests you undervalue your performance in a particular domain. Although this is also an indication of lower self-awareness, this insight is equally valuable because your low confidence in an area may be influencing the choices you are making about how and where you show up. Across my coaching practice, countless clients have discovered areas where they are performing far better than they initially thought and have limited their focus on these areas due to that limiting belief. Realizing hidden strengths powerfully changed not only their day-to-day leadership, but also the trajectory of their careers.

- b. Spend the most time with the toughest feedback. Whenever any of us receives feedback, it can be tempting to minimize or dismiss its relevance. This is especially true if we feel it violates our own self-view. For example, if I strongly feel I'm approachable and the data suggest otherwise, I can react strongly and reject the idea.

My experience has taught me that it is better to spend more, not less, time examining the feedback when this happens, as this may represent our biggest opportunities to learn and grow. In fact, the strength of our resistance to the feedback may represent one of our largest blind spots.

A powerful leadership hack shared with me by Doug Stone applies strongly here. Rather than ask, "what is wrong with the feedback?" which most of us do, the more effective question is: "what is right about this feedback?" This allows us to take a more objective lens in extracting key insights and also allows us to better appreciate its potential breadth.



Key takeaway: The tougher the feedback, the more time you want to spend with it.

- c. Partner with a coach. A study published in the *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, which involved almost three hundred executives, concluded "that the combination of multi-rater feedback and individual coaching does increase leadership effectiveness up

to 60% and beyond according to direct report and peer post-survey feedback⁹.” In addition, the author noted a preliminary indication that the higher the number of coaching sessions, the greater the overall improvement.

Engaging with an objective and external expert to discuss your feedback results, ideally someone trained in the administration of 360-degree feedback assessments, has many benefits. It allows the participant to sift through and make sense of the large amount of data collected without feeling overwhelmed. The coach can also contextualize the feedback for the participant. Another major advantage is that the coach can assist in the creation of a follow-up and well-rounded development plan¹⁰.

From Self-Awareness to Strategic Leadership

As public service leaders, you are entrusted with enormous responsibility – serving the public, stewarding public trust, and navigating complexity with clarity and courage.



Key takeaway: Self-awareness is not a “nice to have” – it is a strategic imperative. The ability to recognize your internal patterns and understand how others experience your leadership directly impacts your credibility, your influence, and your results.

Cultivating this awareness isn’t about achieving perfection – it’s about leading with greater intention.

Here’s the invitation: start small and stay consistent. Ask your team how they experience you. Reflect on what situations tend to trigger you – and how you typically respond. Keep a weekly leadership journal, not just about what you did, but how you showed up. The most effective leaders aren’t the ones with all the answers. They’re the ones committed to learning, especially about themselves. That’s how trust is built. That’s how leadership scales. And that’s how we lead with integrity in service of something bigger than ourselves.

For more resources on Positive Leadership, access the full [APEX Positive Leadership Toolkit](#).

⁹ Thach, E. C. (2002). The impact of executive coaching and 360 feedback on leadership effectiveness, *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 23, no. 4, 205-214.

¹⁰ Check out the Appendix for relevant resources.

Appendix

Identifying a balanced and insightful circle of 360° feedback respondents

Purpose: To help you choose individuals who can offer meaningful, honest feedback – while avoiding bias, blind spots, or unintentional filtering.

Estimated Time: 15-20 minutes

1. Clarify the goal of your 360°

Before you begin, remind yourself of the purpose of this exercise: To deepen your self-awareness by understanding how your leadership is experienced by a diverse group of people who've worked closely with you. This is about learning, not validation.

2. Identify key relationship categories

Use the categories below to ensure a full view of the different groups that may help you select a clear and balanced circle of respondents.

Group	Names of those who come to mind
Supervisor(s)	
Peers or colleagues	
Direct reports	
Cross-function (people from other teams or projects)	
Clients or stakeholders (if relevant)	

Aim for at least 2-3 individuals per group, depending on the size of your organization, to preserve confidentiality.

3. Apply the fairness filter

Now that you have a list, reflect on the following questions:

- Do these individuals know my leadership style well enough to provide specific feedback?
- Have they worked with me regularly or meaningfully over the past 6-12 months?
- Am I avoiding certain individuals because I suspect they might offer tough feedback?
- Am I over-selecting those I feel most comfortable with or who are likely to “sugarcoat” their feedback?
- Have I unconsciously excluded those who may think or work differently than I do?

