Developing self-awareness using the Johari Window

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The development of Emotional Intelligence in clients underpins many coaches' work. Emotional Intelligence, as described by Daniel Goleman,[1] is the development of four key competences: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management.

For true learning and growth, one must develop greater self-awareness. Goleman said that self-management was practically impossible without self-awareness. And, as John Whitmore put it, 'I am able to control only that which I am aware of. That which I am unaware of controls me. Awareness empowers me.'

Johari Window

A useful model for use in coaching to develop self-awareness is the Johari Window. This model was developed by Joe Luft[2] and Harry Ingham – hence the name – and it helps people to look at the quality of their relationships.

The Johari Window is divided up into four squares, rather like a quartered window pane.[3] The top two squares represent you, and the bottom two squares represent others.

Region 1 (top left) is called the **arena**. This is information known by the self and by others – it is out in the open arena, and is how you are seen in public. The fact that both you and others hold similar information creates greater effective interpersonal communication.

Region 2 (bottom left) is called the **façade** and, as it suggests, it's a mask or image we project when we are in public. This region holds things that you know about yourself but of which others are not aware – for example, feelings and opinions that it may be risky to divulge.

Region 3 (top right) is called the **blind spot** because it is all the things others can see in us that we are oblivious to – for example, perceived weaknesses in certain situations.

Region 4 (bottom right) is the **unknown**. These are all the things you do not know about yourself and that others do not know either. This tends to be your untapped potential.

The most effective individuals are those that have a bigger arena, and the aim of coaching is to increase the arena across the divisions so that the blind spot is reduced, and some of the self downwards is exposed so that the façade is also reduced. This opens up the undiscovered self of the unknown.

Two things are required to change a person's window:

1 Feedback from others to improve self-knowledge.

2 Exposure or self-disclosure of hidden thoughts and feelings.

Within a coaching environment, this model helps clients to understand the value of feedback and the disadvantages of holding things back for fear of appearing weak or losing status.

In my own coaching, I have often used a personal relations survey,[4] which is a questionnaire based on the Johari Window. This is mainly focused towards managers, and it asks questions about their relations with:

- employees;
- colleagues;
- supervisors.

by asking specific open questions – such as 'What was good about it?', 'What did you like the most / least?', 'How was my voice / content/pace?' and so on.

3 People may be worried about giving feedback, especially if it is to the boss and if the relationship has never been particularly open. (Don't shoot the messenger!) This is why it is helpful for the manager to expose themselves first, allowing others to see that they are aware of their own weaknesses and that they are willing to work on these. Staff will then see that there is minimal risk in giving constructive feedback to the boss. They also need a clear explanation of what the boss needs and what will be done with the feedback – that is, let others know how it has been of use and how they have contributed to the process.

For those who find feedback difficult because of past experiences – and therefore, for example, become defensive – it is useful during coaching to outline some of the rules about receiving feedback:

- Listen carefully and clarify rather than arguing with the feedback.
- Do not justify or make excuses; accept it gracefully, whether you choose to use it later or not.
- Take into account who is giving the feedback. This might make a difference to how it is perceived.
- Always thank the person giving feedback to encourage the giving of it freely in the future.

Exposure

As stated above, exposure entails open, candid expression of feelings, factual knowledge and even guesses in an honest attempt to share. Again, this will have to be thought about in relation to where respective relationships with certain people are on the Communication Pyramid. Self-disclosure may encourage others to move up the pyramid if both parties are fairly evenly matched. However, be warned that if a person is comfortable at the ritual and routine level and fears moving from there, both will find it very uncomfortable to go in at a emotions/feelings level.

Within a team environment, there are a number of activities that would engender a more open approach and enable people to move out of their comfort zone.

Two ideas that can work are these.

1 Glimpses

- Ask people to write down three to five things that they have never shared with the team.
- Grade them on what the risk would be to share them with team members and pick one from each end of the scale.
- If the team leader goes first and divulges a high-ranking glimpse, then everyone may follow.
- Each member needs to say what number they have assigned to the item they are divulging.
- If the team leader starts with a 'biggie', then everyone is more likely to follow. They need to divulge what number their glimpse is first to register the risk they are taking.

2 Hot seating

Again in a group or team environment, each person takes turns to be in the hot seat and talks for three minutes about their strength and weaknesses. Once their time is up, each member of the group sums up what they have heard and adds their feedback on what they perceive the person's strengths and weaknesses to be.

The environment for doing these activities needs to be carefully thought about because of the risk people are taking in sharing information.

Conclusion

Like all models, the Johari Window is just that, a model. However, it can be a useful tool in providing background knowledge to help increase a client's self-awareness. Often the client experiences a sense of relief that the problems or difficulties they are dealing with are understood by others, and that they have their very own model to prove it.

Furter reading

1 Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *The New Leaders*, Little Brown, 2002.

2 Joseph Luft, *Group Processes: An Introduction to Group Dynamics*, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1963, 1970.

3 See http://www.chartwell-learn.co.uk/theories.html

4 Personal Relations Survey, Telemetric (distributed in UK by Chartwell Learning & Development Ltd, Old Orchard, Bickley Road, Bromley, Kent, BR1 2NE; + 44 (0) 20 8467 1956 or info@chartwell-learn.co.uk)

5 The Leadership Trust: www.leadership.co.uk

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Our levels of interaction with different people may vary widely

The 'windows' created may show wide differences between how the client interacts with different levels of people. For instance, they may be open to exposing their real self and gaining feedback from colleagues, but they may hold back and maintain a greater façade for their own employees and manager, for a number of reasons. A 360° version of this questionnaire is also useful for others to complete, so that the client gets a fuller picture of how they are perceived by others around them.

