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The Pillar of Self

The greatest discovery in our generation is that human beings by changing their inner attitudes of their minds can change the outer aspects of their lives.

—William James

Wan Linyi, currently the CEO of Yang-Guang, one of the most successful land developers in China, was born in a small village in the province of Liao Ning, where he endured a childhood of extreme poverty. Yet despite many hardships—or perhaps because of them—he grew to value hard work and determination. With the support of his father, Wan Linyi recognized in his youth that the only way to live up to his full potential was by leaving the village to pursue an education. As

a student at Peking University, he travelled throughout China to learn about the connection between people and the natural landscape. This experience helped him to commit himself to promoting “harmony between man and nature” in his work as a developer. Although he left his village for an urban life, Wan never forgot the importance of his journey toward self-awareness. Later, when the board at YangGuang first approached him to accept the job of CEO in 2007, he politely refused. He said, “I felt I was not ready. I needed more experience and more acceptability by the people.” Because he was in tune with himself, Wan was able to realize that he needed to know more about the business before accepting the top job. When he did become CEO at the end of 2008, Wan was confident in his abilities.

Wan’s ability to reflect is part of what has made him an effective leader. Even as one of the youngest CEOs in his field, he is widely respected. In addition, his deep appreciation for integrity has enabled him to foster a trusting work environment and a rapidly growing organization.

Building a pillar of self-awareness is a long-term endeavor, yet it reaps benefits for organizations and individuals alike. Some companies, like Google, have already bought into this idea. Chade-Meng Tan, a forty-one-year-old engineer and Google’s 107th employee, has started a course at the search engine giant’s Mountain View headquarters called Search Inside Yourself (SIY). The course—which aims to improve one’s “mindfulness”—is perpetually oversubscribed. What the course is really about is learning to be self-aware.

For leaders, building a pillar of self-awareness is not optional. After all, before we can be honest with others about their development needs, we need to be honest with ourselves. This is part of what Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus called the deployment of “positive self-regard.” The pair argued that this capacity allows leaders to make their strengths effective and their weaknesses irrelevant.¹

An example of this is Sir Richard Branson, the sixty-one-year-old chairman of the Virgin Group of companies. From trying on lipstick at the launch of Virgin’s line of cosmetics and riding with the *dabbawallahs* in Mumbai’s crowded local trains, to carrying a burlesque performer on his back, and even dressing up as a bride, Branson has pushed the limits of extremism. Branson’s public persona is that of a happy-go-lucky extrovert—someone who is not worried about how others perceive him. We could easily imagine that he grew up this way. Surprisingly, that isn’t the case.

The Branson we see today is the product of hard work and self-examination. In the 1980s, Branson’s role model and fellow entrepreneur Freddie Laker gave Branson a piece of sound advice that would pay dividends in the years to come. Years later, during an interview with *Strategy+Business* magazine, Branson recalled,

Freddie Laker sat me down and said, “If you are going to take on Pan Am, TWA and British Airways, you’ve got to use yourself and get out there and realize that if you dress up in a captain’s outfit when you launch the airline, you’ll get on the front page.

If you turn up in ordinary business clothes, you'll be lucky to get a mention. Remember, the photographers have a job to do: they'll turn up to one of your events and give you one chance. If you don't give them a photograph that will get them on the front page, they won't turn up to your next event."²

Branson went on to say, "Before we launched the airline, I was a shy and retiring individual who couldn't make speeches and get out there. I had to train myself into becoming more of an extrovert." Branson realized that he was destined to fail as a public figure in a competitive industry if he did not make some changes in style. The shy and introverted Branson had to get to know himself well enough to admit his areas of weakness in order to succeed as the entrepreneurial face of Virgin, and he tells people, "It can be done." It is a matter of conviction.

