FACTOR VI: PERSONAL AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

CLUSTER T: DEMONSTRATING PERSONAL FLEXIBILITY

55 Self-Knowledge

*Know thyself.* Socrates (469-399 BCE) – Greek philosopher

**Section 1: Your Development Need(s)**

**Unskilled**

- Doesn’t know him/herself well—strengths, weaknesses or limits
- Doesn’t seek feedback—may be defensive or arrogant
- Doesn’t listen to or learn from feedback
- May misestimate his/her performance—either too high or too low
- May rush in where he/she shouldn’t, or not move when he/she should
- May be surprised by or not know own impact
- May know some shortcomings but will not share with others
- Avoids discussions about him/herself
- May assume he/she already knows when he/she doesn’t
- May be an excuse maker and blamer; doesn’t learn from mistakes
- Doesn’t get much from personal insight exercises or performance discussions
- Is surprised by negative personal data

*Select one to three of the competencies listed below to use as a substitute for this competency if you decide not to work on it directly.*

Substitutes: 6,19,32,33,44,45,54,56,64

**Skilled**

- Knows personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and limits
- Seeks feedback
- Gains insights from mistakes
- Is open to criticism
- Isn’t defensive
- Is receptive to talking about shortcomings
- Looks forward to balanced (+’s and –’s) performance reviews and career discussions

**Overused Skill**

- May be too self-critical, too open about self
- May not move past knowledge to improvement and action
- May spend too much time in self-insight activities
- May be too dependent upon waiting for feedback
May overly solicit feedback

Select one to three of the competencies listed below to work on to compensate for an overuse of this skill.

Compensators: 1,4,11,22,27,29,33,42,44,46,48,52,54,64

Some Causes

☐ Arrogant
☐ Assume you know but others think you don’t
☐ Defensive
☐ Don’t get any feedback
☐ Don’t know how to get feedback
☐ The only perfect person on the planet
☐ Too much success

Leadership Architect® Factors and Clusters

This competency is in the Personal and Interpersonal Skills Factor (VI). This competency is in the Demonstrating Personal Flexibility Cluster (T) with: 40, 45, 54. You may want to check other competencies in the same Factor/Cluster for related tips.

The Map

Self-knowledge is strongly related to success in life and work. In one study, the best predictor of a high performance appraisal was seeing yourself as others see you; the best predictor of a low one was overrating your skills. Deploying yourself against life and work is greatly helped by really knowing what you’re good, average and bad at, what you’re untested in, and what you overdo or overuse. Known weaknesses don’t get you in as much trouble as blind spots. You can loop around and compensate for a known weakness. A blind spot is the worst thing you can have. You can really get into performance or career trouble with a blind spot, because you don’t know or are unwilling to admit you’re not good at it. You will venture into areas that should make you cautious and humble, but you go in strutting and confident. Disaster soon follows. An important life and career goal is to have no blind spots.

Section 2: Learning on Your Own

These self-development remedies will help you build your skill(s).

Some Remedies

☐ 1. Not sure how others see you? Get feedback. People are reluctant to give you feedback, especially negative or corrective information. Generally, to get it, you must ask for it. Seeking negative feedback increases both the accuracy of our understanding and people’s evaluation of our overall effectiveness. A person who wants to know the bad must be pretty good. People will increase their estimation of you as you
seek out and accept more feedback. If people are reluctant to give criticism, help by making self-appraisal statements rather than asking questions. Saying, “I think I focus too much on operations and miss some of the larger strategic connections; what do you think?” is easier for most people to reply to than a question which asks them to volunteer this point.

☐ 2. Want to get the real story? Keep it confidential. Confidential feedback—a private discussion, a private 360°—tends to be more negative and more accurate than public—annual performance appraisal—feedback. Don’t be lulled to sleep by your public feedback. For most of us, it’s an excessively positive view. When the feedback giver knows results will be public, scores go up, accuracy goes down.

