

DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES

Research: We're Not Very Self-Aware, Especially at Work

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If you've participated in a training or development program in the past two decades, chances are you took an assessment designed to increase self-awareness. While you may have discovered your "type," "profile," or "style," it probably did little to make you a more effective leader or team member.

Put simply, self-awareness is understanding who we are and how we are similar to or different from others. One key facet is self-knowledge – how we see our various personality traits, values, attitudes, and behaviors. But another aspect is being aware of how consistent (or inconsistent) our self-view is compared to an external appraisal – how other people see us or against objective data. The latter is essential for transforming self-knowledge beyond mere personal introspection into accurate self-awareness.

Yet in talent development practice, companies spend millions of dollars and countless hours every year on self-reported assessments that only target self-knowledge. The core problem is that we're notoriously poor judges of our own capabilities. A [2014 study](#) of 22 meta-analyses (containing over 357,000 people) found an average correlation of .29 between self-evaluations and objective assessments (a correlation of 1.0 would indicate total accuracy). And the correlation was even lower for work-related skills. So my self-reported profile may suggest that I see myself as a persuasive speaker – but tell that to the audience who just fell asleep.

The punch line is that with no external data, the results of self-knowledge assessments are presumed to be accurate, when instead they may reinforce inaccurate perceptions of ourselves. The net result can be harmful to development and performance and, as we observed, the effectiveness of teams.

For teams to perform effectively, each member must possess a combination of technical and interpersonal skills and constantly adjust their contributions to meet the team's needs. Correctly understanding one's capabilities relative to others is therefore paramount.

To illustrate, we recently collected data from an executive development program at a Fortune 10 company. With 58 teams and more than 300 leaders performing in a dynamic and competitive [business simulation](#), we tested the extent to which accurate self-awareness was related to team effectiveness, which was evaluated across a number of business metrics like market share, ROA, customer awareness, productivity, and so forth. Levels of team coordination and conflict management were also assessed. And what we found was striking.

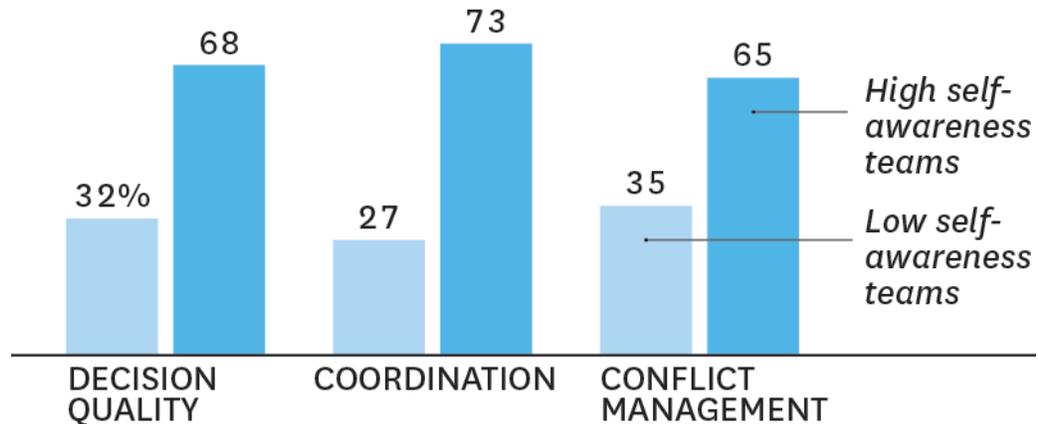
First, when individuals were less self-aware (i.e., there was a large gap between the assessments of their own behavioral contributions and the assessments of their team members), the teams substantially suffered. In fact, teams with less self-aware individuals made worse decisions, engaged in less coordination, and showed less conflict management. These findings held even when we controlled for teams' overall levels of teamwork.

Second, the most damaging situation occurred when teams were comprised of significant over-raters (i.e., individuals who thought they were contributing more than their team members thought they were). Just being surrounded by teammates of low self-awareness (or a bunch of over-raters) cut the chances of team success in half.

HIGH SELF-AWARENESS LEADS TO BETTER TEAM PERFORMANCE

A simulation shows that it affects decision-making, coordination, and conflict management.

PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS



SOURCE ERICH C. DIERDORFF AND ROBERT S. RUBIN

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It's clear that talent development interventions need to go beyond self-knowledge to be effective. So what should leaders and talent development professionals do? We see three tactics that can help people build accurate self-awareness.

Use self-awareness tools that are linked to performance. It's no secret that many of the most popular developmental assessments used for gaining self-knowledge, such as the MBTI, DiSC, The Birkman Method, and The Core Values Index, woefully lack evidence linking their results to actual learning or job performance. Whatever instrument, exercise, or intervention you use must capture and deliver results that truly predict something of value. Use external benchmarks: measure how someone's self-view compares to others' views and measure how assessments directly relate to outcomes like increased learning and job performance.

Create a line-of-sight between self-awareness and personal job success. A wealth of research shows that when individuals see learning as valuable to their careers, they're more [motivated to learn](#) and [apply new skills](#) to their roles. This means that we must directly communicate why the capabilities on which individuals are receiving feedback are actually relevant. Don't assume that individuals already recognize the need for accurate self-awareness: substantial [research](#) shows that those most in need of improvement are the most unaware.

Teach self-development skills in addition to self-awareness. Acquiring accurate self-awareness is only the beginning – true personal development builds the capacity to take action. Most talent

development efforts unfortunately fall short of teaching self-development skills, leaving behind a “knowing-doing gap.”

Research shows that multiple strategies can be brought to bear. For example, [self-management training](#) can help people plan, apply, monitor, and adjust their newly learned competencies. And by reinforcing that mistakes are natural to any learning process, [error management training](#) encourages deeper learning and the transfer of that learning back to one’s job. At the very least, demonstrate how imperfect self-views block the way to real and lasting behavioral change.

Will Rogers rightly once quipped, “It isn’t what we don’t know that gives us trouble, it’s what we know that ain’t so.” It’s time for talent development professionals to focus their development resources on the forms of self-awareness that matter most.

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