

Becoming a Self-Mentor

by Paula Jorde Bloom

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Socrates summed up the secret to a meaningful life in two simple words — “Know thyself.” Self-awareness means knowing your needs and values, your strengths and limitations, your passions and your idiosyncratic quirks. It means having a deep appreciation of what makes you a unique specimen on this planet. On a deeper level, self-awareness means knowing how you react in different situations and accepting full responsibility for your feelings and actions.

Having a better understanding of oneself is the first step to having a better relationship with others. This is because self-awareness provides a window to expand our understanding about other points of view and perspectives. While the importance of self-awareness is readily understood by most people, achieving it is easier said than done. Even Benjamin Franklin acknowledged this when he wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanac*, “There are three things extremely hard: steel, diamonds, and to know one's self.”

The reason self-awareness is so difficult to achieve is that it involves an ongoing assessment of our assumptions, beliefs, values, and mental models that shape our behavior and guide our actions both at work and in our personal lives. The goal of this kind of reflection is not merely to see who we are and better understand ourselves today, but to envision what we might become tomorrow. It is a life-long process — a journey of self-discovery, meaning making, and identity shaping. It is the journey of becoming a self-mentor.

Why self-awareness is so important

The importance of self-awareness is based on George Kelly's construct theory, first published in 1955, and his notion that every person is a psychologist. Kelly believed that people's common sense ideas and their own theories about life and relationships are

enormously rich sources of knowledge about human affairs. The central thesis of his approach is that we do not merely react to events; we are in charge of what we do in the world and have the potential to recreate ourselves.

Two other social psychologists have been influential in promoting the self-awareness movement of personal psychology. In his 1987 book *Beginning with Ourselves*, David Hunt calls the approach *inside-out psychology*. He contrasts this to the outside-in approach which leaves human affairs to the experts. The same year, Donald Schon published his seminal work *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner*. This book, as well, gave credence to the idea that achieving professional competence is a dynamic process involving continual inquiry and renewal.

Being self-aware is at the core of what Howard Gardner refers to as *intrapersonal intelligence* or what John Mayer, Peter Salovey, and Daniel Goleman refer to as *emotional intelligence*. They describe self-awareness as the capacity to be introspective and examine thoughts and feelings. This includes:

- affective awareness — knowledge of one's feelings, attitudes, moods, and outlook;
- ethical awareness — the ability to set one's principles and moral priorities;
- self-regulation — the ability to monitor one's thoughts, actions, and behavior; and
- metacognition — the ability to be aware of one's thought processes.

Self-awareness also means having a clear picture of our internal motives; those things that drive us to say what we say or do what we do. Peeling away the layers of our motivations is not always a comfortable process, but it is a necessary step if our goal is to

become an authentic leader known for personal integrity. Central to this process is gaining absolute clarity about what we perceive our purpose is in life and how we define success.

Becoming a reflective practitioner

The capacity to reflect and engage in candid introspection is at the core of achieving self-awareness. Reflective practitioners think creatively, imaginatively, and, at times self critically about what they are doing. Individuals who use a variety of reflective approaches have a better awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses and can better understand, monitor, and adjust their behavior in personal and professional interactions.

The most common type of reflection is referred to as *reflection-on-action*. This is simply a replay of an experience to review, revisit, or recall what has happened — kind of like replaying a videotape. *Reflection-in-action* refers to a kind of out-of-body experience where we watch ourselves act and simultaneously reflect about the decisions we are making. A third type of reflection is referred to as *reflection-for-action*. This is a predictive process for forecasting how we will use what we have learned from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. It involves consciously adjusting our behaviors based on our reflections (Saban et al., 1994).

The content or substance of reflection also goes through a change as individuals gain mastery in their profession. They are better able to surface the gap between their *espoused theories* (what they say) and their *theories-in-action* (what they actually do).

Using self-assessments to build self-awareness

There is certainly no shortage of formal and informal self-assessment tools to help build self-awareness. Some are quick snapshots — a questionnaire that can be taken in ten minutes and scored independently. Others are quite lengthy and must be administered by a certified psychologist or trainer.

At the risk of oversimplifying, self-assessment instruments can be divided into two broad categories of awareness building: prescriptive and descriptive. *Prescriptive* assessments compare a person's traits to

those of a model teacher or administrator and diagnoses the individual's strengths and weaknesses in relation to that ideal. *Descriptive* instruments, on the other hand, are the ones that say, "This is your type, your style, your preference. It is no better or worse than any other, just different."

The goal of engaging in self-assessment is obviously to improve professional practice and job fulfillment. When we use the term *professional practice*, we're really talking about *competence* in whatever role the early childhood educator holds. The goal of self-assessment then is to surface a greater awareness on the part of the practitioner of his/her strengths and talents as well as knowledge and skill areas that need to be improved. We can think of this as moving to progressively higher stages in learning from *unconscious incompetence* ("I don't even know what I don't know"), to *conscious incompetence* ("Oh my, I have so much to learn"), to *conscious competence* ("I am keenly aware of what I know and how it impacts my performance"), to *unconscious competence* ("I am on automatic pilot").