☐ 3. Want a broader view of yourself? Seek feedback from more than one source. Different types of raters are likely to know more about and be more accurate about different competencies. Fruitful areas for bosses usually include: strategic grasp, selling-up skills, comfort around higher management, presentation of problems, solutions, clarity of thinking, team building, confronting and sizing up people skills. Customers generally know about responsiveness, listening, quality orientation, problem-solving skills, understandings of their business needs, persuasiveness. Peers know persuasion, selling, negotiation, listening to find common cause, keeping the interests of the organization in mind, follow-through on promises, and how well you maintain give-and-take in 50/50 relationships. Direct reports are best at the day-to-day behavior of leadership, management, team building, delegation, confronting, approachability, time use. When you get a piece of feedback, ask yourself if the person is in a position to know that about you. You may be the only one who doesn’t know the truth about yourself. Other sources agree much more with one another about you than you will likely agree with any one of the sources. Even though your own view is important, don’t accept it as fact until verified by more than one other person who should know.

☐ 4. Need a precise understanding? In choosing people to give you feedback, 360° or otherwise, focus on those who know you best to get the most accurate feedback. Try not to stack the deck, picking either those you do best with or worst with. Both friend and foe tend to pick similar competencies as strengths and weaknesses. Friends will use higher scores than foes but their highest and lowest competencies will usually be the same.

☐ 5. Not sure what to do with your feedback results? When getting feedback, focus on the highest and lowest items or competency results from each group. Spend less time worrying about whether your scores are high or low in an absolute sense. In development, you should worry about you relative to you, not you relative to anyone else. Your goal is simply to know yourself better. To do this, answer the following questions: Why am I this way? How did my strengths get to be strengths? What experiences shaped my pattern? Do I have strengths tipping over into weaknesses—“I’m intelligent but make others feel
less so”; “I’m creative but disorganized.” If you are clearly poor at something, what’s getting in your way? Many times you’ll find you don’t like it and have a poor understanding of why and how it’s done well. Think of tough situations for you where your strengths and weaknesses play out. More help? – See #54 Self-Development.

6. Is feedback intermittent? Work to get continuous feedback; don’t wait for annual feedback events. There are three ways to get better continued, high-quality feedback:

- Prepare specific areas you are concerned about and ask people to respond —anonymously in writing. List the areas where you need feedback and ask them what they would like for you to keep doing, start doing, and stop doing to improve.
- Work with a development partner who knows what you’re working on and —gives up on-line feedback as you try new things.
- In areas you are working on, ask others who have watched you to debrief —events with you shortly after they happen.

7. Screening out feedback? Consider all three kinds of feedback:

   Things others see that you also see that are true about you. —
   Things others see that you don’t see that are true about you—these will be —strengths you have that you sell yourself short on and weaknesses you have that you deny or are unaware of (blind spots).
   Things others think they see, but you don’t agree and are not really true about —you. The perceptions of others are facts to them, even though they may not be true about you. On just those incorrect observations that really matter, try to demonstrate by actions, not words, that their perceptions are wrong.

8. Attempting do-it-yourself feedback interpretation? Don’t go it alone. Regardless of how you get the feedback, get help in interpretation. Most 360° instruments can only be presented by a certified facilitator, but even if you get homegrown feedback, pick numerous people to talk with. Select people from each major constituency at work and people who know you best off-work. Don’t ask them for general reactions. Select a few things from your feedback, state what you think the issue is, see if they agree and ask them what they would like to see you do differently in this area.

