

Why “Awareness” Is Important for Leaders

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2014, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Mon., May 19, 2014

What do you think it would take to improve your effectiveness as a leader?

“Leadership” is such an all-encompassing term. You’d probably want to zero in on some specific aspect of leadership that you know would be helpful. Then you’d likely have to gain some knowledge you don’t now have, and then practice some behaviors that, because they are new, may be a bit awkward at first. You’d most likely want to continue to practice until you’ve mastered the new skill.

How much time would all that take? Several months perhaps? Maybe a year?

An alternate approach (let’s call it a supplemental approach) is simply becoming more aware of what’s happening around you, to you, because of you, and in spite of you! Further, you could probably even expand your awareness just by being more conscious and intentional.

A key piece of your effectiveness as a leader is just being aware. “Aware of what?” you might ask. In preparation for this article, I quickly jotted down about thirty items!

Here are a few examples. You should be aware of your leadership strengths and limitations, aware of the needs of your direct reports, aware of what your competitors are doing, aware of why your customers choose you instead of competitors, aware of why good team members leave your company, etc. The list could go on and on. Pause, please, and think of your own examples.

Did you notice that being aware is what all those phrases had in common? How long would it take to become aware of something you don’t already know? A few minutes? Maybe. All that’s required is that new, hopefully accurate information comes to your attention.

How often does that occur for you currently? Could you increase the frequency? I think you could, and I think you should! Being more aware is one of the easiest things you can do as a leader to improve your effectiveness! Yes, but it requires deliberate effort.

Let’s say you are very skilled in one unique aspect of leadership. Suppose you can deal with ambiguity easily without becoming rattled, and you can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty.

A younger, less experienced, growing leader admires your skill and comes to you for counsel. The obvious question you’d be asked is, “How do you do that?”

You think about the question for a moment and answer, “Gee, I’m not sure. I’ve somehow always been able to sort through all the noise and pull out the most important information.”

Imagine the disappointment of the person who had anticipated your help in improving his or her skill. You failed to help a future leader who was seeking an insight or two from you.

“Awareness” involves being able to consciously think about and describe what you do, how you do it, and how you make decisions relative to that topic. In this case, your awareness involves how you successfully generate clarity when everyone else sees nothing but confusion.

The need for awareness is perhaps more obvious for someone who is not skilled. Let’s say you conduct a self-assessment of your leadership skills, and you realize that your listening skills are weaker than you wish they were. You remember that you’ve received feedback in the past about needing to focus more on the speaker. You also realize that you talk a lot more than you listen.

You start asking around, and you receive lots more confirmation that you really are a terrible listener. Now that you are aware, you want to correct that situation. Last week, you weren't concerned about your poor listening skills. Today, it's a major concern. What made the difference? You became aware!

I see it all the time. A person recently assigned to a leadership position is likely both unaware and unskilled. Other people realize the lack of competence, but the new leader may have the perception that everything is great. Who do you think is more likely to be correct?

My advocacy for leaders, whatever the skill level, is simply, "Do everything you can to increase your sensitivity to what's going on around you, to you, because of you, and despite you!" That is, increase your awareness. And how do you do that specifically?

The brief answer is, "Pay closer attention to everything, seek out and listen to feedback, and open your eyes and ears to potential paradigm shifts." How do you do those three things? Go to my website (see below) and scroll down alphabetically to find "Leadership Improvement: Raising Your Awareness." Then contact me if you have further questions. I love this topic, and I promise that together, we'll find ways to raise your awareness!

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