INSIGHT

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The **SURPRISING TRUTH**
About How Others See Us,
How We See Ourselves, and
WHY THE ANSWERS MATTER
More Than We Think

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THE META-SKILL OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The toughest coaching session of my professional career began with me staring, for what seemed like an eternity, at the top of a senior executive's bald head. That head belonged to Steve, a construction company boss with a bleeding balance sheet. He'd been in the job for just four months when his CEO asked me to come in and help him.

That morning, I'd taken the elevator to the eighth floor, waited in the reception area, and was finally shown to Steve's palatial office by an assistant whose voice shook slightly when she announced my name. As the door closed silently behind me, Steve didn't look up from his computer, acknowledging my presence only with a long sigh and an aggressive flurry of mouse clicks. Which left me standing there, awkwardly staring at his head and admiring the contents of a presentation cabinet. It included a large award in the shape of a demolition ball, and that really said a lot about the situation.

I'm not easily unnerved, but as the seconds dragged by, I began to feel the challenge that lay ahead of me as a sensation of mild nausea. It didn't help that I was holding a red folder bulging with interview notes that told me just how volatile this man could be.

"Should I take a seat?" I finally ventured.

"Please, Dr. Eurich," he sighed impatiently, still not looking up. "Whatever makes you comfortable."

As I sat down and opened my folder, ready to begin, Steve pushed his chair back. Finally, he looked at me. "Let me tell you a thing or two about my operation here." Then, with the restlessness of a caged tiger, he began pacing up and down behind his desk, sharing his ambitious vision for the business and his hardball leadership philosophy. I was impressed with his energy—I also knew that our work together would require all he could muster.

Steve's department, he told me, was in trouble, although I already knew that. His predecessor had been fired because of cost overruns, so his in-the-red business unit needed to drive growth while finding efficiencies wherever possible. There was no room for failure, but Steve had no doubt that he was just the man for the task. His self-proclaimed leadership skills included setting high expectations, rallying his troops, and being tough but fair. "I know I'll face challenges in this role," he confidently stated, "but I also know how to get the best out of my people."

Unfortunately, Steve was totally delusional.

What I'd uncovered when I interviewed his direct reports, and what his CEO had only begun to sense, was that Steve's reign was already proving disastrous. In the 16 weeks since his official promotion, three employees had quit. A fourth, who had recently started taking blood pressure medication because of the "Steve stress," was halfway out the door. Though not a single member of Steve's team questioned his capabilities and experience, they thought that he was—to use a more polite term than they did—a complete jerk. He'd bark orders at them, question their competence, and scream at them in a way they found unprofessional and frightening. And they weren't a bunch of whiners, either. I found them to be seasoned, seen-it-all types who weren't looking to be coddled. Steve had simply pushed them too far.

To be fair, Steve had grown up in the rough-and-tumble industry of construction, where he'd learned that great leadership often meant "he who yelled the most." And while this hard-charging style may have been passable in the past, it was a costly miscalculation in his current role, especially against the backdrop of the company's collaborative culture.

As he paced around his new office, proudly detailing all the ways he was exactly the visionary leader his company needed during this difficult period, I marveled at how utterly oblivious he was. His behavior was hurting his employees' morale, his team's performance, and his own reputation. Even losing some of his best people hadn't shaken his self-image as an effective and respected leader. But Steve's team had had enough of his bullying. And somehow, I had to find a way to break that to him. More fundamentally, Steve lacked the single most important, and yet least examined, determinant of success or failure—in the workplace, or anywhere else. I've spent the last four years studying self-awareness. My research team and I quantitatively surveyed thousands of people around the world in ten separate investigations. We analyzed nearly 800 scientific studies. We conducted in-depth interviews with dozens of people who made dramatic improvements in their self-awareness.

While a precise definition is more complex than it first seems, ***self-awareness*** is, at its core, **the ability to see ourselves clearly—to understand who we are, how others see us, and how we fit into the world.*** Since Plato instructed us to "know thyself," philosophers and scientists alike have extolled the virtues of self-awareness. Indeed, this ability is arguably one of the most remarkable aspects of being human. In his book *The Telltale Brain*, neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran poetically explains:†

> Any ape can reach for a banana, but only humans can reach for the stars. Apes live, contend, breed and die in forests—

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* Throughout the book, I'll set key terms, tools, and key takeaways in bold type so it's easier to refer back to them.

† Throughout this book, there are more than 400 scientific studies, books, and articles cited. All references are listed by chapter starting on page 301.

> end of story. Humans write, investigate, and quest. We splice genes, split atoms, launch rockets. We peer upward . . . and delve deeply into the digits of pi. Perhaps most remarkably of all, we gaze inward, piecing together the puzzle of our own unique and marvelous brain . . . This, truly, is the greatest mystery of all.

