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HOW TO BUILD SELF-AWARENESS

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Self-awareness, like any muscle, can be built through discipline. In this episode, a leader learns two exercises to help build awareness of her thoughts and feelings.

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Leader in denial

Chin Sun seemed unable to recognize her own feelings. This was apparent during our coaching when she spoke about her boss, Martina. Managing up was a major goal Chin Sun had for herself through the coaching, so we talked about Martina a lot.

Early in our coaching, here's what would happen.

Chin Sun would tell me an encounter with Martina. Talking about her boss, her language would blossom with emotional words. Her breathing would shorten. She'd bounce in agitation.

When I'd reflect what I'd witnessed, saying something like 'sounds upsetting' or 'must've been hard to hear,' she'd snap out of her emotion and deny she was having any feelings at all. Everything was fine! The story was just kind of funny, she'd say.

I learned to listen silently. Then I tried something different.

After she'd tell a story where I'd seen emotion, I'd wait until her emotions had ebbed. Then, later, I'd ask what she



thought about that story. She'd insist she didn't have thoughts about it at all. It was what it was, she'd tell me.

A few months into the coaching, I asked for time on that day's agenda. When my turn came, I told her I'd like to talk with her about self-awareness as a discipline. She asked what I meant.

Self-awareness as a discipline

I said, "When it comes to the ability to be self-aware, I think we're all calibrated differently. Some people have it more naturally than others. Like some people have a gift with language. Or a gift with numbers."



She laughed. "Like my kids. My daughter is always cool as a cucumber, but my son is a total drama queen. It's hilarious. Their default settings are way different."

I said, "Exactly. Self-awareness is just like that. It's different for different people. By the way, am I right, with your kids, if you wanted to, you could get each of them a little stronger on their less-developed side?"

"Yeah, probably," she said.

I replied, "Well, that's how I'd like to think with you about this idea of self-awareness as a discipline."

"You think it's my weak side?" she asked, worried.

"I don't know, Chin Sun. Let's see. Can I tell you what I had in mind?"

"Sure!" She shifted in her chair as she engaged her learning mode.

I said, "Okay. Self-awareness. Great. So what are you supposed to be aware of? Two things: your thoughts and your feelings."

"Which are pretty much the same," she interjected.

"Do you think so?" I asked.



“Well, aren’t they?” she said, suddenly doubtful.

Thoughts are not feelings

I said, “Personally, I think thoughts are different from feelings. Let me think up an example and you can tell me what you think. Oh! Here’s the perfect Los Angeles example: someone cuts you off on the freeway.”

She gave a laugh of recognition.

I said, “When someone cuts you off, two things happen in a finger snap, one after the other. First, a feeling happens. Maybe you’re scared. Maybe you’re angry. Whatever the feeling is, it shoots through you. It changes your chemistry. It activates different parts of your brain. Those are feelings. Then, the second thing happens. You have thoughts.”

“After the feeling?” she asked.

“Yup. So suppose the car that cut you off is one of those two-hundred-thousand-dollar Mercedes. Would you have a thought about that?”

“Oh, yeah!” she said. “Rich self-centered bastard!”

I laughed. “That thought would make sense! What would you think if it were some beat-up old twenty-year-old Toyota Corolla?”

With kindness, she said, “They should learn to check their mirrors if they want to keep their car going!”

“Those are both *thoughts* about the people. They’re different from the jolt of feeling you had first. Thoughts. Feelings. Separate.”

She was nodding.

I offered, “I’d like to give you some tools to help you build muscle with both.”

She was still nodding. “Sounds great – even though I haven’t totally wrapped my head around thoughts being



different from feelings. But keep going.”

Conversations with yourself

I laughed. “Fair enough. I’m going to propose two exercises. Both are conversations you’re going to have with yourself, but with very different focuses.”

She squinted. “Am I going to be talking to myself?”

“If you like. Some people do. A lot of people like to write. Some people talk into a recorder. Some people just think in the shower. Whatever. It’s all an experiment. The learning is in just doing it, not aiming for ‘right.’”

“So what’re the exercises?” she asked.

“One focuses back at a time when things didn’t turn out the way you wanted. The other focuses on what’s happening in real time.”

“Am I doing these every day?”

“The first one, looking back, no. You’ll make some time to do it. Maybe once a week for a month or two. The other one you can do a hundred times a day if you want.”

“Does it matter which one we start with?”

Looking back at not-so-great

“Let’s start with the looking back one. You’re going to think about a time when things didn’t work out so well. You’re not doing this to pick apart your choices and pass judgment on yourself. You’re doing this to look at what happened and see what there is to learn from it. You’re going to look at it from two different angles: from the inside and the outside.”

