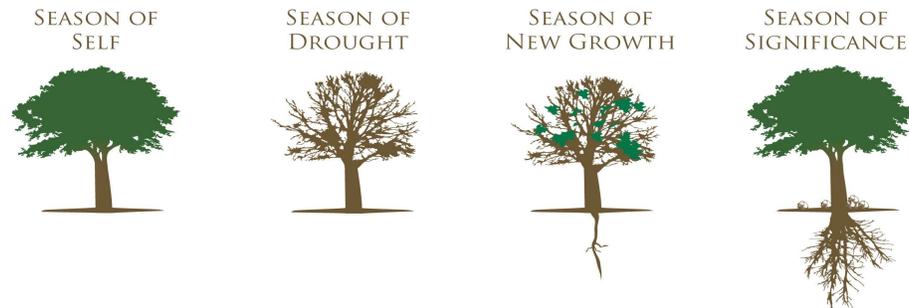


# Number One Challenge: Self-Awareness

## SEASONS OF GROWTH™



*Why settle for success when you can grow to significance?*

Larry Cole, Ph.D.  
Byrd Baggett, CSP  
Lawson Magruder, LTG, US Army Retired

## Number One Challenge: Self Awareness

The Stanford Business Council’s Advisory Group, consisting of seventy-five leaders, recently concluded that the Number One challenge for leaders is to develop self-awareness. Self-awareness is a requirement for authentic leaders to *know who they are*. Knowing who you are is important for two reasons: (1) maximize strengths and minimize the impact of weaknesses, and (2) control the ego. Advocates of the *Authentic Leadership* movement, James Collin’s *Level 5 Leader*, and *Transformational Leadership* describe world-class leaders in terms of avoiding the limelight while attributing their success to the privilege of working with a highly talented team and to a degree, luck. Such leaders have successfully put their egos where it belongs — in the background.

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Self-Awareness → Know Self → Authentic

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A prevailing notion is a crucible – a severe test or challenge - must be experienced to help put egos into perspective. This notion is founded on the premise that authentic leaders, those who humbly lead their organizations to greatness, attribute personal tragedies as turning points in their lives, i.e., helped them realize which values are really important. This intriguing trend leads to two similarly intriguing questions:

1. Can someone become an authentic leader before or without experiencing a crucible?
2. Why does one individual become a victim of the events in their lives while another uses the experiences to become a “better” person?

**First Question:** Can someone become an authentic leader before or without suffering a life-changing crucible?

One school of thought is that suffering must occur to intensify the level of “awareness” because we’re so entrenched in our comfort zones. The suffering serves as the strong push that gets us out of our ruts. Whenever these writers address such crucibles, it’s usually in the context of some life changing event, e.g. illness, a divorce, or career derailment. We agree with this notion to the extent that discomfort with the comfort zone must occur to reach the conclusion to increase self-awareness. In all likelihood, each of us has a different “self awareness” threshold. Some people will have to be hit with a baseball bat before getting their attention. You just don’t want to be that person. We believe we can increase our “self awareness” without suffering a life changing event.

As you know, life consists of a series of positive and negative experiences with varying intensities. The question is, “Do positive and negative experiences have an equal impact upon our learning history?” The truth of the matter is that pain grabs our attention more quickly than pleasure.

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## Pain Grabs Our Attention

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Evidently, that impact is what Mother Nature intended with the pleasure-pain principle. Pain sends the message to protect ourselves from imminent danger. We propose that the pleasure-pain principle also explains the reason for citing that “*we learn more from painful experiences than positive ones.*” The attention grabbing magnitude of the negative experiences increases our awareness of the responsibility to take control and maximize the quality of life. This notion is supported by those participants who share their life’s story during our seminars. That is, they suggest a positive correlation exists between the intensity of the negative, or life-changing event, and the degree one’s values change. In other words, there is often an automatic recognition of the need to change.

Let’s return to the question of whether you can be a world-class leader without experiencing a crucible. Ultimately someone may discover a “self-awareness” gene, but until that day we believe the potential to be an authentic person and leader resides within each of us.

