



Self-Awareness and Self-Reflection

Of the 147 Delphic Maxims, the most famous is “know thyself.” This maxim is as relevant today as it was in the ancient world. Self-awareness and self-reflection are tools that can help us take charge of our lives and overcome traps of fear, self-deception, or internal monologues that can undermine effectiveness and equilibrium.

Explore self-awareness and the importance of reflection, and review thirteen tips for practicing them in your career.

Self-Awareness

Sages, writers, philosophers, and theologians from antiquity forward recommend growing in self-awareness. Psychologists recommend self-knowledge for a healthy life. Self-awareness, coupled with emotional intelligence about our interactions with others, can improve a leader’s effectiveness and comfort in the role.

Internal Monologue

We all have an internal monologue: a voice in our heads with which we talk to ourselves. We use this voice to make sense of the world around us. We talk ourselves through events, consider our past and future behavior, and justify them to ourselves.

Social identity theory suggests that people want to and are naturally inclined to fit into social groups. This likely stems from survival advantages to groups versus lone humans. Abraham Maslow, a famous motivation researcher, suggested that after basic needs have been met, social and esteem needs arise as concerns. One of the drivers of human behavior is to fit into your social group.

Another tenet of social identity theory is that “We” are good and “They” are bad. Being perceived as “bad” by a social group places a person psychologically out of that group. Historically, the punishments of banishment and excommunication emphasize the punitive nature of being pushed out of a social group. We are often only partially aware of how much of our behavior is governed by a desire to be perceived by self and others as “good.”

Our internal monologues are replete with guiding questions. In addition to the good/bad judgment, we ask questions regarding truth (*is*

something true, false, right, or wrong?), consequences (*why? how? because... in order to*), challenges (*what is the problem/solution/answer?*), duty (*I have to/must/should/can’t/shouldn’t*), and trust (*trust/distrust/ how will I/they/you benefit or be harmed?*). We ask, answer, and act based on these questions, often in a semi-conscious way.

Self awareness raises automatic meaning-making to a fully conscious level, and enables more deliberate, considered action that more fully incorporates the world around us, especially those closest to us. Self-reflection is the way to self-awareness.

Fear

Frank Herbert wrote in his saga *Dune*, “Fear is the mind killer. Fear is that little death that brings total obliteration.” Fear is one of the most powerful emotions. It has inspired writers, poets, and filmmakers. It has caused wars and divorces. From a biological-anthropological standpoint, fear is important for the preservation of life. It prevents us from coming too close to a cliff’s edge or a wild animal. Fear is often legitimate.

We also often fear irrationally. The proverbial “monster under the bed” or in the closet that keeps children up at night is an early manifestation of this reality. As we move into adulthood, our irrational fears change form, but stay with us and serve as obstacles to social and career progression. Even rational fears, such as those surrounding the tenure process, can paralyze. Awareness of fear, managing irrational fears, and coping with rational fears are essential skills for living a successful and deliberate life.





What do you fear?

Self-Deception

Humans are excellent liars, especially to ourselves. We are essentially storytellers, and we build narratives around our perceptions of events and encounters. These perceptions are filtered through the lenses of our personal histories, the way we have experienced our lives cognitively and emotionally.

It is critical and often uncomfortable to recognize that our stories can be riddled with fiction. J. Michael Straczynski wrote, “understanding is a three-edged sword.” True understanding in human relationships has three components: your perception, the other person’s perception, and the truth.

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology corresponds with this idea. Phenomenology admits that there are actual things and events in the world in contrast to other philosophical traditions that doubt this, as portrayed in the movie *The Matrix*. We cannot know these things and events perfectly, and it is our job as human perceivers and meaning-makers to strive for an ever more perfect understanding of the real world, while acknowledging that we will never achieve a perfect understanding.

▶ Self-awareness can help you uncover the (un)conscious lies you tell yourself.

Past Events

The echo of the past can drive our behaviors. Past events, especially in early childhood, are critical to the formulation of how we think and feel about, and react to present events.

The clinical practice of psychological talk therapy is grounded in the idea that talking through these events can expose hidden beliefs and motivations that (un)consciously drive behaviors. While many think of trauma, such as death, divorce, and abuse as reasons for therapy, the reality is that, as children, we can make minor things into critical life formation events.

For example, deprivation of ice cream after dinner can be interpreted as rejection or failure and entire cognitive, emotional, and behavior structures can emerge to compensate for this perceived and perhaps unreal deficiency that lead to the deprivation of dessert. It may simply be that there wasn’t enough ice-cream for both children and the parent did not disclose this.

Because these events happen when there is little other information and experience available, they form a greater proportion of experience at the time and therefore serve as more fundamental and foundational.

Humans do not like being wrong. Cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable and tearing down old schemas, practices, habits, and belief systems, and replacing them with new ones can be taxing. Thus, without deliberate action, childhood schemas persist into adulthood and can fade into unconsciousness. They become part of “who I am” and can operate, unchecked.