Some have even argued that the ability to understand ourselves is at the core of human survival and advancement. For millions of years, the ancestors of *Homo sapiens* evolved almost painfully slowly. But, as Ramachandran explains, about 150,000 years ago, there was an explosive development in the human brain—where, among other things, we gained the ability to examine our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as to see things from others' points of view (as we will learn, both of these processes are absolutely critical for self-awareness). Not only did this create the foundation for higher forms of human expression—like art, spiritual practices, and language—it came with a survival advantage for our ancestors who had to work together to stay alive. Being able to evaluate their behaviors and decisions and read their impact on other members of the tribe helped them, to use a slightly more modern reference, not get voted off the island.

Flash forward to the twenty-first century. Though we may not face the same day-to-day threats to our existence as our ancestors did, self-awareness is no less necessary to our survival and success—at work, in our relationships, and in life. There is strong scientific evidence that people who know themselves and how others see them are happier. They make smarter decisions. They have better personal and professional relationships. They raise more mature children. They're smarter, superior students who choose better careers. They're more creative, more confident, and better communicators. They're less aggressive and less likely to lie, cheat, and steal. They're better performers at work who get more promotions. They're more effective leaders with more enthusiastic employees. They even lead more profitable companies.

On the flip side, a lack of self-awareness can be risky at best and

disastrous at worst. In business, regardless of what we do or what stage we're at in our careers, our success depends on understanding who we are and how we come across to our bosses, clients, customers, employees, and peers. This becomes even more important the higher we ascend on the corporate ladder: senior executives who lack self-awareness are *600 percent more likely* to derail (which can cost companies a staggering $50 million per executive). And more generally, un-self-aware professionals don't just feel less fulfilled in their careers—when they get stuck, they tend to have trouble figuring out what their next phase should even be.

The list goes on and on. After so many years of researching the subject, I would go so far as to say that **self-awareness is the meta-skill of the twenty-first century.** As you'll read in the pages ahead, the qualities most critical for success in today's world—things like emotional intelligence, empathy, influence, persuasion, communication, and collaboration—*all stem from self-awareness.* To put it another way, our self-awareness sets the upper limit for the skills that make us stronger team players, superior leaders, and better relationship builders. And here, even small gains in self-awareness can have a big payoff.

Now, you'd certainly be hard-pressed to find many people who don't instinctively know that self-awareness is important. After all, it's a term we tend to toss around pretty freely about our boss, our colleagues, our in-laws, our politicians. Although have you noticed that when we do, it's usually in the negative, as in "so-and-so just isn't self-aware"? Despite the critical role it plays in our success and happiness, self-awareness is a remarkably rare quality.

For most people, it's easier to choose ***self-delusion*—the antithesis of self-awareness**—over the cold, hard truth. This is particularly true when our delusion masquerades, as it often does, as insight. I recently picked up Travis Bradberry's best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, and I was astonished to learn that over the last decade, our collective emotional intelligence (EQ) has improved. (EQ is the ability to detect, understand, and manage emotions in ourselves and others, and countless studies have shown that people who have it are more

successful, more resilient, more tolerant of stress, better at building relationships, and more.) But in my work as an organizational psychologist, Bradberry's findings didn't match what I had observed: at least anecdotally, I've seen low EQ becoming more, not less, of a problem in recent years.

It wasn't until I took the online assessment that came with the book that I identified the stunning source of the discrepancy. While, yes, Bradberry's research involved a staggering 500,000 people, his conclusions were *based on their own self-assessments*. Think about that for a minute. Picture a few of the least emotionally intelligent people you know. If you asked them to evaluate their own EQ, how much would you bet that they'd see themselves as *at least* above average? So an alternative, and far more likely, explanation for Bradbury's findings is a **growing gap between *how we see ourselves* and *what we really are.*** In other words, what looked like an *increase* in EQ was more likely a *decrease* in self-awareness.*

Our increasingly "me"-focused society makes it even easier to fall into this trap. Recent generations have grown up in a world obsessed with self-esteem, constantly being reminded of their wonderful and special qualities. It's far more tempting to see ourselves through rose-colored glasses than to objectively examine who we are and how we're seen. And this isn't just a generational problem, or even just an American one—it afflicts people of all ages, genders, backgrounds, cultures, and creeds.

Right now, you might be mentally conjuring all the delusional people you know and chuckling—the co-worker who thinks he's a brilliant presenter but puts everyone to sleep in meetings; the boss who brags about being approachable but terrifies her team; the friend who thinks

* I'm often asked how self-awareness is related to emotional intelligence. The simple answer is that whereas emotional intelligence is primarily about awareness and regulation of emotions in ourselves and others, self-awareness is a much broader term: it covers our internal characteristics that go beyond emotions—our values, passions, aspirations, fit, patterns, reactions, and impact on others—as well as how we're seen by other people.

she's a "people person" but is always the most awkward guest at the party. Yet there's something else we all need to consider. As the Bible asks, "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:4). Whether it's at work, at home, at school, or at play, **we're quick to accuse others of being unaware, but we rarely (if ever) ask ourselves whether we have the same problem.** Case in point: in a survey that I conducted among potential readers of this very book, a full 95 percent reported that they were either somewhat or very self-aware!

