

The importance of understanding yourself

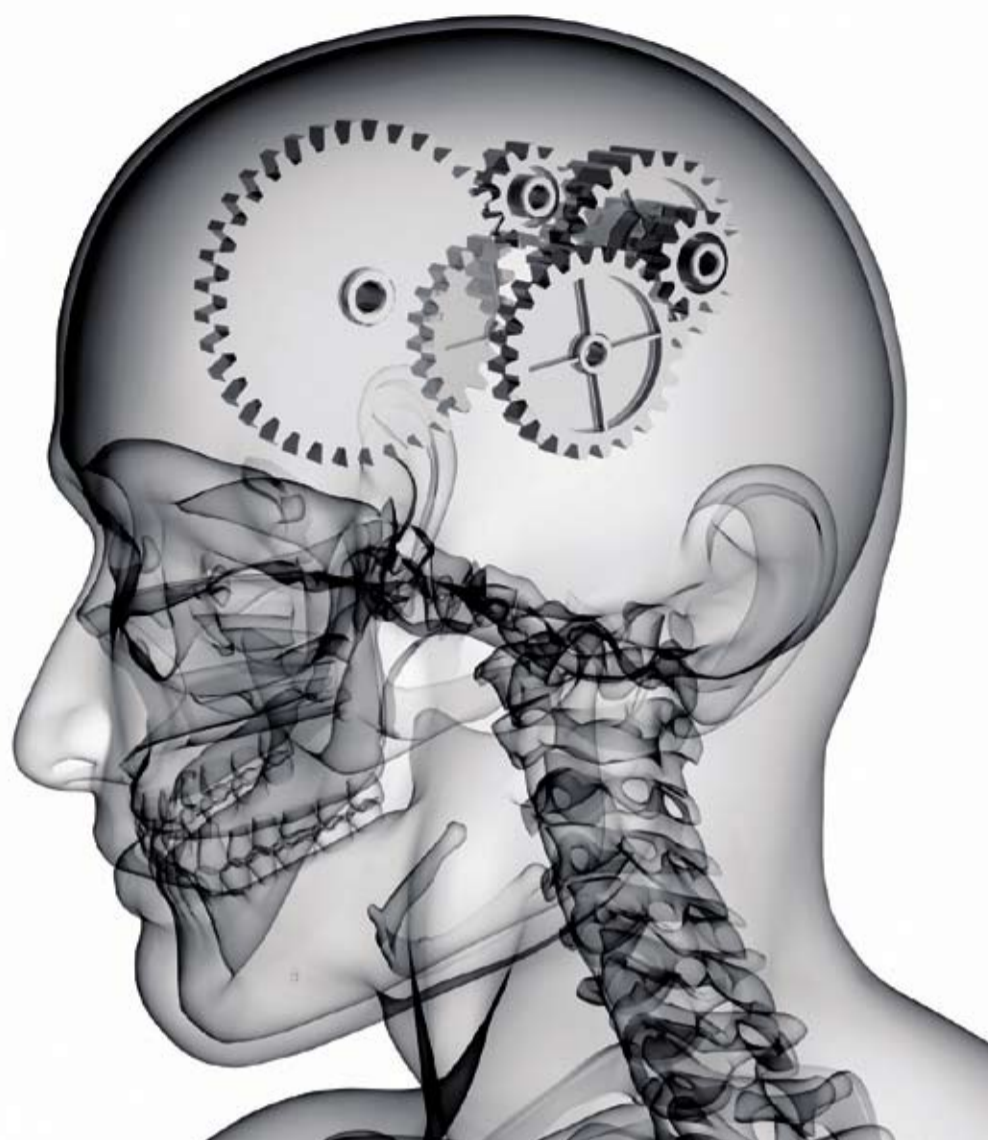
Research has consistently shown that people with the greatest self awareness tend to be stronger performers in the workplace and better leaders. It's not just about knowing your strengths and weaknesses; someone with true self awareness understands their personality and how it drives their behaviour. They are aware of how it helps them in certain situations, and how it hinders them in others. Someone with self awareness is armed with the information they need to interact with and lead others in a way that makes the most of their unique personal strengths and reduces any negative or unwelcome impact from their behaviour.

It seems sensible then that organisations should concentrate on developing self awareness in their employees. However, our experience at GatenbySanderson indicates that too many development interventions focus on what people do, rather than how they go about things, or they try to teach people one way to lead or one way to influence and negotiate. This type of development is less likely to deliver lasting results - irrespective of the effort and expertise that has gone into designing and delivering it - because it takes little or no account of how each individual's personality is going to affect the way that they put what they have been taught, into practice. Therefore enhancing an individual's understanding of themselves, particularly before embarking on any development programme, should significantly enhance its effectiveness. Each participant will be able to apply what he or she learns in the context of the unique way that he or she approaches the world - instead of aiming for a 'one size fits all' solution.

Developing self awareness enables people to consciously make subtle alterations to their behaviour, so that they can approach situations in the most effective way. For instance, someone who tends to influence others by putting forward logical, rational arguments might find that they will improve their chances of winning people round if they practice an alternative style, such as one which taps into people's emotions as well as their intellect. When leading a team, the individual may then find that employing this alternative influencing style enables them to win their team's commitment more readily.

Of course, there are certain widely accepted characteristics of an effective leader: setting direction, making decisions, driving implementation, understanding the bigger picture, and so on. However, this list represents what a leader should do, not how they should go about doing it. If a leader is hoping to improve his or her ability to set direction for others, or to be more effective at managing people in order to drive implementation, they should start by carefully examining the way that they typically behave - which is driven by their personality - and what that brings to the table in terms of both pros and cons.

Some of the latest thinking on leadership focuses on a concept called 'authenticity'. This is about a leader being true to themselves; in other words, using their unique characteristics in the way that they lead people in order to enhance their effectiveness. This implies that a person can become, develop or grow into a leader, rather than having to be 'born' a leader. To lead effectively, or so the argument goes, an individual needs to make people want to follow them. They do this by using knowledge about themselves and about other people. For instance, they reveal their differences, capitalising on what's unique about themselves; and they selectively show their weaknesses to signal to people their approachability and humanity. They also rely on intuition to know when and how to act and they practice 'tough empathy' - respect for the person and the task at hand, not just one or the other. To do any of these things, not only does an individual need to know about themselves, but they need to understand how their behaviour is likely to impact on other people, how it manifests



itself in interactions with them and whether these things will come naturally or require some effort. What it isn't, however, is one style, one type, or one way of operating. It depends totally on how the individual uses their unique combination of personality traits.

It would therefore appear logical to begin any development intervention, whether an organised leadership programme, coaching, mentoring or otherwise, with an in-depth assessment of an individual's personality. This can be achieved by asking participants to complete a selection of personality questionnaires. Some of these questionnaires examine an individual's typical behaviour at work; others give an insight into how that person is likely to behave when under pressure - and how that could impede their effectiveness and their relationships with others. Importantly, it is critical that the individual is given the opportunity to spend time exploring the output of the questionnaires - the personality profile - with an occupational psychologist or other appropriately qualified facilitator, who will help them understand what the results mean and what that could tell them about their effectiveness as a leader. This will enable them to embark on any development activity from a position of really in-depth understanding about themselves, which they should use to inform and refine their approach as they learn.

Developing self awareness and using this knowledge to change behaviour is not an exercise in fundamentally altering who a person is. It is an exercise in helping that person to understand how he or she will typically behave in most situations; where their particular style will be effective and where an alternative approach might

be more beneficial; and then making a conscious effort to operate differently. Putting significant resources into leadership development initiatives should be welcomed, but their impact on the individuals and their organisations will be massively enhanced by ensuring that participants have real self awareness.

Executive assessment is an essential tool for supporting a recruitment process or as part of an individual or top team development plan. GatenbySanderson has a dedicated, in house team offering a highly flexible package of assessment tools that can be tailored to support and reflect your organisation's competency framework. Alternatively, we can design your leadership competencies with you, and then develop assessment solutions that are specific to your needs.

A refreshing aspect of our approach is that we take the time to talk to you, understand your specific needs and provide simple, valid, objective and legally defensible solutions that are matched to your requirements.

If you would like to find out more about Assessment and Development at GatenbySanderson, then please contact Mandy Parker on 0121 644 5703