She was clearly intrigued. I continued.

“When you’re looking from the inside, you want to remember what the experience was like. If it were a movie,





it'd be the movie of what your eyes were seeing. Ask yourself what it was like when that thing happened. What did you feel? What did you think? Whatever you recall, just notice it, don't judge it, because you're not done yet."

She laughed. "What's next?"

"Next, look from the outside. Now the movie you're watching is all third person. You're up in the balcony watching the movie of yourself projected on the screen. You can't change the movie, but you can ask, is that woman getting what she wants? How is she contributing to what's happening? What impression is she making? What does everyone think about her? And as you're watching, ask yourself, 'What do I think about this?' 'What do I feel about this?'"

"Sounds like I'll feel embarrassed," she said.

I noticed she had just named a feeling. I said, "If you did feel embarrassed, how would that be for you? Could you tolerate it?"

"I wouldn't like it, but it wouldn't stop me. So this is it? Drag up some uncomfortable moment from my past and live through it again, inside and out?"

Seeking patterns

I laughed at her depiction. I said, "There's one last question to ask. Looking at all this, ask yourself, do any of those thoughts or feelings show up in other situations that didn't turn out so well? Are there patterns I could learn from?"

She grimaced. "As if I want these answers!"

I smiled and said again, "You're not there to judge yourself or shame yourself, Chin Sun. The past is past. It's not something broken you have to fix. You're just there to learn."

She said, "How could I see a mistake like that and not want to fix it?"

"What if it's not a 'mistake,' Chin Sun? What if it's just a movie? An instructional movie. And you're there as a



student to take notes and do a little comparative research.”

She laughed. “Okay, okay, okay. So what do I do if I think I see a pattern? Tell you?”

“Sure! I’d love to hear how this goes for you. But the goal is not discovery, it’s practice. You’re trying to build the discipline of viewing your life as a learning tool. You want to get used to watching your life from the inside and the outside. It’s a muscle you’re going to build. Which is also true of the other exercise.”

“Which was a real-time thing, right?”

Looking in real time

“Right,” I said. “This is a little three-question script you ask yourself as many times a day as you can think of. As soon as you think to do it, you stop and ask yourself three quick questions: ‘What am I doing right now?’ ‘What feelings do I have right now?’ ‘What’s happening in my body right now?’”

After looking up at the ceiling for a second, she ticked on her fingers. “I’m listening to you. I’m feeling fine. I’m ready to write. Those are my answers.”

“Great,” I said. “Let me give you a little challenge on that second one, about your feelings. It’s natural to settle on a neutral feeling like ‘fine’ or ‘good’ or ‘alright.’ But you build muscle faster by looking deeper for something stronger.”

She frowned, looking inward. “Okay. Uh, I don’t know. Curious, maybe?”

“Okay! So your real-time check on these three questions was: What am I doing? Listening to Tom. How am I feeling? Curious. What’s in my body? I’m ready to write. Done! You do that as often as you can every day. Just like the first exercise, the goal’s not to fix anything. You’re just gathering data. You’re learning to be aware of yourself in real time.”

She wrote again, then looked up and asked, “So suppose I do these two exercises. What am I supposed to get, exactly?”

“They’re meant to build your ‘self-awareness’ muscle,” I answered.



“Which gets me what?” she asked.

“People who are high in self-awareness are better able to choose their actions. They can decide whether to respond to their feelings and their thoughts. They get their emotions working for them instead of against them.”

“Whoa!” she said. “That’s one big leap from recognizing a pattern to getting my emotions working for me. How does that happen?”

That, I told her, was not a self-awareness issue. That was a self-management issue. My conversation with Chin Sun about self-management is next month’s episode of [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).

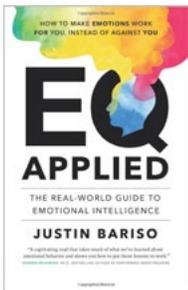


Core Concepts:

- Thoughts are different from feelings.
- To increase awareness, examine a less-than-great outcome in your life
- Search for patterns; don’t judge the past
- Practice the 3 ‘check-in’ questions:
 - What am I doing right now?
 - How am I feeling right now?
 - What’s in my body right now?

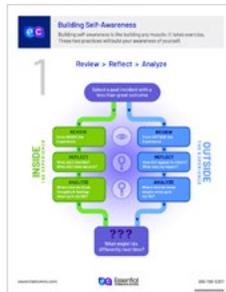


Resources:



EQ Applied: The Real-World Guide to Emotional Intelligence

by Justin Bariso



Download a free PDF showing the two exercises from this episode, plus our Feeling Word Grid.

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