From reflection and self-awareness to self-mentoring

It is one thing to be self-aware, to acquire information from reflection and formal and informal self-assessments, and quite another to apply that information into concrete behavioral changes. No doubt about it, the most effective professionals hold a transformational view of human growth and change. They see themselves as active agents in describing, interpreting, and shaping their behavior. In other words, they are self-mentors.

The great Roman philosopher Cicero is credited with saying, "No one can give you better advice than yourself." That is really the premise of self-mentoring. Self-mentoring is essentially self-directed learning. It means intentionally developing or strengthening those aspects of who you are and who you want to be. Self-mentoring requires that you not only get an accurate picture of your real self — who you are now — but also a strong image of your ideal self — the person you aspire to become.

One vital aspect of self-development, stresses Richard Boyatzis, a leader in the self-directed learning movement, is striking a balance between what it is about

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yourself you want to preserve, and what it is you want to change. His research shows that people who successfully change in sustainable ways cycle through the following stages:

- Creating an image of an ideal self: Who do I want to be?
- Coming to terms with the real self: Who am I? What are my strengths (where my ideal and real overlap)? What are my gaps (where my ideal and real differ)?
- Crafting a learning agenda: How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?
- Experimenting with and practicing new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery.
- Developing trusting relationships that help, support, and encourage each step in process.

Self-mentoring means cultivating your own professional growth through reflection, networking, and seeking out appropriate resources.

Self-mentoring strategies

Aldous Huxley once said, "There is only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self." Self-mentoring means cultivating your own professional growth through reflection, networking, and seeking out appropriate resources. The process clearly requires motivation and self-discipline. Here are a few strategies to consider.

Observe the behavior of individuals you admire. Effective leadership is both an art and a science; leadership behaviors can definitely be learned. If there is a person you admire for their listening skills, study the precise behaviors that exemplify good listening. Observe the person's body language and the specific probing questions they ask.

Talk to individuals you consider to be experts in the field. Don't be bashful. If there is a person you admire for their knowledge in a specific area, contact the person and ask for his/her advice and resources to build your own expertise in this area.

Read, read, read. Subscribe to journals and magazines that enrich your understanding of different topics of interest. Don't limit yourself to professional journals, either. Some of the best wisdom you can get will be from literature in the fiction section of your bookstore. Most important, though, don't just read things that reinforce your point of view. Read articles and books that challenge your assumptions and promote a contrary point of view.

Pursue formal coursework. While demonstrated competence will get you promoted to higher levels of responsibility in your job, it is probably the formal

Getting Started

What's really important to you? What do you value most?

How do you define personal success? When have you felt most successful?

How have you used your knowledge, skill, and special talents to make a difference in the world?

When have you felt most energized and excited about work? When have you felt most depleted and discouraged about work?

Is there something you've always longed to do, but never quite had the courage to do?

How do you handle adversity?

Have you achieved a reasonable sense of balance in your life between your personal and professional pursuits?

Would people consider you to be a compassionate and kind person?

Do you know how to regulate your emotions or do your emotions get in the way in your interpersonal relationships?

Is it hard for you to relax and enjoy the present moment?

Are you quick to blame others when things don't go well?

Do you often find yourself comparing yourself to others?

What do you want more of in your relationships? What do you want less of?

How would you describe your most favorite co-worker? How would you describe your least favorite co-worker? How are these individuals different? How are they like or not like you?

What legacy do you want to pass on?

degrees or certificates you hold that got you the job in the first place. Consider taking formal courses that will help you attain the degrees, certificates, and certifications that will enhance your vita and open doors to new opportunities.

Take risks. Be bold and audacious and stretch your comfort zone. Challenge yourself to try new things and risk the awkwardness of not being perfect at something.

Cultivate a diversified portfolio. Don't just focus on the bolstering of your intellect; your emotional, physical, and spiritual sides are just as important. A balanced life has diversity and coherence.

Be open to feedback. Listen fully. Be open to receiving any message — compliment or criticism — as helpful data in understanding yourself better.

In sum

Socrates was right! The quest for excellence begins with an inner quest to discover who we are — our passions, values, talents, personal resources, and even those foibles and annoying habits we might prefer not to acknowledge. The insight that comes from self-awareness will help you appreciate the unique gifts you have to offer your organization and the importance of surrounding yourself with others who complement (and not necessarily compliment) your unique skill set and personality.

The job of becoming a self-mentor is really about developing the disposition of life-long learning and self-

transformation. It means becoming fully aware of what you really want in all areas of your life and being able to invent new possibilities to unleash your passions. It is about taking charge of your life and taking responsibility for your choices.

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It's a process!: Becoming self-aware and reflective is a process that leads, according to Bloom, to self-mentoring. Where are you in this process? Where do you need to focus your attention? Answering these types of questions is a good place to begin.

Strategies galore!: The list of self-mentoring strategies opens the door for action. Start at the beginning of the list and see how many of these strategies might work for you.

Getting started: Bloom proposes that becoming a self-mentor emerges from self-awareness and reflective practice. Use her list of questions (p. 56) as a starting place for getting started on your journey.

Using Beginnings Workshop
to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht