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Self-awareness

Introduction

Burnard (1992) defines self-awareness as: ‘the process of getting to know your feelings, attitudes and values. It is also learning about the effect you have on others’ (p. 126). In view of this, self-awareness can be seen to have a major part to play in developing people skills.

Self-awareness involves understanding our characteristic responses to situations so that we can build on our positive qualities and be wary of any negative ones that may get in the way of effective practice. Developing self-awareness is not a simple or straightforward matter and cannot be achieved quickly – although major steps forward can be made once the process is under way.

But, before looking more closely at what this entails, it is important to consider why self-awareness is necessary and what problems can occur if it is lacking.

The need for self-awareness

A commonly used phrase in what can broadly be described as therapeutic or problem-solving work is that of ‘use of self’. In working with people, our own self or personality is often used as a tool, a means by which positive change can be facilitated. This is perhaps the most obvious reason for encouraging self-awareness – using a tool without knowing what it is or how it works can hardly be seen as a wise basis for practice! However, there are also a number of other reasons that are worth considering:

- Self-awareness brings confidence. Having a greater awareness of who we are, and what our strengths and weaknesses are, can be a tremendous source of confidence that can allow us to operate from a much stronger position.
- Self-awareness can also inspire confidence in the people we are working with. If we give people the impression that we lack self-awareness, then it is unlikely that they will have much faith in us, or set much store by what we are trying

to achieve. In this way, confidence can be seen as infectious – it is passed from one person to another.

- The importance of the Think–Feel–Do framework has already been commented upon. The ‘feel’ dimension is one that is often neglected. In order to be able to become attuned to other people’s feelings, we need to be ‘in touch’ with our own feelings, aware of how situations are affecting us emotionally.
- Rogers (1961) introduced the term ‘unconditional positive regard’ to describe a non-judgemental attitude. Making judgements about people can be a barrier to effectiveness, and so it is necessary to have a positive regard for the people we work with, regardless of any possible judgements we might make of them. Unconditional positive regard requires a degree of self-control and discipline which, in turn, rely on a degree of self-awareness.
- In addition to recognizing the impact of our own behaviour on others, we also need to be conscious of the impact of other people’s actions and attitudes on us. This is a major point and is discussed in more detail below when the importance of ‘triggers’ and ‘blind spots’ is considered.
- Self-awareness is also relevant in terms of dealing with prejudice, discrimination and oppression. We live and work in a society characterized by diversity – that is, differences of culture, gender, age, sexuality, language use and so on make for a very diverse society. Good practice in people skills is based on recognizing this diversity and its significance, as we shall see in Chapter 11.
- In Chapter 3 we shall consider stress management and the issue of self-awareness will also feature there.
- Similarly, Chapter 9 looks at the need to continue learning – continuous professional development, as it has become known. Knowing what you need to learn, and the best way or ways of learning it, depends very much on having a degree of self-awareness.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but should be enough to confirm that self-awareness is an important issue that we need to understand and act upon. In order to take us a step further in that direction, let us now explore in a little more detail how self-awareness (or a lack of it) can affect other people.

How we affect others

In social interactions people have an impact on one another; we influence and affect each other. In order to maximize the effectiveness of our interactions, we need to be ‘tuned in’ to what effect we have on others and, indeed, as I shall explain below, to what effect they have on us. Self-awareness is a major part of that ‘tuning in’. I shall therefore outline some of the important ways in which we can affect other people.

Listening

An important part of social interaction is affirmation. We affirm and recognize the other person in and through our interactions and thereby give him or her a sense of security and importance. Chapter 9 will stress the importance of active listening as a people skill, but a point to be noted here is that developing good listening relies on a degree of self-awareness, a sensitivity to how we are responding to the other person or persons. Without this sensitivity, there is a very real danger that we will fail to ‘connect’.

PRACTICE FOCUS 1.1

Tina's birth had been a complicated and difficult one. This left her parents anxious about possible ill-effects coming to light as Tina developed. They had raised their concerns about this a number of times but felt nobody was listening to them – all they received was bland reassurance. It was only when their health visitor, on realizing how anxious they were, listened carefully to what they had to say that they started to accept the reassurances they had been given. The health visitor's skill in active listening therefore made a major positive difference to this family.

Barriers

If we are not sufficiently sensitive to how people perceive us, we may ‘alienate’ them, or place an unnecessary distance or barriers between ourselves and the people we are working with. Body language is a good example of this. If we lack sensitivity, we may not notice that a particular mannerism is annoying, irritating or distracting an individual or group of people.

Similarly, other aspects of personal presentation may be problematic for certain people or in certain circumstances. This includes: clichés or overuse of certain words and phrases; a tendency to ‘talk down’ to people; a lack of manners; a reluctance to say ‘sorry’ or a tendency to apologize repeatedly.

Bullying

In Chapter 5, the topic of assertiveness will be explored. A central theme in the development of assertiveness is the need to avoid ‘bullying’ – bullying others or allowing others to bully us. Chapter 6 explores bullying and the related topic of harassment in more detail. Being sensitive to bullying or the potential for being bullied requires a degree of self-awareness. We need to understand, and practise, the skills involved in developing an assertive approach to interpersonal relations,

beginning with an understanding of how we use power, and how we respond to the power of others. That is, assertiveness begins with self-awareness.

Anger

Anger is a commonly experienced emotion and often arises in response to frustration. In the more extreme cases, we are only too aware that we are angry – it can be an intense and overpowering experience. However, it can also be a more ‘low-level’ experience in which the anger affects us without our realizing it. It can emerge as a smouldering resentment, rather than a flaming passion. As such, it can lead to irritability, impatience, poor concentration and a tendency to deal with people harshly.

Good people skills are therefore premised on the ability to recognize one’s own feelings and the impact they are having on other people. Without this awareness, interactions between people can be distorted or undermined by the unacknowledged influence of feelings of anger. Indeed, this can apply even where the person we are dealing with is not the one who gave rise to the anger. That is, feelings of anger can be generalized to the point where we ‘take it out’ on other people. See the discussion of ‘handling feelings’ in Chapter 18.

Mixed messages

Sometimes we can confuse other people by giving ‘mixed messages’. That is, we can give a confusing or contradictory message by failing to communicate clearly and consistently. This often arises where there is inconsistency between what is said (the verbal content) and the way in which it is communicated (the nonverbal content). For example, if I say that I am feeling relaxed, but my body posture indicates that I am very tense, it will be difficult for people to work out which is really the case, although non-verbal communication tends to be more powerful and influential than the verbal content – see Chapter 13.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but does give some indication of the range of ways in which we can affect others unwittingly. We now need to turn our attention to how other people can have an effect on us.

How others affect us

The effects of other people’s behaviour and attitudes are often obvious and undeniable. Each day we encounter situations in which what others say or do has a significant bearing on us. Indeed, this is a central part of day-to-day interactions. However, as I noted above in relation to anger, we can sometimes be affected without fully realizing that this is the case.

There are a number of ways in which this can occur, and I shall here outline some of the major ones, as these can act as significant barriers to effective practice if we are not aware of them.

Transference

This is a term which derives from Freudian theory. It refers to the process that occurs when someone we meet evokes a set of feelings, because that person reminds us in some way (appearance, mannerisms, accent or whatever) of another person we have known and who has made an impression on us. That is, feelings about one person are 'transferred' to another. For example, if a person we meet reminds us of a key person in our life, father or mother perhaps, then our feelings towards that person will be coloured by our feelings for the other. This can apply in either a positive or negative sense. That is, if we like one person, then we may find ourselves favourably disposed towards the person who reminds us of him or her. But, if we dislike a particular person, we may find that we are prejudiced against the one who now triggers off memories of that person. Transference, then, can make a significant difference in terms of how we respond to other people and, more often than not, we are not aware that the process is going on.

Triggers

A trigger is something that causes a reaction in us. It is something which gives rise to a particular response, positive or negative, and is, in this respect, similar to transference. For example, a person who is an animal lover may respond quite strongly to a situation in which animals are involved. A worker dealing with someone who has neglected or ill-treated an animal may find it difficult to work positively and fairly with that person. Similarly, a worker who was abused as a child may have great difficulty in dealing calmly or effectively with an allegation of child abuse.

What this means, in effect, is that our values and our memories are important filters through which our everyday experiences must pass. We all have trigger points in some shape or form.

Blind spots

A blind spot is the converse of a trigger. It is something which *should* arouse a reaction but does not do so. For example, a white man may be sensitive to racism and be very committed to anti-racism while, at the same time, having little or no sensitivity to sexism. That is, he may be 'gender blind', seeing the world through a man's eyes and failing to recognize that women are likely to have a different

perspective. Similarly, a person who is keen to ensure that children's rights are not overlooked or undermined may, ironically, display a very negative, patronizing or dismissive attitude towards older people. This is a point to which I shall return in Chapter 11.

Fear

Working with people involves a number of possible threats – violence, humiliation and failure, to name but three. We owe it to ourselves, therefore, to recognize that fear is a legitimate part of people work and not one we should be ashamed of. Indeed, the 'macho' attitude of fearlessness is potentially very problematic, as there is a thin line between fearlessness and complacency.

Provided that it is kept in proportion and not allowed to paralyse our efforts, fear is a healthy part of a realistic approach to working with people. Being aware of what causes us fear and developing strategies for responding positively and constructively can be seen as an important strength in people work.

Own needs

Each of us has needs. Just because we are in the business of helping to ensure that other people's needs are met does not mean that our own needs are unimportant. Indeed, it can be seen as positively dangerous to ignore our own needs, as this can leave us very vulnerable to stress, or even 'burnout' (see Chapter 3). That is, if we do not recharge our own batteries when we need to, how can we be expected to continue to energize other people and motivate them to solve their problems or cope with their day-to-day challenges?

It is therefore very important that we are aware of what our own needs are, and take the necessary steps to ensure that they are met. A stoical approach to one's own needs is a dangerous one, as a worn-down worker could certainly do more harm than good.

PRACTICE FOCUS 1.2

Elaine was delighted that she had now achieved her long-standing ambition of being able to work with people with a learning disability. She committed herself fully to the work and made a 100 per cent effort. However, over a period of time she gradually became more worn down. She was plagued with a series of minor illnesses and felt unable to keep up her level of energy and commitment. It was only when a friend advised her that she needed to look after herself better that

she started to regain control of her life. She began to realize that she had to take account of her own needs, otherwise she left herself too vulnerable – and therefore in no position to help meet the needs of others.

Conclusion

As time moves on we encounter new demands and new challenges. Life is characterized by change and therefore presents a need constantly to reappraise our approach, its appropriateness and effectiveness. Self-awareness, then, is not a static thing – it needs to grow, develop and adjust as circumstances change, and indeed as we ourselves change. It needs to be constantly ‘on the agenda’ if we are to reduce the ‘hidden’, ‘blind’ or ‘unknown’ areas and correspondingly increase that area which is ‘open’ (see Figure 1.1).

	<i>Known to self</i>	<i>Not known to self</i>
<i>Known to others</i>	Open area	Blind area
<i>Not Known to others</i>	Hidden area	Unknown area

Figure 1.1 The Johari window

To conclude, then, we need to consider some of the ways in which a degree of self-awareness can be developed and maintained. I shall identify five such methods in particular:

1. A simple but effective method is to ‘open our eyes’, to become very self-conscious of what we do, how we react and so on. A diary or log can be particularly helpful in this respect. It should be noted, however, that this should be for a brief period only. We should not make a habit of being too self-conscious, as this can get in the way of skilled practice. Being self-*aware* can be seen as a strength, while being self-*conscious* implies being unduly concerned with oneself, and is therefore a potential weakness.

2. One problem with the above method is that it may not succeed in breaking down the defensive barriers we develop to protect ourselves. It may therefore be necessary to use certain techniques for breaking down these defences. One such technique is described in Exercise 1 below.
3. Self-disclosure can also enable us to use other people, particularly those we respect and trust, as a mirror to reflect those aspects of self that we cannot see (box 4 in the Johari window – see Figure 1.1). This can be a potentially frightening undertaking and so, as Taylor (2006) recognizes, a degree of courage may be called for: ‘You need courage to look at yourself and your practice, because it takes honesty and frankness to move outside your comfort zones’ (p. 49).
4. This chapter has covered a number of issues in relation to self-awareness, and so time can usefully be spent reviewing the main points and considering what they can tell us about our own level of self-awareness.
5. A key theme of this book is empowerment, the process of helping people obtain a greater degree of control over their lives. This notion of empowerment can also be a tool for developing self-awareness. By concentrating on taking greater control over the circumstances of our lives, we can become more aware of ‘what makes us tick’ and what our strengths and weaknesses are. Indeed, this is a theme that will re-emerge in some of the chapters that follow.

EXERCISE 1**Developing Self-Awareness**

This is an exercise designed to break down barriers that stand in the way of greater self-awareness. To carry out this exercise you will need to have the use of a tape recorder and microphone, and somewhere where you will not be disturbed.

The simple task is for you to set the tape recorder to 'Record' and start talking about yourself – you can say anything you like, as long as it is about *you*. At first, social barriers are likely to inhibit you but, after a little while, these are eased and you are likely to start talking openly about yourself.

You may, if you wish, play the tape back once you have finished, but usually people find it is enough simply to talk openly without the usual social inhibitors. If you find the exercise a useful way of developing your self-awareness, as many people do, then you may want to consider repeating it from time to time.

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