9. Arrogant? Adopt some humility. Arrogance is a major blockage to self-knowledge. Many people who have a towering strength or lots of success get little feedback and roll along until their careers get in trouble. If you are viewed as arrogant, you may have to repeatedly ask for feedback, and when you get it, there may be some anger with it. Almost by definition, arrogant people overrate themselves in the eyes of others. Others who think you are arrogant might rate you lower than neutral observers. If you devalue others, they will return the insult.
10. **Defensive? Let down your guard.** Defensiveness is the other major blockage to self-knowledge. Here people suspect you really can’t take it, that you are defending against something, probably by blaming it on others or the job context. Defensive people get less feedback, thereby fulfilling their dream of being perfect. To break this cycle, you will need to follow the rules of good listening (More help? – See #33 Listening) and give examples of the behavior being described to validate what people are saying. While this may sound unfair, you should initially accept all feedback as accurate, even when you know it isn’t. On those matters that really count, you can go back and fix it later. More help? – See #108 Defensiveness.

### Section 3: Learning from Feedback

*These sources would give you the most accurate and detailed feedback on your skill(s).*

- **1. Development Professionals**
  
  Sometimes it might be valuable to get some analysis and feedback from a professional trained and certified in the area you’re working on—possibly a career counselor, a therapist, clergy, a psychologist, etc.

- **2. Human Resource Professionals**
  
  Human Resource professionals have both a formal and informal feedback role. Since they have access to unique and confidential information, they can provide the right context for feedback you’ve received. Sometimes they may be “directed” to give you feedback. Other times, they may pass on feedback just to be helpful to you.

- **3. Natural Mentors**
  
  Natural mentors have a special relationship with you and are interested in your success and your future. Since they are usually not in your direct chain of command, you can have more open, relaxed, and fruitful discussions about yourself and your career prospects. They can be a very important source for candid or critical feedback others may not give you.

- **4. Spouse**
  
  Spouses can be powerful sources of feedback on such things as interpersonal style, values, balance between work, career, and personal life, etc. Many participants attending development programs share their feedback with their spouses for value-adding confirmation or context and for specific examples.

### Section 4: Learning from Develop-in-Place Assignments

*These part-time develop-in-place assignments will help you build your skill(s).*

- Attend a self-awareness/assessment course that includes feedback.

- Join a self-help or support group.
- Manage a group of people who are towering experts but you are not.
- Take on a tough and undoable project, one where others who have tried it have failed.
- Make peace with an enemy or someone you’ve disappointed with a product or service or someone you’ve had some trouble with or don’t get along with very well.
- Do a study of failed executives in your organization, including interviewing people still with the organization who knew or worked with them, and report the findings to top management.
- Train and work as an assessor in an assessment center.
- Assemble a team of diverse people to accomplish a difficult task.
- Take over for someone on vacation, leave of absence, or on a long trip.
- Volunteer to fill an open management job temporarily until it’s filled.

Section 5: Learning from Full-Time Jobs

These full-time jobs offer the opportunity to build your skill(s).

- **1. Cross-Moves**
  The core demands necessary to qualify as a Cross-Move are: (1) Move to a very different set of challenges. (2) Abrupt jump/shift in tasks/activities. (3) Never been there before. (4) New setting/conditions. Examples of Cross-Moves are: (1) Changing divisions. (2) Changing functions. (3) Field/headquarters shifts. (4) Line/staff switches. (5) Country switches. (6) Working with all new people. (7) Changing lines of business.

Section 6: Learning from Your Plan

These additional remedies will help make this development plan more effective for you.

Learning to Learn Better

- **1. Examine Your Past for Parallels to the Current Situation**
  Examine your past for similar or contrasting experiences that match with or counter the current situation. What has worked in the past that you’ve dropped? What hasn’t worked that you’re repeating? What “pearls” of wisdom did you take away from your successes and failures which you could apply today?

- **2. Learn to Compensate for a Weakness**
  Some weaknesses just aren’t correctable or at least are not worth the effort. Instead of ignoring what you can’t change, try to create tactics to compensate for these weaknesses; be alert when these are needed. To compensate for your weak areas, use people whose strengths in that area are better; use a strength against your weakness.
3. Keep a Learning Journal
Keep a learning log or diary about the issues and opportunities you’ve faced and how you’ve acted. Focus on how you’ve used your strengths and weaknesses. Deduce your effective and successful rules of thumb—what worked and what didn’t, and how you would have done it differently.