As demonstrated by Linyi and Branson, admitting your shortcomings is not easy. Yet not all of us are fortunate enough to have a supportive father, like Linyi, or a Freddie Laker in our lives to tell us the truth, so we have to commit to a journey of getting to know ourselves better. Those who jump into a leadership role without practicing self-reflection are caught ill prepared and are blind to the impact their behaviors have on others.

Research shows that when individuals become wealthy, they often continue to feel that something is missing in their lives. Likewise, in our work we consistently see executives who confess that, despite all of their achievements and material well-being, they are still searching for something and are unable to identify what it is. That *something missing* is what psycholo-

gist Abraham Maslow called the highest level of needs—or self-actualization. Most of us are so busy managing day-to-day tasks that we consider self-reflection to be frivolous. Yet studies have found that the most successful people are those who take the time to reflect. The Chinese describe this as a person's ability to *ascend* and *walk onto the balcony*. Ronald Heifetz also describes “getting on the balcony” in his breakthrough work on adaptive leadership as a way to be reflective and remain far enough above the fray to see the key patterns. As a result of the process of reflection, a person learns, and the learning, in most cases, leads to change. That change is a milestone along the path to leading with conviction.

As simple as it may sound, getting to know yourself—literally the one person you have *known* for all of your life—is one of the hardest things you will do. Most of us are what we call “prisoners of our own self-image.” Whenever we engage in introspection, it is almost always to take stock of the good things. We fail to acknowledge our mistakes and notice our flaws, let alone to do something about them. And of course, those who surround us are sometimes equally guilty of propping us up. *Financial Times* columnist Lucy Kellaway put it well: “A decade of psychobabble, coaching and 360-degree feedback has made no difference. It has not changed the most basic truth: people never speak truth to power.”³

We saw this when we met with Jane, an executive at a West Coast business magazine, in early 2000. In 360° feedback, people reported that she was abrasive and an excessive micromanager. She was rude to peers—almost abusive at times.

Worse, she wasn't aware of the impact her behavior was having on her team. When her bosses tried to discuss the problem with her, she reacted very badly and outright refused to acknowledge her shortcomings. Her direct reports wouldn't dare to speak up directly, and her colleagues began avoiding her altogether. In the end, the organization lost when good people started quitting. Eventually, Jane, who was otherwise a diligent worker, also quit because she had isolated herself within the organization.

In our work with executives and students, we have observed over and over the gap between how we perceive ourselves and how others see us. We tend to judge ourselves based on our intentions, whereas others judge us based on our actual deeds and results. If you rationalize your shortcomings instead of addressing them, blaming your leadership inadequacies on the people around you, you create a leadership gap that can damage not only your credibility but also your actual ability to succeed.

As you develop the personal capabilities that enable you to lead with conviction, it is essential that you build a pillar of self-awareness, in the ways laid out in the "Assessing Your Ability to Reflect" exercise.

Assessing Your Ability to Reflect

To assist leaders in honing their ability to reflect and learn, we have devised a simple form that illuminates the degree of self-knowledge.

THE PILLAR OF SELF

Circle the number that represents the frequency with which you practice the actions in the chart, using the following values:

1 = Not at all

2 = Sometimes

3 = Most of the time

1. Review the events of the day	1	2	3
2. Examine my behavior in key interactions	1	2	3
3. Assess my decision-making process	1	2	3
4. Audit my values and how they are demonstrated	1	2	3
5. Solicit feedback from others	1	2	3
6. Evaluate my behavior under pressure	1	2	3
7. Determine how I project myself with others	1	2	3
8. Explore my positive and negative feelings toward others	1	2	3
9. Measure my progress against personal goals	1	2	3
10. Draw lessons from my experience	1	2	3

Now add up your circled numbers.

24–30 points = Very Reflective

17–23 points = Somewhat Reflective

16 points or below = Not Reflective

THE CASE FOR SELF-AWARENESS

One of the most challenging courses we have developed is called *Know Thyself*. The course guides students through a series

of tests that measure their approach to decision making, personality type, thinking preferences, leadership style, response to conflict, emotional intelligence, and affinity for teamwork. The reason these measures are relevant is simple: understanding ourselves pushes us to dig deeper and thereby become more authentic leaders. It allows us to act with conviction and with purpose, rather than reactively or in a random, inconsistent manner.