The truth is that while most of us think we know ourselves pretty well, this confidence is often unfounded. Researchers have established that our self-assessments "are often flawed in substantive and systematic ways." As you'll read more about soon, studies show that we tend to be terrible judges of our own performance and abilities—from our leadership skills to our car-driving prowess to our performance at school and at work. The scariest part? The *least* competent people are usually the *most* confident in their abilities.

And in most cases, the planks in our eyes are pretty obvious to everyone but us. A tone-deaf college student who drops out of school to become a singer. A braggadocious boss who reads scores of business books but remains a terrible leader. A parent who spends very little time with his kids but thinks he's "Dad of the Year." A thrice-divorced woman who's convinced that the end of each marriage was her ex's fault.

But being overconfident about our abilities isn't the only way that low self-awareness can play out. Sometimes we lack clarity about our values and goals, causing us to perpetually make choices that aren't in our best interests. Other times, we fail to grasp the impact we're having on the people around us, alienating our colleagues, friends, and families without even knowing it.

Now, if that's what unawareness looks like, the next logical question becomes: What does it mean to be self-aware? When I began my four-year empirical research program on the subject, answering this question seemed like a rather straightforward place to start. Yet I was

stunned to learn just how many conflicting definitions existed. Without a clear definition of self-awareness, though, how could I possibly develop a method to help people improve it? So my research team and I spent months reviewing hundreds of studies to see what patterns emerged. In the process, we unearthed two main categories of self-awareness that, strangely, weren't always related.

Internal self-awareness has to do with seeing yourself clearly. It's an **inward understanding of your values, passions, aspirations, ideal environment, patterns, reactions, and impact on others.** People who are high in internal self-awareness tend to make choices that are consistent with who they really are, allowing them to lead happier and more satisfying lives. Those without it act in ways that are incompatible with their true success and happiness, like staying in an unfulfilling job or relationship because they don't know what they want.

External self-awareness is about understanding yourself from the outside in—that is, **knowing how other people see you.** Because externally self-aware people can accurately see themselves from others' perspectives, they are able to build stronger and more trusting relationships. Those low in external self-awareness, on the other hand, are so disconnected with how they come across that they're often blindsided by feedback from others (that is, if others are brave enough to tell them). And very often, by the time they hear this feedback, their relationships are too far gone to be salvaged.

Now, it's easy to assume that someone who is internally self-aware would also be externally self-aware—that being in touch with our feelings and emotions helps us tune in to how we're seen. But strangely, research (mine and others') has often shown *no relationship between them*—and some studies have even shown an inverse one! You probably know someone who loves to gaze at their own navel but has precious little understanding of the way they're coming across. The other side of the coin is also dangerous. Being too fixated on how we appear to others can prevent us from making choices in service of our own happiness and success.

The bottom line is that to become truly self-aware, you have to understand yourself *and* how others see you—and what's more, the path to get there is very, very different than what most people believe. But if this sounds intimidating or untenable, there is good news. My research has shown that **self-awareness is a surprisingly developable skill.**

THE DEPTHS OF OUR DELUSION

In humorist Garrison Keillor's invented town of Lake Wobegon, every child is above average. We chuckle at this statistically impossible trope because we see such delusion everywhere: at work, in class, at PTA meetings, at the grocery store, at home, and, in the colonel's case, the battlefield.

I'm sure you know more than a few of these people. The colleague who, despite her past success, obvious qualifications, and undeniable intelligence, displays a complete lack of insight into how she is coming across. The boss who thinks his detail orientation makes him a good

manager, but in reality is infuriating his employees; the client who thinks she's a great partner but is known the office over for being impossible to work with.

According to behavioral economist and Nobel Prize laureate Daniel Kahneman, human beings possess an "almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance." Research suggests that we tend to think we're smarter, funnier, thinner, better-looking, more socially skilled, more gifted at sports, superior students, and better drivers than we objectively are.* Scientists have dubbed this the "Better Than Average Effect." But in honor of our "above average" executive from chapter 1, I call it ***Steve Disease.***

Of course, mathematically speaking, 49 percent of us *will* be above average on any given measure. But often, where we actually fall on the bell curve has little resemblance to where we think we fall. In one study of more than 13,000 professionals, researchers found almost no relationship between self-assessed performance and objective performance ratings. In a second investigation, more than 33 percent of engineers rated their performance in the top 5 percent relative to their peers—and only one brave soul out of a thousand labeled himself as below average.

Empirical evidence of Steve Disease also extends outside the walls of corporate America. In one famous study, a full 94 percent of college professors thought they were above average at their jobs. And in another—and perhaps disturbingly for anyone planning a medical procedure in the near future—surgical residents' self-rated skills had literally no relationship with their board exam performance (although, thankfully, that's probably why they have a board exam).

