



Mirror mirror

KNOWING AND CHANGING YOURSELF

Mirror, mirror:

Knowing and changing yourself

Arja Aarnoudse
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1. Introduction

I thought I already knew myself

It was my fourth job in life, I was in my mid-forties and thought of myself as quite grown-up, with plenty of life experience. I had just ended my first marriage after many years of exploring what was going on within me, and in my relationships. Now my organisation wanted me to go on a training in Human Dynamics, which is an approach to learning more about how people function, and differences between people. But I was not really interested. I felt that I knew myself well because I had been through several kinds of psychotherapy, both as a client and as a student. I didn't feel open to being confronted once again with my limitations and weaknesses.

But I had to go. Despite my misgivings, after half a day I was fully involved. It was a shock to identify myself with one of the personality dynamics (there are six different ones). Yet I was pleasantly surprised because I wasn't confronted with limitations and weaknesses, but with qualities and strengths. Instead I was given a different picture. Yes, this was me, with my drives, my way of communicating, my logic and my way of problem-solving. And I felt appreciated and valued.

Afterwards, co-operating with colleagues who were aware of their own, and my, personality dynamic was a great experience. Our revealed differences didn't lead to irritation; it encouraged fruitful dialogue. It was truly an experience of being valued only because of the person I am. And I learned never to say again, 'I know myself'! Yes, I knew myself to some extent. But a new way of looking also gave new insights. In future that can happen again; I am never too old to learn.

This article is written in contribution to the second Barefoot Guide to Learning Practices in Organisations and Social Change. It is about taking up the challenge for each of us to learn more about ourselves. Why should we do that? How does that contribute to learning and to social change? What route does the journey of self-knowledge and personal growth take? What can we use on that journey? I describe processes that happen in daily life, that you will easily recognise. I give you some suggestions and signposts. Some models are also good to use with others: friends, family, colleagues or community members.

To start this journey of self-knowledge, let's begin with some direct questions.

- **How do you describe yourself?**
- **And how do others describe you?**
- **Are these two descriptions different?**

2. Social change comes through individual change

People and groups are social beings. We each have a strong drive to belong to a group and to interact with others. We belong to families, communities, organisations. Things are changing in these systems all the time. Some people leave the system, some people enter; people themselves change and connections between people change. When an individual changes, the configuration of the system changes and it follows that this will, one way or another, influence the system. Exactly what impact the change has on your family, community or organisation, on their habits and ways of doing things, is another question.

It is clear that a system cannot change without individuals in it changing, and a number of people need to change to make a visible difference in that system. If you, and your neighbour or colleague don't change, nothing will happen.

Individual agency and personal leadership

Agency is about the individual: a person's action, will, intentionality, choice and freedom. It refers to the inborn capacity of each of us to act independently and to make our own free choices.

Personal leadership has nothing to do with a position or a title. It has to do with our attitude and how we see our role in life. It is the desire to take charge of our own life, being the captain of your own ship. It is strongly reflected in the catchphrase: 'Before I seek to change or motivate others I must first learn to change and motivate myself'.

Questions to think about

How do you think people and society change?

Where does your own drive to learn and change come from?

Rediscovering our drive to learn

Learning – despite school teaching!

'We all know that children learn despite school teaching.'

I was astonished to hear this. It was the first meeting, on the first day, of my first job in the educational sector. A really experienced practitioner who had supported teachers and school teams for years said this. Others in the meeting nodded. He continued:

'When will we stop hindering their natural development by forcing our theories and systems on them?'

Self-awareness is the ability to know (facts) and understand (see the processes, work with the facts) oneself. It is thus connected to learning. Why is that so? A little child is not aware of him or herself and yet is naturally driven to learn and develop. Learning and developing happen when you support an enabling environment. Somehow, in growing up, we lose much of this natural drive and energy. For example, we are educated to not ask questions and to accept given answers. Or we are educated to give only the right answers and so we become shy and afraid to speak up. Or we are educated to behave like a 'real girl', not supposed to climb trees or to participate in a discussion, so we *unlearn* bringing our true voice.

As adults we have to again find the connection with our inborn drives to know, to develop and to improve. That is why we need self-awareness and self-reflection.

Question to think about

What things inhibit your drive to learn and grow

Drives and motivation

According to Coenraad van Houten in his 1999 book, *Awakening the Will: Principles and Processes in Adult Learning*, there are three primary 'drives' inside all human beings, drives that feed the learning process.

