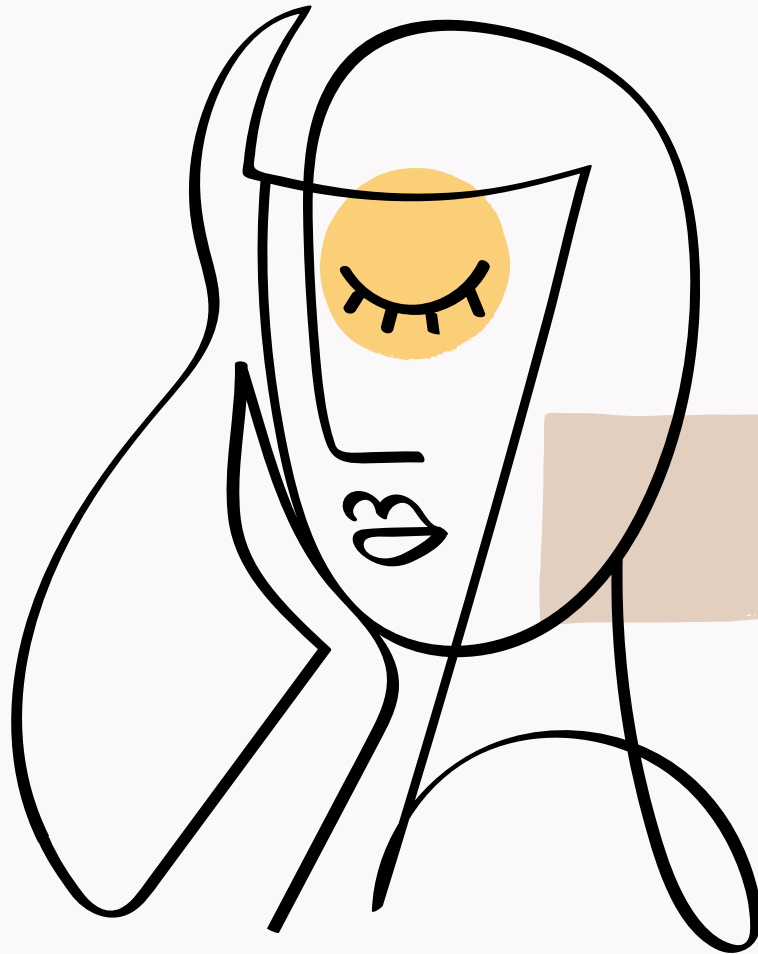


Demystifying the self-awareness debate



Self-awareness is a popular buzzword in management literature and a trait that is said to yield numerous benefits for leaders. However, a lack of clarity over its components often results in it being taught in a limited way, argues **Julia Carden**. Here, the Henley Business School tutor deconstructs this multifaceted framework to make the case for offering entire modules on the subject

Self-awareness is an ever-evolving, dynamic and complex construct. This can be problematic when teaching on executive education programmes since, if we are unclear on what self-awareness is, we are unable to teach or develop it. I have been interested in this area for some time, reading books such as *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, but it was my PhD research that really opened my eyes to what I needed to do to develop the concept and the way I talk about it when teaching coaching programmes at Henley Business School.

I was initially made aware of the theory behind self-awareness during my leadership training to become a Royal Naval officer and then dipped into thinking about it through personality profiles, 360-degree feedback and appraisals. Training to be an executive coach increased my interest even further when I noticed that the harder I worked on myself, the more effective my coaching became. This led to me doing a deeper dive into it and undertaking a PhD centred on research around the subject.

We need to be clear on what self-awareness is to develop and teach it. I use a simple visual model of the construct and present the components as ‘ingredients’, explaining that we need to work on all of them to develop the concept fully. The model I use is a diagram that shows that there are two core components: the inter-personal, ie how we act in relation to others and the intra-personal, ie what is within us, what we know about ourselves (or can discover), but others don’t know. The inter-personal is on top because we do this work in service of leading and managing, but the intra-personal components feed into the inter-personal.

