

Chapter 1: Self-Awareness – The Foundation of Transformational Leadership Coaching

ICF Core Competencies in this Chapter:

- **Embodies a Coaching Mindset**
- **Evokes Awareness**

Self-awareness isn't just a leadership skill; it's a powerful act of self-discovery and empowerment. As women leaders, we often navigate spaces where we feel the pressure to prove ourselves, balance expectations, and lead with strength, even when we're silently questioning if we're enough. In fact, we are enough! True leadership doesn't come from striving for perfection, it comes from deeply understanding who we are at our core.

When we take the time to explore our values, emotions, and behaviors, we gain the clarity and confidence to lead with authenticity. Self-awareness helps us recognize the patterns that drive our decisions, the fears that may hold us back, and the strengths that set us apart. In coaching, this journey isn't just about uncovering blind spots, it's about embracing the full picture of ourselves, with courage and self-compassion.

This chapter invites you to reflect deeply on your leadership style, the impact you have on those around you, and the ways in which your personal growth can inspire and empower others. Because when women lead with self-awareness, we don't just transform our own lives, we create a ripple effect that uplifts everyone around us.

Personal Stories of Self-Awareness

Early in my leadership consulting and executive coaching career, I had a moment of deep self-reflection, one that changed the way I lead and coach. I realized that my tendency to judge was holding me back, closing me off to deeper curiosity and limiting my ability to truly connect with others.

The first time I auditioned for an internal executive coaching position, I was recorded on video and received direct feedback on my coaching skills. It was uncomfortable, even humbling, but it was also eye opening. I was paired with a strong results-driven leader who thrived on action, execution, and getting things done. She was brilliant at leading with decisiveness, but she rarely expressed her emotions or thought processes behind her decisions. Her approach was all about doing, while I was beginning to understand the power of being, of presence, reflection, and deeper self-awareness. I really wanted to be present, reflective and self-aware with this client, however, my judgmental nature kicked in.

I couldn't help but wonder; did they pair an introvert (me) with another introvert (my client) on purpose? Was this some kind of test? Turns out, it was.

We were both skilled at solving problems and getting things done, but when it came to sharing our emotions and motivations behind our actions, we fell into silence. The session felt like two people standing at a crossroads both waiting for the other to take the first step.

At first, after our session, I felt frustrated. Was it my client's reluctance to share or was it me? But instead of staying in judgment, I shifted into curiosity. I asked myself what could have I done differently? I knew not every client I coached would be naturally expressive, so I had to find a way to create trust and connection even with those who prefer to keep their thoughts private.

That moment changed me. It taught me that coaching isn't about waiting for someone to share, it's about creating the right space for them to feel safe enough to do so.

Coaching is built on dialogue, but what happens when the conversation barely gets off the ground? As I explained, this client was brief, direct, and all business; the kind of leader who got straight to the point and didn't offer much beyond the surface. At the time, I wasn't leaning into curiosity the way I should have, and she wasn't naturally inclined to share. The result? A coaching session that felt more like a transaction than a transformation.

The feedback I received from that experience, was a great learning opportunity. I realized that curiosity isn't just a skill, it's the bridge that builds trust. I learned the power of asking open-ended questions, of listening beyond the words spoken, and of creating a space where even the most results-driven leaders feel safe to reflect and explore. That session taught me an invaluable lesson. When we approach leadership and coaching with genuine curiosity, we open the door to deeper understanding, stronger relationships, and true growth.

This led me to a life-long exploration of my own self-awareness. How am I perceived by others? How curious am I about others? What do I need to do to improve my presence as a coach and leader? How can I listen not only to the words in a client's story, but the meaning behind the words?

That experience stayed with me. It made me realize how often women leaders, me included, are conditioned to prioritize action over introspection, results over resilience. But true leadership isn't about what we do; it's about who we are.

“The difference between doing coaching and being a coach begins with me.” Dr. Carol Turner

Coaching isn't just something I do, it's a part of who I am. Over the years, I've learned that true coaching isn't about having all the answers; it's about creating a space where others feel seen, heard, and understood. I've discovered the power of deep listening; not just hearing the words, but truly understanding the fears, doubts, and aspirations beneath them. I've learned to ask the kind of questions that make people pause, reflect, and uncover insights they didn't even realize were there.

But coaching is more than guiding our clients through curious questions, it's a partnership. Every conversation is a chance to walk alongside my clients, challenging them with

honesty, supporting them with compassion, and celebrating their breakthroughs as if they were my own. Watching them step into their confidence and lead with purpose is what fuels me every day.

When my coaching clients asked me to share my most effective tools, I realized that no technique or framework could compare to the power of being present. My greatest coaching tool wasn't something I could hand them; it was the way I showed up with them. True coaching begins not with what we do, but with who we are.

