

APM Yearbook contributor **Brenda Hales** examines how self awareness plays a vital role in project management.

THE FOUNDATION OF PROJECT LEADERSHIP

ABOUT ten months ago I joined the People Special Interest Group of the Association for Project Management.

With monthly meetings and varying attendance this means, that we have had the benefit of over 1,000 years of project experience; with all the scars to prove the encounters.

What initially delighted me was how often self awareness was cited as the place to start for the more people based perspective we were all interested in. Nearly everyone arriving at their first meeting will say frustratedly something like, “this discussion about is all very well but surely the starting point should be self awareness”.

Having mullied on this pattern, I have concluded that it is incumbent on the “believers” in the importance of self awareness to provide an explanation. For we have not yet convinced many of the paradox, that in order to lead others you must focus on yourself.

In order to function in the world we all have self awareness, at its simplest we know when we are hungry: don't we? Yet how many of us eat “because it's meal time”, or have a sticky toffee pudding as “it's a habit”.

Now let's think this through with a more complex issue. Imagine a close peer is promoted above you. Become aware of how your stomach felt as you read this and notice do you feel jealous, pleased, concerned, threatened or

excited by the possibilities? How you feel will radically alter the way you now relate to this person and since all emotions “leak” through, the only way you can start to change or manage them, is first, to become aware of them.

So what is self awareness?

There are a number of dimensions to self awareness and while recognising that they are inextricably linked, let us consider some of them in a bit more detail:

The riddle of who is who

A client starts his session saying to me, “You look tired”. Unable to admit even to himself that he is worn out, he thinks he sees tiredness in everyone.

While this has implications for managing stress, the more serious issue for my client in terms of his leadership capability is that in his confusion about who is who, he is not meeting me at all. He is meeting his image of me and he is incorrect, I am not tired.

The problem is he now treats me as if I am tired and it would be easy for us both to get horribly entangled.

It is impossible for someone to be even a competent leader if they cannot sufficiently separate out who is who.

Preconceptions, biases, prejudices and assumptions

It is a natural tendency, indeed a necessary function for us to evaluate the people we

meet. We do this based on our own highly subjective set of experiences, prejudices and assumptions. Difficulties arise

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when we unknowingly make the assumption that our ways are “right”, not just a different perspective.

Leadership does not come from following or imposing rules; it comes from challenging customs and encompassing others' perspectives.

Do unto others?

I am constantly amazed at how few people in the project community can accept praise. They deflect, reject, ridicule or accept any positive feedback with an immediate but.... In

my experience if you cannot accept praise it is unlikely you are giving it.

I can hear the chorus of indignant denials, but just check out, do you give praise and immediately follow it with the next task, after all you don't want people to get big headed or complacent and forget how much more there is to do, do you?

Context

Everything is different in the light of the context as you, and only you, experience it; this includes areas of your life like your work, finances, family and relationships. So a seriously failing project is an opportunity for someone to prove to senior managers their fire fighting skills or the reason to resign. It depends on the context for you. Less analysis and blame about right and wrong and more on understanding the context of people's decision making, enables choice and enhances decision making.

Everyone is constantly changing

Every experience has the capacity to change how we feel, what we think, how we act. Once we really grasp this concept then the opportunity for growth is almost limitless. Our self awareness becomes the ground we keep digging and from which we can expand our range of choices and responses, constantly honing our