These are the:

Drive for knowledge – the continual need to understand ourselves and the world we live in.

Drive for development – the basic force of our spirit which shapes and reshapes us as we grow.

Drive for improvement – this stems from a deep inner sense that things could be done better, that we are on a path, not yet at the destination.

Talking about 'the force of our spirit' and 'a deep inner sense' connects to a kind of learning, other than school learning. It connects to our values, our beliefs, to the resources that keep us going and to what we see as our task in life.

The issue of motivating people to learn has to do with these kind of questions. To express oneself and open up with others about drives, passion, values and vision is highly motivating. Cultures, education or personalities can be very diverse in a group, yet the members can at the same time find common ground in motivation and drives.

Deep listening to yourself

Barefoot Guide 1, page 30, speaks about listening to our heads (thoughts), hearts (feelings) and feet (will) together, and discusses the challenges of listening at the three levels.

Firstly, people all have their own ways of seeing the world and thinking about things. Be careful not to assume they see things the way you do. Secondly, listening to someone's true feelings gives you important clues about what really matters to them. And thirdly, listening at the level of will is where resistance to change is usually found and where the drive for change can be awakened. Helping people to listen to, and transform, their own will is one of the deepest challenges of change.

Deep listening to others is a highly-valued ability when working with people. But what does it mean in connection with you? What is 'deep listening to yourself'? It is about being aware of yourself as a whole person, with head, heart and feet. It means noticing what you *feel* about a certain situation or a certain person, but also noticing what your *thoughts* are too. What comes up first, your feelings or your thoughts, and what is the connection between the two? Once you are aware, how are you able to change your reaction?

And what about your impulse for *doing*? Do you know your will, what you really want, and is it easy for you to express what that is?

Thoughts and feelings – which changes which?

The answer to this question is that it seems to be easier to first change your thoughts, and your feelings then naturally change at the same time. It is quite amazing to experience changing your feelings and attitudes by consciously changing your thoughts, because we usually think this works the other way around. Yet, it is all about finding another way to look at things, how you tell the story. Which angle do you choose? Do you say the glass is half empty and you feel sad about that? Or do you say the glass is half full and you feel happy?

Another aspect connected to deep listening to yourself is the ability to become silent. To make space for your inner voice, or even your inner voices. The section below explains this further.

Diversity within yourself

If you are like most people, you experience never-ending discussions with yourself, in your mind, especially when you are supposed to make a choice. There is always a voice 'on the one hand' and a voice 'on the other hand' or even a third or a fourth voice. Each of us has a whole community of voices in our heads, often talking at the same time!

When you pay careful attention you can describe some voices. You understand that one voice is you being a 'good family member'. The other is you being the 'responsible volunteer'. And the third one is you being a 'playful child'. And we have many more. Most of us are more or less familiar with the father or mother voice: the severe conscience. More diverse are the voices of, for example, 'the brave fighter' or 'the jealous sister'. How you name the different voices is up to you – it is how you recognise the different parts within yourself. We have experienced that a lot of people recognise the 'little child' part of themselves. The little child that can be playful, but sometimes also scared, or panicking, or longing for comfort. Some theories about personal development call this 'the inner child'.

Work with your diversity to stay energetic

When you have a discussion in your mind about taking a decision, and hear the different voices negotiating with each other, you are aware which voice wins the battle. The winner will mostly be the one that is dominant or has the most power. Other voices aren't able to come through. We aren't even aware of some of them. This might be the case with the inner-child-voice. Yet this voice is the one that can help you to stay energetic, to stay healthy and avoid a burnout. The inner-child-voice talks about freedom, about playing, about exploration, about need for sleep or being comforted and hugged.

When you are overloaded with tasks, work too hard, start to lose your enthusiasm for almost everything and you are ignoring your inner-child-voice you still have one rescuer. That is your physical body and the signals it sends. Actually, it is also a kind of voice. It is part of deep listening to recognise the signals of your body in its need for rest, relaxation, rhythm, food and so on. When you ignore both the inner-child-voice and the signals of your body, your body and mind will start to give you very strong signals, like bad headaches, lost concentration, constant tiredness, stumbling and having accidents. You are really far on your way to collapsing. Turn around and go back! Listen for the voices that need to be empowered – let them come through. It isn't that different from your work for social change; the only difference is that you work with the diversity within yourself instead of the diversity in society.

