

## Develop Your Self-Awareness

I have often thought that the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensively active and alive. At such moments, there is a voice inside which speaks and says, "This is the real me."

—William James, *Letters of William James*

We have placed self-awareness at the center of the True North compass because everything turns on it. A compass needle orients itself to Earth's magnetic field. To do so, it pivots on the fixed point of a tiny fulcrum. Self-awareness is the pivot point upon which all development depends. Without self-awareness there is nothing to anchor your journey, no way to orient yourself, no way of knowing if you are losing or finding your way. Discovering your True North requires a willingness to be vulnerable and a capacity for honest introspection—a lifelong commitment to become more self-aware.

So how self-aware are you? When you look in the mirror, how clear is the picture? How well do you really know yourself? How comfortable are you with yourself? How accepting are you of that person in the mirror? Progress on your journey toward becoming a more authentic leader is marked by how you answer these fundamental questions. At some deep level, this entire fieldbook is designed to help you gain greater clarity about who you are, your values, motivations, strengths and weaknesses—your purpose.

This chapter goes straight at these issues. Becoming more self-aware takes work. It is a discipline that can be learned; but like most habits, it requires real commitment and more than a little courage to develop. Therefore, when completing the exercises in this chapter, be as open and honest as you can. The potential rewards are great. To paraphrase William James, when was the last time you felt "most deeply and intensively active and



	Self-Rating (1-5)	Rating from Others (1-5)
How effective am I at regulating my moods so as to minimize their impact on other people?		
To what extent am I able to suspend judgment of others and their ideas, in order to gain a full understanding first?		
When confronted with situations that disappoint or anger me, to what extent am I able to pause, disengage, and think clearly before responding or reacting?		
When I receive critical feedback, how well am I able to actually "hear it" and respond in a constructive manner without getting defensive or attacking the source?		
To what extent am I comfortable in novel situations?		
To what extent am I comfortable responding to ambiguity and change?		

Describe a situation in which you demonstrated a lack of self-regulation.

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In what contexts or situations do you struggle most with self-regulation?

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What steps can you take to improve your ability to more consistently self-regulate?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Overall assessment of your self-regulation (1-5): \_\_\_\_\_

Self Others

### III. Empathy

**Empathy:** the ability to understand and be sensitive to other's emotions and experience a situation from their frame of reference.

	Self-Rating (1-5)	Rating from Others (1-5)
How good am I at understanding another's perspective or experience?		
How well do I understand the emotions of others?		
How likely am I to respond in a sensitive and helpful way to others' emotional needs?		
To what extent do others view me as sensitive and empathic?		

Describe a situation in which you demonstrated a lack of empathy for others.

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In what settings or under what conditions do you find it most difficult to demonstrate empathy?

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What steps should you take to be more empathic?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Overall assessment of empathy (1-5): \_\_\_\_\_

Self Others

Truly seeing ourselves as others see us can be difficult. As you review others' assessments, you are likely to find that some of their perspectives differ from yours. Such differences should be expected and represent a potentially powerful learning opportunity. First, monitor your emotional response to reading their assessments. How open are you to hearing what they have to say? How defensive are you? How will you incorporate their perspective into your own?

When it comes to self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, the looking-glass self can sometimes feel more like a house of mirrors. When truly seeing yourself through the eyes of others, what do you see? A cartoon-like caricature, full of unrecognizable distortions? Or an increasingly refined, more complex sense of who you truly are? The important question is not, "Who is right?" The real question is, "What will you do with this new information?" Incorporate it into your ever-evolving sense of self, or dismiss it and cling to your own self-serving, less accurate portrayal?

