



## What is Self-Awareness?

It is simply 'knowing who you are' and understanding why you think, feel and behave the way you do.

## Why is it important?

- Because authentic leaders understand and are in tune with their personal values
- Because your personal beliefs and value system drive your behaviour
- Because your life experiences shape your sense of self and therefore your behaviour
- Because you can't influence others without understanding what influences you
- Because leaders need to choose their behaviour
- Because without awareness the impact of your behaviour may not be the same as the intention
- Because without it you will repeat the same old mistakes
- Because you owe it to those who follow you

## Success strategies for new leaders - Self-Awareness

### Espoused theory V theory-in-use

We all hold many different values, developed from a combination of our innate personalities, family circumstances, life experiences and those who have influenced us most. Understanding how all these factors have shaped our thinking and beliefs will create self-awareness. For example, a leader whose early life experiences were ones of struggle and hardship may have developed a belief that says 'rely only on yourself, trust no-one'. You can imagine how that might translate into their leadership style.

Defensive reasoning encourages individuals to keep private the premises, inferences and conclusions that shape their behaviour and to avoid testing them in a truly independent, objective fashion. We blame something or someone else - anyone but ourselves and we defend ourselves against the fact that we are defending ourselves!

In their seminal work on conscious and unconscious reasoning processes, Argyris and Schon<sup>1</sup> sought to understand and explain why the way people actually behave is often so different to how they say they behave. They found that people design and operate a set of 'rules' which govern their behaviour, which they called 'theories of actions'. There are two sets of these rules. The first is their 'espoused theory of action', the master programme in effect. This is the individual's world view and values which they believe their behaviour to be based on. Ask people how they do or might behave in any given situation, and they will give you their '**espoused theory**'.



## "Leadership and learning are indispensable to one another"

### Example of Espoused theory V theory-in-use

When asked about how he would deal with a disagreement with a client, a management consultant responded that he would first state his understanding of the disagreement, then negotiate what kind of data he and the client could agree would resolve it. This represents his espoused theory (or the theory behind what he says) which was one of joint control of the problem.

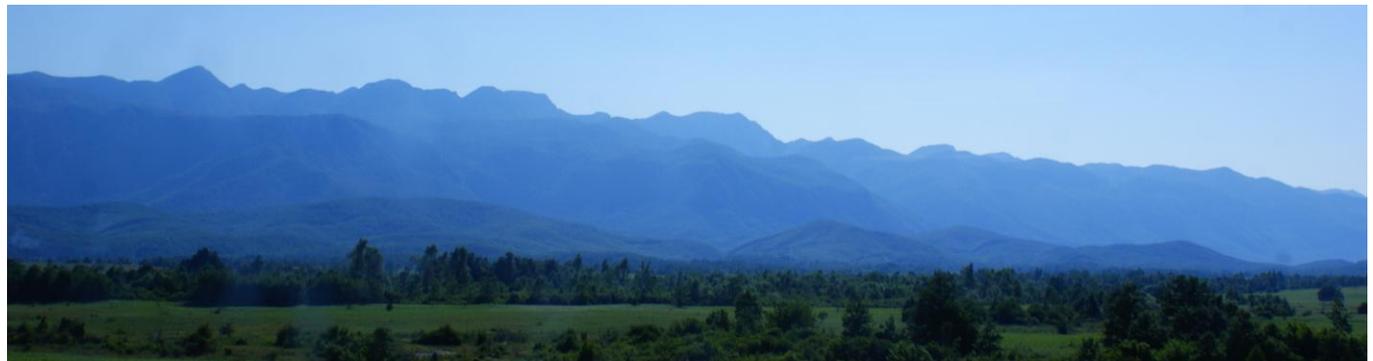
A tape recording of the consultant in such a situation however, revealed that he actually advocated his own point of view and dismissed the client's. This indicated his theory-in-use (or the theory behind what he actually did), which more closely approximates his unilateral control of the problem and a rejection of valid information exchange.

### Espoused theory V theory-in-use continued

However, when we observe these same people, their behaviour can be quite different, even downright contradictory. Instead, what people are actually doing is working to another set of 'behavioural rules', which they have also designed but may be blissfully ignorant of. Argyris and Schon named this the '**theory in use**' and it is the world view and values which is the more likely given the individual's behaviour (see shaded box below for an example).

People consistently act inconsistently; unaware of the contradiction between their espoused theory and their theory-in-use, between the ways they think they are acting and the way they really act. Why? Well, Argyris and Schon concluded it was to do with **defensive reasoning**, the aim of which is to protect us from fear of embarrassment or threat and feeling vulnerable or incompetent. Our behaviour for a large part of the time, will be driven by this rationale, irrespective of how true to our values we think we are being (see the Tool: Individual Defence Routines/Defensive Reasoning for further explanation)

1. Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978) *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*, Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley.





## Success strategies for new leaders –

### Self-Awareness

#### The left hand column exercise

In this exercise you will be attempting to listen to what you don't want to hear – to the unconscious or 'covered up' conversation going on with you and others when you are caught up in defensive reasoning.

Select a specific situation where you are interacting with one or several other people in a way that you feel is not working – something that is not producing any positive outcome or progress. Find a 'psychologically safe' place where you are by yourself. Have an A4 pad available and divide it into two columns.

In the right hand side of the page, recall the actual conversation and write it down, in the form of a script, in as much detail as possible.

Now in the left hand side, recall - uncover, admit, think carefully, confess – what *you were really thinking but not saying* at each stage of the exchange.

You can do this exercise for situations or meetings that you have yet to encounter. Write down the imagined dialogue and in the other column, note any unsayable thoughts or feelings you might have about the conversation.

#### Defensive reasoning

Defensive reasoning encourages individuals to keep private the premises, inferences and conclusions that shape their behaviour and to avoid testing them in a truly independent, objective fashion. We blame something or someone else - anyone but ourselves and we defend ourselves against the fact that we are defending ourselves!



#### Overcoming defensive reasoning

So how do we become aware of what we are not aware of? To 'look in the mirror' and see our true reflection, without defensive reasoning kicking in? We need to be in a safe environment, both physically and psychologically before we will be able to honestly engage in an objective evaluation of our actions or behaviour. Below is an exercise devised by Dr Chris Argyris to get people to listen to themselves.

## Success strategies for new leaders - Tools and exercises to increase self-awareness

### Shadow of the leader

Use this simple technique to assess how much your attitude and behaviour, the bad as well as the good, is being picked up and replicated by your team.

- First think about how your team as a whole and its individual members behave. What have you observed?
- List the tendencies you have observed which you like about how they operate/behave in column A
- Now consider which you feel they have picked up from or been influenced by your behaviour and/or actions – list them in column B
- Do the same exercise with column C, only this time list the tendencies you don't like about how they operate or behave
- Now for the tricky bit! Which of these tendencies do you feel they have picked up from you? Record them in column D

How can you alter your behaviour to influence the team more effectively?

A) These are tendencies I see in my team that I <b>like</b>	B) This is a shadow of me because...	C) These are tendencies I see in my team that I <b>don't like</b>	D) This is a shadow of me because....



Paper Author: Lorraine Lewis

Lorraine is an organisational development consultant who works with companies and individuals to create sustainable improvements in performance and change in behaviour across all business disciplines and seniority.