



The Inner Work of Leadership: Knowing Yourself First

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Leadership begins long before anyone calls you a leader. It starts with the quiet work of knowing yourself: your triggers, your strengths, your stories, and the values that guide your choices. Every leader wants to inspire trust, yet few realize that trust does not begin with others. It begins within. Before people can trust your leadership, you have to trust your own self-awareness enough to lead with clarity and authenticity.

The inner work of leadership is not glamorous. It is uncomfortable, humbling, and deeply human. But it is also the foundation of emotional intelligence, resilience, and relational trust.

Why Self-Awareness Is Leadership's Starting Line

The best leaders are not those who know the most. They are those who know themselves the best. They understand how their mindset, moods, and motivations shape the environment around them.

Research from Tasha Eurich and her team (2018) found that while 95% of people believe they are self-aware, only about 10-15% actually are. That gap between who we think we are and how others experience us is the single biggest threat to credibility.

A leader who lacks self-awareness might intend to be decisive but come across as dismissive. They might believe they are empowering but actually be avoiding responsibility. They may think they are approachable but project intensity that shuts people down.

Self-awareness closes this gap. It helps you align intention with impact so that what you mean to communicate is what others actually receive. Without it, even the best strategies fall flat because trust cannot survive misalignment.

Reflection: The Mirror You Cannot Avoid

Reflection is the most powerful leadership habit you can build, and the easiest to abandon. It requires slowing down when every instinct tells you to move faster.

When you pause long enough to ask yourself, “What really happened in that moment?” you begin to notice patterns. Maybe you interrupt people who take too long to explain themselves. Maybe you over-explain when you feel uncertain. Maybe you say yes too often out of guilt or fear of disappointing others. None of these behaviors make you a bad leader. They make you human. But reflection turns these human moments into data, and data becomes the raw material for growth.

Daniel Goleman, who pioneered the concept of emotional intelligence, identified self-awareness as the first and most essential of all leadership competencies. It allows you to regulate emotion, empathize with others, and adapt with agility. Reflection is how you practice that skill. It is how you notice what you feel before your team does.

Try this small exercise at the end of each day. Take two minutes to ask yourself three questions:

1. What energized me today?
2. What drained me today?
3. What did I learn about myself in those moments?

Over time, patterns will emerge, and patterns reveal priorities.

Feedback: Seeing Yourself Through Others' Eyes

No leader can achieve full self-awareness alone. The mirror of reflection shows you what you think you see, but feedback shows you what is actually there.

Feedback can be uncomfortable, but it is also the fastest accelerator of growth. It exposes blind spots and confirms strengths. It reveals how your leadership lands.

Zenger and Folkman's research (2020) found that leaders who actively seek feedback are rated 33% more effective than those who do not. It is not the feedback itself that makes them better; it is the mindset behind it. Leaders who invite truth signal confidence, humility, and psychological safety all at once.

To start, make feedback safe for others to give. Replace vague invitations like "Any feedback for me?" with something specific and time-bound. Try asking, "What is one thing I could do differently to make our next meeting more effective?" or "What is one thing I do that makes your work easier?"

When you receive feedback, do not rush to defend. Just listen. Say thank you. Reflection can come later. The simple act of hearing feedback without reacting builds trust faster than any training ever could.

Over time, your team will learn that truth is not punished in your presence. It is welcomed. That is when leadership begins to shift from authority to authenticity.

Integration: Turning Awareness into Action

Self-awareness without behavioral change is just observation. The real test of leadership maturity is integration, the ability to apply what you have learned to how you lead.

Ask yourself: How do I make decisions under pressure? How do I behave when I am tired or stressed? How do I recover when I get it wrong?

Integration means translating awareness into intentional action. It means catching yourself before you snap, slowing down before you interrupt, and noticing your body language before it becomes a barrier.

Leaders who integrate awareness into daily behavior are not controlled by emotion; they use emotion as information. They model growth instead of perfection, and that humility becomes contagious.

Integration also requires boundaries. You cannot be self-aware if you are chronically exhausted. You cannot be emotionally intelligent if you are emotionally unavailable. Self-leadership is not indulgent; it is responsible.

Take the time to rest, reflect, and recharge. When you protect your energy, you protect your judgment.