That journey started with deep self-awareness. Coaching is not just about guiding others, it's about continuous learning, growth, and transformation.

The best way I know how to evolve as a coach is to partner with my own coach, to challenge new perspectives, and to embrace new ways of thinking and being. I had to confront a hard truth; my judgment was standing in the way of my curiosity. If I wanted to create meaningful change for my clients, I had to first create it within myself.

Many years of consulting, giving advice and leading teams were my skillset. Leadership coaching was a new skill that I had to develop. How could I possibly coach and develop our company's executives, if I didn't take on the challenge of learning and growth myself?

Our coaching program was started by the director of the Leadership Center, who believed executive coaching was key to learning and development of the top 2,000 executives in our company.

As it turned out, I was invited to join the executive coaching organization. I was deeply honored and jumped in with both feet. I hopped on a plane and arrived at the most beautiful, lush green fields with a Chateau and Residential Leadership Center overlooking the river. This was the beginning of my leadership coaching career.

Our manager was wonderful and encouraged us to enroll in the International Coaching Federation (ICF) accredited coaching school as soon as possible. Three of us applied to the coaching school in California where we practiced our coaching skills. My goal was to graduate from the coaching program while gaining practical experience working at my company's Residential Leadership Center.

Coaching at the Leadership Center over the next four years gave me the opportunity to coach hundreds of executives both one-on-one and in group coaching sessions. The constructive feedback I received in coaching school gave me the confidence to help leaders uncover their potential and grow their leadership and coaching skills.

I saw the importance of self-awareness in my life and encouraged my clients to begin their own journey of self-awareness.

For example, I shifted from finishing other's sentences to truly listening, not just hearing their words but holding space for their thoughts, emotions and discoveries. Instead of thinking about ways to respond to their stories, I became genuinely curious about what they were telling me. This shift changed not only my coaching conversations, but also my relationships, as I

realized how my words, actions, and presence influenced the trust and connection I built with others.

Beginning the Self-Awareness Dialogue

How can you apply the practice of self-awareness with your clients? You can begin by saying, “Let’s talk about self-awareness, it’s foundational for great leadership.

You know, a lot of leaders focus on what they’re doing, but real impact comes from understanding how they’re being. When you walk into a room or start a conversation, how are you showing up? Your patterns, your assumptions, even the way you react under pressure, all shape how others experience you. One of the simplest tools you can use is asking yourself: What’s really going on here? That question alone can cut through your learned behaviors and get you to a place of clarity instead of reactions.

To further understand the foundation of self-awareness, I turned to the recent thought leaders on self-awareness.

Self-Awareness Research:

Reflection – Connection – Influence

To find out more about leadership coaching, our manager invited Marshall Goldsmith to visit our executive coaching organization and introduced us to his book, *Coaching for Leadership, a collection of writings by the world’s greatest coaches* (2012).¹

In one of Goldsmith’s more recent books, *Triggers* (2015) he shared the following:

Leaders who understand their own biases and motivations are better equipped to create inclusive environments where others feel safe and valued.

Self-awareness also involves identifying triggers and understanding how they influence responses to stress or conflict. When leaders recognize these triggers, they can manage them more effectively, responding with composure rather than reactivity. This emotional regulation not only improves personal resilience but also sets a positive example for the team, developing a culture of thoughtful, mindful leadership.

Through consistent coaching, leaders learn to maintain a strong sense of self even amid challenging situations, which is critical for transformational impact.²

Furthering my research on self-awareness, I found some excellent key points in Michael’s Stanier’s book, *The Coaching Habit* (2016), from a coaching perspective as well as a leader’s perspective. One of the core ideas in *The Coaching Habit* is to ask yourself better questions. Start small with simply stated questions. A simple question is: What just happened? That moment of curiosity can uncover motivations and the triggers behind your actions. Michael shared the following:

Self-awareness is foundational to transformational leadership coaching, enabling leaders to understand their values, strengths, and limitations while encouraging

authenticity and intentionality through self-reflection tools like 360-degree feedback, personality assessments, and journaling exercises.

Most importantly, self-awareness isn't about beating yourself up. Stanier emphasizes staying curious instead of being judgmental. When you catch yourself slipping into old habits or reacting poorly, ask: What's the learning here? This reframing turns missteps into opportunities for growth. The more you practice, the easier it becomes to notice patterns and choose how to respond instead of just reacting.³

Self-awareness isn't just about knowing your strengths and weaknesses, it's about understanding how you show up in the world. Do you ever find yourself reacting in a way that surprises even you? Often, that's because we're running on assumptions, following patterns we haven't stopped to question.

