

CHAPTER 1

KNOW YOURSELF

‘All you can change is yourself,’ Gary W. Goldstein argues, ‘but sometimes that changes everything!’ Self-awareness is perhaps the biggest challenge to developing as a person. The ability to look ourselves in the mirror, admit our flaws, celebrate what we’re good at and actively seek feedback isn’t something we’re all blessed with.

And this self-knowledge isn’t enough in itself. You have to use it to analyse what you do before committing to change, and change you must if you are to achieve the goals you’ve set yourself. Sometimes you’ll need to change the way you communicate, while at others you’ll need to reset a habit or behaviour. Abraham Maslow said, ‘Self-knowledge and self-improvement are very difficult for most people. It usually needs great courage and long struggle’. But don’t let this stop you!

All too often in the project management world, people forget to look at themselves while insisting that others are to blame for the problems they are encountering.

A few years back a friend of mine introduced me to the Dunning–Kruger Effect. For those of you who are unfamiliar with it, Cornell University students David Dunning and Justin Kruger found, through a series of experiments, that unskilled employees weren’t as good as they thought they were—or, as the *Harvard Business Review* titled their article ‘Those Who Can’t, Don’t Know It’.

The Dunning–Kruger Effect may come as something of a surprise to you, unless of course it speaks to you personally, in which case you probably already knew it all too well. The researchers found that incompetent people (their words) didn't recognise their own lack of skills or the extent of it. Worse, they couldn't recognise the skills that others had either. Results from a follow-up study suggested that with 'minimal tutoring' on the skills they were previously deficient in, people were better able to understand their skill level. Or, if you prefer, they were more aware of their own shortcomings.

The resulting paper, 'Unskilled and unaware of It: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments', is definitely worth reading, and perhaps passing on to others you feel might benefit from it (*cough*).

The easiest way to become more self-aware is to ask others for their honest opinions of your behaviour and performance. Choose people who know you well and have seen you in action. It might be a project sponsor, a team member, a fellow project manager or a line manager familiar with your work. It's important that you ask them about your *behaviour*, as this is something we can often miss in the heat of the moment.

You have to welcome and be prepared for frank and critical feedback. You should also repeat this regularly and show your gratitude for their time and effort (see chapter 13).

Something I like to do is document how certain situations made me feel and how I responded to them. This is particularly important if you seek to change a behaviour, but it's also useful if you want to become more aware of how you react emotionally in different contexts. Write it down as soon as possible after the event. It will be invaluable to your development as a leader.

It's also important to acknowledge the things you're good at, as self-awareness isn't just about the bad stuff. While you

won't be cartwheeling down the corridor screaming 'I can plan, I can plan, I can plan', these positive affirmations should give you the confidence that your skills and behaviours have been recognised and provide an emotional springboard to improvement in other areas.

There are many benefits to being more self-aware, including:

- greater personal contentment
- improved relationship building
- improved collaboration
- enhanced respect from peers
- reduced stress and anxiety.

In his book *Emotional Capitalists*, Martyn Newman rates self-awareness as the number one component to becoming more emotionally intelligent. Once you've received feedback on something you weren't aware of, and have taken action to change it, you'll recognise why it's so important.

ACTIONS

DO: Ask for regular feedback on your performance and behaviours.

DON'T: Think the Dunning–Kruger Effect only happens to other people.

WATCH: Rosalinde Torres's TED talk, 'What it takes to be a great leader' ('Knowing what I'm good at, and not so good at, makes me a better leader').