The Shadow Side of Awareness

Self-awareness is not always comfortable. Sometimes it reveals contradictions between who you say you are and how you actually show up.

Maybe you realize you avoid conflict, even though you preach transparency. Or that you micromanage, even though you claim to trust your team.

When you see these contradictions, resist the urge to judge yourself. The goal of awareness is not self-criticism; it is self-honesty. You cannot change what you will not name.

Awareness without compassion leads to shame. Compassion without awareness leads to stagnation. The balance of both leads to growth.

The most trusted leaders are those who can say, “I was wrong,” without losing their sense of worth — because they have already done the work of understanding who they are beneath the title.

Identity, Inclusion, and the Inner Landscape

Self-awareness is also cultural awareness. You lead not only as an individual but as a collection of identities, experiences, and biases shaped by the world around you.

Equity and inclusion begin here, with the willingness to examine how your lived experience shapes the way you interpret others. Leaders who skip this inner examination often default to sameness, trusting what feels familiar rather than what is fair.

Ask yourself: Whose perspectives do I seek out most often? Whose voices am I missing? How do I react when someone challenges me from a different lived experience?

Inclusive leadership starts with inner work. When you recognize your own lens, you can hold space for others without making their truth about you. That is how belonging begins — not with a corporate policy but with an individual's humility.

Equity requires awareness in action: sharing credit, rotating opportunity, and interrupting bias in real time. When leaders practice that kind of presence, trust grows across lines of difference, and people feel safe to bring their full selves forward.

Self-Awareness in Motion

Knowing yourself is not a one-time insight. It is a lifelong discipline, and a feedback loop between experience, reflection, and refinement.

The more you know yourself, the less you need to prove yourself. The less you need to prove yourself, the more clearly others can see your intention. That clarity becomes contagious.

When people see that you lead yourself with honesty, they trust you to lead them with fairness. When they see you take responsibility for your blind spots, they feel safer naming their own. In this way, self-awareness does not just improve leadership; it scales it. It creates cultures where humility and accountability are shared norms, not rare exceptions.

Reflection Prompts

- When do you feel most aligned with your values?
- What recurring emotions show up in your leadership; frustration, pride, anxiety, and what might they be trying to teach you?
- Who gives you the most honest feedback, and what patterns have they helped you see?

- How might your personal or cultural background shape the way you lead and the way others experience you?

Trusted Practices

1. **Build a reflection ritual.** Spend five minutes at the end of each day identifying one thing you did well, one thing you could have done better, and one thing you learned about yourself. Reflection does not require hours; it requires consistency.
2. **Seek specific feedback.** Ask one person each week, “What is one small change that would make it easier to work with me?” Then act on what you learn.
3. **Name your triggers.** When you feel reactive, pause and ask, “What value of mine feels threatened right now?” Awareness converts emotion into insight.
4. **Check bias in real time.** Notice who you turn to first for advice or validation. Expand your circle. Ask for input from people whose perspectives challenge yours.
5. **Protect your energy.** Self-leadership requires restoration. Block time for thinking, learning, and reflection before leading others.

Trusted Action of the Week

Choose one feedback conversation you have been avoiding and have it. Ask openly, listen quietly, and thank the person who offers it.

Awareness grows through humility, and humility builds trust. Leaders who seek truth about themselves earn the trust of others not because they are flawless, but because they are real.

Leadership Starts With You

Leadership begins on the inside. Before you can inspire, direct, or influence, you have to understand what drives you. Leaders who do their inner work create ripple effects far beyond their role; they build cultures of curiosity, fairness, and compassion.

Self-awareness is not a destination. It is a discipline, a mirror you clean daily. Every time you choose reflection over reaction, you strengthen the foundation of trust that others will stand on.

Follow along, share your reflections, and join the weekly polls. Together, we will explore what it truly means to lead with empathy, curiosity, care, integrity, and credibility while building workplaces rooted in equity, inclusion, and psychological safety. This is our opportunity to co-create a living definition of trust in leadership, one week and one conversation at a time.

References

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This article was researched with the assistance of AI (artificial intelligence) but written entirely by HI (human intelligence). We believe AI is a powerful ally in advancing our work, yet authentic writing about leadership and trust will always rely on human integrity, empathy, and understanding.