

## Self-Awareness and Personal Development



### In a Nutshell

With our busy schedules it might be difficult to find time to think about who we are, our strengths and weaknesses, our drives and personalities, our habits and values. Besides, many of us just aren't inclined to spend much time on self-reflection. Even when personal feedback is presented to us, we're not always open to it, because *honest* feedback isn't always *flattering*. Consequently, many of us have a pretty low level of self-awareness. That's unfortunate, because **self-awareness** is an essential **first step toward maximizing management skills**. Self-awareness can improve our judgment and help us identify opportunities for professional development and personal growth.

### In This Issue

- [Does Eisner Have CEO Disease?](#)
- [Key Areas for Self-Awareness](#)
- [How Self-Awareness Makes You More Effective](#)
- [Practicing This Management Skill](#)
- [About the Newsletter and Subscriptions](#)
- [Good, Clean Joke](#)
- [LeaderLetter Web Site](#)

### Does Eisner Have CEO Disease?

The board members who led the coup that brought current CEO Michael Eisner to Disney in 1984 are poised to lead another coup. Earlier this month Roy Disney (nephew of founder Walt Disney) and his ally on Disney's board, Stanley Gold, resigned. On their way out the door, the duo wrote scathing critiques of Eisner's leadership and vowed to lead stockholder and employee revolts against him. Specifically, Roy Disney and Gold criticized Eisner's failure to develop a successor, empower the creative staff, and generate marketable innovations and programs.<sup>1</sup> For years press reports have suggested Eisner is a politically minded manager who develops power bases better than he develops executives.

Michael Eisner could very well be suffering from what Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee refer to as "CEO disease" in their best-selling book, *Primal Leadership*. They describe CEO disease as "the information vacuum around a leader created when people withhold important (and usually unpleasant) information."<sup>2</sup> Eisner is the prototypical candidate for CEO disease. He is notorious for filling Disney's board of directors with cronies and others who would be unlikely to be very critical of his decision-making and performance. Consequently, he can act with virtual impunity and caprice. It would be risky for an executive to criticize Eisner's actions or choices. Hence, Eisner is unlikely to be offered much of the constructive criticism a CEO needs to improve his or her performance.

Just as being able to see your reflection in the mirror helps you to fix your hair, feedback on your characteristics and behaviors helps you to develop your management skills and improve your judgment. Self-awareness--i.e., knowing your personal characteristics and how your actions affect other people, business results,

etc.--is an essential first step toward maximizing your management skills. Self-awareness is the antidote to CEO disease.

### Key Areas for Self-Awareness

Human beings are complex and diverse. To become more self-aware, we should develop an understanding of ourselves in many areas. Key areas for self-awareness include our personality traits, personal values, habits, emotions, and the psychological needs that drive our behaviors.

**Personality.** We don't normally change our personalities, values and needs based on what we learn about ourselves. But, an understanding of our personalities can help us find situations in which we will thrive, and help us avoid situations in which we will experience too much stress. For instance, if you are a highly introverted person, you are likely to experience more stress in a sales position than a highly extroverted person would. So, if you are highly introverted, you should either learn skills to cope with the demands of a sales position that requires extravert-type behavior patterns, or you should find a position that is more compatible with your personality. Awareness of your personality helps you analyze such a decision.

Roy Disney and Stanley Gold would say that Michael Eisner's personality is too controlling. He has buffered himself from threats to his tenure as CEO by co-opting the board of directors and by micro-managing the executives he should be developing and empowering. As a result, his performance as CEO has suffered.

**Values.** It's important that we each know and focus on our [personal values](#). For instance, if your first priority is "being there for your children" or "your relationship with God," it's very easy to lose sight of those priorities on a day-to-day, moment-by-moment basis. During the workday, so many problems and opportunities arise that our lists of "things to do" can easily exceed the time we have to do them. Since few (if any) of those things pertain to what we value most, it's easy to spend too much time on lower priority activities. When we focus on our values, we are more likely to accomplish what we consider most important.

**Habits.** Our habits are the behaviors that we repeat routinely and often automatically. Although we would like to possess the habits that help us interact effectively with and manage others, we can probably all identify at least one of our habits that decreases our effectiveness. For example, if you are a manager who never consults your staff before making decisions, that habit may interfere with your ability to build your staff members' commitment to the decisions and their decision-making skills as well.