It's no surprise that the consequences of Steve Disease are as severe as the problem is pervasive. At work, for example, employees who lack self-awareness bring down team performance. Empirical research

* People often ask me whether there are people who consistently *under*-rate themselves. The answer is yes—although these people tend to be fewer and farther between. Yet just as overconfidence hurts our self-awareness, failing to appreciate our strengths shows a different kind of un-self-awareness.

has shown that the unaware reduce decision quality by an average of 36 percent, hurt coordination by 46 percent, and increase conflict by 30 percent. In aggregate, companies with large numbers of unaware employees perform worse financially: one study with hundreds of publicly traded companies found that those with poor financial returns were 79 percent more likely to employ large numbers of un-self-aware employees.

As anyone who has worked for a delusional boss can attest, Steve Disease is especially infectious—and disastrous—in the ranks of management. When leaders are out of touch with reality, they're six times more likely to derail. Overconfidence can also blind managers to their employees' brilliance, causing them to underestimate their top performers' contributions. And though people in positions of power don't usually start off any less self-aware (it requires a certain measure of self-awareness to ascend to a leadership position in the first place), their delusion often grows with their rank and seniority. Early successes give way to an intoxicating pride that blinds them to truths they can and should be seeing.

And as their power increases, so does their degree of overestimation. Compared to managers and front-line leaders, for example, executives more dramatically overvalue their empathy, adaptability, coaching, collaboration, and (ironically) self-awareness skills. What might be even more shocking, though, is that compared to their less experienced counterparts, experienced leaders are more likely to overestimate their abilities. Similarly, older managers tend to misjudge their performance relative to their boss's ratings of them far more than their younger peers do.*

But wait. Shouldn't a leader's experience, age, and seniority *increase* insight? There are a many reasons this isn't the case. First, senior positions are often complex, with murky standards of performance and

* It's been shown that, in general, we become more accurate at self-assessing between the ages of 25 and 35, but our accuracy tends to decrease between 35 and 45. Also, and quite shockingly, business students, compared to students majoring in physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, most strongly inflated their self-assessments relative to their objective performance.

subjective definitions of success. Second, above a certain level, there usually aren't reliable mechanisms to supply honest feedback sufficient for gauging performance on these more subjective measures. Making matters worse, many powerful people encircle themselves with friends or sycophants who don't challenge or disagree with them. As professor Manfred Kets de Vries put it, they're surrounded by "walls, mirrors and liars." And finally, executives are often rewarded for delusion—for example, overconfident CEOs tend to be paid more than their peers, and as their compensation packages grow, so do their levels of overconfidence. In reality, CEO compensation has less to do with talent or performance than it does with PR and perception; no board wants their CEO to be below average, so no one lets their packages lag market expectations. These companies might as well be headquartered in Lake Wobegon!

Yet regardless of our degree of overestimation—and whether we're in a position of power or not—our misguided beliefs follow us home, taking an equal toll on our personal lives. For example, overconfidence can affect how we parent. Research shows that the majority of mothers and fathers grossly overestimate the number of words they speak to their pre-verbal children (children who hear more words at home develop better vocabularies, higher IQs, and better academic performance). Eighty-two percent of parents also think that they're capable of handling their finances despite holding too much debt and neglecting to build long-term savings, and it's these same parents who fancy themselves as great financial management teachers to their kids. Now, it probably comes as no shock to hear that this delusion rubs off on our children. One study surveyed more than a million high school seniors and revealed that a full 25 percent placed themselves in the *top 1 percent* in their ability to get along with others. How many thought they were below average? Two percent.*

* This study was conducted in 1976—when Baby Boomers were in college—providing evidence that Millennials were not the original instigators of this pattern! And I say this, totally objectively, as a Millennial.

Making matters worse, the *least* competent people tend to be the *most* confident in their abilities, a finding first reported by Stanford psychology professor David Dunning and then-graduate student Justin Kruger. Their research revealed that participants who performed the worst on tests of humor, grammar, and logic were the most likely to overestimate their abilities. Those who scored in the 12th percentile, for example, believed on average that their ability fell in the 62nd. This phenomenon came to be known as the ***Dunning-Kruger Effect,*** and it's been replicated with dozens of other skills like driving, academic performance, and job performance.

All this being said, is it possible that deep down, people know they're incompetent but just don't want to admit it to others? Strangely, the Dunning-Kruger Effect still surfaces even when people are offered money to be accurate about their abilities. So it seems that the incompetent are not in fact lying; the more likely possibility is that they are, according to David Dunning, "blessed with inappropriate confidence, buoyed by something that feels . . . like knowledge."