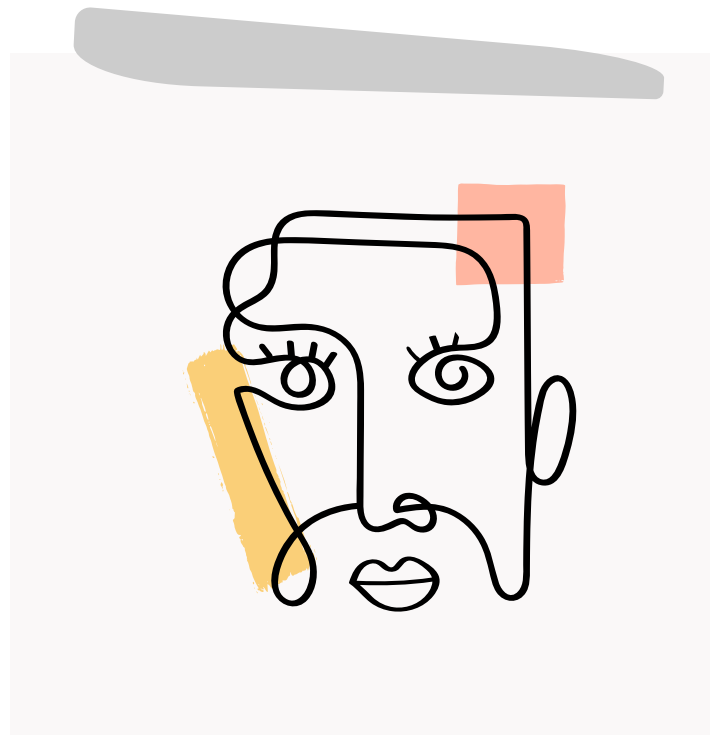
The diagram can also support clarification in the difference between self-awareness, self-consciousness and self-knowledge. In this context, self-consciousness is equivalent to the intra-personal components of self-awareness, while self-knowledge is the output or result of self-awareness. I would add a note of caution here, though: the visual that I’m referring to over-simplifies self-awareness because it is not actually as neat and tidy as a two-dimensional box diagram. Instead, it is more like lots of balls of wool all tangled up, whereby pulling on one strand, you find out something about another part of the pattern.

Humans’ ever-evolving nature

Self-awareness is not something we can focus on, develop and then be done – it is an ‘infinite game’. We are ever-evolving creatures, always developing and making meaning. I had been under the illusion that there would be a point when my journey was complete, but I now realise that is not the case. We need to keep thinking and reflecting to continue deepening our self-awareness – and for those with a preference for completing, finishing and perfectionism, that is challenging. It is, therefore, something to be returned to continually during business management programmes and executive education courses.

We are not as self-aware as we think we are. I say this because most people don’t actually know what self-awareness is. It is something that is ever-evolving in nature; the minute we think or say we are self-aware is often the moment we tip into self-delusion, self-deception or hubris.

Gaining an accurate insight into how others experience us and our impact on them is challenging because other people often project their ‘shadow’ side on to us. They give feedback based on their filters (their intra-personal aspects) and then we as receivers delete, distort and generalise the information they convey based on what we want to hear. This means we



must encourage our students to think about how they gather thoughts and feelings that relate to how others perceive them.

Developing self-awareness requires some reflective activity; I learned this through my PhD research, which highlighted that reflection is central to its development. As teachers, we must engender a reflective environment and help students learn methods of reflection.

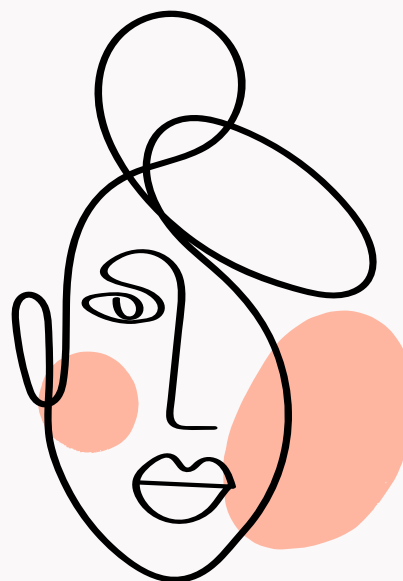
Why we need a greater focus

There is a real case to be made for business students spending time and effort developing self-awareness and for programmes to include a module on it. Firstly, there are many instances in academic literature linking it to the effectiveness, success and authenticity of a leader, as well as promotion opportunities. I also believe that it could help students better understand their learning preferences, how they create meaning and start really thinking about how they will apply that learning to their work life.

Secondly, developing self-awareness supports leaders in developing what 19th-century poet John Keats described as “negative capability”, which he defined as “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” I believe this is core to leading in today’s environment – often described as a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) or BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible) world.

Self-awareness has this effect because the more we develop it, the more we accept ourselves and acknowledge that we do not have all the answers. We can then start to disconnect our ego from outcomes. Thirdly, through self-connection we develop greater engagement with team members because through the process of accepting ourselves we become more accepting of others. This can then underpin team cohesion, employee satisfaction and retention.

