

Explore Ideas, Spark Clarity

Well-researched insights to deepen your thinking, expand perspective, and support leadership growth

Why Self-Awareness Is the First Step to Stronger Leadership

By Sustavia Global / For The Coaching and Leadership Library

Introduction: Why It All Starts With You

Leadership is often viewed as a role that begins with others—setting vision, guiding teams, driving results. But the most effective leadership begins somewhere else: within. The ability to lead with clarity, purpose, and integrity depends on how well we understand ourselves.

Self-awareness is more than just a buzzword or a leadership trend. It is a foundational capability that helps leaders align their actions with their values, build stronger relationships, and respond with intention rather than impulse. Before we can lead others, we need to recognize how we show up, what drives us, and what may be getting in our way.

This article explores what self-awareness means in a leadership context, why it matters, and how you can build it through simple, reflective practices.

What Is Self-Awareness?

Self-awareness is commonly defined as the ability to recognize your emotions, values, patterns, strengths, and the impact of your behavior on others. Organizational psychologist Dr. Tasha Eurich further breaks it down into two dimensions:

- Internal self-awareness: Understanding your inner landscape—your values, beliefs, aspirations, and how you respond to different situations.
- External self-awareness: Understanding how others perceive you, and how your actions affect them in real-time (Eurich, 2018).

While many people consider themselves self-aware, research suggests that only about 10–15% of individuals actually meet the criteria for high self-awareness (Eurich, 2018). This gap can lead to miscommunication, disengagement, and leadership blind spots that undermine trust.

True self-awareness is not about constant introspection. It's about cultivating insight, being open to feedback, and staying aligned with your intentions and impact.



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Why Self-Awareness Makes You a Stronger Leader

Leadership without self-awareness can feel reactive, performative, or out of sync. When we lead without understanding our default patterns, we may unintentionally reinforce the very issues we hope to resolve.

On the other hand, research consistently links self-awareness with stronger leadership outcomes:

- Leaders with high self-awareness are more likely to be rated as effective by their teams (Goleman, 1998).
- Self-aware individuals demonstrate better emotional regulation, decision-making, and adaptability, especially under pressure.
- Organizations led by self-aware executives tend to perform better financially and culturally (Korn Ferry Institute, 2013).

These leaders don't just perform well; they lead in a way that builds trust, alignment, and sustainability over time.

"You can't manage others until you manage yourself."

— Bill George

How Coaching Supports the Development of Self-Awareness

Coaching is uniquely positioned to deepen self-awareness. Through powerful questions, active listening, and structured reflection, coaching helps individuals uncover blind spots, challenge limiting beliefs, and reconnect with their values.

A coach doesn't offer solutions. Instead, they create the space for you to explore what matters, observe your patterns, and choose more intentional paths forward. Whether in career development, transition, or leadership growth, coaching begins with helping you see yourself more clearly.

Self-awareness is not a one-time realization, it is a practice. Coaching provides the tools and accountability to stay in that practice and grow from it.

Five Ways to Cultivate Self-Awareness

If you're looking to lead yourself more effectively, here are five research-informed practices that can help you deepen your awareness and act with greater clarity.

1. Reflect With Intention

Self-reflection isn't about overthinking. It's about creating a habit of checking in with yourself. Set aside a few minutes each week to consider:

- What gave me energy this week?
- What challenged me?
- When did I feel most like myself?

These questions help you notice patterns and stay anchored in your personal truth.



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2. Revisit Your Strengths and Values

Your strengths are not just what you're good at—they're what make you feel most alive. Your values reflect what you stand for. When these two are aligned with your actions, you feel more confident and fulfilled.

Try using a tool like the Strengths & Values Snapshot to write down your top five strengths and core values. Then ask: Where am I honoring these in my current role? Where am I not?

3. Ask for Feedback

Even if you're self-reflective, it's hard to see yourself clearly without the perspective of others. Asking for feedback builds external self-awareness and shows a willingness to grow.

You can start small:

- What's one thing I do well that I may not notice?
- What's one thing I could do differently to be more effective?

Be open, not defensive. Use the input as a mirror, not a verdict.

4. Track Emotional Triggers

Our strongest emotional responses are often clues. Frustration, defensiveness, or withdrawal may signal a value conflict, a fear, or an outdated pattern.

The next time you're triggered, pause and ask:

- What value might be under threat here?
- Have I felt this way before in similar situations?
- What response would be more aligned with who I want to be?

This awareness creates space for conscious choice.

5. Notice the Intent–Impact Gap

You may intend to be supportive, but others experience you as rushed. You may think you're clear, but others feel confused. Self-awareness means being curious about the difference between what you meant and how it landed.

Try asking:

- What did I mean to convey?
- What was the actual impact?
- How can I bridge the gap more effectively next time?

This kind of awareness builds trust and influence in teams and relationships.

Practicing these five steps doesn't require a major time investment—but over time, they help you become more consistent, grounded, and intentional in how you lead yourself and others.



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Suggested Further Reading

- Eurich, T. (2017). *Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think.*
- Goleman, D. (1998). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ.*
- Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.*
- Harvard Business Review. (2018). *What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)* by Tasha Eurich.
- Korn Ferry Institute. (2013). *The Self-Aware Leader: Taking Ownership of Your Identity, Impact, and Reputation.*

Final Reflection

Self-awareness is not a destination, it's a continuous unfolding. The more you understand yourself, the more grounded and authentic your leadership becomes. And from that place, you create space for others to show up more fully too.

Leadership begins with self-awareness. Everything else grows from there.

References

1. Eurich, T. (2018). *What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)*. Harvard Business Review.
2. Goleman, D. (1998). *What Makes a Leader?* Harvard Business Review.
3. Eurich, T. (2017). *Insight*. Currency.
4. Korn Ferry Institute. (2013). *The Self-Aware Leader: Taking Ownership of Your Identity, Impact, and Reputation.*

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