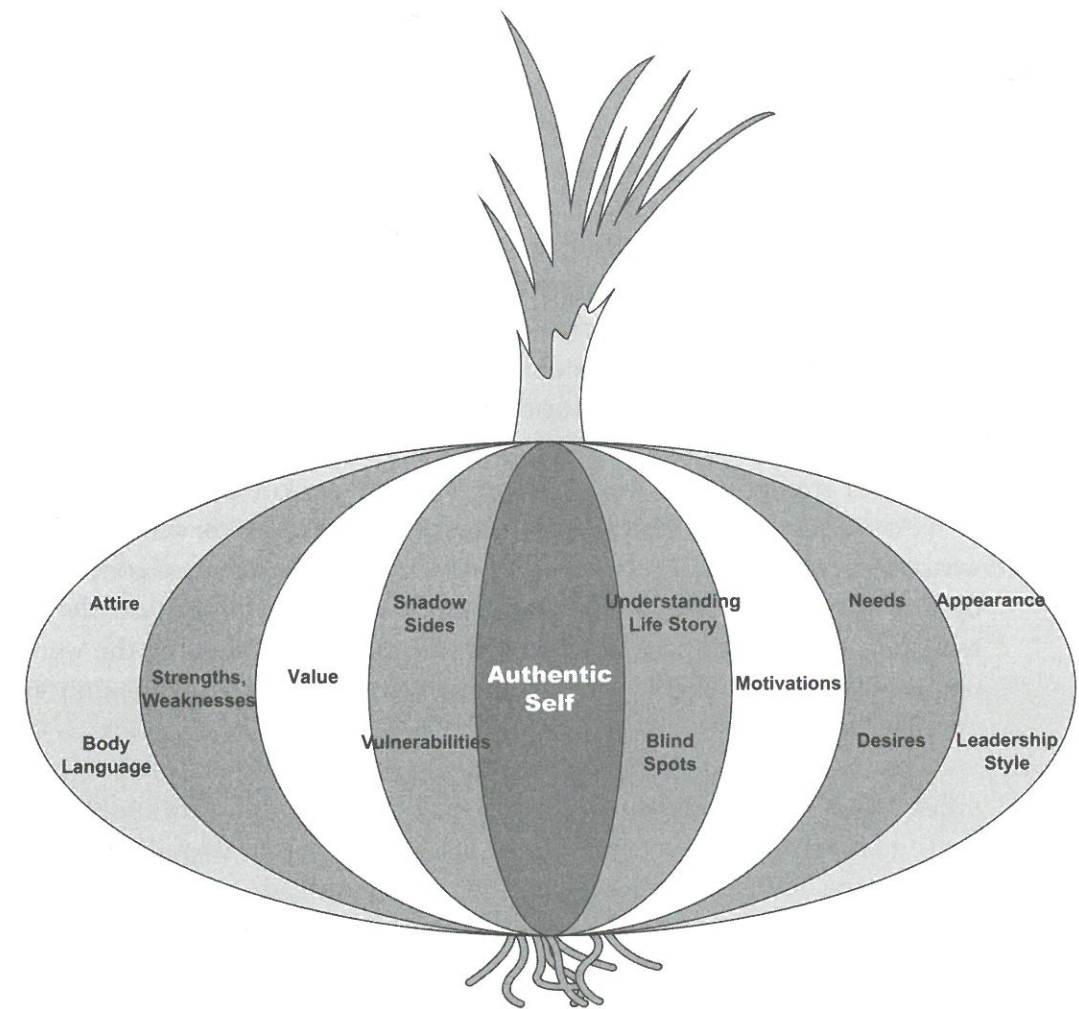
## COVERING YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF

It is impossible to be authentic without being aware of your core strengths and weaknesses. You also need to identify and understand your blind spots, hot buttons, and areas of vulnerability.

We all know people who represent themselves in one way and then behave in exactly the opposite. In reality, you may have been guilty of this as well. This is a working definition of being inauthentic. Authenticity is not about being perfect, either. People who behave as if they are perfect are just as inauthentic.

As we have seen from our research, those leaders who can speak openly about their weaknesses, blind spots, and vulnerabilities permit others to do the same. If you can do this, you will create deep levels of trust and commitment. You will be living with the humble truth of owning and accepting *all* of who you are, your gifts as well as your weaknesses.