In the very nature of this phenomenon lies a troubling paradox: If you were afflicted with Steve Disease, would you even know? Researchers Oliver Sheldon and David Dunning designed a series of ingenious studies that revealed just how oblivious even the smartest, most successful people are about their delusions. They began by bringing MBA students—intelligent, driven professionals with an average of six years' work experience—into their lab and giving them an assessment of emotional intelligence (EQ). You'd think that if you presented clever people with evidence that they needed to improve their EQ, most would want to take steps to do so. But that's not what Sheldon and Dunning found. When given the opportunity to purchase a discounted book on improving EQ, the students with the *lowest* scores—that is, those who most needed the book—were the *least* likely to buy it.

When giving keynotes to organizations, I'll often present the statistic that 50 percent of managers are ineffective. After dozens and dozens of talks all over the world, the reaction I get is always exactly

the same. At first, people in the audience politely smile. So I ask them, "Do you know what this means?" Then, after an invariably long pause, I instruct them to look to their left, then their right. Nervous laughter breaks out, and they finally get it. The terrible manager is either them or the person next to them! At that point, everyone starts looking around hesitantly at each other, thinking, *Well, since it isn't me, it must be this guy next to me, right?*

The point is that it's uncomfortable to consider the possibility that we're not as smart or skilled or emotionally intelligent as we think we are—after all, to paraphrase Daniel Kahneman, identifying other people's mistakes and shortcomings is much easier and far more enjoyable than facing our own. But **when people are steeped in self-delusion, they are usually the last to find out.** The good news about Steve Disease is that it is curable, and in a moment, we'll explore how we can overcome our blindspots to become braver but wiser. But first, it's worth asking: Why are we this delusional in the first place?

THE ORIGINS OF SELF-AWARENESS

While the capacity for self-awareness exists in nearly all human beings, absolutely no one is born with it. As infants, we think we're the center of the universe. After all, at that age, we're little more than a mewling bag of constant demands that usually get met, as if the world itself was set up for the sole purpose of serving our needs. Our first awareness milestone is therefore to gain an understanding of ourselves as separate from the world around us.

Just when we're strong enough to push ourselves off our knees, and happen to see a reflection of ourselves in a mirror, we coo at the stranger looking back. But around age two, we begin to learn that this person is actually us. We're not the whole world after all—we're just another thing that lives in it. With this knowledge, obviously, comes a potentially disappointing fall in status. And with that comes the disquieting onset of emotions such as embarrassment and envy.

Yet at this point, while we may have realized that we're just another "self" surrounded by other selves, our brains haven't yet developed the ability to objectively evaluate that self. Studies show that when young children rate how they are performing in school, for example, their evaluations have little to no resemblance with their teachers'. In other words, we don't yet know the difference between our wish and our reality. The mere desire to be the best and prettiest ballplayer in the room means that we *are* the best and prettiest ballplayer in the room. Adorable as that may be at this age, these inflated views persist despite repeated revelations of their inaccuracy. (You might even know a few adults who have yet to overcome this affliction, but we'll get to that.)

By our pre-teen years, the fresh, early breezes of awareness begin to blow in. Here, we start to develop the capacity to label our behaviors with descriptive traits (like "popular," "nice," and "helpful") and experiment with a more balanced self-view—that is, the possibility that we might actually possess a few less-than-ideal characteristics. Then comes the tempest. During our stormy teenage years, we discover a new and apparently limitless capacity for introspection. Building a coherent theory of who we are, with all our apparent contradictory moods and urges, can be tortuous. This example, from Susan Harter's book *The Construction of Self*, should really take you back to that fun process:

> What am I like as a person? I'm complicated! . . . At school, I'm serious, even studious . . . [but] I'm a goof-off too, because if you're too studious, you won't be popular. . . . [My parents] expect me to get all A's. . . . So I'm usually pretty stressed-out at home. . . . But I really don't understand how I can switch so fast from being cheerful with my friends, then coming home and . . . getting frustrated and sarcastic with my parents. Which one is the real me?

Most of us spend years wrestling with these contradictions, desperate to pin down the essence of our teenage personalities. For some, this self-seeking manifests in many hours of uninterrupted brooding behind a closed bedroom door, often accompanied by deafeningly

loud music (in my case, it took the form of long-winded journal entries that are simply too embarrassing to talk about). Other times, it can lead to acting out: shoplifting, cutting class, or bullying.

Thankfully, as we approach our second decade on earth, we start to organize these conflicting self-perceptions into more cohesive theories (*Just because I'm shy around people I don't know doesn't mean I'm not mostly outgoing*). We start to understand and embrace our attributes, our values, and our beliefs, and often deepen our sense of what we *can't* do well. We also feel a new level of focus on our future selves, which can provide a welcome sense of direction.

But though most people show a predictable progression toward becoming self-aware, our pace varies wildly. The journey to self-awareness is therefore a bit like the Kentucky Derby: we all begin at the same starting line, but when the gun fires, some of us speed out of the gate, some of us progress slowly but surely, and some of us falter or get stuck along the way.