Events in adult life are also influential. Death, divorce, career setbacks, negative commentaries on manuscripts, loss or denial of grant funding are all common difficult or tragic events for academics. Self-awareness involves coming to terms with these events, the emotions surrounding them, the meaning you ascribe to them, and how this affects your life. For example, a manuscript rejection can be internalized as “none of my research is any good” when the actual meaning is not nearly as severe.

Left unchecked, the emotions of anger and fear surrounding the rejection can impact intimate, familial, and professional relationships, health, and productivity.

▶ Risk. What risks are you avoiding? What justification are you using to avoid them?

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection encourages and develops self-awareness. Through self-reflection, you become aware of and gain control over the (un)conscious processes that drive your behavior, affect your health and success,





and influence how people see your personality.

1. Don't Avoid It

Self-reflection is hard. Many spend their lives running from themselves. Overwork, alcoholism, and TV bingeing are examples of common escapes and self-avoidance techniques. Writers have long lamented the challenges associated with self-reflection (for example, Emily Dickinson's "One not need be a chamber to be haunted").

The first step to self reflection is to consider whether you may be avoiding it, in part out of fear. As put in the Chinese proverb, "the journey of a 1000 miles begins with a single step." Start with this step and see how the journey proceeds.

2. Self-Reflection Requires Practice

Self-reflection, like any human activity, takes time and practice to master. It is a daily and semi-continuous activity, not something to complete once and never again. Recognize that it is a skill, and if you have not practiced it very often, it can be awkward at first.

Don't give up at the first sign of struggle.

Patience and perseverance are critical for the development of self-reflection skills.

3. Self-Reflection Takes Time and Space

Set aside time on a regular basis to engage in self-reflection. Put it on your calendar. Build it into your daily routine. Turn off the phone, email, and other distractions. Find a place that provides sufficient privacy and quiet (e.g., a park, your office, your bedroom). If you find yourself falling asleep, you can try going for a walk or occasionally changing positions. Some find repetitive activities requiring a low cognitive load, such as cleaning or going for a run, help to focus the mind.

“ Through self-reflection, you can become aware of and gain control over the (un)conscious processes that can drive behavior.

4. Self-Reflection May Be Uncomfortable

Self-reflection may reveal uncomfortable things. You may realize things about yourself that you have been hiding from yourself. It is better to encounter them and gain control over them and your life, rather than be ruled by unconscious processes that can undermine health and success.

5. Thoughts and Behaviors Are Linked

What you think influences how you feel. How you feel influences what you think.

For instance, thoughts of deprivation can cause anger. Expressing anger can deprive you of opportunities. In another example, depression affects thoughts of self-worth, which then reinforce a depressed mood. The awareness that you can cognitively and deliberately influence your emotional state is new to many.

Gaining awareness of this relationship is a clear benefit of self-reflection.

6. Challenge Your Decision Rules

We all have cognitive habits that guide our thinking. Because humans tend to be naturally cognitively lazy, once we think we have something figured out, we apply a decision rule or heuristic and apply it to every similar situation we encounter.

Prejudicial behavior is one example. Trust is another. Once you decide you do not trust someone, it is difficult to reverse that choice.

Reflect on how accurate your decisions rules, some perhaps made long ago, are in your present reality. You may say "John is like..." when that was how John was just one day or during a particularly difficult time in his life.

7. Test Your Biases

Biases work to filter information and guide thinking. They can often lead us astray.





Self-reflection can help uncover unconscious biases and test conscious ones against reality. (See the Leadership Collection Quick Tips on Cognitive Bias.)

- What do I believe about the situation?
- Why do I believe this?

8. Emotional Intelligence

Be aware of emotional realities underlying your behaviors. (See the Leadership Collection Quick Tips and Executive Briefing on Emotional Intelligence.)

9. Journaling

Journaling about events, and how you reacted cognitively and emotionally to them, can bring to the surface latent thoughts and emotions that can influence your behavior in ways you would not otherwise be aware.

10. Spirituality & Religion

Many religious traditions include self-reflection tools and exercises. Many employ meditation and reflective contemplative prayer to gain awareness of and control over unconscious drivers of thought, emotion, and behavior. Consult with a leader in your tradition for guidance.

11. Conversations

Talking with trusted friends can help you say out loud, and “try on”, aspects of your motivation.

12. Counseling

Professional counselors can help you develop the skill of self-reflection, support you, keep you honest, and serve as a sounding board as you encounter yourself, growing in self-awareness through self-reflection.

13. Ask Questions

Use the internal monologue to your advantage. You are practiced at asking questions about the world around you. Doing so in a deliberate way can help you. Questions that raise the semi-conscious to the conscious develop the skill of self-reflection.

- How do I feel?
- Why do I feel this way?
- What do I want?