

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2024 Edition

Ask The Expert

Handling Self-Awareness Issues in the Workplace

Create the proper environment



Gail Boone
MPA, CEC

*Next Stage Coaching
and Facilitation*

Q How do I work with an employee who lacks self-awareness?

Working with employees who need more self-awareness can be challenging. The absence of employee self-awareness can negatively impact their development and the team dynamic.

There are several ways to help an employee grow their self-awareness.

Start with self.

Be mindful of your attitude, assumptions and judgement about the employee. When working with an employee who lacks self-awareness, it's easy to become frustrated and irritated when you see behaviour the employee can't see or is unwilling to change when brought to their attention. There can be solid reasons for the lack of self-awareness including diagnostic conditions, PTSD or complex PTSD. It's essential to reflect to understand the impact this employee's lack of self-awareness has on your ability to lead with a safe, supportive and curious approach. A leader's self-awareness directly affects their ability to support the employee.

Host open and honest conversations about what's needed in the workplace.

Create the conditions and ask questions to open the employee up to self-reflection. For there to be a link between motivation and satisfaction, employees need to be able to answer YES to three questions: Do I know what you want me to do? Can I do it? Do I want to do it? Make sure that employees clearly understand what is expected. Have an honest conversation about their knowledge, skills and ability to do what is required. Support them to close any gaps identified. Don't be afraid to find a non-confrontational way to ask them if they want to do the work that the role requires.

Establish agreements on how all employees are to behave in the workplace.

The leader has a role in generating the space and content to create an environment conducive to positivity and productivity. Make the invisible visible. Work with the team to identify the elements of good behaviour. Use descriptive language to define the behaviours of respect, good listening and providing feedback so that what's expected is not left to individual interpretation. Have a conversation on the way to talk about and fix behaviour that is contrary to what has been agreed. Ensure that everyone knows the consequence of behaviour that is out of alignment with what is expected.

Continuously operate from a place of curiosity rather than judgment.

Marilee Adams, author of *Change Your Questions Change Your Life*, offers powerful tools for leadership, coaching and life. She talks about the power of thinking in questions. Every encounter we have with another provides an opportunity. Ask yourself "how do I show up in this moment?" To exhibit exemplary leadership in difficult situations, it's helpful for us to understand our human nature. When we are threatened, our body activates the sympathetic nervous system, or fight-flight, to protect us from harm. Once we know what activates us, we can learn strategies to calm ourselves so we can operate from a place of curiosity rather than

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2024 Edition

Ask The Expert continued

defensiveness. When we display curiosity with employees who lack self-awareness, we can ask questions that encourage their self-reflection and invite them to see their behaviour through the eyes of others.

Address issues stemming from a lack of self-awareness promptly.

Talk with the employee about the behaviour that was witnessed. Ask them to describe the situation based on their perception. Determine if they want to hear how others might have seen the same interaction. Expect that some employees will be defensive and make excuses. Rather than getting drawn into an argument and listing all of the behaviour that makes your point, state what is acceptable and agreed upon. Ask the employee about their desired impact and how they want to be known by their colleagues. Ask them to identify behaviour that would align with how they want to be known.

Identify all professional development, mental health and employee assistance supports available to employees.

Employees who lack self-awareness live this way everywhere, not just in the workplace. In addition, it is a long-standing problem. It's often difficult for those in a relationship with the employee to point out the lack of self-awareness and its impact on others. Ensure that the employee is not shamed, blamed or wronged when attempting to help them grow their self-awareness.

Manage your own emotions and lead by example. Leaders are human.

Things happen in the workplace that can be upsetting. It's essential to understand your own emotional response and to take responsibility for how you show up. Ensure to self-regulate and learn strategies to co-regulate others. Staying calm when an employee with limited self-awareness is activated is critical. Refrain from asking them to calm down. That can be very threatening and inflame their nervous system even further. Create a safe space for the employee to regain their sense of security.

Supporting an employee who is not self-aware takes work. It calls for leaders to be socially and emotionally aware to create an environment where the employees can be helped to safely examine their behaviour to understand themselves and their impact on others.

Gail Boone is an Executive Coach and Owner of Next Stage Coaching & Facilitation and can be reached via email at gailboone@ns.sympatico.ca.