In the absence of a committed effort to build self-awareness, the average person makes only meager gains as they grow older.* Our self-awareness unicorns, however, are different. Though they enter childhood as equally or only slightly more self-aware, their pace accelerates with each passing year. In the race to insight, these Triple Crown winners break away from the pack early on and continue to widen their lead over each stage of their lives.

Remember, the behaviors needed to create and sustain self-awareness are surprisingly learnable. We just have to know where to start—which, at least foundationally, means understanding the obstacles that prevent us from seeing ourselves clearly. Some exist within us, and others are imposed on us. For the remainder of this chapter, we'll focus on the inner obstacles to self-awareness—that is, how we get in our own way without even knowing it.

* For you statistics geeks, the correlation we've found between age and internal self-awareness is only .16, and for external self-awareness, it's .05.

THE THREE BLINDSPOTS

One of my all-time favorite psychology studies was conducted with prisoners serving time in the south of England. Psychology professor Constantine Sedikides and his colleagues gave the prisoners, most of whom had committed violent crimes, a list of nine positive personality traits and asked them to rate themselves on each in comparison to two groups: average prisoners and average non-incarcerated community members. The traits were: moral, kind to others, trustworthy, honest, dependable, compassionate, generous, self-controlled, law-abiding.

Now imagine you find yourself in jail for, let's just say, armed robbery. It seems hard to believe that you'd use any of the above traits to describe yourself, right? And yet the prisoners did. In fact, not only did they rate themselves as superior to their fellow inmates, on no fewer than eight out of nine traits, they even thought they were superior to average non-incarcerated community members. The one exception? According to Sedikides, inexplicably, "they rated themselves as *equally* law-abiding compared to community members." (Don't think about that for too long or your head will explode—trust me.)

This study is just one example of how blind we can be to the truth about ourselves. When it comes to the inner roadblocks that most limit our success, there are three main areas where we get in our own way. And the more we ignore ***The Three Blindspots***, the more pernicious they become.

Professor David Dunning (who first showed us that the least competent people are the most confident) has spent most of his career trying to understand why we're so terrible at evaluating our own performance. Though there is admittedly no satisfying single explanation, Dunning and his colleague Joyce Ehrlinger uncovered the powerful influence of something they call "top-down thinking" (I call it ***Knowledge Blindness***)—which is our first blindspot. In a series of studies, they discovered that the opinions we have about our abilities in specific situations are based less on how we perform and more on the general beliefs we have about ourselves and our underlying skills. For example,

participants who saw themselves as good at geography thought they'd performed particularly well on a geography test, even though as a group they'd scored no better than anyone else.

Ironically, the more expertise we think we have, the more harmful Knowledge Blindness can be. For an example, let's look back to 2013, when the Boston Red Sox beat the St. Louis Cardinals in a nail-biting World Series. Before the season began, ESPN published the predictions of 43 bona fide baseball experts on the outcome of the season. How many do you think predicted that either Boston or St. Louis would make it to the World Series? The answer is zero. The same was true for the experts polled by *Sports Illustrated*. *Baseball America*'s picks performed only slightly less terribly, with one out of ten predicting that St. Louis would go the distance. So these 60 well-paid, highly respected baseball authorities showed an absolutely abysmal 0.83 percent success rate in predicting the World Series teams. Had each expert chosen two teams at random, they would have been more than seven times more accurate!

At first glance, this seems like a freak occurrence. But as it turns out, experts are wrong more often than we think. In 1959, psychologist Lewis Goldberg conducted a seemingly simple study where he compared the accuracy of expert clinical psychologists' diagnoses with those made by their secretaries (as they were then called) to demonstrate the important role of experience in such judgments. You can imagine his dismay upon discovering that the experts were no better at diagnosing psychological disorders than their inexperienced counterparts (who were actually 2 percent *more* accurate!).

Yet even for non-experts, being overconfident about our skills and talents can get us into trouble. We might choose a field or specialty for which we're poorly suited ("I'd be a great astrophysicist; I'm good at math!"), overlook mistakes in our personal life ("It's okay to let my five-year-old walk to school alone; I'm a great parent!"), or take poorly advised business risks ("We should definitely buy this failing company; I'm great at turnarounds!").

Our inner roadblocks don't just create blindness about what we think we *know*—they distort our perceptions about what we think we *feel*. To understand ***Emotion Blindness***, our second blindspot, imagine the following question:

> On a scale from 1 to 10, how happy are you with life these days?

How would you go about answering this? Would you go with your gut, or would you thoughtfully consider the various factors in your life and made a more measured judgment?* Most people are adamant that they would use the more thoughtful approach—after all, accurately assessing our precise level of happiness is not an easy task. Indeed, studies show that when we're asked how happy we are, we have every belief that we're considering all the available data in a rational way. But unfortunately, our brains prefer to use the least possible effort and therefore don't always cooperate. So even when we think we're carefully deliberating a certain question, we're actually making more of a gut decision. According to Daniel Kahneman and other researchers, our brains secretly and simplistically morph the question from "How happy are you with life these days?" into "What mood am I in *right now*?"