We each have many aspects that we present to the world in layered succession. In *Discover Your True North*, we introduced the metaphor of an onion with all its layers.



Outer layers are expressions of our external identity to the world. These are the first signals to other people about who we are and what lies beneath. Yet they are also forms of protection; they prevent the world from seeing our deeper selves. Underneath the surface skin lie deeper layers: our strengths and weaknesses, our needs and desires. These elements shape and drive what others see on the surface. Deeper still lie our values and motivations, criteria that define our sense of success and fulfillment in the world.

Most hidden of all are our shadow sides, our vulnerabilities, and our blind spots. We all have them, whether we are aware of them or willing to acknowledge them or not. Either way, these deeper layers powerfully influence who we are, yet by their very nature they are hard to see. Unless we are brutally honest with ourselves or invite others to give us candid feedback, these important forces remain hidden and influence us in ways both potent and unpredictable.

At the very core of our being lies our authentic self—our true and genuine nature, our identity. If we can “own” all aspects of who we are, we can live in harmony with our authentic selves and present our true selves with confidence and comfort to the world. Our True North comes from this authentic place, from which springs our calling, our purpose.

Why is the outer skin of our onion so tough? For fear of being judged harshly by others, or possibly rejected, we are reluctant to expose our deeper layers. We want to display our strengths, but work hard to hide any weakness.

As a result of such fears, we try to hide our deeper selves, where our vulnerabilities, weaknesses, blind spots, and shadow sides reside. Many of us are so good at covering them up that we ourselves are not aware of them, yet others see them so clearly. Frequently, we remain in denial until powerful forces or situations reveal them to the world, often with unfortunate consequences. When leading, being forced into a situation where parts of ourselves are suddenly exposed can often result in us losing our way.

The paradox underlying this process of revealing only parts of ourselves while hiding others is that our vulnerabilities, shadow sides, and blind spots are also the parts of us most starved for expression, acceptance, and integration. When we fail to acknowledge them as being just as central to our identities as our strengths, they cause us to behave in inauthentic ways. Only when we embrace these largely hidden aspects of ourselves can we become fully authentic as human beings.

## SELF-ACCEPTANCE

The good news about self-awareness is that it can lead you to accept yourself as you really are. It is a simple fact that none of us can be the best at everything. Each of us has a set of strengths that come naturally, talents we have developed over time, and things we are never going to be good at. At the same time, what enables us to be authentic is maximizing the use of our strengths—not focusing on our weaknesses—and surrounding ourselves with others whose strengths complement our own and fill in for our gaps. The ability to accept ourselves as we are is a gift that leads not only to self-acceptance, but to true freedom.

We have found that accepting yourself for who you are and loving yourself unconditionally requires compassion. In order to acknowledge your weaknesses and shadow sides, you have to accept the things you like least about yourself as being integral to who you are. We see this illustrated in the following reflection when Bill learned to accept his weaknesses:

*In 1997 when I was chairman and CEO of Medtronic, I was driving from downtown Minneapolis to my office listening to a CD featuring an address by poet David Whyte called “The Poetry of Self-Compassion.” One of the poems recited by Whyte was “Love After Love” [see sidebar], by the Nobel Prize-winning poet Derek Walcott. Walcott’s poem talks about the challenge of getting in touch with those parts of ourselves that we have rejected, denied, and ignored for many years. Walcott encourages us to “invite them into the feast that is our life.”*

*I was so stunned by these words as I listened to Whyte recite the poem that I pulled my car over to the shoulder of I-94 several times in order to write them down. In retrospect, this seems pretty silly, as this was just a CD and I could have easily written down the poem after I arrived at my office.*

### Love After Love

**DEREK WALCOTT**

The time will come when, with elation,  
 You will greet yourself arriving at your own door,  
 In your own mirror, and each will smile at the other’s welcome,  
 And say, sit here. Eat.  
 You will love again the stranger who was yourself.  
 Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart to itself,  
 To the stranger who has loved you all your life,  
 Whom you ignored for another,  
 Who knows you by heart.  
 Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,  
 The photographs, the desperate notes,  
 Peel your own image from the mirror.  
 Sit. Feast on your life.