When you begin to question your assumptions, you demonstrate to your team how to approach challenges with intention and insight rather than impulsive reactions.

Recognizing how quickly our assumptions influence our reactions, organizational psychologist, Chris Argyris developed the Ladder of Inference.

The Ladder of Inference model describes how individuals move from observing data to drawing conclusions and acting, often based on subconscious beliefs and assumptions. It's widely used in business settings to improve decision-making and communication by encouraging individuals to reflect on their thought processes and challenge assumptions.⁴

The Ladder of Inference was later popularized by Peter Senge in his book, *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* (1990).

Senge refers to the Ladder of Inference as a "mental model." The steps on the ladder include:

1. Observing reality and facts.
2. Selecting specific data from observations.
3. Adding meaning to the data.
4. Making assumptions based on the interpreted data.
5. Forming beliefs based on those assumptions.
6. Taking actions based on those beliefs.⁵

Senge encourages leaders to introduce the concept of a "Learning Organization" to their employees. Once they learn the concept, they can remind themselves and each other to slow down and admit they "jumped up the ladder" before stopping to reflect and test their assumptions before sharing their opinions on the topic.

This journey toward self-awareness is a continuous practice, that takes time to develop. It's like peeling back layers of an onion, each question leads you deeper. When you're in a tough situation, try asking: What do I want from this? Or, What's the story I'm telling myself about

this? These questions can stop you from spiraling into unhelpful stories. Instead of being a victim, you start seeing the role you are playing in your story.

When leaders gain a realistic understanding of themselves, they're better positioned to align their actions with their values and genuinely inspire others.

As a leader, your self-awareness isn't just about you – it sets the tone for everyone around you. – Peter Senge

Self-awareness doesn't mean getting stuck in self-criticism. It's about being curious. When you notice something about how you've handled a situation ask: What can I learn from this? Every mistake, every tough moment is an opportunity to grow. As a leader, when you commit to that kind of reflection, you not only improve yourself but also inspire your team to do the same. That's the kind of leadership people want to follow.

Here are some key points on self-awareness from the book by Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves. *Emotional intelligence 2.0* (2009).

Self-awareness extends to recognizing the impact of one's behavior on others. A leader understands how their words, actions, and decisions resonate with team members.

By promoting empathy and emotional intelligence, coaches encourage leaders to consider the perspectives and feelings of others, which enhances communication and strengthens relationships.⁶

Self-Awareness Coaching Skills

Encourage leaders to engage in self-reflection and seek feedback from peers and team members from a 360-degree feedback exercise. Suggest daily journaling or personality tests (e.g., Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or DISC) to gain insights into personal strengths and blind spots. Regularly scheduling time for introspection can also help leaders better understand their motivations and behaviors.

Coaching a Leader's Self-Awareness Scenario

Marcus, a coach, worked with Carla, a senior manager struggling with team morale issues. Through coaching, Marcus helped Carla uncover that her high standards and direct communication style, while well-intentioned, were perceived as critical by her team.

Carla initially resisted this insight but, with Marcus's guidance, explored her triggers and underlying beliefs about leadership. As she became more self-aware, Carla adjusted her approach, incorporating empathy and active listening into her leadership style.

Over time, her team responded with increased engagement and trust and Carla felt more confident in her ability to lead authentically.

Questions to ask this client regarding her self-awareness:

1. How do you think your team perceives your communication style, and what feedback have you received about it?
2. What patterns have you noticed when your direct approach is well-received versus when it causes tension?
3. How can you balance being clear and direct while also encouraging trust and morale within your team?

ICF Core Competencies in Scenario

Embodies a Coaching Mindset: Marcus modeled curiosity and openness, encouraging Carla to embrace self-awareness as a continuous journey. His mindset helped Carla feel supported as she navigated discomfort and growth.

Evokes Awareness: Marcus used powerful questions and reflective exercises to help Carla identify patterns in her behavior and explore their impact. This facilitated Carla's shift in perspective and supported her behavioral transformation.

Coaches Reflection and Application on Self-Awareness

Coaches Reflective Exercise:

Reflect on a time when you gained a new insight about yourself. How did this awareness influence your decisions or actions?

Consider a client who may struggle with self-awareness. How can you help them identify their strengths, challenges, and blind spots?

Coaches Application

During your next coaching session, invite your client to reflect on their values, leadership style, and the feedback they've received from others. Use tools like 360-degree feedback or journaling exercises to deepen their self-awareness. Help them identify actionable steps to align their behaviors with their leadership goals to build growth in themselves and their team.

A Real-Life Example of a Woman Leader who Embodies Self-Awareness

Indra Nooyi, Former CEO of PepsiCo

Indra Nooyi's leadership journey reflects exceptional self-awareness, enabling her to navigate the challenges of being a woman leader in a male-dominated industry. She recognized the unique challenges she faced, including cultural expectations as an Indian immigrant and societal pressures as a working mother, using these experiences to shape her leadership style.