Your goal is [balance](#) – not comfort.

4. Final selection

Choose a mix of individuals who represent:

- A range of working relationships (hierarchy, function, seniority)
- A diversity of perspectives, styles, and personalities
- Those who will be honest and thoughtful – even if it’s hard to hear

5. Reminder to self

Keep this statement visible throughout the process:

“The goal of my 360° is not to protect my ego – it’s to elevate my impact.”

1) Email template to invite 360° feedback participants

Subject: Your input would be invaluable: Request for confidential 360 degree feedback

Hello [Name],

I’m reaching out to invite you to participate in a 360-degree feedback process I’m undertaking as part of my leadership development.

This initiative is designed to strengthen my self-awareness by gaining a deeper understanding of how my leadership is experienced by those I work with closely. Your input would be incredibly valuable—and I want to emphasize a few key things up front:

- **Your feedback is entirely confidential.** It will be collected and reported by [insert name of facilitator/tool provider] in a way that ensures individual responses remain anonymous.
- **Honesty is not only welcome—it’s essential.** Constructive, candid feedback (both affirming and challenging) is what makes this process meaningful.
- **Your time is respected.** The survey should take approximately [X] minutes to complete, and you’ll receive clear instructions and a link shortly.
- **This is about learning and growth.** My goal is not to “look good”—it’s to get better. Your perspective will help me understand where I’m showing up well and where I need to evolve.

I truly appreciate your time and your candour. If you have any questions about the process, please don't hesitate to reach out (include name of provider if/where warranted). I deeply value your insights.

With thanks,

[Your name, with title and contact info]

Following up with 360° feedback respondents

1) Email template to thank 360 participants

Subject: Thank You – and What's Next

Hello [Name],

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my 360-degree feedback process. I want to express my sincere appreciation for your honest input. Your perspective is a vital part of my learning journey, and I don't take it lightly.

After reviewing the feedback, I've taken time to reflect on both the strengths that were highlighted and the areas where there's room for growth. A few clear themes have emerged, and I've committed to the following next steps in my leadership development:

- **[Insert key action #1 – e.g., “Be more intentional about how I respond under pressure.”]**
- **[Insert key action #2 – e.g., “Seek regular feedback from my team on how my decisions are landing.”]**
- **[Optional: Insert key action #3 or accountability step.]**

I'm sharing this with you for two reasons:

First, as a way to say thank you—and to let you know your input mattered.

Second, to invite your continued partnership. If you notice me making progress—or slipping into old habits—I welcome your observations. A quick check-in or candid insight can go a long way in helping me stay accountable to these goals.

Thank you again for your trust, your time, and your candour. I look forward to continuing to learn and lead more effectively—with your support.

Sincerely,

[Your name, with title and contact info]

2) Moving from feedback to insight

Purpose: To help you process your 360 feedback constructively and extract actionable insights—especially if some feedback is surprising or difficult.

Instructions:

After reviewing your 360 results, spend at least 30–45 minutes reflecting and responding to the following prompts.

1. Initial Emotional Reaction

- What feedback surprised or unsettled you the most?
- What was your first internal reaction? (Be honest.)

2. Reframing the Data

- Choose one piece of challenging feedback. Ask: “What might be right about this?”
- If this feedback is true, what are the implications?

3. Hidden Strengths

- Where did others rate you higher than you rated yourself?
- What strengths might you be undervaluing?

4. Themes & Patterns

- What consistent messages are emerging across rater groups?
- What gaps exist between how you see yourself and how others do?

5. Your Leadership Commitment

- Based on these insights, what’s one new leadership behaviour or habit you will try in the next 30 days?

Building a sustainable 360° feedback development plan

Purpose: To translate feedback into behaviour change through self-directed action and accountability.

Instructions:

Use this template as a monthly self-check or to co-create a development plan with your supervisor, coach or mentor.

1. Top 2 insights from my 360

- Insight #1:
- Insight #2:

2. Target behaviours for growth

- What observable behaviours will you develop or adjust?
- What specific actions will you take? (e.g., “I will ask for feedback monthly from my direct reports.”)

3. Success signals

- What will progress look like?
- How will you know change is happening?

4. Support system

- Who can provide feedback, accountability, or coaching?
- What support do you need to succeed?

5. Revisit & reflect

- Schedule a reflection check-in: [Insert Date]
- What new insights or feedback will you seek then?