

The Director's Toolbox

A Management
Series
For
Early
Childhood
Administrators



From the Inside Out

*The Power of Reflection
and Self-Awareness*



Paula Jorde Bloom

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and Self-Awareness*

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Paula received her master's and doctoral degrees from Stanford University. She has taught preschool and kindergarten, designed and directed a child care center, and served as administrator of a campus laboratory school. She is the author of numerous journal articles and several widely read books, including *Avoiding Burnout*, *A Great Place to Work*, *Blueprint for Action*, *Circle of Influence*, *Making the Most of Meetings*, *Workshop Essentials*, and *Leadership in Action*. She is co-author with Teri Talan of the *Program Administration Scale*.

Acknowledgements

Writing this book was truly an inside-out experience for me. I am turning 60 this year and approaching this important decade marker seemed like a good time to step back and reflect on my own personal and professional journey. As coincidence would have it, just as I started writing I was diagnosed with cancer...again. Being struck by lightning twice has an interesting way of putting one's priorities into sharp focus.

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Becoming a Self-Mentor

Socrates summed up the secret to a meaningful life in two simple words—"Know thyself." Self-awareness means knowing your needs and values, your strengths and limitations, your passions, and your idiosyncratic quirks. It means having a deep appreciation of what makes you a unique specimen on this planet. On a deeper level, self-awareness means knowing how you react in different situations and accepting full responsibility for your feelings and actions.

Having a better understanding of oneself is the first step to having a better relationship with others. This is because self-awareness provides a window to expand our understanding about other points of view and perspectives. While the importance of self-awareness is readily understood by most people, achieving it is easier said than done. Even Benjamin Franklin acknowledged this when he wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* that "There are three things extremely hard: steel, diamonds, and to know one's self."

The reason self-awareness is so difficult to achieve is that it involves an ongoing assessment of our assumptions, beliefs, and values, and the mental models that shape our behavior and guide our actions both at work and in our personal lives. The goal of this kind of reflection is not merely to see who we are and better understand ourselves today, but to envision what we might become tomorrow. It is a lifelong process—a journey of self-discovery, meaning making, and identity shaping.

Why Self-Awareness Is So Important

The importance of self-awareness is based on George Kelly's construct theory, first published in 1955, and his notion that every person is a psychologist. Kelly believed that people's common sense ideas and their own theories about life and relationships are enormously rich sources of knowledge about human affairs. The central thesis of his approach is that we do not merely react to events; we are in charge of what we do in the world and have the potential to recreate ourselves.

Two other social psychologists have been influential in promoting the self-awareness movement of personal psychology. In his 1987 book *Beginning with Ourselves*, David Hunt calls the approach *inside-out psychology*. He contrasts this



With greater self-knowledge, you can become a better pilot of your life.

Michelle Seligson

to an outside-in approach which leaves human affairs to the experts. The same year, Donald Schön published his seminal work *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. This book, as well, gave credence to the idea that achieving professional competence is a dynamic process involving continual inquiry and renewal.

Throughout the course of life, individuals have a compelling need to make sense out of their experiences and choices. In Robert Kegan's words, "The activity of being a person is an activity of meaning making." Self-awareness is central to meaning making. Lives cannot be understood without an appreciation of the context in which they are lived. Self-awareness helps one connect broad concepts to their situation-specific relevance.

Being self-aware is at the core of what Howard Gardner refers to as *intrapersonal intelligence* or what Daniel Goleman refers to as *emotional intelligence*. Self-awareness is the capacity to be introspective and examine thoughts and feelings. It means being aware of both our mood and our thoughts about that mood. Self-awareness includes:

- affective awareness—the knowledge of one's feelings, attitudes, moods, and outlook
- ethical awareness—the ability to set one's principles and moral priorities
- self-regulation—the ability to monitor one's thoughts, actions, and behavior
- metacognition—the ability to be aware of one's thought processes

Self-awareness, in short, means the ability to identify and name our emotional states. The ability to understand the link between our emotions, our thoughts, and our actions is necessary before we can manage our emotional states. When people can recognize and manage their own emotions, they are better equipped to understand the emotions of others. Self-aware people are attuned to their emotional reflexes. This means they are better able to modify their actions and behavior in different situations. The good news is that just being aware of the importance of being aware increases self-awareness.