Where there are mismatches, the coach can help raise awareness and focus on the specific questions in the questionnaire that have low scores. For those with very small arenas, there is the challenge of seeing the benefits of opening this up. The coaching may have to focus on their beliefs around fear of failure, or how they think people ought to behave.

If one of the key ways of enhancing the quality of relationships via enlarging the arena through self-awareness is exposure, then a useful model to put in alongside the Johari Window is the Communication Pyramid[5] (see Figure 1).

This shows how self-disclosure becomes more risky to individuals the higher they go up the pyramid. It is also useful for raising awareness in clients about the different types of relationships they have with others, because it is able to pinpoint where they are with that person on the pyramid.

1 **Ritual and routine** – most interactions start off with less risky topics such as the weather or travel difficulties.

2 **Gossip and facts** – once people feel more secure, then a greater variety of topics are shared, such as politics in the office or interests outside work.

3 **Ideas and judgements** – the risk is now greater because they are exposing personal opinions and ideas that may not be the same as other people's, and may even be contentious. Most people only do this when they are comfortable with each other.

4 **Emotions and feelings** – showing your innermost hopes and desires, strengths and weaknesses is even higher up the chain of risk, particularly in a work situation, but it leads to a reduction of the façade region of the Johari Window.

5 **Intimacy** – these relationships may be extremely rare in a work or personal context for some people. At this level, you are not only sharing emotions and feelings but your sense of identity, purpose, meaning, deeply held values, beliefs and prejudices. This is emotionally risky for most people.

So how do you enlarge the arena in your Johari Window via feedback and exposure?

Feedback

There are three possible issues here:

1 It may be that the client is not asking for feedback because they fear what they might get back, or fear that it may look 'un-managerial' and weak. Also, they may not know what feedback to ask for – they don't know what they don't know. This can be teased out in coaching by raising awareness about the fear and disputing the negative thought patterns that are acting as blockages. If the problem is the latter, we can start with things like working out what good managers do, self-assessing strengths and weaknesses, and using the Johari questionnaire to build up a picture. This can then give them a structure to compare themselves with and ask for feedback on. This at least starts the process and gives confidence for pursuing more feedback later.

Case study 2 – Making small talk

Robert was a young and inexperienced manager who was seen as having great potential and his technical abilities were good. However, he suffered from a lack of self-confidence during the various networking events he had to attend. As Robert was much younger than colleagues at these events, he found it difficult to engage in the small talk that was needed when first building a relationship. Robert felt that, because his colleagues were older, they were at a different point in their lives. They were talking about mortgages, children and schools. By using the Johari Window and the Communication Pyramid, Robert came to see that he was showing his irritation at their small talk because he felt he couldn't join in. This meant he was impatient to move to the second and third levels of the pyramid and engage in some of the more business-oriented areas. He realised that others were resisting this move because for them it was too soon, before they felt comfortable.

Our coaching together helped him to formulate some ideas on the type of things he could talk about, and see the time spent in small talk not as unnecessary trivia or time wasting, but as part of a natural progression in the development of interpersonal relationships.

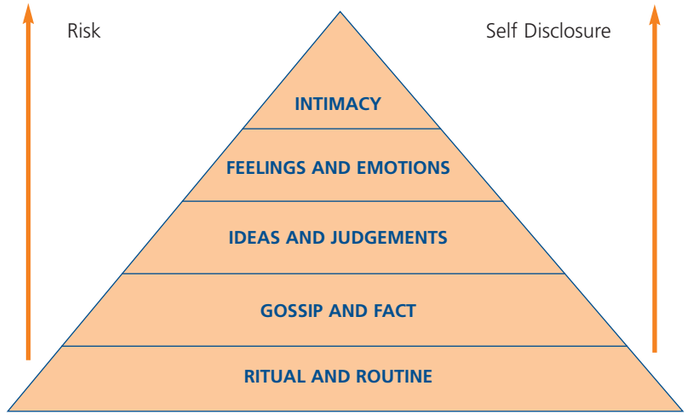

Fig. 1: The Communication Pyramid

The client can then come up with a list of opportunities where feedback could be garnered – such as appraisals, meetings, interview, training courses and so on.

2 The people they are asking may not be good at delivering feedback. This is helped if you know what feedback you are after. For example, if the client has just made a good presentation and the only feedback they get is either 'It was great' or 'It was rubbish', they need to hone their own questioning techniques

Case study – Jack's blind spot

Jack was a manager who had undergone a 360° appraisal. The feedback he received was that his staff felt that he had a bullying and autocratic style. His brusqueness was well known and he did not suffer fools gladly.

I worked with Jack using the Johari Window as he had great difficulty in accepting that this was him. He felt that people did not know him well and that they were misinterpreting his behaviour. He came to see that his inability to risk exposing his real opinions and feelings (which he saw as a sign of weakness in a manager) was leading to staff creating their own impressions, but what they were seeing was in fact a front that he was putting on.

His blind spot was related to the fact that he didn't receive the feedback he needed to make changes. His staff were too frightened of his bullying style to give him the information that would have helped him to grow and change. Our coaching work focused on the type of things he would need feedback on, and on how he would go about getting that feedback.

Coach the Coach