**Needs.** Maslow and other scholars have identified a variety of psychological needs that drive our behaviors such as needs for esteem, affection, belongingness, achievement, self-actualization, power and control. One of the advantages of knowing which needs exert the strongest influence on our own behaviors is the ability to understand how they affect our interpersonal relationships. For instance, most of us have probably known people who have a high need for status. They're attracted to high status occupations, and they seek high status positions within their organizations. Such people also want the things that symbolize their status. They insist that they be shown respect, and they want privileges and perks that people of lower status can't have. Sometimes these people fight for things that others see as inconsequential--like a bigger office. Needs cause motivation; and when needs aren't satisfied, they can cause frustration, conflict and stress.

**Emotions.** Emotional self-awareness has become a hot topic of discussion recently because it's one of the five facets of emotional intelligence. Understanding your own feelings, what causes them, and how they impact your thoughts and actions is emotional self-awareness. If you were once excited about your job but not excited now, can you get excited again? To answer that question, it helps to understand the internal processes associated with getting excited. That sounds simpler than it is. Here's an analogy: I think I know how my car starts--I put gas in the tank, put the key in the ignition, and turn the key. But, my mechanic knows a lot more about what's involved in getting my car started than I do--he knows what happens under the hood. My mechanic is able to start my car on the occasions when I'm not because he understands the internal processes. Similarly, a person with high emotional self-awareness understands the internal process associated with emotional experiences and, therefore, has greater control over them.

[back to the top](#)

### How Self-Awareness Makes You More Effective

Self-awareness helps managers identify gaps in their management skills, which promotes skill development. But self-awareness also helps managers find situations in which they will be most effective, assists with intuitive decision making, and aids stress management and motivation of oneself and others.

**Skill development.** Improvement projects should normally begin with an assessment of the gap between the current situation and the desired future situation. Having an accurate sense of who you are helps you decide what you should do to improve. Often, self-awareness will reveal a skills gap that you want to work on.

**Knowing your strengths and weaknesses.** Self-awareness helps you exploit your strengths and cope with your weaknesses. For instance, if you are someone who is good at "seeing the big picture" that surrounds decisions, but not as good at focusing on the details, you might want to consult colleagues and subordinates that are more detail-oriented when making major decisions. Cooperation between big-picture-oriented decision makers and detail-oriented decision makers can produce high quality decisions.

**Developing intuitive decision-making skills.** Leaders with well-developed emotional self-awareness are more effective intuitive decision makers. In complex situations, intuitive decision makers process large amounts of sometimes unstructured and ambiguous data, and they choose a course of action based on a "gut feeling" or a "sense" of what's best. This type of decision making is becoming more important for managers as the rate of change and the levels of uncertainty and complexity in their competitive environments increase. Managers who are highly emotionally self-aware are better able to read their "gut feelings" and use them to guide decisions.

**Stress.** Jobs that don't suit your personality tend to give you more stress than jobs that are more compatible. This is not to say that you should never take a job that conflicts with your personality. However, be aware that you will need to work extra hard to develop the skills for that job, and there are jobs that would be less stressful for you.

**Motivation.** It's very difficult to cope with poor results when you don't understand what causes them. When you don't know what behaviors to change to improve your performance, you just feel helpless. Self-awareness is empowering because it can reveal where the performance problems are and indicate what can be done to improve performance. In addition, awareness of your psychological needs can increase your motivation by helping you understand and seek out the rewards that you really desire such as a sense of accomplishment, additional responsibility, an opportunity to help others, or a flexible work schedule.

**Leadership.** When we understand "what make us tick"--what gets us excited, why we behave the way we do, etc.--we also have insight into what makes others tick. To the extent that other people are like you (and, of course, there are limits to the similarity), knowing how to motivate yourself is tantamount to knowing how to motivate others.

[back to the top](#)

### Practicing This Management Skill

You can become more self-aware by seeking feedback from the people who know you, completing self-assessment surveys, and hiring an expert like a professional counselor or executive coach.

**Ask somebody.** If you have open, trusting relationships with the people who know you, you can ask them for feedback about your personality, habits, needs and values. Research shows that your coworkers, friends and family members CAN provide valid assessments of your personality. But, they do NOT ALWAYS provide an accurate assessment. For instance, I once asked my undergraduate students to describe my personality on the four Myers-Briggs personality dimensions, and they described the exact opposite of my actual personality. Their ratings described the personality that is appropriate for a teacher, and they also rated me as an effective teacher. So, they saw me act like a teacher in my role as a teacher, but those behaviors are not representative of my behaviors in other roles. There are two lessons in that: (1) You can develop skills for a role that doesn't match your personality. (2) People who only see you in one role can only describe your behaviors in relation to that role. Analogously, if you mismanage your time so that you spend too much time on things that don't matter much to you, people will have a very different perception of your values than you do. For instance, maybe you say that your family is important to you, but how do you spend your time?