Self-awareness also means having a clear picture of our internal motives—those things that drive us to say what we say and do what we do. Peeling away the layers of our motivations is not always a comfortable process, but it is a necessary step if our goal is to become an authentic leader known for personal integrity. Central to this process is gaining clarity about what we perceive our purpose in life to be and how we define success.

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

The capacity to reflect and engage in candid introspection is at the core of achieving self-awareness. Reflective practitioners have the ability to think both creatively and self-critically about what they are doing. Individuals who use a variety of reflective approaches have a better awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and can better understand, monitor, and adjust their behavior in personal and professional interactions.

Joseph Saban and his associates have identified three different types of reflection. The most common they refer to as *reflection-on-action*. This is simply a replay of an experience in order to review, revisit, or recall what happened, like replaying a videotape. *Reflection-in-action* refers to a kind of out-of-body experience in which we watch ourselves act and simultaneously reflect about the decisions we are making. A third type of reflection is referred to as *reflection-for-action*. This is a predictive process for forecasting how we will use what we have learned from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. It involves consciously adjusting our behaviors based on our reflections.

The content or substance of reflection goes through a change as individuals gain mastery in their profession. They are better able to recognize the gap between their *espoused theories* (what they say) and their *theories-in-action* (what they actually do). The formula for bridging this *knowing-doing gap* is pretty straight forward and consists of several questions:

- What do I do?
- Why do I do what I do?
- Is what I do achieving the results I want?
- How might I do things differently?

These are not rhetorical questions; they are intended to raise consciousness, to challenge complacency, and to engender a higher order of professional practice.

Using Assessments to Build Self-Awareness

As humans we have an insatiable appetite for understanding what makes us tick—how we think, how we process information, how we make decisions, how we learn, what makes us feel good, and what makes us feel miserable. There is certainly no shortage of formal and informal self-assessment tools to help build self-awareness. Some tools offer quick snapshots—a questionnaire that can be completed in ten minutes and scored independently. Others are quite lengthy and must be administered by a certified psychologist or trainer.

It's hard to see the picture when you are in the frame.

Michael Brandwein

The unexamined life is not worth living.

Socrates

At the risk of oversimplifying, self-assessment instruments can be divided into two broad categories of awareness building: *prescriptive and descriptive*. Prescriptive assessments compare a person's traits to those of a model teacher or administrator and diagnose the individual's strengths and weaknesses in relation to that ideal. Descriptive instruments, on the other hand, are the ones that say, "This is your type, your style, your preference. It is no better or worse than any other, just different." Descriptive instruments aim to raise self-awareness and give insights into the differences among individuals. These instruments often result in "Ah-ha!" moments, opening the door to changes in behavior.

The goal of self-assessment is to improve professional practice and job fulfillment. When we use the term *professional practice*, we're really talking about *competence* in whatever role the early childhood educator holds. Engaging in self-assessment then should give practitioners greater awareness of their strengths as well the areas of as knowledge and skill that need to be improved. Using William Howell's levels of competence, we can think of this as moving to progressively higher stages in learning—from *unconscious incompetence* ("I don't even know what I don't know") to *conscious incompetence* ("Omigosh, I have so much to learn") to *conscious competence* ("I am keenly aware of what I know and how it impacts my performance") to *unconscious competence* ("I am on automatic pilot").

From Reflection and Self-Awareness to Self-Mentoring

It is one thing to be self-aware, to acquire information from reflection and formal and informal self-assessment, and quite another to apply that information to concrete behavioral changes. No doubt about it, the most effective professionals hold a transformational view of human growth and change. They see themselves as active agents in describing, interpreting, and shaping their behavior. In other words, they are self-mentors.

The great Roman philosopher Cicero is credited with saying, "No one can give you better advice than yourself." That is really the premise of self-mentoring. Self-mentoring is essentially self-directed learning. It means intentionally developing and strengthening those aspects of who you are that will move you toward who you want to be. Self-mentoring requires that you not only get an accurate picture of your real self—who you are now—but also a strong image of your ideal self—the person you aspire to become.

