



Becoming self-aware

TN94 Training Notes series: Leadership

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Knowing how we come across to others is vital for all Christians but especially so for church leaders and staff and anyone working in a team. It helps us to understand ourselves and to see what we need from others to make up for our deficiencies. This is being taken seriously in secular leadership training, but in my work as a church consultant I keep finding people's understanding of themselves differs from what others tell me about them.

I am approaching this subject as a pragmatist, concerned at the way a lack of emotional intelligence can hinder Christian ministry. Here are examples of what I sometimes see.

- Ministers who seem to be unaware that their staff and leadership teams view them as micro-managers, or controllers, or perfectionists, or bossy, or uninterested in those who work with them, or always coming across as rushed and stressed.
- Church office staff who fail to realise that people try to avoid the office because the Administrator is seen as a bully, regards the office as their personal territory, talks too much, is passive-aggressive or seems unwelcoming.
- Preachers (or choose any other ministry) who are blissfully unaware that their sermons are not understood or seen as irrelevant or delivered in a boring way.
- Team members (especially leaders) who cannot understand that the team is not functioning as it should because members do not trust each other, harbour grudges or fail to understand what teamwork is all about.

The title is 'Becoming self-aware' rather than 'Being self-aware' because this has to be something we work on all our lives as a process. This is a subject that Christians should excel in because we can be secure in who we are in Jesus Christ. Yet many of us fail to be vulnerable, and find it almost impossible to be sensitively honest with others for fear of the hurt caused or the backlash that may ensue.

Factors that impact our self-awareness

Here are some of the reasons why I believe Christian leaders and workers may lack the ability to understand how others see them.

1 **Failure to appreciate God's love and grace**

If we do not really recognise what God in Christ has done for us through the cross and resurrection, that we have a freedom to be real, that we are precious to our Creator, we may put up defensive mechanisms to protect ourselves. Good self-awareness begins with a proper understanding of our salvation.

2 **Background**

Our childhood story, our early relationships with both family and friends, and the values instilled into us at an early age impact the ways we behave and see ourselves throughout life.

3 **Theological modelling**

If we view the New Testament, for example, as guidance for each one of us personally and fail to see the value placed on the idea of the Christian community, or if we see church leadership as solo more than team, we learn isolationism and so protect ourselves from what others may think of us.

4 **Society's norms**

In UK society today there is an emphasis on self-confidence. Children are taught that they are wonderful, business people present CVs that exaggerate their abilities, assertiveness training is stressed. If we over-state our place in society we can become blind to reality.

5 **Personality disorders**

There are identifiable medical conditions, such as various types of autism or Asperger's Syndrome, which impact emotional intelligence.

6 **Lack of honesty in relationships**

Within British Christian culture most of us have never learned to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). And so we talk behind people's backs rather than sensitively facing issues with each other. People may be too embarrassed to tell us how we come across to our face, or concerned that this will hurt us, or impact our view of them.

7 **Pride**

Perhaps people have told us some of our weaknesses, but we are simply deaf to any perceived criticism and so close our ears. Or we are simply stubborn and refuse to believe any of it. Or we immediately blame circumstances or other people or seek to justify ourselves. It cannot be our fault.

8 **Textbook exercises**

Many Christian leaders can quote their Myers Briggs index, their psychological colour or their learning style. But, though helpful starting points, self-awareness needs more than these alone. Thinking that such exercises are sufficient is a mistake.

What of this writer?

Writing on this subject is a dangerous thing to attempt, which is probably why I have hesitated for so long to do so. But you as the reader need to understand something of my understanding of myself.

I was brought up as a single child of a one-parent family (my father died when I was five). By nature I am a loner and a micro-managing controller but failed to be aware of this last point until one day many years ago my staff team (at that time) accused me of this and my wife, to my shock, then confirmed it. I have a tendency to overstate something for impact, to say 'sorry' too often and, like many administrators, to see things at first glance as black or white. I find some relational situations intensely difficult to cope with. I am very much work in progress.