The path of self-knowledge

Facilitators have a double task in gaining self-knowledge. On the one hand they need to know about themselves and on the other hand they need to be able to help others towards self-knowledge. The facilitator herself is the most important instrument in her work and therefore should be a 'learning facilitator of learning'. She brings her personality, her temperament and her typical way of thinking, feeling, doing and interacting in her work. These things affect her work and the people she is working with, either in courses and workshops or in other processes she is involved in. She needs to be aware of who she is and how she affects others.

How can you gain more awareness of who *you* are, in the sense of new insights and gaining common language to express yourself and share with *others* what your typical characteristics are? What can you – as facilitator of learning – use in supporting people to gain more self-knowledge and self-awareness? There are many different ways and different frameworks to guide your exploration processes towards self-knowledge.

Meditation

We talked about listening to oneself and mentioned 'becoming silent'. This touches upon meditation. Different spiritual schools practise different forms of meditation; you might find it in your own religious context.

Biography work

Another way of getting to know more about yourself is through biography work. Biography work means working with your own story, past, present and future. From this you can gain valuable insights into what has formed you, what your patterns of behaviour are and what future challenges and strengths you have to work with. See "*The Chapters of My Life Exercise*" on the BFG1 website in the Resource Centre (Chapter 2 – Inside Out, www.barefootguide.org)

'This work is also about seeing and being seen. To be seen is a blessing, which engenders in us new strengths to listen to our deepest calling, the courage to search for what our heart seeks and the capacity to take responsibility for our own life path.'
www.biographywork.org

3. Using models on the path of self-knowledge

Observing yourself, noticing what your thoughts, your feelings and your doubts are, keeping a diary, and becoming aware of your own personal history are actually things we can do always, everywhere. We don't have to use tools, models or instruments to learn about our self.

However models or tools can be of some help. Below, we suggest two models that we like, but there are many others that are also helpful.

One warning about models: using a model is like looking at a three-dimensional reality with the help of a two-dimensional instrument. A model is only a tool to look at reality and give a common language to talk about it – it isn't reality itself. If you find, for example, that your preferred learning style is 'Theorist' it doesn't mean that you have to identify yourself as: 'I am a Theorist'. It is even more dangerous when others define you by saying 'You are a Theorist'. Human beings don't like to be put into boxes. So let's not use models to do that, but rather to give direction to growth and development. Now that I have discovered that I tend to learn in the way of a 'Theorist', I can challenge myself by looking for and using other learning styles, and so enrich the ways I act.

And when you find out from someone else that she learns in the way of an 'Activist', you can put out a friendly challenge and support her to use other styles. Never criticise, or fix on her a certain characteristic; it does not invite learning and mostly causes resistance.

A good model is useful not for its answers but when it helps us to ask ourselves better *questions*. Models are dangerous if we use them to give us *answers* – every situation in life is unique and a model cannot possibly give answers for all questions!

In the context of this Guide about learning, the model of *learning styles* is probably one of the first things to look at. In Chapter 00, How do we learn? you can find a description of several learning styles.

The *Barefoot Guide 1*, page 36, gives the model of the 'Four Temperaments' with background, further description and ideas of how to work with this model.

Below we introduce to you the models of Human Dynamics and Core Qualities.

Managing diversity – Human Dynamics

All around, you can observe that people behave in very diverse ways. Some make contact easily and tell personal stories; others will look for a quiet corner at a meeting and will leaf through the pages of the material at hand. When a question is asked in a conversation or meeting, one person will think and frown while the other starts talking right away, and forms his reaction in the process of talking. Differences can also be seen at work. While one colleague says little during staff meetings yet afterwards wants to ask questions about a decision that's already been made, another colleague is noticing who is comfortable and at ease, busy watching carefully if everyone has had something to drink.. Another colleague, uninvited, starts to speak. He asks a few questions out loud, then in the same breath presents four ideas for a new project, leaving everyone else confused. Some executives are valued for their pleasant and supportive conversations, but their plans are never realised. Other executives write clear policy plans and synopses of the annual plans, but they blunder when it comes to communicative skills. Some executives can express their view on work in impressive ways, but they fail to persuade others.

Sandra Seagal and David Horne discovered that there are fundamental differences between people that can be explained using a set of universal behavioural features and patterns. They call their model Human Dynamics.

The model refers to three principles that are present in each human being. These are the *mental* (rational, thinking) principle, the *emotional* (sensitive, relational) principle and the *physical* (practical, acting) principle. (This model is connected to the Threefold Human Being, as described in the *Barefoot Guide 1*, page 29.)

