



Turning Who You Are into What You Do

How others perceive our identity and actions may be very different to who we think we are and what we think we're doing.

Around 600 B.C., the first of the Greek sages, Thales of Miletus, made the observation that the most difficult thing in the world was “To Know Thyself.” This astute comment still rings true today and is even timelier given the rediscovery of Sigmund Freud’s notion of unconscious processes.

Using the metaphor of the iceberg, Freud accorded the minute part seen above the water as the conscious mind, and the bulk of the iceberg beneath as the unconscious. Begging the question, is it possible to know oneself when so much of that knowledge is beyond conscious awareness?

Contemporary neuroscience has now affirmed Freud’s inferential assumptions - that we are all quite ignorant of ourselves and of the mechanisms that determine a large part of how we feel and act.

In the corporate world, the fact that much of our mental activity is done on an automated mode explains the dichotomy between what executives say they do, and what they actually do. Why the significant gap between good intentions and actual behaviour exists, and why so many executives are completely unaware, of it is troublesome.

Do we see ourselves as other do?

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One obvious explanation is that a great deal of our perceptual abilities: judgment, decision-making, reasoning, and memory, take place outside our conscious awareness. Often our actions are based on what we, in that instant, *feel* like doing, not what we *think* we should be doing. It’s our immediate feelings (if we believe what contemporary neuroscience tells us) driving much of our behaviour.

Another major contributing factor to this “gap” is that all of us (and senior executives are certainly no exception) have a tendency to see ourselves in a positive “narcissistic” light. Most of what we do, we see subjectively through filtered glasses. However, the reality of who we think we are and what we do may be quite different.

Leaders, in particular, are often preoccupied with preserving their self-worth. More than others, they interpret much of what happens to them in a highly egocentric manner. But in spite of a glorious facade, executives are also a quite anxious lot with a deep sense of *vulnerability* hidden in the unconscious. This basic insecurity explains our elaborate defense system to ward off any signs of weakness.

We are all programmed with a self-serving, self-preserving bias, through which we over-estimate

our own contributions towards our successes and, in case of failure, attribute blame to others or to forces not under our control. The ability to positively reframe things keeps feelings of inadequacy at bay and maintains the self-esteem, confidence, and optimism needed to keep us motivated.

These dual concerns (*vulnerability avoidance* and *search for approval*) account for the contradiction between what we say we do and what we really do. The push and pull of these vectors explains the gap between our good intentions and how we really behave.

Are you a habitual micro-manager?

One common example of executives not seeing the true picture is that of the micro-manager. Year in and year out these executives receive feedback that their micromanaging style is ineffective; that they create high levels of stress for people who work for them, and that they should find better ways of dealing with their people. These people promise to change, but nothing happens. They may tell a good story about what they are doing, they say they delegate, they say that they allow for small failures and let their people get on with it. But in reality, none of these good intentions comes to fruition. What is really going on?

What these executives don't realise is that their narcissistic, unconscious strivings override their conscious good intentions. Despite knowing the benefits of change, they are unable to control their actual behaviour, unconsciously driven by the fear of appearing vulnerable, and not receiving the kudos they need to preserve their self-worth.

What this example illustrates is that most models of human behaviour are built on the erroneous assumption that we make decisions consciously and logically. But nothing is further from the truth. Contemporary brain research suggests our actions are in response to a number of basic, unconscious rules that, at times, produce completely baffling results.

Addressing the gap

Executives looking to narrow the gap between good intentions and reality, may find a 360-degree or multi-party feedback exercise is a good beginning. Such feedback will reveal how their actions are seen by others, and highlight the inconsistencies with how they perceive themselves.

As the writer Sholem Aleichem once wrote: "If somebody tells you that you have ears like a donkey, pay no attention. But if two people tell you so, buy yourself a saddle."

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Once the discrepancies are revealed, executives can begin to work on narrowing the gap.

However, any effort taken to change will require a lot of practice, and perhaps some professional help. In general, discoveries about one's behaviours are difficult to process alone. The observations of an executive coach or therapist can help clarify personal reflections and encourage new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. They may also help leaders stay on track by holding them accountable to their change.

Self-awareness or knowing oneself is not an illusion. But the journey of change towards greater self-actualisation requires hard work and an honest look at one's vulnerabilities and weaknesses.

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