The good news is that you can control your personal awareness and, hence, motivation in the absence of an excruciating crucible. To do that, you must complete the exercise to identify the disadvantages and advantages associated with the person you are today. Complete the same exercise for being an authentic person. Whether you decide to change depends upon your answers to the following two questions:

1. Is the degree of discomfort associated with the disadvantages of your life “as it is” today grabbing your attention to improve?
2. Is the degree of excitement generated by realizing the benefits associated with becoming an authentic person and leader tempting you to change?

Answering “yes” to both questions suggests that you hold the promise to become more authentic.

We think as you examine the following figure and information, you will agree that increasing your self awareness can be healthy for you and your career.

**Figure One**  
**Self Awareness & Competence**

	<b>Not Competent</b>	<b>Competent</b>
<b>Not Aware</b>	Not Aware/Not Competent	Not Aware Competent
<b>Aware</b>	Aware/Not Competent	Aware/Competent

Leaders know who they are, so the ideal is to be aware of your competencies as well as your limitations (for obvious reasons). It stands to reason, that we may not be completely aware of all of our competencies and there will be times when others may view us as more competent than we view ourselves. The category that can derail you individually and professionally is not being aware of your incompetence. This latter category leads to behavioral blind spots or what others know about you that you don't know about yourself. Obviously, it is not to your benefit when you're not aware that others perceive you as being a low performer. This can be particularly damaging if you should see yourself as a high performer. This fact speaks directly to: (1) the leadership principle that your perception of me is more important than my perception of me, and (2) the need to obtain feedback to manage your reputation.

**Second Question:** Why does one individual become a victim of events in their lives while another uses the experiences to become more aware of life, the importance of values, being comfortable living in their skin, and thus authentic?

We really don't know the answer to this question. More than likely the answer appears in the complex learning history interacting with the person's genetic makeup. We can, though, tell you the psychological process that is required to learn self-awareness and become more authentic without having a major crucible. To do so requires: (1) becoming an eager student studying your life, (2) using forgiveness as a powerful healing process, and (3) taking advantage of the guidance offered through feedback.

**Student**

A beginning point is to write your life's story. Doing so means identifying your most significant negative and positive (1) experiences, (2) critical decisions made, and (3) people that served as role models. Record how each of these impacted your development. We expect you find this historical journey to be richly rewarding.

This learning process can be extended through writing a vision describing what you want living to be like and describing your life's purpose — your reason for living. Knowing this about you is much more rewarding than just occupying space and consuming natural resources. Ideally, we want our careers to germinate from our life's vision and purpose.

This ideal alignment creates synergy in our lives. Unfortunately, most of us have an established career before we're mature enough to take advantage of the proposed vision/purpose exercise. On the other hand, doing so has the promise of leading you to a more satisfying lifestyle and career.

## **Forgiving**

It is important to remove any emotional baggage that can impede our life's journey. Life is a combination of positive and negative experiences. Those who use life experiences as stepping stones to improve life have evidently learned to accept them, learn from them, and move on. You may recognize that these actions are the essential ingredients of the powerful healing process labeled "forgiving." The stumbling blocks to growth can be the combination of negative life events that have happened to us or those that we initiated that we hold onto through regret, guilt, or anger. We believe each of us has the resource to forgive and release the emotional hold such experiences might have. Forgiving is a choice.

The key ingredient of forgiveness is "accepting." Intellectually and emotionally we must agree that it was "okay" the event occurred. Reaching this conclusion doesn't mean that we condone the event, nor that we want it to happen again. Instead, we've stopped fighting its existence. We've reached the realization that fighting its existence simply gives the experience more intensity to cast a shadow over our lives. Likewise, a key ingredient to acceptance is determining the personal benefit (i.e., personal meaning) accrued for having experienced the event. Once that has been identified, we release the strangle hold the event has had over our lives.

