(U.S. army photo by Sgt. Thomas Calvert taken Nov. 17, 2019) A team leader with 27th Infantry Regiment "Wolfhounds", 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division observes his machine gun crew providing suppressive fire during a fire support coordination exercise at Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii, Nov. 17. 2019.

# The Importance of Self-Awareness

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Ancient Greek philosophers often preached to "Know Thyself," a maxim engraved on the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Although this philosophy is centuries old, modern scientific evidence suggests leaders who know themselves and how others see them (a core component of emotional intelligence), are more effective in leadership positions with higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Esimai, 2018). Effective leaders learn who they are as an individual and build positive relationships with their subordinates.

## The Pursuit of Self-Awareness

*Army Doctrine Publication* (ADP) *6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession* states "leaders require self-awareness if they are to accurately assess their own experience and competence as well as earn the trust of those they influence" (Department of the Army, 2019, p.

1-17). The more self-aware a leader is, the more influence they wield, resulting in a higher level of performance from subordinates. Additionally, leaders who possess high self-awareness understand their strengths and shortcomings and recognize knowledge, skills, and attributes that require improvement (Issah, 2018).

There are two classifications of self-awareness:

**Internal self-awareness** is the ability to see yourself clearly as an individual.

**External self-awareness** is the ability to understand how others see you (Taylor, 2010).

Both components are critical to effective leadership and form a guiding principle for leaders to make meaning of the world around them (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

At its core, self-awareness refers to a candid understanding of a person's needs, principles, thought patterns, goals, motivations, emotional reactions, ambitions,

strengths, and limitations, and how these affect other people (Issah, 2018). Once this skill is developed and regularly practiced, it allows leaders to better manage their conduct and enhance relationships and interactions with others. Self-awareness allows leaders to project positivity, increasing their effective presence with Soldiers (Department of the Army, 2019). However, self-awareness is not just about what needs to be done; it is also about knowing what not to do.

## Misguided Leaders

Regardless of one's profession or career echelon, success depends on recognizing who you are as well as how you come across to others. This becomes more important the higher someone ascends in rank and stature. Because of the positional power senior leaders possess, those lacking self-awareness are significantly more likely to trigger angst throughout an organization and cause derailment (Kim, 2016). Dr. Tasha Eurich (2017) states that the delusion of misguided leaders often grows with rank and seniority because "early successes give way to an intoxicating pride that blinds them to truths they can and should be seeing" (p. 47).

There are three categories of misguided leaders: the *lost cause*, the *aware don't care*, and the *nudgable* (Eurich, 2017).

### The Lost Cause Leader

*Lost cause leaders* remain true to their delusion with a principled, disgruntled, and firm commitment. They refuse to consider any other opinions and anyone who mentions their shortcomings will most likely be sub-



Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston, visits with Paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division as they train for the Expert Infantryman and Expert Soldier Badge at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, June 24, 2020. (U.S. Army photo)

jected to an emotional response. It is unproductive to challenge a *lost cause* because they don't realize anything is wrong and refuse to change.

### The Aware Don't Care Leader

The *aware don't care* leaders are cognizant of their behavior and the impact it has on others but also refuse to change. For example, an ego-driven senior leader that is demanding and patronizing knows they are negatively regarded by subordinates, but refuse to change because they are set in their ways, or because *that's how it's always been done*. These types of leaders lack humility, and choose to be self-absorbed because they believe their behavior is productive even though it's harmful to the organization.

### The Nudgable

The final type of misguided leader is the *nudgable*. Unlike the previous categories, a *nudgable* leader wants to change and improve, they are just not aware of their shortcomings. *Nudgable leaders* are accepting of constructive feedback, and they act upon it accordingly. They are in pursuit of self-awareness and understand that it is a life-long process that can be difficult, complex, confusing, and sometimes unpleasant. With a supportive team, nudgable leaders can become great leaders.

## Ask *What* not *Why*

Often, when leaders want to make a change, they ask questions like: *Why do I get so mad? Why am I this way? Why am I being micromanaged?* Dr. Tasha Eurich states:

> ❝ *Why* questions draw us to our limitations; *what* questions help us see our potential. *Why* questions stir up negative emotion; *what* questions keep us curious. *Why* questions trap us in our past; *what* questions help us create a better future (2017, p. 101). ❞

It is important to understand that *why* questions lead to defensiveness as leaders analyze their behaviors and emotions. This causes them to search for quick answers; however, they only search for answers that confirm their beliefs, and if they cannot find them––they invent them. When people ask *why* questions they set themselves up as victims.

In contrast, asking *what* questions leads to introspection and open-mindedness (Eurich, 2017). Leaders should be asking: *What can I do to change my behavior? What is going on? What can I do to fix it? What is the best way to handle the situation?* This line of questioning translates emotion into language, which then allows the leader to stay in control of their response to the situation. Changing the question from *why* to *what* can be the difference

between remaining defensive or gaining wisdom and self-awareness.

## Conclusion

Deepening the understanding of one's self and the influence they have on the world around them remains paramount to successful leadership. Therefore, to avoid the pitfalls of misguided leadership, self-awareness is a skill that must be practiced often. A self-aware leader not only empowers themselves, but the entire unit as they foster esprit de corps, collaboration, and organizational commitment. ■

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