

Managing Yourself

How to Move from Self-Awareness to Self-Improvement

by Jennifer Porter

June 19, 2019



Jonathan Knowles/Getty Images

Summary. We know that leaders need self-awareness to be effective — that is, an understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, feelings, thoughts, and values, as well as how they affect the people around them. But that’s only half of the story. Self-awareness is... [more](#)

We know that leaders need self-awareness to be effective. That is, an understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, feelings, thoughts, and values — as well as how they affect the people

around them. But that's only half of the story. Self-awareness is useless without an equally important skill: self-management.

A client of mine, we'll call him Rick, serves as a case in point. He has been given repeated feedback that he speaks too often and for too long in meetings. He has told me that he wants to improve this behavior and learn how to be a more productive participant in order to help his team make better decisions. After a recent meeting with 15 people where he spoke for 30% of the time, I asked him to evaluate his participation. He replied, "I know I talked too much but I had a lot of points to make." He then continued to tell me more about his ideas. Rick is very self-aware, but he isn't as effective as he could be because he doesn't self-manage.

Self-management is a conscious choice to resist a preference or habit, and instead, demonstrate a more productive behavior. It's a four-step process:

1. **Be present.** Pay attention to what is happening in this moment — not what was said 15 minutes ago or what will happen in your next meeting.
2. **Be self-aware.** What are you seeing, hearing, feeling, doing, saying, and considering?
3. **Identify a range of behavioral choices.** What do you want to do next? What are the possible consequences of each action? What feedback have you gotten that might inform your choices? What are some alternative choices you can make — even if they're not what you want to do or what you usually do?
4. **Intentionally choose behaviors that are believed to be the most productive.** What behavior will generate the best outcome — even if it's not the behavior that comes easiest to you?

For Rick, self-management would look like this:

1. Be present: “I’m focused on this conversation, really listening to everyone’s comments, and paying attention to what is happening.”
2. Be self-aware: “I notice I’m excited and eager to share my ideas. I want to give an example. I also recognize there are a lot of people in the room who are trying to speak, and I know I have a tendency to speak too often in meetings, which can stop others from participating.”
3. Identify a range of behavioral choices: “I could explain my ideas, ask a helpful question, invite others to share their ideas, or listen silently.”
4. Intentionally choose behaviors that are believed to be the most productive: “I’m going to withhold my comments and instead listen to what others are saying. Even though I really want to share my ideas, I’ve been repeatedly told that I talk too much, and don’t give others a chance to contribute. If I listen now, I will finally be giving others that chance.”

What makes self-management so hard goes back to the definition. The most productive behaviors are often not aligned with our habits and our preferences. (If they were, we would not need to manage ourselves.)

Behaving in ways that aren’t aligned with your preferences can make you feel uncomfortable (“I always respond first in a Q&A. I worry others won’t get it right”), unskillful (“I don’t know how to give negative feedback”), and even unpleasant (“I like being direct and get impatient when I have to choose my words carefully”).

Operating in ways that contradict our habits can evoke similar negative reactions. With a habit, our brain creates a shortcut and moves from stimulus to response without thinking, saving both time and effort. But non-habitual behaviors require us to think about a situation, consider choices, make a choice, and then demonstrate the behavior that aligns with that choice. This takes

work. The auto-pilot efficiency of habits is what make them so hard to change. It's easier and more pleasant to default to an old habit than it is to invest the energy in creating a new one.

Despite these barriers, self-management is a learnable skill. This is how you can start:

- 1. Decide where you want to self-manage.** Pay attention to how you typically operate — what you say and do and what you don't say and don't do. Identify instances where your current approach is not working as well as you'd like, and self-management might be useful. For example, maybe, like Rick, you talk too much in meetings.
- 2. Notice and reflect on what's driving your lack of self-management.** In those moments where you're not self-managing but would like to, notice how you feel, what you want, and how you are interpreting what's going on around you. What is driving your actions? Is it lack of awareness in the moment, wanting to look good, lack of skills, insecurity, or something else? If you talk too much in meetings, for example, consider why you do that. Maybe you like your own ideas better than others, or it never occurred to you to talk less. Those of us who have a bias for action may be tempted to skip this step of reflection and move straight to planning and practicing — but don't. Understanding why we make the choices we make is crucial to changing those choices.
- 3. Consider your choices and your reactions to those choices.** Instead of your default behaviors, if you were self-managing, what else could you do? What is your reaction to those options? Notice how your preferences and habits show up here, and ask yourself what you are trying to avoid when you default to those habits and preferences. Sticking with the example of talking too much in meetings, one option you might consider is waiting for others to speak before offering your perspective.

Now, consider your reaction to that option. Are you afraid someone else will make your point and you won't get credit for it, or that others won't have ideas that are as relevant as yours and a bad decision will be made

4. **Make a plan.** Now that you know what you want to change, better understand what's driving you, and have identified some options, think of concrete steps you can take. If you talk too much, your plan might include deciding how many times you will speak in a meeting and for how long, or in which meetings you will only listen and not speak.
5. **Practice.** Old habits are hard-wired into our brains. To change them, we need to create new neural pathways (new habits), and this requires practice. If we stay with the example of talking too much in meetings, practice might look like counting your comments and stopping when you hit your maximum — even if you have just one more very important thing to say. Do this repeatedly until you are consistently able to self-manage that behavior. At the same time, explore your reactions to your practice. What can you learn from what you're doing, and from how you're reacting, that can inform your continued practice?
6. **Repeat the process.** Go back to step two and observe your efforts, reflect on your choices, revise the plan, and practice some more. In each successive iteration, you'll learn a bit more about how you're operating, what's driving your behavior, and how you can improve it.

It's natural to behave in ways that feel good and familiar — to not self-manage — and yet, if we did this all the time, we'd never get better at anything. To become as effective as possible, leaders need to move beyond self-awareness to self-management. Start by recognizing your current actions, considering alternative options,

and then putting in the hard work required to resist what may be most familiar or comfortable. Instead, commit to effectively executing what is most productive.

JP

Jennifer Porter is the Managing Partner of The Boda Group, a leadership and team development firm. She is a graduate of Bates College and the Stanford Graduate School of Business, an experienced operations executive, and an executive and team coach.

Recommended For You

Self-Awareness Can Help Leaders More Than an MBA Can



5 Ways to Become More Self-Aware



To Become Your Best Self, Study Your Successes



Are You Developing Skills That Won't Be Automated?