One vital aspect of self-development, stresses Richard Boyatzis, a leader in the self-directed learning movement, is striking a balance between what it is about ourselves we want to preserve and what we want to change. His research shows that people who successfully change in sustainable ways cycle through the following stages:

- First, they create an image of their *ideal* self. They ask themselves the question, "Who do I want to be?"
- Second, they come to terms with their *real* self. They ask themselves, "Who am I?" "What are my strengths—where do my ideal and my real self overlap? What are my gaps—where do my ideal and real differ?"
- Third, they are deliberate in crafting a learning agenda. They ask themselves, "How can I build on my strengths while reducing my gaps?"
- Fourth, they experiment with and practice new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to the point of mastery. They ask themselves, "What subtle adjustments can I make to refine and expand my repertoire of skills and abilities?"
- Finally, they develop trusting relationships that help, support, and encourage each step in process. They ask themselves, "Who can I count on to give me direct and candid feedback and keep me on track?"

In sum, the goal of self-mentoring is to create the internal dialogue that will help you shape your future in deliberate and conscious ways.

Getting Started

Sadly, many people wait for a crisis before beginning to think deeply about themselves. The job of becoming a self-mentor is really about developing the disposition of lifelong learning and self-transformation. Ongoing self-reflection is central to that process. This means becoming fully aware of what you really want in all areas of your life and being able to invent new possibilities that enable you to unleash your passions. Here are some questions to get you started.

- What's really important to you? What do you value most?
- What special talents make you unique?
- What qualities do you most admire in others?
- How do you define personal success? When have you felt most successful?
- How have you used your knowledge, skill, and special talents to make a difference in the world?
- When have you felt most alive, energized, and excited about work? When have you felt most depleted and discouraged about work?
- Is there something you've always longed to do but never quite had the courage to do?

Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power.

Tao Te Ching

Insight
is more
valuable than
hindsight.

Anonymous

- How do you handle adversity? Are you quick to blame others when things don't go well, or do you take ownership for the outcome of your decisions and actions?
- When do you feel most at peace?
- Have you achieved a reasonable sense of balance in your life between your personal and professional pursuits?
- Do you know how to regulate your emotions, or do your emotions get in the way in your interpersonal relationships?
- If you had unlimited time and resources, what would you choose to do?
- Do you often compare yourself to others?
- What do you want more of in your relationships? What do you want less of?
- How would you describe your favorite coworker? How would you describe your least favorite coworker? How are these individuals different? How are they like or not like you?
- What legacy do you want to pass on?

The Power of Journaling

Keeping a journal is a great way to promote self-awareness. Your journal doesn't need to be fancy; a plan memo pad or notebook will do. The key is the process—candid dialogue with yourself, sharing thoughts, reflections, insights, frustrations, and joys about memorable moments in your life. Your journal can be a detailed record of your experiences or your perceptions and observations about critical incidents and interactions that have occurred. It can serve as a way to vent your emotions, analyze your actions, or capture in writing your hopes and dreams for the future.

Self-mentoring means cultivating your own professional growth through reflection, networking, and seeking out appropriate resources. The process clearly requires motivation and self-discipline. *From the Inside Out* is designed as a guide to support you in that process. In the following chapters you'll have an opportunity to reflect on where you are in your journey through adulthood—the joys and challenges you've experienced, as well as your hopes and dreams for the decades ahead.

- You'll be presented with thought-provoking questions to help you be more aware of your beliefs and attitudes and examine how your core values shape your self-perception and influence your decision making;
- You'll gain insights as you complete a variety of self-assessments that will help you better understand your temperament, your communication strengths and pitfalls, and your preferred learning style;
- You'll have an opportunity to gauge the gap between your current and your ideal work environment and determine the factors that impact your job satisfaction; and
- You'll become the architect of your own future by engaging in a number of exercises to help you explore new possibilities and articulate a compelling and achievable vision.

From the Inside Out is not a book about formulas. It is a book about the reflective process necessary to achieve the personal and professional identity to which you aspire. It is a book designed to promote self-discovery and introduce ways to stretch your potential and connect your daily actions to a deeper sense of purpose. It is a book that will help you take charge of your life *from the inside out*.

The most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes.

Parker Palmer