

# Chapter 1

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## Know Yourself

Leadership is about influencing people, and a leader is someone who attracts others to follow them. So, if you want to become a more effective leader, you should start by putting yourself in the shoes of those people who work for you. What makes you worth following? Why would they want to be led by *you*?

Some leaders do this by formulating and communicating an inspiring vision to give people a sense of purpose in their work. It's great if you can do this, but the reality is that many leaders are not bold, charismatic visionaries. If you think about leaders you have worked for, some may have been like this, but others were probably quietly efficient people who got things done without a lot of fuss.

A more universal characteristic of effective leaders is that they are authentic: They bring a human touch to their work, they play to their strengths, and they are highly self-aware. To make the same point in reverse, we can all spot a boss who is faking it – someone who is trying to be the larger-than-life, charismatic leader that they have read about in business magazines. These types of people are a big turn-off, not just because they seem phony but also because they are unpredictable and hard to read, which makes our jobs more difficult. We would much prefer a boss whom we can relate to, who struggles with difficult decisions, who isn't always perfect.

This notion of authenticity is central to our current understanding of effective business leadership. It provides a good starting point for the book because it reminds us that, even though being a good boss is ultimately about understanding and enabling *others* so they

can do their best work, the ability to do this rests on a deep understanding of *ourselves*. Simply stated, good bosses have high levels of self-awareness, and as a result, they are able to reflect on and develop their own personal skill sets, which makes them more effective over time.

This chapter describes seven ways to help you know yourself better, to help you become more self-aware, and to help you become an authentic leader. We first describe a well-known framework for understanding your personality in the workplace (#1), then we develop two techniques for assessing your personal strengths (#2) and setting goals (#3). Next, we describe ways of improving self-confidence (#4) and self-awareness (#5). Finally, we propose two techniques for self-development – the notions of cognitive restructuring (#6) and growth mindset (#7).

## 1. Understand Your Own Personality and Manage Accordingly (The Big Five Personality Model)

Have you ever worked in a role that didn't suit your personality? And have you ever managed people who put in a huge amount of effort but just didn't have the right mindset for the work they did? This can be an unhappy, low performance situation for all involved, and it's why it's so important to understand your own personality – and to shape the way you manage accordingly.

One way of avoiding these situations is to be aware of and use the big five personality model, which addresses what researchers call the big five dimensions of personality:

**Openness** – your desire for new knowledge and experience, your appreciation of art and beauty, and your creativity.

**Conscientiousness** – how much care you take with things and how hard you work. This brings together factors such as industriousness, self-discipline, competence, dutifulness, orderliness, and your sense of duty.

**Extraversion** – how sociable you are. Are you warm, enthusiastic, and gregarious in social situations, and does being in a crowd fill you with energy? Or do you find yourself drained by social contact with new people?

**Agreeableness** – your friendliness and kindness to others. This includes factors such as compassion, altruism, trust, politeness, modesty, and straightforwardness.

**Neuroticism** – how volatile you are and how far you are in control of your emotions. It also takes into account factors such as hostility, impulsiveness, anxiety, self-consciousness, and depression.

The big five model is useful because it's actionable and because there are plenty of online tests available for it – use the second URL below to try one. So how should you use the results?

If you find that your conscientiousness is low, you need to take firm action – if you don't change this, you are not going to get far in your career because people won't be able to trust you to get things done.

Similarly, low levels of agreeableness and high levels of neuroticism are going to make you unsettling to work with, particularly in high-stress workplaces. There are strategies you can learn to manage these things (for example, see #4).

Introverts can often bring deep thinking and calm reflection to situations, but many twenty-first-century workplaces favor a faster, team-oriented, extroverted approach. Introverts need to adapt to this or find situations and roles that better suit the way they prefer to work.

Finally, greater openness is generally a good thing in the workplace. There are situations where a low level of openness may be useful: For example, we sometimes need people to make sure that rules are followed. However, if you have a low score on this dimension, you will probably want to work on trying out new experiences and ways of thinking.

Once you've used the test, think about what you have learned from it, and make appropriate plans to address these learning points.

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Find out more about the big five model, and discover strategies for addressing disadvantageous scores:

<http://mnd.tools/1-1>

Take an online big five personality test (free):

<http://mnd.tools/1-2>

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Source: Adapted from Judge et al. 2013. Reproduced with permission of the American Psychological Association.

## 2. Understand and Make Better Use of Your Personal Strengths (Personal SWOT Analysis)

We are most likely to succeed in life if we use our talents to their fullest extent and if we understand and address our weaknesses. SWOT analysis is a popular tool for looking at an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (#85). It works just as well on a personal level.

