

How to develop self-aware leaders



Imagine leading a high-performing team that consistently exceeds expectations. Or picture a company culture where employees are engaged, motivated, and thriving. What do these successful organizations have in common? Often, it's the caliber of their leadership. Studies have shown that effective leaders are the cornerstone of organizational success. But more importantly, these effective leaders all have something in common: They leave ego at the door.

One of the most critical qualities that distinguishes exceptional leaders from the rest is self-awareness. It's the ability to understand one's strengths, weaknesses, emotions, and impact on others. Let's take a closer look at the importance of self-awareness in leadership roles and the practical steps that you can take to cultivate this essential trait.



"Self-awareness
is a lifelong
commitment."

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What is self-awareness?

To be self-aware, is to know your own character. Imagine looking into a mirror and seeing your personality, rather than seeing your physical appearance. A [self-aware leader](#) possesses this deep understanding of themselves; they can see how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors influence others.

Think of it this way: Self-awareness is the key to understanding who you are as a leader. It's about knowing your strengths and weaknesses, recognizing your triggers and

reactions, and understanding how your actions impact others so that you can:

- **Build authentic relationships:** Self-awareness allows leaders to be genuine and transparent, fostering trust and respect among their team members.
- **Make informed decisions:** By understanding their own biases and limitations, self-aware leaders can make more objective and rational decisions.
- **Provide effective feedback:** By understanding their own communication style and the impact it has on others, self-aware leaders can deliver constructive feedback that is both helpful and well-received.
- **Adapt to change:** Self-awareness enables leaders to be flexible and adaptable, recognizing the need to adjust their approach as circumstances change

When you're self-aware as a leader, you can navigate relationships and challenges with confidence. But how can leaders develop this trait?

Steps to develop self-awareness in a leadership role

If you're asking yourself how you can develop self-awareness as a leader, we have good news for you: You are already self-aware! But the path to achieving self-awareness does not plateau. Leaders who are truly self-aware understand the importance of mindset, especially when it comes to their emotional intelligence. They actively seek to understand their strengths, identify their weaknesses, and recognize how these traits influence their peers and the broader organization. Here are some steps that you can take to develop self-awareness:

How to develop self-awareness



Improve your emotional intelligence

Understanding and managing your emotions, as well as recognizing and influencing the emotions of others, can significantly enhance your leadership effectiveness.



Practice self-reflection

Regularly taking the time to assess your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors allows you to gain insight into your motivations and actions.



Seek out feedback

Feedback can offer new insights into your leadership style and help you understand how others perceive your actions and decisions.



Commit to continuous learning

Commit to staying curious, seeking out new experiences, and embracing challenges that push you out of your comfort zone.

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1. Improve emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a critical component of self-awareness. Understanding and managing your emotions, as well as recognizing and influencing the emotions of others, can significantly enhance your leadership effectiveness. Leaders with high EI are better equipped to:

- Handle stress
- Navigate conflict
- Foster a positive work environment

To develop your emotional intelligence, practice mindfulness, and empathy, and work on regulating your reactions.

2. Self-reflect

One of the most powerful tools in developing self-awareness is self-reflection. Regularly taking the time to assess your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors allows you to gain insight into your motivations and actions. Ask yourself questions like:

- “Why did I react this way?”
- “What are my ‘red flags’ when I start to get frustrated?”
- “What could I have done differently?”

Journaling is a practical way to track these reflections over time, helping you identify patterns in your behavior and mindset.

3. Seek feedback

While self-reflection is essential, it’s equally important to seek feedback from others. Peers, subordinates, and superiors can provide [valuable perspectives](#) that you might overlook.

Encourage open and honest communication within your team and be receptive to constructive criticism. This external feedback can offer new insights into your leadership style and help you understand how others perceive your actions and decisions.

4. Commit to continuous learning

Leaders who prioritize continuous learning are more likely to maintain and grow their self-awareness. Commit to staying curious, seeking out new experiences, and embracing challenges that push you out of your comfort zone. Stay up-to-date on the latest leadership trends and best practices by:

- Reading [books](#), articles, and industry publications
- Attending conferences, webinars, and workshops
- Seeking out mentorship opportunities with experienced leaders
- Participating in [leadership development programs](#)

By incorporating these steps into your leadership practice, you can cultivate a deeper understanding of yourself and your impact on others, ultimately becoming a more effective and successful leader.