Another limitation on the value of the feedback you get from family, friends and especially coworkers is that they may not be completely candid with you. This is where the [trust](#) factor looms large. Unflattering feedback is the type that has the most potential for helping you develop your management skills, but it is also the most difficult to give and to accept. People aren't very likely to give you unflattering feedback if there isn't a high level of trust in your relationship with them ... unless they don't mind harming the relationship. For this reason, many experts (e.g., Ed Eppley, Area Manager for [Dale Carnegie Training](#), and Ellen Van Velsor of the [Center for Creative Leadership](#)) suggest that managers find a way to get anonymous feedback from staff members and co-workers.

**Questionnaires.** One of the ways to improve the quality of the feedback that you can receive from other people is by asking them to fill out a psychometrically sound inventory of your personality, values, needs, or habits as they perceive them. Those surveys are composed and structured in such a way as to maximize the accuracy of the feedback they generate. With the help of a facilitator, the surveys can be completed anonymously. You can also fill out surveys yourself as a means of self-assessment.

**Seek professional help.** Professional counselors and executive coaches can be a great source of feedback to help you develop your self-awareness. Of course, not everyone who calls herself a coach is qualified. You should evaluate the training and certifications of counselors and coaches. Nevertheless, executive coaching is a great resource, and it's a growing area of management consulting. Coaches not only help you get a better picture of who you are; they also guide you through self-improvement. Often coaches collect anonymous evaluations of their clients from their subordinates, superiors or anyone else who is in a position to provide helpful feedback. Good coaches know how to effectively collect and digest the feedback. Professional counselors, such as guidance counselors and clinical psychologists, are also great resources. Guidance counselors can provide inventories of your personality and interests. Clinical psychologists can help you understand and work on aspects of your personality and habits that interfere with any facet of your life, including work.

### In Summary ...

To perfect your management skills, the best place to start is self-awareness. Self-awareness means knowing your values, personality, needs, habits, emotions, strengths, weaknesses, etc. With a sense of who you are and a vision of the person you want to become, a plan for professional or personal development can be created. Moreover, self-awareness allows you to motivate yourself and manage your stress better, helps you with your intuitive decision making, and helps you to lead and motivate others more effectively. Self-awareness is very useful.

[back to the top](#)

### Photo Credit

AP Photo/Peter Cosgrove: e-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*; news.yahoo.com.

### Notes

1. Grover, R. (2003). Stalking a wily prey at Disney. *Business Week Online*, Dec. 2. Retrieved December 11, 2003 from [http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/dec2003/nf2003122\\_5238\\_db035.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/dec2003/nf2003122_5238_db035.htm).
2. Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press. (The definition of CEO disease appears on page 93.)

### About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

*LeaderLetter* is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

[back to the top](#)

### E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **I learn a lot from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

## A Good, Clean Joke

In a certain suburban neighborhood, there were two brothers, 8 and 10 years old, who were exceedingly mischievous. Whatever went wrong in the neighborhood, it turned out they had had a hand in it. Their parents were at their wit's end trying to control them. Hearing about a priest nearby who worked with delinquent boys, the mother suggested to the father that they ask the priest to talk with the boys. The father replied, "Sure, do that before I kill them!" The mother went to the priest and made her request. He agreed, but said he wanted to see the younger boy first and alone. So the mother sent him to the priest.

The priest sat the boy down across a huge, impressive desk he sat behind. For about five minutes they just sat and stared at each other. Finally, the priest pointed his forefinger at the boy and asked, "Where is God?" The boy looked under the desk, in the corners of the room, all around, but said nothing.

Again, louder, the priest pointed at the boy and asked, "Where is God?"

Again the boy looked all around but said nothing. A third time, in a louder, firmer voice, the priest leaned far across the desk and put his forefinger almost to the boy's nose, and asked, "Where is God?"

The boy panicked and ran all the way home. Finding his older brother, he dragged him upstairs to their room and into the closet, where they usually plotted their mischief. He finally said, "We are in BIG trouble!"

The older boy asked, "What do you mean, BIG trouble?"

His brother replied, "God is missing and they think we did it." ever!

[back to the top](#)

**RAJ SOIN**  
College of Business  
**WRIGHT STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

