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Know Thyself

Intense, to say the least...

I once convened our senior leadership team from all over the world for a series of meetings. Then came the session they weren't expecting. As they entered a conference room, a remote control "clicker" was on the table where each leader was to be seated. Those clickers were to ensure anonymity as they rated my leadership—in real time. Joining us for the session: a moderator/coach (who, by the way, used to be a high-stakes mediator).

Question after question, the results were immediately displayed on a huge screen at the front of the room. Some of the responses were as expected, some surprising—and all of it up close and personal. As insightful and appreciated as the feedback was, that wasn't the only purpose of this exercise. It was to know myself better—vulnerabilities and all—through the eyes of those I work closest with.

That's why, at the end of the three-hour session, I gave a small mirror to each person. As I watched the team examine their own reflections, I knew the message had hit home: Leadership begins with self-awareness.

No wonder Socrates called self-knowledge "the beginning of wisdom."

All of us have seeds of change to sow—whether opportunities and advancement, or development and learning. But what about learning... about ourselves? Before we focus outward, it's important to first look inward. That's how we move onward.

But as our firm's research shows, when

it comes to looking at ourselves—and being accountable for how we are perceived—many of us struggle.

Based on the 110 million assessments our firm has conducted, it's interesting to note that 80 percent of leaders fail to see their own skills and deficiencies clearly. Not only that, but our research also shows that people who greatly overstate their abilities are about six times more likely to derail than those who are self-aware.

It's "mirror, mirror on the wall" time. Just like in that fairy tale we probably know from childhood, asking "who's the fairest of them all?" may not always give us the answer we want. That's why taking a good look in the mirror is one of the most practical and insightful things anyone can do. The reason? A mirror cannot lie. It only reflects back exactly what we perceive—and what others see.

Andriy Onufriyenko, Faraz Hyder/Getty Images



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This brings to mind one of the first experiences I ever had with a camera as a kid. It was a Polaroid Land Camera—big as a brick with a viewfinder at the top. You focused outwards—on others—and pressed the button. First came a bright flash, then a square of photographic paper popped out. Slowly, the image emerged.

Back then, we never would have turned that great big camera around to take a picture of ourselves. Instead, we wanted to capture the moment—the people and places around us—creating a shared experience.

Now compare that to the selfies we snap today. Too often, our focus is on how we want others to see us—which, if we're being honest, may not exactly match reality. It's all about the right setting, the best lighting—not to mention editing the background and enhancing the image.

The real insight, though, lies in what others

see—whether captured by that old Polaroid or in the mirror.

At some point, we need to look up from our mobile phones and away from the myriad, myopic distractions—to see ourselves. And to see ourselves is to know ourselves. Only with a clear view of who we are can we offer our unique gifts to connect with and lead others.

Because here's the thing: The world is changing, but are we? Self-awareness precedes every step we take toward personal and professional growth.

We cannot improve an organization or inspire others—unless we first know thyself... through the lens of others. ■

Read the new book from Gary Burnison: *Love, Hope & Leadership: A Special Edition*. Available where books are sold.