

Self Awareness, a powerful people skill

Self awareness, probably one of the most underrated, under-practiced and un-developed skills of [Crew Resource Management \(CRM\)](#) and bridge resource management (BRM). Self-awareness brings great advantage in productivity, performance, and safety, in all positions of work and in personal lifestyles.

To start with we should first point out that we receive a lot of information that our brain is aware of, but chooses to either ignore, store for later, or just process and discard. As you are reading this text your brain is receiving masses of information, more than it can process, or requires, to pay attention to what you are doing; reading.

You perhaps are aware of the colour of a carpet, a picture on the wall, the sounds of machinery, a distant conversation, the smell of coffee or a cleaning product. But most of the time you will not be able to recall many of the thousands of specific visual sensations you receive. The brain commits many edits of information, discarding much as soon as it deems it unnecessary. [Paul E. Bendheim, MD](#), an internationally recognized neurologist says in his book “The Brain Training Revolution”

“In general, we remember about 50 percent of events the next day, about 10 percent the next week, 5 percent within a month, and less than 1 percent a year of two later. Our brains simply ‘forget’ more than 99 percent of all experiences”

The brain and it's one [hundred billion neurons](#) can only absorb a finite amount of information. So what we choose to hold (pay attention to and are aware of), is very much in our own hands (or heads), which is significant when it comes to good leadership. Whether a Captain or OOW, AB or Chief, each and every one of us are parts in much bigger systems that we interact, impact and interconnect with.

People with good self awareness are acutely aware of the impact their interconnectedness has on others and the systems around them. They can change their behavior according to a particular person or situation. Others that have not developed a good sense of self-awareness can easily transfer their likes, dislikes and preferences onto others; for example, because a Captain follows policies, he may assume that his crew will, or because an OOW favors ‘logic’ as his or her favorite lens, they may assume others they work with do as well, or because a Chief likes all things in place, he can assume everyone else likes this as well.

These projections tell us everything about ourselves and nothing about the people we are talking to, or interacting with, at work or at home.

Although we are generally quite good at reading others, many times we get self absorbed; not selfish, but caught up in our own thoughts, and the task at hand. Getting a waypoint entered, or filling a report in, raising and anchor, or working on loading cargo; when we lack self awareness, we miss the subtleties and signals that others are giving off and this can lead to serious mismatches in communication.

Self Awareness, a powerful people skill

Looking at how we communicate we can quickly see how important it is to have good self awareness. According to A. Barbour, author of Louder Than Words: Nonverbal Communication, the total impact of a message breaks down like this:

- 7 percent verbal (words)
- 38 percent vocal (volume, pitch, rhythm, etc)
- 55 percent body movements (mostly facial expressions)

On top of what we receive consciously, there are also subconscious communications going on as well, as Neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti found in the early 1990's when he stumbled on, and named '[Mirror Neurons](#)'. These neurons have been located in the frontal and parietal lobe areas of the brain. The areas that deal not only with movement, but emotions, sensations, and intentions as well.

The [Society for Neuroscience](#) writes this about mirror neurons:

"The mirror neuron system appears to allow us to decode (receive and interpret) facial expressions. Whether we are observing a specific expression or making it ourselves (a frown of disgust, for example) the same regions of our brain become activated. And the better we are at interpreting facial expressions, the more active our mirror neuron system."

We have a mass of information coming at us and whether a reinforcing or balancing system, delays can have significant affect, not only on efficiency, but also behavior. Experience should be used in an implicit way not explicit, as circumstances change so will actions, using old experiences in an explicit way says you are not being self aware.

Another problem that comes from not developing self-awareness is what New York Times and the Wall Street Journal bestselling author, [Daniel Goleman](#) calls 'Blind spots'.

Looking at a study (administered by Robert E. Kaplan), of forty-two successful executives ranging from department heads to CEO's, Mr Goleman wrote in his book 'Working with Emotional Intelligence':

"Such blind spots can actually motivate people to avoid self-awareness since by knowing themselves they would have to admit to failings that they cannot bear to acknowledge."

Problems caused by missing our own tendencies or, 'Blind Spots', setup not only failure for ourselves, but the systems and organizations we live and work in. We can turn a perfectly good self-maintaining systems into a system that is cumbersome and inefficient because we continue to look at linear cause-effect chains in problems, instead of looking at interconnections and interrelationships.

In his book 'The new Executive Brain' [Elkhonon Glodberg, Ph.D](#) says of self-awareness:

"Our ability to accomplish our goals depends on our ability to critically appraise our own actions and the actions of those around us."

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With good self-awareness you are far better able to see a delay, a poor action, or inaction, and influence the outcome, understanding that small errors of omission can grow into large errors of commission.

For example in the report [No 4/2011](#) from [MAIB](#) there are several errors of omission from the Captain, second officer and AB on the give way vessel, and also from the two person crew aboard a fishing vessel (stand on vessel), a collision occurs resulting in a fatality. In the report there are multiple places where good self awareness would bring questions and actions thereafter

The report notes the second officer's reason for deviating from, Collision Regulations (COLREGS), Master's Standing orders and Company policy, was this.

“His experience was that fishing vessels often carried out erratic manoeuvres, and that taking early avoiding action could result in unnecessary close-quarters situations”

Whether this thought was actually going through the second officer's mind at the time is not the point, rather what can be done to dissolve the problems of poor interconnectedness and understanding.

The MAIB report concluded that, *“the second officer showed a poor attitude towards guidance”* and that the Captain, *“did not sufficiently motivate the second officer to follow company's navigational procedures”*.

While these may have been effects, they were not the cause. Self-aware leaders focus less on themselves and more on the people they lead. Did either Captain know how their behavior affected their crew, did they understand or even know their interpersonal style, was it passive, assertive or aggressive, did they think which would be more effective in each situation.

Action taken by the Company of the ro-ro passenger vessel following the accident was to distribute a circular about following company's navigational procedures, to introduce another procedure that requires master's to report on competence of a newly joined officer, and to carry out unscheduled audits at sea.

Adding parts to a system that was not the cause of the accident is just adding redundancies. It may slow down the result (another accident), but the parts will not dissolve the problem on their own.

If all the crew were to develop good [self-awareness](#), (in this case basic CRM skills), there should be no need to add to a system (COLREGS), that for all intents and purposes, works well aboard vessels Worldwide when used correctly.

No one is perfect and there are times that we have all experienced a sense of “loosing ourselves” in the moment when engaged in a task. It is in these times, as Jeff Brown and Mark Fenske point out in their book [‘The Winner's Brain’](#) that:

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“ Having confidence in your strengths is clearly a good thing, but ‘Winner’s Brain Self-Awareness’ means getting a handle on your weaknesses, too.”

The options are open, we can develop and practice self-awareness, use the information to be better more productive leaders and gain superior performance from ourselves and others by how we interact, or ignore this and receive erratic, unknown and unwanted behavior.