Based on my own experience, I am aware that self-awareness is often taught in a very limited way, only focusing on one or two elements, for instance through the use of a personality profile. Instead, I would recommend that an entire module be dedicated to self-awareness and personal development. I recognise that many will not have the time to teach the whole construct in depth. However, the proposed framework will give both tutors and

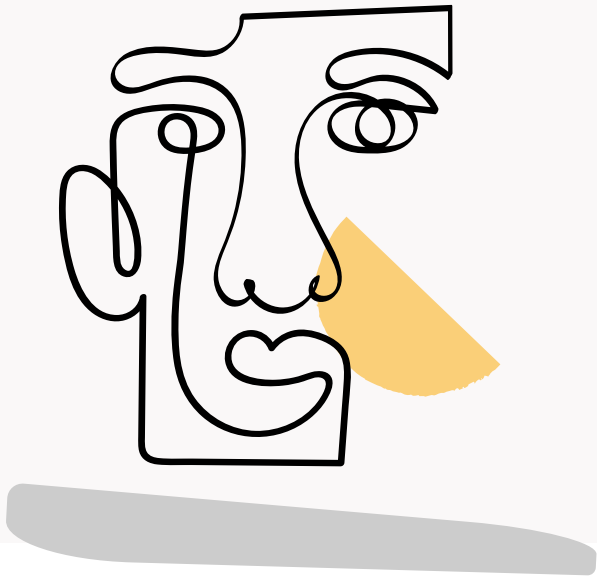


“As teachers, we must engender a reflective environment and help students learn methods of reflection”

students greater clarity around the construct of self-awareness and an appreciation of how all the components fit together.

I would, therefore, recommend that the whole model be presented to students before homing in on those components that are relevant to the module being taught. For example, where there is a heavy emphasis on leadership authenticity, the tutors might focus on the intra-personal components relating to values and beliefs.

At undergraduate level – when self-awareness is being taught and explored for the first time – it is important to start by achieving clarity around what it is and how it differs from self-consciousness and self-knowledge. One activity to explore the definitions of the construct could involve asking students to generate ideas on the similarities and differences of self-knowledge, self-consciousness and self-awareness before the tutor shares their own perspective.



For postgraduate students, executive education or leadership development programmes, where the development of self-awareness is a major learning outcome, I strongly recommend that all the components are taught using a wide range of cognitive, emotional and sensory exercises, combined with time for reflection on completion of these exercises. For example, a range of profiling tools could be used to explore personality and motivations, including Lumina Spark, strengths profiles, or motivational assessments.

Mindfulness practice might be used to develop awareness of the internal mental state, thoughts or cognitions, physiological responses and feelings or emotions. Students can complete a self-reflective exercise where they consider their values and beliefs; they could then share these in small groups and discuss how they shape their identity and leadership.


Approaches to gain data on the inter-personal components are also required – perhaps using a 360-degree feedback tool or a process where cohort members provide feedback to one another. For those on executive education programmes, one-to-one coaching would also provide the space for individuals to reflect on all the components of self-awareness. Alternatively, there is an option to use experiential learning as a basis for developing the inter-personal elements of self-awareness, given that such a process provides the opportunity for observation, self-evaluation and reflection.

A core element of leadership success

I have seen some individuals pose the question, “Can we become too self-aware?” My immediate response to that is “no”, because it is continuously evolving. However, when self-awareness was first written about in the 1970s by Robert Wicklund and Shelley Duval in their book, *A Theory of Objective Self-Awareness*, it was deemed to be an aversive state because it can lead to rumination, negative self-talk and anxiety.

This might, therefore, be perceived as too much self-awareness. However, if we approach it with curiosity and a reflective stance, it follows that we cannot be too self-aware. While negative self-talk is unhelpful, initiating some self-questioning can be beneficial for self-awareness development; as US-born author and coaching pioneer Nancy Kline suggests: “We think better in the presence of a question”.

In terms of teaching on the Henley programmes, my research has supported me in deepening my own self-awareness, something that enables me to be grounded and settled in front of the class. I accept that I am not the ‘finished article’, that I make mistakes and I am not perfect. This enables me to role model appropriate levels of vulnerability so we can all learn together and be open to alternative views and perspectives, thereby encouraging debate.

Secondly, I now ensure I share with students what self-awareness is and, when designing a new programme, I include it as a core element. In summary, self-awareness is essential to achieving leadership and business success; developing it takes effort and we can only develop it if we know what it is, we are motivated to do so and we include some form of reflection or reflective activity. With that in mind, I firmly believe that self-awareness should be included in modules for all business school students. 



Julia Carden is a visiting tutor at Henley Business School, as well as a relational coach and coach supervisor practitioner. Carden is also the author of *You are not as self-aware as you think you are: Why true self-awareness is at the core of great leadership*, published by Practical Inspiration Publishing