Self-knowledge is a prerequisite for effective leadership for several reasons. First, self-knowledge enables us to maintain a grasp on the values that guide our actions and inspire others to follow our lead. It anchors and informs what Bill George calls our “true north.”⁴ It allows us to trust our instincts and to step back, reflect, and act from a place of considered conviction. And it ensures that our actions, although adapted to each specific situation, will be consistent and ring true. If we’ve made the effort to understand and cultivate our natural response to crises, for example, we are better positioned to take the lead in a situation of extraordinary organizational stress. Others immediately sense and are inspired by our calm authority.

Second, understanding ourselves allows us to leverage our strengths and manage our weaknesses. When we truly know ourselves, our personal difficulties and even our failures can become assets. Meeting difficult challenges provides essential learning experiences that fuel our determination to succeed and provide a foundation for future positive outcomes.

Third, getting to know ourselves allows us to break free from unhealthy cycles. Many executives, even those who are well-educated and highly trained, suffer from a lack of self-awareness, so they tend to make the same mistakes over and over again. Certain types of situations can trigger automatic, deeply ingrained reactions. Humans are creatures of habit, so breaking away from these unhealthy patterns does not come easily. Self-awareness allows us to recognize our triggers and make agile adjustments. It helps us to break out of our comfort zones and challenge ourselves to be better.

Fourth, self-knowledge allows us to be cognizant of the impact we have on others. Being oblivious can derail our career and limit our effectiveness. If we offend rather than engage, people will back away from our vision. If our actions make others feel threatened and frustrated, they will refrain from offering their real opinion, and in time they will avoid taking risks and challenging themselves at work. In addition, how we behave as leaders sets the tone in terms of values. If we are prone to bad behavior, such as a lack of empathy, it infects the corporate culture: others will follow our negative lead. All of this weakens the bonds between us and our followers and undermines performance. A leader's failure to recognize these connections can have far-reaching consequences.

The value of building a pillar of self-awareness goes far beyond all these reasons. We know intuitively that increasing our self-awareness will be fulfilling in every aspect of our lives. Without it, the ideal of leading with conviction is impossible.

Determine Your Nonnegotiables

To help the leaders we work with understand themselves and what is important to them, we ask them to make a list of what they consider their nonnegotiables. For example, many leaders list honesty as a nonnegotiable. We go on to challenge their definition of honesty and ask them to further reflect and clarify what they mean—that is, whether they practice being absolutely honest or mostly honest, and what the term “nonnegotiable” means to them. We also challenge them to effectively communicate their nonnegotiables to the people they work with. Living up to nonnegotiables helps individuals build more effective relationships and increase their credibility. It also helps them in their ongoing journey to lead with conviction.

THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The concept of self-knowledge is not new. It is deeply embedded in Asian philosophy and Judeo-Christian thought. From the Chinese perspective, underlying the work of Sun Tzu (author of *The Art of War*) and others, self-knowledge is a function of three fundamental elements: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

Confucianism is driven by the notion that to get to know yourself, you must learn how to relate to others, and that by building harmony with others you actualize your own being. Confucianism, similar to humanism, concerns itself with man's relationship to man. Relationships are a central theme for Confucius, and his ideas are expressed in terms of (1) the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), (2) understanding the necessity of acting with propriety in society, and (3) the requirement that individuals keep their word. Trust and building trust with one another is at the core of Confucianism.

In Taoism, self-awareness becomes evident when we are in harmony with our surroundings. It is manifested by moderation and humility as well as compassion and kindness. Taoists teach us that excessive drive, inflated egos, and blind ambition can be destructive forces. Taoism also holds that respecting the environment is crucial for sustainability and happiness, "like birds using currents of air to support them as they glide rather than fight the drafts."⁵ Our translation of Taoism for leaders is that we need to create and sustain environments and relationships that are founded upon respect, simplicity, and receptiveness.