To illustrate Emotion Blindness in action, Kahneman describes a study by German researcher Norbert Schwarz, who set out to investigate life satisfaction. Unbeknownst to his participants, he arranged for half the group to find the German equivalent of a dime on a nearby copy machine outside the lab. Though they had no idea why, those who found the coin—a mere 10 cents!—subsequently reported feeling happier and more satisfied with their lives as a whole.

The main danger of Emotion Blindness is that we often make decisions, even important ones, from a place of emotion *without even realizing it*. In the fall of my senior year of high school, I was deep into my search for the perfect college. My parents and I took two separate trips,

* In his book on the subject, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman calls these processes "thinking fast" and "thinking slow," respectively.

a few weeks apart, to eight schools on the East Coast. The weather during the first visit was sheer perfection. At every school I visited, happy students were frolicking outside, enjoying the cool, crisp temperature and the peak fall foliage. But my second trip coincided with one of those dreadful New England storms that dumped sheets of freezing rain and kept the sky gray for days. Naturally, when I visited *those* schools, the students weren't so much frolicking as they were helplessly running from building to building in a futile attempt to stay dry.

So which colleges do you think ended up on my list of favorites? You guessed it—all four schools from my first visit and zero from my second. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I now know how much of an impact my emotions had on my judgment. It can be disconcerting to realize that we're so ill-equipped to evaluate the thought processes that drive our decisions, but as with all blindspots, the more aware we are of their existence, the better chance we have of overcoming them.

Which brings us to ***Behavior Blindness***, our final blindspot. It's also one that most of us experience far more often than we realize. A few years back, I was invited to deliver the closing keynote at a professional conference for engineers. Because of our shared practical mindset and the three years I spent working at an engineering firm, I've always gotten along famously with engineers, or "my fellow geeks," as I affectionately call them. But from the moment I set foot on stage that day, something felt off. For the life of me, I couldn't make my points cogently; my jokes were bombing; and I just didn't feel like myself.

Over the course of the hour, my inner monologue turned into a blow-by-blow account of my incompetence. *Why didn't that joke get a laugh? How could I have forgotten to mention that point? Why do they seem so bored?* Much to my horror, I remembered mid-talk that the bureau agent who had booked me was in the front row. *Well, that's it,* I concluded, *he'll never recommend me to a client again.*

When my talk was over, I rushed offstage just about as quickly as my legs would carry me and ran smack into the bureau agent who'd come backstage to find me. Ready to face the music, I asked, "What did you think?" Sure that he was going to demand his client's money back, I braced myself for the inevitable torrent of criticism that was sure to follow. But his gleeful response was literally the last thing I ever expected to hear: "Oh, my gosh. They *loved* it!"

Struggling to grasp how this could be possible, I asked, *"REALLY?"* and he nodded earnestly. At the time, I thought he was being unnecessarily polite (i.e., lying). But later that day, when I checked to see how many audience members had opted in to my monthly newsletter,* I was stunned to discover that a higher percentage had signed up than any audience I'd ever spoken to! (And just for the record, I've also had my fair share of the opposite—talks I thought I'd nailed but where the feedback I got didn't match up to my own assessment!)

How could I have been so wrong? Psychologists used to think the inability to see our own behavior clearly or objectively was the result of a perspective problem; that we literally can't see ourselves from the vantage point that others can. By this account, I couldn't have accurately evaluated my speech because I couldn't see myself from the same perspective as the audience did.

But this explanation turns out not to hold water. In one study, participants were given a series of personality tests and videotaped making a brief speech. They were then asked to watch the video and identify their nonverbal behaviors—things like eye contact with the camera, gestures, facial expressions, and voice volume. Because the participants could see themselves from the same angle that others could, the researchers predicted that their ratings would be fairly accurate. But shockingly, their self-assessments failed to match up with those of an objective observer even when they were offered money for correct answers. Though scientists are still working to definitively uncover the real reasons for our Behavior Blindness, there are, as we'll soon see, a few tools you can use to avoid falling victim to it.

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* Which you can do at www.TashaEurich.com.

When it comes to the way we see ourselves, we must be brave enough to spread our wings, but wise enough not to fly too high, lest our blindspots send us soaring straight into the sun. When we learn the truth, it can be surprising, or terrifying, or even gratifying—but no matter what, it gives us the power to improve.

Indeed, the commitment to learn and accept reality is one of the most significant differences between the self-aware and everybody else. The self-aware exert great effort to overcome their blindspots and see themselves as they really are. Through examining our assumptions, constantly learning, and seeking feedback, it's possible to overcome a great many barriers to insight. Although it would be unreasonable to try to eliminate our blindspots altogether, we *can* gather and assemble data that helps us see ourselves and the impact of our behavior more clearly.