The positive impact of forgiving can be illustrated through stretching a rubber band. Assume for this discussion, the right hand represents moving into the future while the left one represents your "as is" situation. What happens when you turn loose with your left hand? The rubber band snaps to the right hand. This letting go allows us to move into the future. Conversely, letting go of the right hand represents holding onto the past and letting go of the future.

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## **Forgiving Allows Us to Grow to the Future**

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Whether you learn to successfully use forgiveness in your life again depends upon the answer to the two questions posed at the end of the preceding section.

1. Is the degree of discomfort associated with not forgiving causing sufficient pain to grab your attention and encourage you to change?

2. Is the degree of excitement generated by realizing the benefits associated with learning from the past and maximizing your life today and in the future strong enough to pull you through the change process?

In closing this section let's note that whatever your personal history holds, it's your story, you can't change it, but you can learn to accept it, and learn and grow from it. Doing so increases the positive impact those events have upon you, thereby molding you to become more aware of the importance of enjoying the present in preparation for the future.

## Feedback

Authentic people understand the critical role feedback plays. Consequently, they seek it, and exhibit an appetite to use it. Authentic people know we *see that which we look to find*. In other words, these individuals look for the opportunities to improve performance contained in feedback and find it.

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## Authentic People Accept the Brutal Truth

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Authentic people realize they can make other choices when listening to feedback. One, of course, is to deny. The other is to agree with the feedback and do nothing to improve performance. These choices are really not options because authentic people understand that “not using the brutal truth” can be a fatal mistake. So they elect to use it.

The logical next question is “How to be the person who can accept and use feedback?” We don't want to sound like a broken record, but we've returned to the two questions previously referenced in this manuscript.

1. What is the degree of discomfort associated with not accepting feedback?
2. Are the magnetic qualities associated with the benefits to accept feedback sufficient to lead you through the required change?

Psychologically, we must put ourselves into the position that whatever we learn is “okay.” To do that, we must believe that we can accept and use whatever is learned. The degree that the feedback is “not okay” is the degree we may push back and elect to use a sabotaging option. Practicing this psychological position can be made easier by again taking advantage of the truism that *we find that which we look for*. Looking for the good creates a positive internal environment. Accepting feedback's positive characteristics puts us into position to seek and use it in accordance to the pleasure-pain principle we've discussed. That is, when we realize there are more positive attributes to accepting feedback than negative ones, we're automatically drawn to it.

There are limited sources of feedback as we continue the journey to increase our self-awareness. The first broad category and perhaps most available, is self study. As we've

previously discussed, examining our personal history through writing our life's story is an excellent start. We can also study our present thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. While doing so, we ask, "*Why do I think, feel, or act in this manner?*" as we consider the consequences of our behaviors upon ourselves and others.

Completing self-assessments is another valuable exercise. We suspect there is a published self-assessment for any human characteristic. If you should need assistance to learn about these, please contact us.

The second category is obtaining feedback from others. This is the more sensitive category for several reasons. First, people are often reluctant to share information that may be perceived as negative. Second, we must be the person to whom others feel comfortable telling us anything. Doing so means we must overcome the natural tendency to avoid any discomfort that may be associated with the constructive feedback. We certainly don't want those providing feedback to see any discomfort or that may elicit their fear of reprisal.

Since most feedback is exchanged in the verbal format throughout the course of the day, it is essential to be an excellent communicator to both share and receive information. (You may want to complete the Johari Window self-assessment and/or use it in a multi-rater perspective to assess your openness to share and solicit feedback.)

A more formal and structured feedback process is offered through a variety of multi-rater assessment techniques. We ask you again to contact us if you need assistance. (As a side bar, contact us to learn about our True Growth 360° Leadership Assessment as well as the TeamMax® leadership/teambuilding methodologies.)

