

Musings on Knowledge of Self

For those of us in positions of responsibility – be it as managers, leaders, supervisors, etc – a first stepping stone to our development is knowledge of ourselves. On many occasions people will apportion blame for problems to other people rather than themselves because they fail to recognise their contribution to the problem. Therefore a solid solution usually involves a change of behaviour that is not forthcoming due to lack of awareness.

In the development of training programmes for managers, leaders, etc I initially include a segment of Managing Self and then broaden it out to Managing Teams and Managing in the Organisation.

So what is Self?

We all have the idea of separateness from others and we rely on the essential privacy of our own consciousness. This is reflected in the ways that we communicate with others as opposed to how we communicate with ourselves. We communicate with others mainly through externalising speech and non-verbals. Whereas we communicate with ourselves privately – internally - , which makes the process relatively more secret and safeguarded. And also our communications with others first originates with an internal communication.

We set boundaries for the experiences that we allow to be relevant to ourselves and to ones that are outside us.

We see ourselves as causes and accept a partial responsibility for the consequences of our actions and therein often lies selectivity in what we chose to accept e.g. the positive consequences were as result of my input as a manager and the major negative consequence was down to the employee John Doe.

A key part of our experiencing self is made possible through the process of reflection i.e. standing back and viewing self. We experience and reflect upon our experience, summarise it, comment on it and analyse it. This ultimately is consciousness.

So, do you know yourself?

Most people will reply yes. Yet we all have kinds of experience which cast doubt on the idea that we completely know ourselves. A basic test of whether you understand someone is your ability to predict accurately what they will do in a given situation. Yet most of us come across situations where we fail to predict our own behaviour; we find ourselves surprised by it and see ourselves behaving in a way we would not have expected to behave if we were the sort of person we thought we were. Some of what influences our behaviour happened in the past and is hidden in what is often called the unconscious and this reinforces the need for feedback to bring the unconscious into the conscious and thus make people aware in the present.

How do we know ourselves?

One common way of knowing ourselves is through the 'trait theory'. Trait theories hinge on the argument that there are, in each of us, enduring characteristics which differentiate us from others, who have more of less of these characteristics. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) focuses on normal populations and emphasizes the value of naturally occurring differences. The MBTI shows preferences for how people perceive the world and make decisions.

Some people derive the picture of themselves through the picture which they have of other people's picture of them. These people would be constantly looking at how people react to them, both what they say of them and the implications of their behaviour towards them. The level of response to people's reaction will be determined by our views of them - whether we respect them, trust them and also the position they hold. Some people will be regularly building up a continuous and changing picture of themselves out of their interaction with other people.

What are the obstacles to self-knowledge and self-change?

To try and understand oneself is not simply an interesting pastime, it is a necessary part of our development. In order to plan our future and to make choices we have to be able to anticipate our behaviour in future situations. This makes self-knowledge a practical guide, not self-indulgence. Sometimes the situations with which we are confronted are of a defined and clear kind so that we can anticipate and predict our behaviour with reasonable certainty. If someone asks you for example to complete a task, drive a car, translate a Russian letter and so forth then it is not difficult to assess your skills and experience and work out whether you can undertake the task or not. But often the choice or the understanding is of a more complex and less defined nature. Can you stand up in conflict with a powerful authority figure? Can you negotiate a major change with your team? The stranger the country we are entering the more threatening the prospect becomes; the more we realise that some degree of self-change may be involved, the more we must rely upon our understanding of our own character and potential. In such circumstances we are acutely aware of the dangers of change and may take refuge in a rigid and inflexible notion of what we are.

Is there a paradox of self-knowing?

If I come to know something of myself then I am changed, to a greater or lesser extent, by that knowledge. Any realisation by a person of the motives and attitudes underlying their behaviour has the potential to alter that behaviour. Put another way, a person is the sum of their understanding of their world and themselves. Changes in what we know of ourselves and the way in which we come to know it are changes in the kind of person we are.