The theory of Human Dynamics proposes that each person has one principle that is dominant and which relates to the way the person experiences their environment and how they process information.

- People with a dominant mental principle process information in a linear and logical way. They feel comfortable being alone, don't often express their feelings, come to clarity by thinking and prefer to talk about meaningful issues.
- People with a dominant emotional principle process information in an associative way. They love to interact with people, to brainstorm new ideas, to sort out their thoughts or to share all kinds of personal experiences.
- People with a dominant physical principle process information in a systemic way. They feel a strong connection to the group they belong to. They come to clarity and solutions by viewing all different aspects of an issue and connecting it to a specific and practical goal. They like doing things with other people.

What are the benefits of using this model?

Knowledge of Human Dynamics can be useful for the interaction in a team. It offers insights into the way in which co-operation takes place between the team members with different personality dynamics. Differences in the speed of information-processing during a staff meeting become clear. You alter your communication and meeting habits.

It also increases your motivation to tackle competencies that have not yet been fully developed. Personal challenges can become clearer, once a person becomes aware of their own personality dynamic. When an executive, for example, is conscious of their personality dynamic, that knowledge may lead to more subtle, but essential, changes in leadership style.

Human Dynamics can play a significant role in helping people in a learning process. It gives direction to setting up a rich and differentiated learning environment, where it is possible to include specific needs of the different personality dynamics.

Finally Human Dynamics is useful for examining the interaction between the dynamic of a facilitator and participants of a training or a course. An emotionally-centred facilitator may find it incomprehensible that a mentally-centred participant wants to be alone, and may try to prevent it. A physically-centred trainer can be amazed and even annoyed about the need of an emotionally-centred participant to discuss everything during a training session.

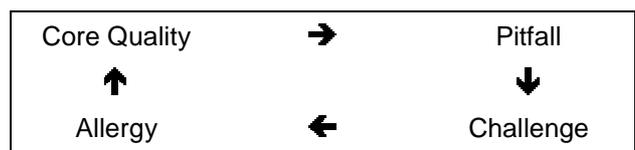
Core Qualities

Core Qualities is a model created by Daniel Ofman. He believes that every person has a few core qualities – qualities that have always been part of you but that you are hardly aware of. For you this quality is so self-evident that you think that everyone has it or should be able to show it. Core qualities are, for example: patience, persistence, caring, decisiveness and flexibility.

Strengthening core qualities is called empowerment and this can be done by using the 'core quadrant'. The quadrant has four concepts: qualities, pitfalls, challenges and allergies.

The *pitfall* is when the quality is 'too much of a good thing'. When the positive quality goes too far, the strength turns into weakness. For example, 'flexible' becomes 'inconsistent'. But note that on the other hand, behind every 'negative' pitfall you can find a positive quality!

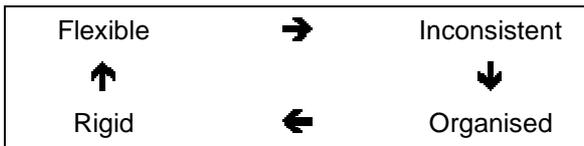
The core quality and the *challenge* are complementary. The point here is that your core quality is always dominant. The way to avoid this situation – stepping into your pitfall – is to develop a complementary



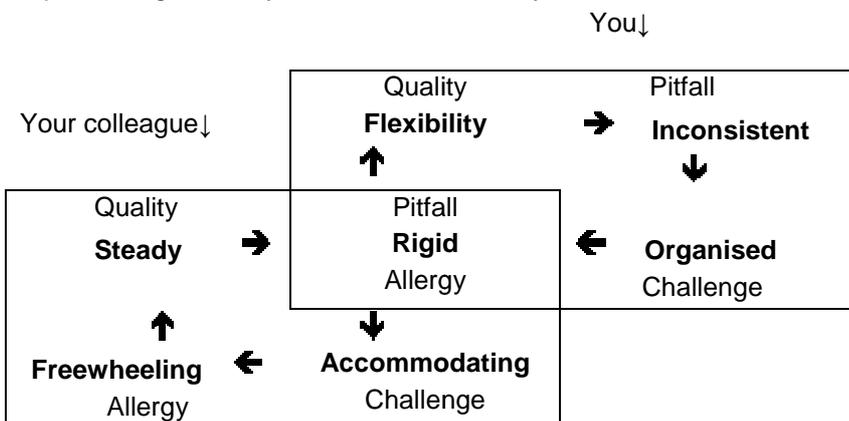
quality that gives balance. What is the positive opposite of the pitfall? Being inconsistent is negative; the positive opposite is being organised. So when your core quality is ‘flexibility’ and you develop ‘being organised’, you can *avoid* being inconsistent.