The bottom line is to recognize the importance of using feedback to learn, improve your performance, and become a world-class leader. Behaviors that you may find useful in your quest to be the best are listed below:

1. Develop the reputation to seek input or performance feedback by asking, "*What do you think needs to be improved?*"
2. Develop the reputation to accept input or constructive feedback while being emotionally calm. A behavioral formula that you may find helpful is as follows:
  - A. Thank the person for offering feedback.
  - B. Paraphrase to demonstrate understanding.
  - C. Agree with the constructive feedback.
  - D. Ask the person what s/he thinks needs to be done to improve the situation.
  - E. Again paraphrase the suggested improvement and its impact.
  - F. Again thank the person for their feedback.
  - G. Use the information whenever possible and give credit where credit is due.

3. Provide constructive feedback to others in a socially and politically appropriate manner.

### **In closing**

Research shows professionals practice as many as 10,000 hours before becoming a world class performer. That may sound like a lot of time, but in reality, that is a matter of a few short years when we consider the number of practice hours available to us each and every day.

We also know that your quest to be a world class leader is a function of your personal motivation. We likewise know that you can regulate your personal motivation by combining the disadvantages of remaining in the luxury of your comfort zone with the benefits of developing your natural resources. In closing, we ask you to consider the Army's motto, *Be the best you can be*. In the final analysis, the greatest challenge each of us must face is to *be the best we can be* by developing our natural resources.

## Contact Information

Larry is the founder of TeamMax®Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in *helping people work with people*. He developed the TeamMax® “real-time” measurement methodologies to improve interpersonal effectiveness and improve teamwork efficiency that drives the company’s financial success. The TeamMax® methodologies systemically drive behavior change and measure the behaviors that were once thought to be too subjective to measure.

Since 1989, he has consulted to a variety of organizations, written articles and books, and has spoken to audiences about maximizing interpersonal performance.

Contact: 800-880-1728, [lcole@cei.net](mailto:lcole@cei.net), [www.teammax.net](http://www.teammax.net)

### **Byrd Baggett, CSP**

Byrd Baggett is a best-selling author and popular motivational speaker. He has been helping organizations develop authentic leaders and passionately engaged teams since 1990. His corporate experience includes sales and management careers with two Fortune 500 companies.

Byrd is the author of 13 best-selling books that have sold in excess of one million copies. He is a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) the highest earned designation presented by the National Speakers Association.

Contact: 251-716-3630, [byrd@byrdbaggett.com](mailto:byrd@byrdbaggett.com), [www.byrdbaggett.com](http://www.byrdbaggett.com)

### **Lawson Magruder, LTG, US Army Retired**

Lawson Magruder, Lieutenant General, US Army Retired, has been coaching professionals, mentoring leaders, and building highly effective professional teams for more than four decades. He led soldiers in combat in Vietnam and Somalia and commanded three large Army commands to include the historic 10th Mountain Division. Retiring with over 32 years of service, Lawson transitioned from the military into the corporate culture building enduring research partnerships in the homeland security arena, publicly sharing his leadership journey at seminars and conferences, and serving as a personal coach and mentor for business and military leaders nationwide. He is a member of the US Army Ranger Hall of Fame.

Contact: 210-364-3978, [lwmag@gvtc.com](mailto:lwmag@gvtc.com) , [www.growingwinners.com](http://www.growingwinners.com)

## Suggested Reading

Cole, Larry & Cole, Michael. *People-Smart Leaders: Maximize People, Performance & Profits*. (2005).

George, Bill. *True North*. (2007).

Goffee, Rob & Gareth, Jones. *Why Should anyone Be Led by You?* (2006).

Loehr, Jim. [\*The Power of Story: Change Your Story, Change Your Destiny in Business and in Life\*](#) (2008).

Loehr, Jim, & Schwartz, Tony. [\*Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal\*](#). (2004).

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We encourage you to log onto [www.truegrowthassociates.com](http://www.truegrowthassociates.com) to learn about additional resources for you and your organization in the areas of leader development and team building.

A series of eBooks are available detailing how to improve your interpersonal performance, coaching with the 7-Step Personal Change Process©, twelve leadership principles leading to peak performance, and using the 7-Step Change Process© to institutionalize leadership/teamwork values within your organization.