Overcoming obstacles to become a self-aware leader

The journey toward self-awareness is both rewarding and challenging for leaders. While the benefits are clear, the path is often riddled with roadblocks. Understanding and addressing these obstacles is crucial for those committed to developing personal growth and effective leadership skills. As you start your self-awareness journey, consider your unique roadblocks. Here are some of the most common obstacles that leaders face during a [mindset shift](#):

Fear of vulnerability

One of the most significant obstacles leaders face when developing self-awareness is the fear of vulnerability. Leaders are often expected to project confidence and decisiveness, which can create a reluctance to admit flaws or show weakness. However, true self-awareness requires a willingness to be vulnerable. Acknowledging your limitations and mistakes is not a sign of weakness but rather a demonstration of strength and authenticity. Embracing vulnerability allows leaders to build trust within their teams and fosters a culture of openness and honesty.



How to overcome your fear of vulnerability:

- Create a safe space for yourself and your team where sharing is encouraged.
- Practice self-compassion and remind yourself that everyone has areas for growth.
- Embrace vulnerability as a powerful tool for connection.

Resistance to change

Another common obstacle is resistance to change. Self-awareness often requires leaders to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and their behaviors. This can be difficult, especially when it involves letting go of long-held beliefs or habits. Resistance to change is a natural response, as it challenges our comfort zones and forces us to adapt to new realities.



How to overcome your resistance to change:

- Adopt a growth mindset and view change as an opportunity for learning.
- Make small, incremental changes and celebrate your successes.
- Seek support from mentors, coaches, or peers.

Fear of feedback

Leaders may also struggle with the fear of [receiving feedback](#), particularly if it is critical. Feedback can feel like a personal attack, leading to defensiveness or a tendency to dismiss the input. However, feedback is an essential component of self-awareness, providing an outside perspective on how your actions and behaviors are perceived by others.

How to overcome your fear of feedback:

- Reframe feedback as a valuable tool for growth.
- Approach feedback with curiosity and a willingness to learn.
- Practice active listening and ask clarifying questions.

Time constraints

Leaders often face significant time pressures, balancing numerous responsibilities and tasks. This can make it challenging to prioritize self-reflection and the development of self-awareness. The constant demands of leadership roles can lead to a focus on immediate tasks rather than long-term personal growth.

How to overcome time constraints:

- Integrate self-awareness practices into your daily

routine.

- Set aside dedicated time for self-reflection.
- Incorporate self-awareness activities into existing leadership practices.

Overcoming obstacles when developing self-awareness is a crucial step for leaders committed to personal and professional growth. By addressing challenges like fear of vulnerability, resistance to change, fear of feedback, and time constraints, leaders can break down the barriers that stand in the way of self-awareness. Embracing this journey not only enhances your effectiveness as a leader but also contributes to creating a more open, adaptive, and resilient [organizational culture](#).

Invest in your leadership development

By prioritizing self-awareness, leaders can cultivate a more authentic, empathetic, and effective leadership style that drives both personal and organizational success. But remember: Becoming a self-aware leader is a journey, it requires ongoing effort and commitment. By prioritizing personal growth and development, you can cultivate a deeper understanding of yourself and your leadership potential.

Ready to embark on your journey towards self-awareness? Whether you're just beginning or looking to deepen your understanding, resources are available to support your growth. Arbinger offers a variety of tools and programs designed to help you develop as a leader and create a [high-performance culture](#), including:

- [Leadership Series](#)
- [Leadership Collective](#)
- [The Arbinger Book Club](#)

- [The Shift Newsletter](#)
- [Outward Leadership](#)
- [Leadership and Self-Deception](#)

Don't wait to take charge of your leadership development. Discover the profound impact that self-awareness can have on your leadership style and the success of your organization in Arbinge's [Leadership Gold Standard Guide](#).