The *allergy* is the negative opposite of the core quality. It is called allergy because it is ‘too much’ of your challenge. For example, when seeing this in your colleague, you feel ‘allergic’ to his behaviour. With your core quality of flexibility, you detest (are ‘allergic’ to) rigid people. It is difficult for you to collaborate with such a person. However this person presents you with a bit ‘too much’ of the quality – being organised – that you need yourself. This is, indeed, your challenge.

So the core quadrant in this situation looks like this:



But, note that ‘rigid’ is, of course, your colleague’s pitfall – too much of a positive quality. So the quadrant representing both of you is linked in this way:



In teams and other situations of co-operation, working with linked quadrants like this helps you to look behind the vexing behaviour of your partner and see that there is also a positive quality – in fact the quality that *you* have to strengthen. You have complementary qualities and can learn from each other.

How can you work with this model?

You may start by identifying your strengths (core qualities), working them out using the pitfall, the challenge and allergy, as in the example. You can also start with a challenge, reasoning back to your pitfall, and recognise the quality behind it.

Or ask friends, family or colleagues about your weaknesses (pitfalls). They are probably able to mention a few. Work back from pitfall to quality and then discover your challenge and allergy.

Are you immensely bothered by a colleague? Discover the quality behind what bothers you and what you can learn from that. You can find a challenge, pitfall and quality of yourself.

I recommend taking time with colleagues to draw up core quadrants and openly discuss allergies. This allows you to increase your level of collaboration.

You can watch Daniel Ofman himself explain the use of quadrants – Google “Daniel Ofman core qualities video”

4. Self-knowledge can be a collaborative process

Learning more about yourself can be difficult to do on your own. Although sometimes quite painful, being confronted by others can help you to become more aware of your behaviour, and its impact on others. People always do give you feedback, in one way or another. This is often not in clear, spoken words, but in the way they behave. They start to ignore you for example – a very clear signal of negative feedback. The problem is that you do not hear or notice the exact behaviour that was rejected, so you don't know what to change, unless you ask. Asking for feedback is a good method to learn more of yourself. Your blind spot, what you don't know about yourself, becomes smaller. The bonus is that when you combine increased self-knowledge with sharing more about yourself, others learn more about you.

A friend experiences collaborative self-knowledge

A friend of mine wasn't aware of his talent to make sculptures (it was unknown to himself and to others). Shortly after his retirement he looked for something nice to do and attended a starters course on making sculptures. In this course he discovered his talent in this area (it became a private knowledge). He showed his creativity to others (brought it from private to public) and people told him they really liked what he made (they gave feedback). Nowadays he runs a shop in town, that is meanwhile his atelier (gallery), and he sells his sculptures.

How feedback made an impact on me

When I am really absorbed into a subject or discussion, I am often acting and reacting in an impulsive way, not very fine-tuned to the other people. I tend to focus more on content than on personal issues. In different situations three colleagues let me know that they really didn't like such blunt reactions. That it actually shocked them or made them feel stupid or rejected. So by their feedback I knew that this behaviour wasn't pleasant for others, but I struggled to understand how to cope with this. I don't want to feel obliged to be nice and friendly. I come to my work to do a job, not to make friends. And I thought my colleagues should get used to my way of doing and then it would be all right. But the question was: what did I need to bring to build fruitful relationships in the context of my work? Indeed it is not about becoming friends – although it is nice when a friendship emerges. Working relationships have surprising similarities with family relationships. I have neither chosen my family nor my colleagues; I can't choose to drop them (in a work context unless I want to leave the job) and I don't like each of them equally. A striking aspect in family relations is that whatever one of your relatives will do or say, you are loyal till the end. You cannot drop your relatives, because you have blood ties. That is what we probably could bring more into work relationships. There are no blood ties, but we are tied in serving a common goal in the job. And we need to be loyal and supportive to each other. That doesn't mean avoiding giving honest feedback. Honest feedback builds open relationships. And what I learned finally in order to lessen my blunt behaviour is that it is too much of the quality of being strict.. And I found my challenge in courteousness, what I now try to practise daily.

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PSO capacity building in developing countries

Scheveningseweg 68
2517 KX The Hague
The Netherlands

T +31 70 338 8433
F +31 70 350 2705

info@pso.nl
www.pso.nl