To use it, start by looking at your **strengths**. What skills, certifications, or connections do you have that other people don't have? What do you do particularly well, and what resources can you access that other people can't? What achievements are you proudest of, and what strengths contributed to these? And what do other people, particularly your boss and your coworkers, think you are uniquely good at?

### Tip

If you're struggling to identify strengths, consider using the online StrengthsFinder and VIA assessments. You can access these using the URLs on the next page.

Next, look at **weaknesses**. What tasks do you struggle to do well, and why is that? What do the people around you see as your weaknesses? Where are they likely to think you need more education or training? What poor work habits do you have, and what weaknesses do these point to? What areas of development have been highlighted in past performance reviews? And what internal factors do you think are holding you back from being fully successful at work?

Then, explore **opportunities**. Brainstorm emerging trends that excite you in your market or things that customers complain about that you can address. And identify opportunities that come from your strengths.

Finally, look at the **threats** you face. What could undermine you or cause problems at work? Is your job or technology changing in

a way that could be worrisome? And could any of your weaknesses lead to threats?

By this stage, you'll likely have long lists in each of these categories, and this can make your analysis unfocused and difficult to use. Prioritize these lists, and then cut them down so that they show the top three to five strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats – these are the ones you should focus on. We'll look at how you can start to act on these things next.

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Find out more about personal SWOT analysis, including a SWOT analysis template:

<http://mnd.tools/2-1>

Take the StrengthsFinder assessment (\$):

<http://mnd.tools/2-2>

Take the VIA character strengths assessment (free):

<http://mnd.tools/2-3>

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### **3. Set Clear Personal Goals, and Show a Strong Sense of Direction (Personal Goal Setting)**

Just as you need to understand your own personality and your strengths and weaknesses, it is important to have a clear idea of where you want to go with your life and what you want to achieve.

Personal goal setting is a popular and well-validated approach for thinking about your ideal future and for creating the plans that will bring it to fruition. It's used by businesspeople, athletes, and high achievers to give themselves the focus and motivation to succeed at the highest level.

Setting personal goals takes only a few hours. These can be some of the most valuable hours of your life!

Start by thinking about what you would love to be doing in 10 years' time, and write down your dreams of what your ideal future will look like then. Think about the obvious areas such as personal meaning, career, family, and athletic achievement, as well as areas such as education, relationships, personal finances, personal enjoyment, and so on. You'll end up with a very long list, so choose three to five dreams that excite you most and that best suit your personality and your strengths.

Now turn these dreams into hard goals. Write them as specific statements of what you want to achieve. This is where the

SMART mnemonic is useful: Your goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. They should also be stretching – difficult but achievable – and emotionally engaging. Review them, and decide whether you need to prioritize further so you can achieve the ones that matter most.

The next stage is to take these 10-year goals and break them down into shorter subgoals – 5-year, 1-year, 1-month – that you'll need to achieve along the way. This takes a lot of self-discipline, but you'll be in a more focused position once you've done it.

Finally, add your goals to your action program (see #10). This gives you the framework to bring them to life by working toward them every single day.

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Find out more about personal goal setting, including  
accessing a structured goal setting program (\$):

<http://mnd.tools/3-1>

Learn more about SMART goal setting:

<http://mnd.tools/3-2>

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## 4. Build Your Self-Confidence

Just as we want the people we rely on to be focused, we also want them to be quietly self-confident. Who would want to be operated on by a nervous surgeon, flown by an anxious-looking airline pilot, or managed by a flustered boss who doubts his or her own judgment? But how do we, as managers, develop and project this self-confidence ourselves – and in an authentic way?

There are two key concepts that contribute to self-confidence: *self-efficacy* and *self-esteem*. Self-efficacy is related to a specific type of work, and it's the self-confidence that comes from doing it well. Self-esteem is the more general notion that we can cope with what's going on in our lives and that we have a right to be successful and happy. If we have good levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem, we tend to show initiative, we're motivated, and we persist in the face of resistance.

The way we view our own abilities is a key determinant of self-efficacy and self-esteem. We can pump ourselves up with positive self-talk and listen to people who flatter us, but this can lead us to become overconfident and to fall flat on our faces. Alternatively, we

can put ourselves down and listen to naysayers and critics, leading us to back away from opportunities and not achieve our potential.

