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Asking Questions begins with Self-Awareness

By Matt Rawlins ©

A quick Google of the word leadership gives 155,000,000 references for it on the web. Leadership is one of the most studied, investigated and talked about topics that effect everyone of us. With all this research and study we can find at least one thing in common among almost all of them: They all are built on a foundation of “it depends.” No one will argue that leadership is vital, but the key is knowing what it depends on.

According to Harvard psychologist Daniel Goleman *a key part of it depends on a leaders self-awareness* – in other words, knowing one’s internal states, preferences, resources and intuitions. I call it simply the art of knowing “where you are.”

Imagine someone calls you on the phone and you invite him over. He asks for directions on how to get to your house and the first question you must ask is, “Where are you?” If you don’t know where he is, your leadership in giving them directions will be useless. All direction, advice, counsel or assistance comes first from an understanding of where someone is. In our own life it is the same. In order to get to where we want to go, we must first know where we are.

This “art of waking up” as one writer called it, marks a leader as someone people want to follow. Nathan Hobbs, Principal Consultant at Business Psychology Consultancy said it this way, "Self-awareness is at the centre of all learning and development and an important skill needed to manage our own behavior alongside colleagues in the pursuit of an organization’s goals. It is at the heart of effective leadership. Increasing self-awareness enables any member of staff to reflect more knowingly on their work performance and identify means of self-improvement."

People naturally respond well to those they respect and trust. Emotional intelligence is not just about “being nice.” It is about getting results in the midst of working with and through others. Once you are aware of the working styles of the leaders and teams around you, you are able to assess, assimilate, and accommodate those styles which best enhance your own style. In essence you build trust and respect. Becoming self-aware is about observing, learning, and teaching one's self. As you become self-aware, you begin to become others-aware, and discover better strategies for leading and working with your team.

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Researchers, Robertson and Walt report the findings of a recent multinational study of nearly 100 CEOs, conducted by the Andersen Consulting Group. The research findings report 14 skills considered essential to effective leadership now and in the future. Some of these skills include the ability to: think globally, create a shared vision, embrace change, live the values, demonstrate personal mastery, and share leadership. Similar to other noted writers in the field, Robertson and Walt write that no one set of universal guidelines exists in the area of leadership development. Leadership, they say, “*is grounded in a high degree of self-awareness and the ability to leverage those personal strengths that set each individual apart.*” They further suggest that the ideal outcome of self-awareness is a “congruence of individual strengths and the job.”

The challenge is that self-awareness cannot be taught. I cannot tell you what is going on inside of you. You are the only one who knows. One of the simplest and most powerful tools to help each person understand themselves better is to work with questions.

On a personal note, one of the marks of freedom for myself and my “growing up” was I found I had a choice to change the questions I asked myself. The simple act of changing the question from “What is wrong with me?” to “What can I learn in this situation?” freed me from self-doubt, insecurity and gave me a confidence I had not known before.

Questions are like air, there is more to life than breathing, but without it you are in trouble. Imagine for a brief moment what it would be like if those involved in your organization were more aware of themselves. What if they all understood their strengths and weaknesses? What if they didn’t have to blame others and accepted responsibility when things go wrong? What if they could ask questions of any situation to better understand it from a different perspective of those involved? If these things began to happen a team or organization would know itself and as a result have more confidence in it’s ability to succeed in a changing world.

Here are a few questions for you:

How are you at asking questions?

What is the hardest part for you of asking questions?

Where are you? Emotionally? Physically? Spiritually?

What question do you need to ask to move you forward to a richer life?

Matt Rawlins “Asking questions begins with Self Awareness”, The Straits Times, Singapore, 9 March 2008, Recruit section.