Buddhism is about self-actualization. As in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the culmination of happiness is driven more by extending ourselves to help others than by helping ourselves. This is accomplished through self-reflection and concentration. Buddhism is the process of heightening one's self-awareness. It is realized when we become aware of the changes we need to make in order to reach enlightenment.

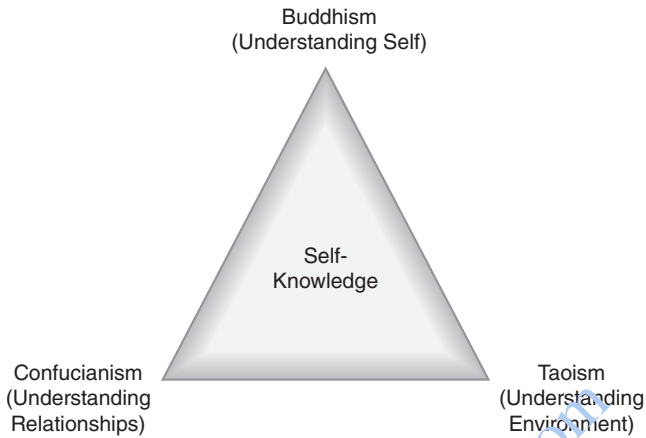


Figure 1.1: The Fundamentals of Self-Knowledge

In summary, the foundation of self-knowledge is the relationship we build with others, the harmony we must create with our surroundings, and our search for meaning and self-knowledge. Figure 1.1 depicts this in graphic form.

STRATEGIES FOR DEEPENING SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Building a pillar of self-awareness is less straightforward than we might imagine. Fortunately, there are effective techniques to help us understand and diagnose what motivates us and to identify our natural strengths and weaknesses. Some schools of thought center on holistically building on our strengths; others focus on individual skill development. Whatever the approach,

the key is to recognize that, like leading with conviction, self-knowledge is a lifelong endeavor—and an essential one. We use several tools to start leaders on the journey to self-awareness.

Turning Points

One of the most effective strategies we use in helping others to know themselves involves reflecting on turning points. We begin by asking individuals to reflect on their lives and identify events and experiences that have impacted them. As they assess those experiences—positive and negative—they draw lessons about how their personalities and views in life have been shaped by those events.

For example, Doug, the CEO of a large Boston-based high-tech company, described a situation in his teens that shaped his future. Doug grew up in a small town in northern New England in a middle-class family. Overall, he was a poor student who hated school. He skipped classes on many occasions and was put on disciplinary notice. His parents were at a loss concerning what to do. Then, as a junior in high school, when Doug was seventeen, he left the class to smoke a cigarette in the washroom, thereby breaking school rules. As he lit the cigarette, his teacher burst into the lavatory stall and lifted him up by the shoulders. He looked Doug in the eye and said, “As far as I am concerned, you are worthless. There is no need for you to attend my classes from now on. I will not report this to your parents.” After that, he dropped him and left.

Shaken, Doug sat in the stall for ten or fifteen minutes. This incident had such an impact on him that, right then and there, he resolved to prove the teacher wrong. It was a turning point—the beginning of his personal transformation. He worked hard, became a good student at a leading university, and years later asked the teacher to be the best man at his wedding.

Upon reflection, each of us can identify moments—more or less dramatic than Doug’s—that define who we are as individuals and as leaders. Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas refer to these moments as “crucibles”—experiences so profound that they change the course of our lives. “A crucible is, by definition, a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity,” they wrote in a *Harvard Business Review* article.⁶ Understanding your own crucibles—and reflecting on how they have shaped you—provides the foundation on which to anchor your identity and lead with conviction.