So how do you get a healthy balance between these two extremes? Research has shown that being *slightly* overconfident in your own abilities is useful because it allows you to take on challenges from which you can learn. Here are some practical steps to follow:

- ◆ Understand your own personality, and plan to make the best use of your strengths, as described in #1 and #2.
- ◆ Set clear goals for the future, as discussed in #3. This gives you a strong sense of direction and highlights the areas where you want to develop self-efficacy.
- ◆ Reflect on your education and your work history so far, and list your successes and achievements in these areas.
- ◆ Now, map out the knowledge, skills, and connections you'll need to achieve your goals.
- ◆ Set small, incremental objectives to build toward your long-term goals. Focus on accomplishing these, and reflect on the skills you have developed along the way.
- ◆ Then, little by little, take on more challenging tasks or activities. If you fail at something, treat it as a learning experience. Take time to understand why you failed, and adjust your course or try again.
- ◆ As you feel your self-confidence building, make your goals bigger and the challenges tougher. And expand the skills you've learned into related arenas.

If you do all of this, and keep reflecting on what you've achieved, you'll find your self-confidence growing in a robust way. There is no need to be boastful or grandiose – you can be confident in where you are and what you've done, and that's all that you'll need.

### **Tip**

Sometimes people work hard and achieve incredible things but still feel unworthy of recognition. If this describes you, read our impostor syndrome article at the URL on the next page.

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Find out more about building self-confidence:

<http://mnd.tools/4-1>

Learn how to combat impostor syndrome:

<http://mnd.tools/4-2>

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## **5. Be Aware of How Your Actions Impact Others (Journaling for Self-Development)**

In addition to self-confidence, self-awareness is one of the things people most look for in their managers. Self-aware managers are good at seeing things from the perspective of others – they understand how their actions affect the people around them, and they can adjust their behavior in a way that makes them effective and generally well-regarded.

Although people differ in their natural levels of self-awareness, everyone can improve in this important area, and the most effective way of doing this is by journaling.

Journaling involves making a record of your thoughts, feelings, and experiences on a regular basis. Many people use a notebook, but other formats – video or audio journals or smartphone apps – can also be effective.

Journaling can sound like a lot of work, another thing to fit into a hyperbusy schedule. But it doesn't take much time, and it's one of the most effective ways of improving your self-awareness and growing, professionally and personally, as a result.

Start in a small way, perhaps spending just 10 minutes reflecting on your day during your commute home. Make notes on what happened, focusing on your interactions with other people and what you could have done to make them more successful. Ask yourself questions such as:

- ◆ What have you learned since your last entry?
- ◆ What difficult or painful events have occurred, and how could you have handled them better?
- ◆ What progress have you made toward your goals, and how could you make even better progress?
- ◆ What are three to five good things that happened in your day? (Finishing on a positive note is important: If it's hard to think of positive things, count your blessings and remind yourself of the people you love or the things that are good in your life.)



**Tip**

When you journal, take care to not dwell on negative emotions – this can be depressing and demotivating. Instead, reflect actively and learn from interactions.

You'll get a lot of value from journaling in the first couple of weeks. You may find you get diminishing returns on your effort, so continue only if it's useful. It may be something you return to when you're experiencing changes or difficulties at work or when you're not achieving personal goals as quickly as you'd like.

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Find out more about journaling for professional development:

<http://mnd.tools/5>

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## **6. Think Positively and Manage Negative Thoughts (Cognitive Restructuring)**

Can you recall a situation when a boss came into work in a bad mood? Perhaps he had been worrying about problems overnight, or she had had a bad commute. He or she probably came in looking cold or cross, maybe snapped at people, and spread unhappiness and anxiety throughout the team, reducing people's performance.

Just as we need to be appropriately self-confident as managers, we also need to be aware of and manage the emotions we project to members of our teams. From the moment we come in the door in the morning to the time we leave, people read our words and our body language. For our teams to be happy and productive, we need to project positive emotions. More than this, we need to be positive for our *own* good at work.

So, how can we think and behave positively, even when things aren't going well? As a first step, force a smile onto your face for several minutes before you enter the office. Because of the way our brains are "wired," this genuinely helps you relax and makes you feel better. (Try it; this works.)

