# Feedback, Self-Awareness, and Confidence

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These three topics frequently come up as I help leaders sort through their responsibilities. I find that they are related, but I usually focus on one at a time. Let's explore how they affect each other.

75 members of the Advisory Council for Stanford's Graduate School of Business were asked to provide a recommendation regarding the most important capability a leader might develop. Their conclusion was nearly unanimous: self-awareness.

Self-awareness is the ability to accurately judge your strengths and weaknesses, your opportunities, and your limits. It also includes the ability to sense your own emotions and recognize your tendencies in a variety of situations. Improving your awareness requires you to work through the discomfort of exploring negative feelings that you sometimes experience.

Here's an interesting paradox. You cannot become self-aware by yourself. Although you can reflect on situations that have occurred, your perspective of your behaviors is biased. You rarely see the impressions you make on others. Further, even if you do, you probably will not understand the depth of your impact.

Many people withhold information from leaders. Some withhold only a little information. However, many people who are important to you, for reasons you may never understand, won't disclose their thoughts or feelings to you.

Some of that may be cultural. In our society, direct reports feel a need to protect themselves from their bosses. It may have nothing to do with you personally. On the other hand, if you have shown in the past that you are not open to feedback, you may have unwittingly contributed to your not receiving the very information that could make you more self-aware and thus, more effective.

You may not know if you rate low in self-awareness. It's easy for a leader to be deceived. A leader is expected to be confident, so you may think you are self-aware when others know some things about you (especially the effect you have on them) that you don't know.

That's where feedback comes in. Feedback is a powerful source of information for both experienced leaders and for those who are young in their careers. Awareness of how you affect others should be of great interest whatever your level of experience. Yet many leaders fail to willfully seek feedback, and some even cringe when they think about receiving it.

I realize this response to the concept of feedback exists, yet it flies in the face of logic. Only three outcomes are possible if you seek the perspective of others, and none of these should be feared.

First, others may see things that merely verify what you already know about you. That's valuable confirmation.

Second, others may see things that are true about you, but that you didn't know. They identify "blind spots" that you've never known existed, both strengths that you sell yourself short on and weaknesses that you deny or ignore. For you to learn about either of these is usually very valuable.

Third, others may see things they think are true, but you don't agree, and they may genuinely not be true. There is little to be gained by arguing; their perceptions are facts to them. It is far better to demonstrate appropriate actions over time; they may adjust their perspectives on their own, or they may just continue to have errant thinking.

What happens if you learn accurate information that you never knew before? That insight having been revealed to you is cause for celebration! Blind spots are far more detrimental than weaknesses. You can work around weaknesses, but you can't adjust for something that you never knew existed.

Learning of some detrimental influence you've had, you now have the option to consider alternative behaviors in the future. Had you not learned of this information, that future opportunity would have been withheld from you, and you'd likely keep on repeating your less-than-desired behavior. Be grateful that someone cares enough about you and your future to share his or her observations.

Confidence is usually closely aligned with high self-awareness. If you know your strengths and limitations well, you can usually apply your strengths with confidence and find a way to appropriately work around your limitations.

A characteristic of highly effective organizations is that team members actively and gratefully seek and volunteer feedback. As a leader, you significantly influence your organization's culture. Consider whether your behaviors model what you'd like to be true in the future. Adjust your frequency of giving and seeking feedback accordingly. Remember, many leaders who receive little feedback are not actively or enthusiastically seeking it.