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Strive to Be Self-Aware and Coachable

Recently in a conversation with a venture capitalist, we were talking about the qualities he looks for when he is thinking about buying a company. I suspected that he would focus on things like profitability and growth potential. But to my surprise he put *self-awareness* and *coachability* in leaders at the top of the list.

I've met and worked with hundreds of leaders over the years—in hospitals, on baseball fields, in government offices, and in hotels, stores, and restaurants—and have seen what self-awareness and coachability look like in action. Organizations that encourage and nurture these two qualities in their leaders (actually, in all employees) tend to be strong, innovative, and profitable.

This should come as no surprise. Today's business environment requires us to adapt quickly and relentlessly. That means leaders must not only be great at what they do, they also have to be great learners. "They must know what they don't know"—and be willing to work hard to learn it.

Self-awareness means knowing what you're good at and what you're not. It means you don't hide your flaws or cover up your mistakes. You don't pretend to know it all. It means you practice humility and embrace learning. Not only do transparency and vulnerability help people like and trust you, they set the right example for other leaders and employees. When everyone is willing to take risks, learn from mistakes, and seek out opportunities to learn and grow, organizations thrive.

Coachability just means you're open to feedback. You don't get bent out of shape by constructive criticism. You're actually grateful for it because you want to improve and grow, personally and professionally. You want to be a better leader, spouse, partner, parent, or friend (and you know that growth impacts all of these roles).

Self-awareness and coachability are connected. Each one leads naturally to the other. When we know what we need to improve on, we're more likely to seek the help of others who can coach us. Once we seek that help we become even more self-aware. It's a cycle that builds on itself. The hardest part is getting started, but it gets easier.

When these two qualities become part of your company's culture, you're on your way to becoming an unstoppable organization. It's easier to engage and motivate employees. High performers will be drawn to you (and will be more likely to stick around). Productivity will soar.

All of this can start with one leader. By improving your own performance and setting an example for others by working to become more self-aware and coachable, you will inspire others to do the same. In fact, if you want to help others improve, this is not optional. Here is a story to illustrate what I mean:

Years ago, I was working in an alcoholism and drug addiction treatment center. I met the daughter of one of our patients, a single mom with her child's father out of their lives. This daughter was struggling in many ways, even blaming herself for her mother's drinking. I happened to know a guidance counselor at this daughter's high school who had shared with me several months earlier that she herself had grown up in an alcoholic home. I thought the guidance counselor would be a perfect person to talk to the patient's daughter.

When I called her and asked, the guidance counselor paused. She apologized, saying she could not talk to this girl because she (the guidance counselor) had not yet even addressed her own issues. For close to 30 years, this story has stuck with me. It's hard to take another person further than you take yourself.

Here are a few tips for becoming more self-aware and coachable:

Know that getting better starts on the inside. It's not "them," it's you. When I was younger I lived in the world of "if only." *If only* I had gone to this school, majored in this, grown up rich, gotten the breaks, or been more appreciated then my life would be better. The problem was always *them*. Then, at 31, I crashed emotionally. I sought professional help and found other resources to learn from. I soon discovered the problem was not *them*; it was me and my expectations. I figured out that I will struggle until I am better on the inside.

Ask for feedback (and really listen). Talk to your boss, to other leaders, to employees, to friends and family members. Ask what they see as your strengths and weaknesses. How do they think you performed on a recent project? What might you have done better?

Don't shoot the messenger. When you receive negative feedback, practice listening without reacting. If you feel yourself getting upset, don't lash out. Process the information and sit with it a while before deciding whether it's valid. Often you'll have to admit it is. It's hard to hear negative truths about ourselves but, with practice, we can become more open to it.

Have a “beginners mind-set.” People who practice “beginners mind” rather than always thinking they are going to be a guru or expert tend to do better in teams. Always be ready and willing to participate, serve, and share your best insights. You will learn a lot more. For example, check your attitude before you go to a meeting. Always come into the group with the intention of learning something. Rather than having attitude of *This isn't relevant to me* or *This is not what I'm interested in*, ask yourself, *How could this apply to me? How could this be useful for me now—and if not now, later?*

Keep an accountability journal. Write down your goals and plans and regularly update what you're doing to move toward them. Track your progress over time. Are you doing what you set out to do? If not, what might be holding you back? Exploring these issues in writing can lead to startling insights on your strengths and weaknesses.

Seize every opportunity to develop yourself. While most entrepreneurs are great at the core “skill” their venture is built on—cooking, accounting, practicing law—they haven't typically mastered the skills it takes to run a business. They need training in basics like hiring, firing, creating revenue streams, etc. I find the most successful small business owners are those who are self-aware enough to know what they don't know and take advantage of resources that can help.

Hire people who are smarter than you. Make sure they're willing to challenge you (and that you're open to being challenged). Being surrounded by a bunch of “yes men” and “yes women” isn't going to help you grow.

Get a mentor, be a mentor (or do both). Jim Clifton, who is Gallup Chairman and CEO and author of *The Coming Jobs War*, writes about the need for what he calls “super mentors.” He says super

mentors are those who light fires under innovators and entrepreneurs and guide and advise small businesses. He calls them “the heroes America needs for this moment in history.”

It's true: mentoring is powerful. Whether you have a mentor or you mentor someone else, this relationship can spark tremendous growth in both parties. Great mentors know that they are not finished products and often they learn as much from the mentee as the mentee learns from them.

Don't be afraid to change your mind. We tend to think of strong leaders as being quick, decisive, and unwavering in their decision making. Most of the time they are praised for being consistent, and their conviction seen as a source of comfort and reassurance for their team. On the other hand, leaders who change their mind or embrace a new way of thinking about something are seen as “flip floppers,” and derided for being wishy-washy or inconsistent.

The reality is that leaders who are open to learning new information and adapting their thinking accordingly are ultimately more successful. Changing your mind is not a sign of weakness but a sign that you are able to learn and grow in real time. Never tie yourself too tightly to your first conclusion. Instead, have the courage to admit that you might have been wrong and the flexibility to course correct as new information becomes available. Good leaders know that new information that contradicts their current position is not a threat but an asset to be leveraged to make their plan stronger.

There is no finish line in learning. There are always things to learn. I guess I assumed at one time that someday, I would know enough. That's just not true. There is always more to learn, and teachers present themselves in many different ways. When the student is ready, the teacher appears. Remaining teachable is key.

Becoming self-aware and coachable doesn't mean striving for perfection. None of us will ever be perfect. It does mean identifying the worst flaws that hold us back and sincerely working to repair them. It means knowing which tasks to delegate, and when to seek the advice of experts. It means realizing more each day just how much we don't know.

This is a journey that we'll never finish. Our main job as a leader is to make sure that we're always headed in the right direction on the path.