Why was I so stunned by these words? I was moved because I had been trying so hard to be perfect all my life that I had rejected my shadow sides and my vulnerabilities for more than 40 years. In that moment, I finally recognized that I had been rejecting parts of myself that I did not like and had tried unsuccessfully to hide from others. These included my impatience, direct manner of challenging others, and often aggressive behavior, coupled with a long-ago memory of being a skinny kid who was picked on by bigger kids in junior high. Even worse, I had been blaming these characteristics on my then-deceased father, who had similar traits, instead of accepting them as integral to who I am. This poem finally enabled me to accept myself with all my warts. Once I did so, I found I could love all of myself, not just the good parts, and become much more authentic in my relationships with others. Even more important, accepting myself for who I was, flaws and all, became very liberating for me.

### EXERCISE 4.2: PEELING BACK THE ONION

The purpose of this exercise is to help you become more accepting by first acknowledging some of those areas you are least proud of.

What are your "shadow sides," those aspects of yourself that you are least proud, those features or traits you know about but don't like to acknowledge, areas where you feel particularly vulnerable to exposure?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Many leaders find that their strengths are actually closely related to their vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Although some parts of who we are might be hard to accept, when we see them as an integral part of who we are, just as we see those parts of which we are most proud, we just might find that it is easier to accept ourselves with all our strengths and weaknesses. After all, they are simply two sides of the same coin. Our weaknesses are just as much a part of who we are as are our strengths. Developing a healthy relationship

with both of them is essential to becoming more self-accepting and ultimately more comfortable with who we really are, not that over-the-top, lopsided, résumé version we work so hard to present to the world every day.

### FEEDBACK SEEKING

Seeking feedback is the single most effective way to increase self-awareness. We all have personal blind spots, certain aspects of ourselves that we can't see but others can. It is only through others that we learn about these blind spots and see ourselves as we truly are, and not just as we think we are.

Good friends call you out when you're not being yourself, when you're trying too hard, when you're being inauthentic. Really good friends are those who not only see your blind spots, but who also have the courage to share them with you in a way that you can truly hear it.

Personal blind spots are areas that are visible to others—sometimes painfully so—but not to you. The developmental challenge of blind spots is that you don't know what you don't know. And yet, what you don't know can still hurt you. Like that area in the side mirror of your car where you can't see that truck in the lane next to you, personal blind spots can easily be overlooked because you are completely unaware of their presence. They can be equally dangerous as well. That truck you don't see? It's really there! So are your blind spots. Just because you don't see them, doesn't mean they can't run you over.

This is where you need to enlist the help of others—not critics, but people you trust. You have to develop a crew of these special people, people who are willing to hold up that mirror, who not only know you well enough to see that truck, but who also care enough about you to let you know that it's there. Of course the challenge is not only finding these kinds of friends; the real trick is keeping them. How you ask for and respond to this type of difficult feedback will determine whether or not you have enough of these people in your life. We'll go straight at this challenge in Chapter 7: Build Your Support Team.

### EXERCISE 4.3: GETTING HONEST FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS

The purpose of this exercise is to explore your ability to ask for and receive honest feedback. Unfortunately, good, honest feedback is often hard to come by. If you are like most of us, you're not very good at asking for it. How many people do you have in your life whom you can easily approach, ask for frank input, receive some, and actually hear it?

List the names of those people in your life that you can count on for good, honest, frank feedback:

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How long is your list? Hang onto this insight. It's the starting point for that deeper conversation we'll have about support teams in Chapter 7.