Comparing Perceptions

Another way to cultivate self-awareness is to examine how we see ourselves compared to what others see. One way to do that is to use the *Johari Window*, a technique created by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham to develop self-knowledge and improve interpersonal relationships.⁷ In this particular exercise you choose five or six adjectives that describe yourself. Several col-

Table 1.1: The Johari Window

	Things I know about myself	Things I don't know about myself
Things others know about me	The public self	The blind self
Things others don't know about me	The private self	The unknown self

leagues are also asked to use adjectives to describe you. The results are then plotted on a grid that consists of four quadrants or “windowpanes,” as shown in Table 1.1. Your self-description goes in the left column; the way that other people describe you goes in the right column.

The upper left quadrant—the public self—represents the part of ourselves that both we and others see. The upper right quadrant—the blind self—shows the aspects that others see but we are not aware of. The lower right quadrant—the unknown self—reveals unconscious or subconscious parts of us that neither we nor others see. The lower left quadrant—the private self—represents all that we know about ourselves but keep from others.

The Johari Window exercise, both simple and powerful, helps us understand how we reveal ourselves to others and how others perceive us. It is also an effective way to get and give feedback. In one recent instance in a training course, the Johari Window helped a woman we met, whom we'll call Jessica, identify why she was having so much trouble connecting with her team.

We were already aware that everybody in her unit—including Jessica—knew that she was extremely negative in how she interacted with others. In fact, her manager was maneuvering to transfer her, because he felt that her behavior was causing a general morale dip within her team. What the others did not know was that Jessica was struggling. Adopted as a child, Jessica had spent her life constantly grappling with feelings of resentment toward her biological mother. Being given away as a toddler had also left her with low self-esteem, which she had learned to mask in negativity. Using the Johari Window, followed by coaching, in time she was able to better understand the root cause of her behavior and consider ways to convert her negative energy into something more positive. Later, Jessica even acknowledged this personal issue to her colleagues. She followed up by publicly apologizing for her behavior. All of this went a long way toward restoring some of the lost trust between Jessica and her colleagues. It created a more harmonious relationship within her team and allowed Jessica to grow as a leader.

There is no magic bullet, but we use tools like the Johari Window to encourage leaders to consider how their perception of themselves matches how others see them.

Establishing Personality Type

A third way to become more self-aware is to identify the various characteristics of your personality and how they affect

your interpersonal relationships. One common framework that can be used to shed light on your predispositions (and more specifically your personality type) is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a popular leadership development diagnostic instrument.⁸ It consists of a questionnaire (which you can generally find online for free), the outcome of which enables you to gain insight into things such as whether you are outgoing or shy, whether you rely heavily on facts and details or on imagination and possibilities. This, and other tools like it, can help you to understand whether your decisions are based on principles or driven by the need for harmony. These tools shed light on whether you prefer to be organized and structured or flexible and spontaneous. The benefit is that the tools not only identify natural preferences but also suggest ways to overcome some of the shortcomings inherent in your personality. For example, if you are extremely introverted, having a better understanding of the elements of your personality might prompt you to reach out to others and become more expressive. If you are very extroverted, this might indicate that you should talk less and listen more.

Another personality preference is a propensity toward data as opposed to possibilities. This understanding can become instrumental in communicating with others. There are those who are inspired by metaphor and analysis, whereas others are more inclined toward facts and details.

Another type indicator concerns one's preference for decision making. There are those who rely on principles to arrive at conclusions, whereas others decide by their feelings. For

instance, the proponents of the “three strikes” laws that mandate a life sentence without parole on a third conviction are most likely thinking types. On the other hand, “That’s three strikes, but let’s consider the actual magnitude of the crime and sentence more appropriately” is likely the attitude of a feeling type with a need for harmony

The last of the four Myers-Briggs indicators identifies whether a person prefers to control events by being organized and structured or is more spontaneous and prefers to go with the flow. This preference can be a source of conflict within organizational settings. For instance, organized types demand that meetings start on time and follow a formal agenda, whereas individuals who are less inclined to be structured prefer to move to the beat of their own drum and are less driven by timelines. These differing personalities are also manifested in the home, where one parent or spouse may be more structured and disciplinary whereas the other is empathic and spontaneous.