The first step is to **identify our assumptions**. This may sound obvious, but unfortunately, it's rare to question our assumptions about ourselves and the world around us, especially for ambitious, successful people. I witnessed a telling example of this when I used to teach a weeklong executive strategy program. On the morning of the second day, participants would enter the training room and find a small, plastic-wrapped puzzle at each table that they'd have five minutes to assemble. They'd open the plastic seal, dump the puzzle on the table, and begin turning the puzzle pieces, which were blue on one side, face-up (or what they assumed was face-up). After a few minutes, having assembled only about 80 percent of the puzzle, they would be scratching their heads in, for lack of a better word, puzzlement. Just as time was about to run out, one person—mind you, almost without exception, it would be just *one* out of about 20 senior executives—would realize that the puzzle could only be solved by turning some of the blue puzzle pieces "upside down."

In our day-to-day lives, we rarely even think to ask ourselves whether we should turn over any proverbial puzzle pieces. As Harvard psychologist Chris Argyris explains in his must-read book *Increasing Leadership Effectiveness*, when something doesn't go the way we want or expect, we typically assume that the cause exists in our environment. Surely

there was a screw-up in the puzzle factory, or the missing pieces somehow got lost on their way out of the box. The last place we look is at our own beliefs and actions.

One way we can question our assumptions is to **get into the habit of comparing our past predictions with actual outcomes.** Celebrated management professor Peter Drucker suggested a simple, practical process that he himself used for more than 20 years. Every time he would make an important decision, he would write down what he expected to happen. Then, he would compare what actually happened with what he had predicted.

But what if you want to identify your assumptions in real time rather than in hindsight? Decision psychologist Gary Klein suggests doing what he calls a ***pre-mortem*** by asking the following question: "Imagine that we are a year into the future—we have implemented the plan as it now exists. The outcome was a disaster. Write a brief history of that disaster." This process tends to reveal potential pitfalls in a way we'd rarely consider otherwise. The same approach can be used for most big decisions, such as moving to a new city, accepting a new job, or deciding to settle down with a romantic partner. (And by the way, in appendix H, you can find a few questions to help you unearth your assumptions and discover whether you might have some, as Donald Rumsfeld might call them, "unknown unknowns").

A second technique to minimize our blindspots is simply to **keep learning,** especially in the areas where we think we already know a lot. In their landmark 1999 study, David Dunning and Justin Kruger found that when overconfident poor performers were trained to improve their performance on a task, not only did they improve, so did their awareness of their prior ineffectiveness. A true commitment to ongoing learning—saying to ourselves, *the more I think I know, the more I need to learn*—is a powerful way to combat Knowledge Blindness and improve our effectiveness in the process.

Finally, we should **seek feedback on our abilities and behaviors.** Out of all the tools we've reviewed so far, objective feedback has the best odds of helping us see and overcome all three blindspots. Why?

As we'll discuss later, the people around us can almost always see what we can't. And as such, we need to surround ourselves with those who will tell us the truth. We need colleagues, family members, and friends who will (lovingly) knock us down a peg when we're getting too big for our britches. In the category of "amusing yet accurate observations," Stanford researcher Hayagreeva Rao believes that leaders who have teenage children are less prone to overconfidence for this very reason. As anyone with a teenager knows, they are perpetually unimpressed and will never hesitate to tell you how great you *aren't*. (And it's true that surrounding yourself with people who disagree with you is one of the most fundamental building blocks of leadership success.)

The bottom line is that when it comes to making the choices that guide our lives, overcoming our blindspots gives us power. As Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön points out, "The most fundamental . . . harm we can do to ourselves is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently." And luckily, the difference between unicorns and everyone else has less to do with innate ability and more to do with intention and commitment. Throughout the rest of this book, we'll discuss more strategies to help us look at ourselves honestly and gently—and in so doing, become more successful in our careers, more satisfied in our relationships, and more content with our lives. But before we do that, it's critical to understand—and fight—the second big roadblock to self-awareness: something called the Cult of Self.

KEY CONCEPTS AND TAKEAWAYS: CHAPTER 3

- **Steve disease:** A condition where we believe ourselves to be smarter, funnier, thinner, better-looking, more socially skilled, athletic, and better drivers than we actually are.
- **Dunning-Kruger Effect:** The least competent people tend to be the most confident about their abilities and performance.

- **Braver but wiser:** The decision to discover the truth about ourselves on our own terms, along with a positive mindset and a sense of self-acceptance.
- **The Three blind spots:** We can't always assess what we know **(Knowledge Blindness)**, how we feel **(Emotion Blindness)**, or how we're behaving **(Behavior Blindness)**.
- **Overcoming blind spots**
    1. Identify our assumptions.
    2. Confront our assumptions.
    3. Keep learning–*especially* in areas where we think we know a lot.
    4. Seek feedback from others.