

# GROWERTALKS

## Guest Column

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## Are You Aware?

*Glenna Hecht*

Every year, I select a leadership skill to focus on for the following year. This year, the skill is awareness—to be aware. This isn't a phrase that's written on a "to-do" list; instead it's at the top of my "to-be" list.

Wikipedia defines awareness as being alert and conscious of your environment, and as a result, understanding what's happening all around you.

Awareness starts by being observant, conscious of what you see, hear, sense and experience. Being aware requires using all our senses. We hear the bird that we may never see, we sense a threat or we feel energized in a joyful environment. Awareness is a "sixth sense" that enables you to walk into an environment as a spectator, gather information and draw conclusions. Once you assess, it's time to act.

Awareness is the result of observation, and self-awareness inspires involvement and action. Self-awareness is the ability to read the environment and understand your purpose and role within it. It's the "Now what?" question. What can the leader do to impact the environment and make a difference?

You may be thinking, this sounds easy! It may be, but welcome to reality.

Today, we live in a world of looking down, typically at our computer or phone, absorbed in a world of email and text. When focused on the online chatter, you can lose track of time, and may not see or hear what's going on around you. Employees may see you involved in technology and assume you're busy. Rather than asking a question or offering a suggestion, they may walk away not wanting to "bother you." Building awareness requires you "look up" to be present.

How does the leader shift from being aware to becoming more self-aware? You move from being a spectator in the environment, to interacting with it.

Growing up, my mom would ask "what" questions. This was a game she played to increase my awareness and thinking skills.

- What do you see around you? Be specific. What's in the room? What are people doing? How are they interacting?
- What do you hear? Listen to voices, sounds in the environment and outside noise. This enhances your ability to "tune in."
- What's happening right now? Read the room. Based on what you see and hear, what's going on?
- What are your next steps? Based on observations, what can you do to impact the situation or environment?

- What do you miss when you're not aware, self-aware or taking action?

I recently participated in a feedback session with a new employee who'd performed erratically the prior week. During the session, the employee was distracted, sat with hunched shoulders and looked deflated. The employee was participating, but answered questions with measured words. This wasn't typical behavior; something was going on.

Later that day, the employee came to see me on a typical business topic. I then asked if everything was okay. The employee said, "No, my family is going through tough times and I had to move out. I have no place to go. I'm thankful for this job, but don't know what to do. I can't afford an apartment and transportation; I'm staying in my car."

I took a deep breath and said, "I can get assistance if you would like me to help." The employee said, "Yes, please. I'm so embarrassed."

We called the employee assistance hotline to find temporary living and financial support. The employee apologized for the situation and said, "I've never worked at a company with someone who cares about me."

I said, "I'm sorry you had that experience; I care!" The employee thanked me and smiled.

Awareness helps you do the right thing with compassion. Imagine if we'd jumped to a conclusion regarding performance and hadn't noticed the body language or energy. We would have been like the "other companies where no one cares."

How does the leader help their employees become more self-aware?

The leader can ask the "what" questions detailed above to increase employee awareness. Self-awareness is developed over time and requires coaching regarding interactions and decision-making. Here's an example:

While driving my car, a message displayed, "Stop the car and leave the engine running." Uh-oh—a message of doom.

I went to a shop near my house to get it checked and they said, "Yes, you have a problem. We can replace the battery and we're less expensive than the dealer." That had been my experience previously and I agreed.

A few hours later, the car was fixed and in my garage. I called the dealer to update my records and asked the cost to replace a battery. Imagine my surprise when they told me an amount that was significantly less than what I'd paid. I called the repair shop and said, "I want to make you aware that I called the dealer and this is the price quoted for a battery. You need to know so that you can inform your customers they may be paying more for a quick convenience."

The employee said, "OK, I will let the owner know." He didn't apologize or offer an alternative. The employee was aware, but didn't possess the skills to take the next step.

This lack of self-awareness impacted customer service and the reputation of the business. As a leader, you must determine if the employees can take desired action. If not, processes and procedures need to be developed and trained.

A great leader must look up, be present, be aware, determine next steps and act to make a difference. **GT**

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