Understanding your type, and that of others around you, will help you better manage needs and relationships. It will also be extremely effective as a way to create diverse teams. Moreover, it will enhance your ability to communicate effectively to different types. However, you need to have a profound understanding of yourself before you can reach out to others. We all have certain predispositions and personality traits that drive our actions and behaviors. Understanding these traits, and how we are alike and different from others, helps us know ourselves and other people better.

3D Feedback

Finally, structured feedback (such as 360° reviews or multirater feedback) is extremely useful because it reveals how others see you, often in their own words. Feedback from direct reports, close colleagues, and senior managers enables you to discern distinctions between how individuals at various levels of the organization assess your effectiveness. Although your manager's perception may seem most important in terms of advancement and job security, it is actually your direct reports and peers who can best help you gauge how effective you are as a leader. Different programs and organizations structure 360° feedback differently, but regardless of format it is a useful way to get to know what your colleagues are thinking—especially on those things they might not vocalize without a formal performance mechanism.

Further, feedback is best achieved when a leader and his or her team have a high level of trust. Steve Wynne, the former CEO of Adidas USA, made it a common practice once a month for the leadership team members to give each other feedback on their performance and behavior, live and in front of one another. This approach, which could have been become politicized, was done in a spirit of continuous improvement. According to Wynne, it resulted in deeper relationships, better performance, and an abundance of positive energy. There were no secrets and no second guessing.

Fast 360° Feedback

Conducting a periodic leadership style questionnaire (LSQ) is a simple and effective way to help you explore the strengths and weaknesses of your leadership behavior. You can conduct your own LSQ by asking your subordinates, peers, and boss to respond to three simple questions about you. Have a colleague send the request on your behalf so that the feedback may be provided anonymously.

The three powerful questions are:

1. How would you describe my leadership style?
2. What should I do more of?
3. What should I do less of?

To paraphrase the Bard, to know or not to know oneself is a choice—and therein lies the rub. An authentic search for self, after all, requires us to hold up the mirror and to celebrate our strengths and recognize our weaknesses. The challenge, then, is to leverage our strengths and to work on our weaknesses. As so often happens in an organizational setting, there are moments or situations where weakness can become one's Achilles' heel. If you refuse to become self-aware, you will eventually hit a wall in terms of personal and career growth. As an effective leader, you must continuously challenge and

change the status quo. In order to do that, you must also forge ahead by demonstrating your own willingness and capacity for self-examination, reflection, learning, and change.

One of the most important figures in Jewish history is a religious leader, Hillel the Elder. Hillel, a sage and scholar, said among other things: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And when I am *only* for myself, what am ‘I’?”

In this famous saying, Hillel gets to the heart of self-awareness as a path to leading with conviction. You need to take the initiative for self-improvement and go through a painful process of discovery for yourself. No one can do it for you. Yet, if taken too far, you risk straying into narcissism. The second part of Hillel’s idea—the notion of reaching out and building relationships and touching others’ hearts—becomes paramount not only for true success but also for true self-awareness.

Searching for the truth about yourself takes courage. But actually using that self-knowledge once you possess it requires something else: an ability to balance the practical task at hand with the leadership behavior or action that will motivate the people around you. In Chapter Two, we will explore balance as the second fundamental pillar of leadership that builds a foundation for leading with conviction.

Five Guiding Principles for Building a Pillar of Self-Awareness:

1. Think about the events in your life that shaped who you are.

2. Make a habit of examining your behaviors, and asking yourself: how can I improve?
3. Know your strengths and weaknesses, and encourage feedback from others.
4. Take time to reflect and commit to constructive, meaningful action.
5. Be clear on your 360° vision for yourself—including work, community, and personal life.

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