Nooyi often reflected on her dual role as a corporate leader and family caregiver, openly acknowledging the sacrifices and trade-offs required to balance both. This self-awareness informed her decisions at PepsiCo, where she prioritized a people-first approach, ensuring employees felt valued while driving innovation and long-term sustainability.

Her ability to align her personal values with her professional goals inspired others to lead authentically proving that understanding oneself is critical to transformative leadership.⁷

Leaders Mindset, Key Learnings, and Questionnaire on Self-Awareness

Mindset:

How do your personal values and triggers influence your leadership style and decision-making in a high- stress environment?

In what ways does your behavior impact your team's morale and productivity?

What specific practices can you adopt to increase your self-awareness and emotional insight?

Leaders Key Learnings

Self-awareness is the cornerstone of effective leadership. Leaders who understand their own strengths, values and triggers can better manage their reactions and decisions. This awareness encourages authenticity and aligns a leader's behavior with their values, building trust within their team.

Leadership Questionnaire

How self-aware are you?

This questionnaire helps assess your level of self-awareness, highlighting areas for improvement and identifying where your strengths can be optimized to enhance your personal and professional growth.

Rate each item using the following scale:

1 = Not true of me

2 = Rarely true of me

3 = Sometimes true of me

4 = Often true of me

5 = Completely true of me

1. _____ I can identify my emotions as they arise and understand how they influence my behavior.
2. _____ I am aware of my personal strengths and how I can use them to achieve my goals.
3. _____ I recognize my weaknesses and take steps to manage or improve them.
4. _____ I reflect on my thoughts and actions regularly to understand how they align with my values.
5. _____ I can identify the impact of my behavior on others, both positive and negative.
6. _____ I seek feedback from others and use it constructively to improve myself.
7. _____ I understand the triggers that cause me stress or frustration and manage them effectively.
8. _____ I am aware of the biases and assumptions I bring into situations.
9. _____ I invite collaboration and trust by promoting open communication and mutual respect.
10. _____ I take responsibility for my actions and decisions, even when they lead to mistakes.

Scoring Yourself:

For each question: Write down your score (1 - 5) for each question (1 is not true and 5 is completely true).

Results interpretation:

2 or below on a specific question: This area represents an opportunity to improve your self-awareness by developing new habits or seeking additional insight.

3 on a specific question: This reflects moderate self-awareness, with potential for further reflection and growth.

4 and above on a specific question: This is an area of significant self-awareness, which you can leverage to strengthen your overall personal and professional effectiveness.

Total Score: Add up your scores for all 10 questions

Results: _____

Overall Score Ranges:

10 – 20: You may need to focus on building practices like reflection, feedback, or mindfulness to improve self-awareness.

21 – 30: You demonstrate good self-awareness, with room to deepen your understanding and optimize your strengths.

31 – 50: You exhibit strong self-awareness, positioning you to use this strength effectively in various aspects of your life and work.

Thank you for downloading the first Chapter. The rest of the story can be found in the Book on Amazon Kindle or Audible. Here are the Chapters in *Empowering Women Leaders*:

Chapter 1: Self-Awareness – The Foundation of Transformational Leadership Coaching

Chapter 2: Leading with Purpose – Connecting Vision and Action

Chapter 3: Adopting a Learning and Growth Mindset – Embracing Challenges as Opportunities

Chapter 4: From Insight to Action – Focusing on Behavioral Change

Chapter 5: Building Emotional Intelligence – Cultivating Empathy and Self-Regulation

Chapter 6: Moving Forward with Feedforward – A Positive Approach

Chapter 7: Communicating Authentically – Building Trust through Transparency

Chapter 8: Building Resilience and Agility – Thriving in Change and Uncertainty

Chapter 9: Championing Diversity and Inclusion – Building a Collaborative and Innovative Culture

Chapter 10: Managing Conflict

Chapter 11: Empowering Others – Developing a Coaching Culture

Chapter 12: Integration Reflection: Coaching with the ICF Core Competencies

Notes

References

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Appendix A: ICF Core Competencies

Appendix B: Sample ICF Credentialing Exam Questions

Thank You

Thank you so much for grabbing a copy of *Empowering Women Leaders* during the free Kindle promotion. I hope you found something that spoke to your heart and your leadership journey.

If you found the book valuable, would you mind taking just a minute or two to leave a quick review on Amazon? Even one or two sentences make a huge difference in helping other readers discover it. You can share what you like, what stood out, or how it helped you. That feedback means the world to me and helps amplify women's voice in leadership.