4. Study Yourself in Detail
Study your likes and dislikes because they can drive a lot of your thinking, judging, and acting. Ask which like or dislike has gotten in the way or prevented you from moving to a higher level of learning. Are your likes and dislikes really important to you or have you just gone on “autopilot”? Try to address and understand a blocking dislike and change it.

5. Examine Why You Judge People the Way You Do
List the people you like and those you dislike and try to find out why. What do those you like have in common with each other and with you? What do those you dislike have in common with each other and how do they differ from you? Are your “people buckets” logical and productive or do they interfere? Could you be more effective without putting people into buckets?

6. Study Your History of Conflicts for Insights
List the people and situations which cause you trouble. What are the common themes? Why do those kinds of people and/or those kinds of situations set you off? Do they have to? Was the conflict really important? Did it help or block your learning and getting things done? Try to anticipate those people/situations in the future.

7. Do a Career Learning Time Line for Insights
Do a time line (a chronology from schooling to the present) for yourself in terms of the development of your thinking and problem-solving style and preferences. List the good and the bad times. What made the difference? What breakthroughs did you have? How have you developed as a learner? How did you get rid of previous blocks? Are you still growing?

Learning from Experience, Feedback, and Other People

8. Learning from Bad Situations
All of us will find ourselves in bad situations from time to time. Good intentions gone bad. Impossible tasks and goals. Hopeless projects. Even though you probably can’t perform well, the key is to at least take away some lessons and insights. How did things get to be this way? What factors led to the impasse? How can you make the best of a bad situation? How can you neutralize the negative elements? How can you get the most out of yourself and your staff under the chilling situation? What can you salvage? How can you use
coping strategies to minimize the negatives? How can you avoid these situations going forward? In bad situations: (1) Be resourceful. Get the most you can out of the situation. (2) Try to deduce why things got to be that way. (3) Learn from both the situation you inherited and how you react to it. (4) Integrate what you learn into your future behavior.

9. Learning from Mistakes
Since we’re human, we all make mistakes. The key is to focus on why you made the mistake. Spend more time locating causes and less worrying about the effects. Check how you react to mistakes. How much time do you spend being angry with yourself? Do you waste time stewing or do you move on? More importantly, do you learn? Ask why you made the mistake. Are you likely to repeat it under similar situations? Was it a lack of skill? Judgment? Style? Not enough data? Reading people? Misreading the challenge? Misreading the politics? Or was it just random? A good strategy that just didn’t work? Others who let you down? The key is to avoid two common reactions to your mistakes: (1) avoiding similar situations instead of learning and trying again, and (2) trying to repeat what you did, only more diligently and harder, hoping to break through the problem, yet making the same mistake again and with greater impact. Neither trap leaves us with better strategies for the future. Neither is a learning strategy. To learn to do something differently, focus on the patterns in your behavior that get you in trouble and go back to first causes, those that tell you something about your shortcomings. Facing ourselves squarely is always the best way to learn.

Learning from Courses

10. Insight Events
These are courses designed around assessing skills and providing feedback to the participants. These events can be a powerful source of self-knowledge and can lead to significant development if done right. When selecting a self-insight course, consider the following: (1) Are the skills assessed the important ones? (2) Are the assessment techniques and instruments sound? (3) Are those who are providing the feedback trained and professional? (4) Is the feedback provided in a user-friendly and “actionable” format? (5) Does the feedback include development planning? (6) Is the setting comfortable and conducive to reflection and learning? (7) Are the other participants the kinds of people you could learn from? (8) Are you in the right frame of mind to learn from this kind of intense experience? Select events on the basis of positive answers to these eight questions.

The unexamined life is not worth living. Socrates (469-399 BCE) – Greek philosopher
Suggested Readings