Most of us don't *really* want honest feedback simply because, when it's really good, it's often painful to hear. All of us crave positive feedback. As high-need-for-achievement people, many of us can't live without feedback; we need constant attention and reinforcement from others. However, few of us have the courage to surround ourselves with people who are willing to call us out when we are slipping; even fewer still have the courage to live our lives as disciplined feedback-seekers.

When was the last time you received some honest feedback that was perhaps a bit difficult to hear? What was it about the situation or relationship that generated such feedback?

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What was the feedback? How did you react to it? What were your feelings about it and the person who offered it?

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Did you learn anything from this situation or feedback? If so, what did you learn and what changes, if any, have you made as a result of receiving this "gift"?

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Are you prepared to share your perceived strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and shadow sides with someone you feel very close to? If so, we suggest that you seek them out at your earliest opportunity and solicit their feedback by asking them the following question:

*"How do you experience me?"*

Record what you learned below.

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When you received this feedback, there is a good chance that some of it might have surprised you. If it did, these surprises—aspects of yourself that someone else sees but you don't—point to potentially important blind spots. Don't lose sight of them. This is what the journey toward self-awareness is all about: seeking difficult feedback from as many different sources as possible and incorporating these blind spots into your constantly evolving, ever-clearer picture of yourself.

What are your blind spots?

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
4. \_\_\_\_\_  
5. \_\_\_\_\_

### LEARNING ABOUT YOURSELF IS AN ONGOING PROCESS

In our research, we learned that authentic leaders are always asking for honest feedback from others in order to calibrate their view of themselves. To incorporate such feedback into their behaviors, they then develop regular practices for reflection and introspection. We heard from many of our interviewees that journaling, meditation, spiritual work, and physical exercise—all practices associated with reflection and introspection—were disciplines widely practiced for gaining deeper self-awareness.

There are two keys to making these practices effective in gaining self-awareness and self-acceptance. The first is to be completely honest with yourself as well as with at least

one other person in your life. The second is to develop regular habits and build time for introspection into your daily routine.

The goal of self-awareness is self-knowledge and ultimately self-acceptance—self-acceptance as the person you are as well as the one you are capable of becoming.

### EXERCISE 4.4: TAKEAWAYS ON SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

The purpose of this exercise is to summarize all of the important self-work you've done in one place, to take stock of where you are at this point in your journey toward greater self-awareness and self-acceptance.

Based on all the work you've done to this point, list your top five areas for improvement:

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
4. \_\_\_\_\_  
5. \_\_\_\_\_

What are some concrete ways you can become more self-aware?

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
4. \_\_\_\_\_  
5. \_\_\_\_\_

How comfortable are you with yourself? What can you do to become more self-accepting?

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## SELF-AWARENESS IS PREPARATION FOR GROWTH

In this chapter, we introduced the foundation for authenticity: self-awareness. Emotionally intelligent, authentic leaders know themselves. They are not only self-aware, but also self-accepting, comfortable in their own skins. Authentic leaders have a healthy relationship with their strengths and their weaknesses. When they look in the mirror, they see all layers of the onion, understand how each contributes to their uniqueness, and leverage this self-knowledge as the basis for continued growth.

One of the most important dimensions of self-knowledge is our core values—what we care about most, those central beliefs that both define and animate our very being. In the next chapter, we'll help you identify these core values, a central signpost on the path toward True North.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Discovering our True North requires a willingness to be vulnerable and a capacity for honest introspection.
- Three ways to improve our emotional intelligence (EQ) are to work on self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy.
- Like an onion, we have many layers. The outer skin protects us, but it also prevents us from showing our authentic self and rarely fools anyone except ourselves.
- We cannot do this work alone.
- Asking for and receiving meaningful feedback is the only way to identify and eliminate potentially dangerous blind spots.
- Self-awareness is a necessary first step toward self-acceptance.
- The process of becoming more self-aware and self-accepting is a lifelong journey.

## SUGGESTED READING

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