But we also need to understand and turn around the negative thinking that underpins our own negative emotions. Cognitive

restructuring is one thoughtful way of doing this. It draws from the broader field of cognitive therapy, and it offers a step-by-step process:

1. **Calm yourself.** Use deep breathing to relax yourself and deal with the immediate upset you're experiencing.
2. **Describe the situation.** Write down a precise description of the situation that has upset you.
3. **Write down the emotion** this has caused. For example, are you anxious, sad, angry, or embarrassed?
4. **Write down the automatic thoughts** that came into your mind when you felt the emotion. These might be things such as "he doesn't respect me" or "maybe I'm not good enough at this job."
5. **Write down the evidence that supports** these automatic thoughts. This may be upsetting, but you may find that there isn't much evidence that supports them. (Writing this down helps you clear your mind and take a more objective approach to the questions that follow.)
6. Next, look for and **write down the evidence that contradicts** these thoughts, and describe any alternative explanations for what has happened. If you're working hard and doing your best, you may find a lot of these.
7. Now, **write down what you think the real situation is and what action you need to take.** Depending on what you conclude, you may need to take action – for example, by apologizing to someone, seeking out coaching in an area you're struggling with, or giving appropriate feedback to people with a view to them changing their behavior.
8. Finally, **reflect on your emotions.** How do you feel about the situation now? It's likely that you'll feel much better about it.

Although this process seems quite involved, you can go through it quite quickly, and it gives you a practical way of dealing with negative thinking.

**Tip**

We've already highlighted that leaders need to be authentic – it's important to understand and be true to your personality, your strengths, and your values. However, this does not fully extend to the emotions you project to others. You are responsible for the morale of your team, and managing your own emotions is a core part of the emotional intelligence (#53) you need to lead people effectively.

Find out more about cognitive restructuring:

<http://mnd.tools/6-1>

Learn more about other aspects of emotional intelligence:

<http://mnd.tools/6-2>

*Source:* Adapted from Greenberger and Padesky 2016. Reproduced with permission of Christine A. Padesky.

## **7. Adopt a Self-Development Mindset (Dweck's Fixed and Growth Mindsets)**

Linked to self-awareness is an understanding of how people grow and develop. An important concept here is Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's notion of fixed and growth mindsets.

People with a fixed mindset believe intuitively that they have a fixed amount of intelligence, talent, and ability and that this doesn't change over time. They worry that some things are beyond their capabilities, they fear that they'll be "found out" and surpassed (perhaps by highly skilled subordinates), and they may prefer to avoid doing difficult or novel tasks rather than risk the shame of failing at them.

By contrast, people with a growth mindset believe that someone's full potential is unknowable. Where they are now in terms of intelligence and ability is the starting point for where they could be in the future, particularly if they work hard and take on difficult and interesting challenges. Failure is no big thing; setbacks are just a prompt to learn more and to try again in different ways.

Clearly, it's much better to have a growth mindset than a fixed mindset, and it's more likely to lead to a whole range of positive outcomes in your teams. However, when you look honestly into yourself,

you may be surprised to find that you have much more of a fixed mindset than a growth mindset. How can you change this? Dweck suggests the following steps:

- 1. Listen to yourself.** What's going on in your mind when you're thinking about taking on a new project? Do you find yourself questioning whether you have the skills or talent for it or worrying that people may look down on you if you fail? If you do, challenge these beliefs rationally, perhaps using the cognitive restructuring approach we looked at in #6.
- 2. Recognize that you have a choice.** Everyone faces challenges and setbacks through life, but the way you respond makes a huge difference. Force yourself to identify opportunities to take a different path from the one you would normally take.
- 3. Challenge your fixed mindset.** When you hear yourself thinking from a fixed mindset perspective, remember that you *can* learn the skills you need to achieve your goals. For example, if you're facing a challenge and you think, "I don't think I'm smart enough to do this," then challenge yourself with "I'm not sure if I can get this right the first time, but with practice and determination, I can learn."
- 4. Act.** When you work on developing a growth mindset, it becomes easier to tackle obstacles in a more positive way. Think of it like practicing the guitar: It takes time, and nobody plays perfectly the first time. When you make a mistake, try to see it as a chance to learn and grow.

And how can you do this for your team? Make sure that you build an open, trusting environment where people feel comfortable expressing their concerns and their doubts. Talk about fixed and growth mindsets, and praise hard work and determined effort, even if it doesn't meet with success. (Dweck's advice is to praise effort rather than success; however, we need both in business.)

**Tip**

Generally, it's a good thing to encourage a growth mindset and to treat short-term failure as a "learning experience." However, a risk-averse mindset is often appropriate in high-risk situations, such as where people's health or safety are at stake, where regulatory compliance is needed, or where large sums of money are involved. In these situations, be nuanced in the way you apply this idea.

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Learn more about Dweck's mindsets:

<http://mnd.tools/7>

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*Source:* Adapted from Dweck 2007. Reproduced with permission of Pearson Education, Inc.

## Other Techniques for Knowing Yourself

The tools we've highlighted here were rated as the most important techniques of their type by the participants in our survey. You can view five other good tools that didn't "make the cut" at <http://mnd.tools/c1c>.