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Reflections on “Self-Observation: A Powerful Tool for the 21st Century Leader”

[A Wisdom Scholar's thoughts on an article available for purchase at: wisdom-works.com]

There is no doubt that a person's ability to lead is dependent on personal wellness. Leadership qualities are diminished in instances where a leader's mental or physical health is compromised. It follows then that conscious efforts to be physically healthy and mentally content can actually enhance a person's leadership qualities. Personal wellness encourages organization and motivation, both of which are key in leadership of a project. Personal wellness is best achieved by leaders who are self-aware, especially in terms of analyzing and fulfilling personal needs. It often takes a high level of self-awareness in a leader to ensure that personal wellness is cared for, in order to eventually benefit the wellness of the team or project. The article examines a pathway to self-awareness by stating, “In effect, we consciously participate in rewiring ourselves for a healthier life.” As an outcome of focusing on achieving personal health, we also gain greater connection with our thoughts and emotions, which can provide increased control in adopting thoughtful and productive responses.

This same self-awareness translates directly into strengthening leadership qualities. Maintaining a level of emotional intelligence that allows a leader to understand the person they are collaborating with is a constant challenge and is key to successful leadership. However, even more fundamentally, sometimes understanding oneself and controlling one's responses for successful collaboration can be more difficult. Successful leadership often requires tempered responses in the face of flaring emotions, which is dependent upon strong self-awareness and self-control. This is illuminated by the article's reference to being “*reflective* rather than *reflexive*”. It is important for leaders to consider their desired outcome and design responses that further progress towards this outcome, rather than inhibiting it.

Leaders must strive to deeply understand the needs and motivations of their collaborators before they can hope to meet these needs and fulfill these motivations, to enable the greater success of the project. Much of academic learning instructs leaders in how to take charge, set goals and act individually, but fails to instruct in how to build a team, delegate in an engaging way and reward members' achievements. Self-awareness can move leaders forward significantly in their interactions with collaborators. By understanding our own reactions, we can emphasize our strengths and improve upon our weaknesses.

My own involvement with a program that I created at American University illustrates the importance of self-awareness in furthering interactions with others. The Office Eco-Certification program is a student-run initiative of our campus sustainability organization and involves training offices in environmental purchasing and behavior. After creating this program, I initially led every office training with the help of only a few student peers. As the number of trainings requested increased, I instructed 30 interested students in how to give the trainings, but still needed to be present to lead each training. Through striving to improve my self-awareness in relationships, I began to listen more closely to the undertones in my conversations with students who were helping

with the trainings, and discovered a thirst for greater participation and increased leadership roles. I am now in the process of meeting with interested peers to define roles that include coordinating trainings, checking in with offices to access progress, and engaging new offices. This will enable increased growth and success of the program, as well as improve my personal wellness and ability to focus on overall leadership rather than micromanagement of the program.