All this is who I am. What I need to keep learning to do is to recognise what is happening, spot when I move into, for example, control mode, and take avoiding action when necessary. It also helps to have something of a sense of humour about it all!

So what to do?

Here are some ideas for starters. If people are blatantly honest without any sensitivity, we shall be hurt. So we need to tread carefully.

1 **Focus on your discipleship of Jesus Christ**

You first need to be real with the one who cherishes you and longs to change you. A reality in your understanding of how you come across has to start with your security in Christ and an appreciation that this matters more than how anyone else views you. If you are to be vulnerable with others, you first need to be sure of your eternal destiny. You need confidence to accept what others may then tell you.

I am not sure that talk about 'thick skins' is quite the right approach. We are all sensitive creatures and often seek to avoid the truth about ourselves because we don't feel we can take it. But as followers of Jesus Christ, you can come to have confidence that it is his view of you that matters most of all.

2 **Find family and friends who can be honest**

Before you can go out to work or church colleagues you need to talk to your nearest and dearest and ask them to be lovingly honest with you. How do they see you? It is of course best if this can be done as two-way exercises (How do you see them?) but you are the one seeking to learn from this.

The typical answer to 'How do I come across?' is a skin-deep 'Fine' which gets us nowhere. So this needs unhurried time in a relaxed setting where there can be real honesty in love. It is unlikely to work if the relationship is fractured in any way.

3 **Seek workplace review and feedback**

If you are in a post where you are appraised on a regular basis, ask for real, honest views from a small group of trusted colleagues or clients who want the best for us. Try to be open, not defensive, to what they say. Get someone skilled at this to be the one that collates their answers and talks them back to you; and then works with you on a plan of action which they then monitor in a sensitive way.

If you appraise others, especially if you are their line manager, turn these times into two-way sessions so both appraise the other's behaviour and attitudes.

Alternatively, ask a small group of people to review a particular activity you lead (preaching, chairing meetings, writing articles, etc.). Find people who you believe will be open, honest and loving in the way they go about this. But the best review needs to be taken immediately, not waiting months for a formal appraisal. Then find one or two colleagues and ask them to let you know discreetly each time you come across in a particular way, so you can learn to take avoiding action the next time.

4 **Do all this as a team exercise**

If you undertake workplace review together as a team, you ideally need an external enabler to ensure that any ground-rules are kept and no one is put in an unnecessarily painful position. Good teams can carry out ongoing self-awareness identification.

5 **Give yourself time away to process what you discover**

I find that hearing difficult news means that I first of all try to ignore it or argue against it or even blame others, but as I ponder it over a few days I can come to a different point where I can see truth in it. So don't rush into self-analysis but do schedule time away to ponder it, to pray about it and to decide on action to take on it.

You should not rush this. If you can, take this as a focus of a Planning Retreat (see Training Notes TN54). Focus it on prayer. If this becomes a regular process there will be fewer unexpected shocks but if you do it as a one-off for the first time it can be quite devastating. Pray to become vulnerable.

If you are to have any hope of seeing yourself objectively, you need time away from the daily round of responsibilities and space to let God speak to you. Without this you will ignore all you hear.

6 **Find someone to be accountable to**

Once you've got the message you need someone else to help you devise a plan to overcome any weakness. If part of a team and you feel you can do this, the other team members will be the ideal group for this. But it might be better to have one trusted friend who meets with you regularly to help you monitor a plan of action and who seeks occasional feedback from others to see if they are noticing a difference. Keeping a record of actions taken can be helpful too.

7 **Apologise when you need to**

If you have been behaving in a certain way to others or one other person and now recognise this, seek to build the relationship by an appropriate apology and an indication of your plan for improvement in future. Don't blame others in this – let God take care of that – but seek to be honest even if your approach is rejected.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes then TN94. See also Training Notes TN30, *How to give and receive criticism*, TN49, *What's going on under the water*, and TN54, *Creating space for a Planning Retreat*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his consultancy service for churches.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN94 under Leadership.

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