

The Power of Coaching: An essay in self-reflection

By Elizabeth Skronski, business and executive coach

Walk through a major bookstore and you will find a myriad of self-help and self-improvement books. Turn on the TV and watch how openly people talk about their life and about their issues. Oprah Winfrey, along with “Dr. Phil”, has made a fortune helping people “discover their spirit” and dealing with everyday challenges. Now, going on TV to get advice is not my style, however, I can say I have read my quota of self-help books. Have they all helped... some yes; others were just too far out for me! One thing is certain: people are waking up to a need to know and understand themselves more. The need for a greater self-awareness and development in dealing with these challenges is growing.

Like many other people, I did embark on this journey of self-awareness. Now, what does self-awareness mean? Lots of research has been done on the topic, which is not the subject of this article. What I can tell you is what it means for me. Being self-aware for me means knowing who I am, why I am doing what I ‘m doing and knowing what I am meant to do.

I’ve always thought I was pretty much self-aware until the day I reached a point in my life where I questioned my success. Suddenly, my professional life no longer made any sense. Why was I getting up every morning, fighting never-ending battles? I decided to take drastic action and leave my position in the quest of more self-awareness.

Looking back, this decision felt empowering. I was in control again (something I have come to learn I held very dearly). The only problem I found is that self-awareness does not come at the snap of your fingers, just because you want to be more self-aware, no matter how much reading you do or how often you meditate. Reading, meditating, writing did help to a certain extent. Through these techniques, I did find what I really wanted to do with the rest of my life... But was that enough to claim self-awareness? In my case, certainly not! Once the original euphoria of finally knowing what I was supposed to do passed, I still had fears of failure, fears of success, needing to be perfect, defining what success meant to me compared to society’s definition of success and the list goes on.

When the student is ready, the teacher comes, as the saying goes. In my case, this could not be closer to the truth. I was ready for more self-awareness that would help me understand myself even more than I thought. The teacher came in the form of a business and executive coach.

Going through the process of being coached by a professional developmental coach is an incredible journey into self-awareness. Powerful questions asked just at the right moment can put someone into a spiral of internal inquiries, opening the door to a greater awareness and leading to a higher level of development.

French writer Marcel Proust said: ***"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."***

In my view, the point is not so much in having a new set of eyes, but rather in being ready, willing, and able to view my own assumptions and beliefs, my own behavior and attitudes in a new way by challenging them, by acting as an objective observer of my actions and discerning what is serving me well and what is not.

This is what coaching can do for someone who is ready, willing, and able to go down the path of development. To say that the journey I experienced was like a roller coaster is an understatement. Moments of clarity, moments of doubts, experimenting with my newly found awareness: these are stages of the coaching process, *my coaching experience*.

At the end, the connection to what the issues were, the clarity I gained on my values and how I operate, and of what was in my way have propelled me into a commitment to action. I have come to realize and embrace my values. I have come to realize that perfection needed to be erased from my vocabulary and that the need for control was much stronger than I had thought. These insights have not been beneficial only from a career standpoint but have rolled over to my personal life as well. This need for control and perfection I so often refer to was in my way to having a more relaxed and enjoyable relationship with people around me. Knowing what I did not know before, I am now able to observe the assumptions I hold, deciding on my response and observing not only my behavior but also the reaction I get from it.

I've also come to understand that my success is my success. Success is so easily defined by standard societal norms and we can just as easily create tremendous internal pressure to meet what we believe is expected of us. Note that the operative word is "believe"! And once I fully embraced my core values and aligned my vision with them, it then became so much easier to stay focused on my purpose, whether it is my personal or business one.

My business coach knew what she was doing. Through intense listening to what I was saying, she was able to discern openings and opportunities for me to dig deeper. That's how I realized how much I valued contributing to society, communities and people. I was also able to discover that my need for affiliation is strong and as such, acceptance is important to me. So, with the help of my coach, when faced with a difficult issue, I was able to see that of all the possibilities, doing this one right thing (for me) would get me what I wanted.

I just completed reading the book "*Primal Leadership*" by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee. This book is an incredible description on Emotional Intelligence and Leadership. As I went on reading it, I had moments when I remembered my own time as an executive and how I could have used this book. Then, I re-read again the back of the book and something struck me:

"If I had read Primal Leadership 10 years ago, I still might be President of Columbia Pictures today!" – Lisa Henson, President, Jim Henson Productions

Looking at what I call my previous life and as I pondered her words, I suddenly realized that not only would I have benefited from this book before, but also how much I would have benefited from executive coaching. And then I almost wished that ALL executives could benefit from this process.

As I reminisced on my times as an executive, questions came to me. Did I realize at that time that what I thought was “doing the right thing” by focusing on the customers’ requirements was actually a sign of need for control by not delegating these tactical tasks to my staff; that, in effect, not only was I sub-optimizing my potential but that of my staff as well. Back in those days, I saw this as a sign of dedication to the organization, to the clients and to helping my employees when in fact I was micro-managing instead of setting strategies and sharing them with my staff.

The self-imposed stress due to a need for perfection (here we go again) eventually led me to my decision to leave because it was easier to do than to face what I believed might happen. And now that I know what I know, I have come to the realization that I was letting all my old assumptions and beliefs about how the world works and what the “world” would think rule my life.

I was and still consider myself a fine executive. I was able to rally the troops when there was a problem. I was able to get them to go beyond. I was able to motivate them and because (or thanks to) my empathy, I was able to enlist various levels of the company in meeting our goals. The question is, how much more efficient would my leadership have been if I had had the chance to have an executive coach? I’ll never know the answer to that question as it relates to my past. What I do know is that the skills and knowledge I have gained about myself through the coaching process have equipped me to be aware of myself and the world around me, to be able to take other perspectives and continue to grow.

Albert Einstein said: *"Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them."*

And it is this new level of awareness that now enables me to solve the problems of the past and move forward! As I ponder this current state of awareness, I find myself wondering what will I know in ten years and how I could implement that knowledge now, and which coach is out there who could take me to that level.

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