

The Human Capital Institute's Thought Leader Interviews

SELF-AWARENESS AS A COMPETENCY WITH DR. MIRIAM LACEY



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Dr. Miriam Lacey is a professor at the Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University. She is an authority on organization behavior and development, and has been at the forefront of integrating behavioral science with principles of total quality management. Dr. Lacey works with Fortune 500 companies on the implementation of large-scale change for greater quality, productivity and employee commitment.

Is 'knowing thyself' a competency?

BY DAVID CREELMAN

Why is it some people are more successful in management than others? Is it specific competencies like team building, attention to detail and conceptual thinking or are we better served by looking for the more general competency of self-awareness? Join HCI's Chief Correspondent, David Creelman, for an insightful interview with Pepperdine University's Dr. Miriam Lacey.

Inscribed on the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi are the words "know thyself." Does this timeless advice apply to recruitment and management development? Dr. Miriam Lacey of Pepperdine University has some ideas about what matters most for managerial success.

What's the fundamental issue that you as an academic are interested in?

That's a provocative question and for me the fundamental issue is this: why are some people successful in organizations while others are not?

When trying to pick who will be successful recruiters tend to look at personality, intelligence, education and track record. Is there something missing?

I'm interested in personal style, which is a little more concrete than personality. Commitment to quality, learning, and productivity are a natural consequence of personal style—the way managers behave. When managers come to me complaining about the productivity of their employees, I like to say, "What are you as a manager doing?" and explain,

"What they see from your employees is a natural consequence of your style." If I were to say, "The employees are reacting to your personality" then it doesn't help managers change.

The standard folklore is that you are who you are by age seven. But if you talk about a personal style then that is under the individual's control. I get impatient when people say 'that's the way I am' and expect everybody else to accommodate that. Your personality is the way it is, but your behavior is completely under your control. You can choose to include people, or not. You can choose to be controlling and structured, or not. You can choose to ask questions, or keep silent. You can choose to share decision-making, or make them all yourself.

Most managers aren't even aware they have a personal style. They show up here at Pepperdine University and they've never thought about it or considered that it's something they get to choose. They just feel they have their strong points and their weak points and they're just going to have to make do. I don't dismiss that notion, but it's not the complete picture.

Awareness of personal style is the first step toward having a broad repertoire of behavior, and a manager with a broad repertoire of behavior is a powerful person. Awareness is about being aware of your style and being aware of the consequences of your behavior—seeing the impact you are having on people. For example, if your style is aggressive and your behavior is to shout at people, there is the short-term gain as people 'hop to it.' But there is the long-term issue of the condition of the relationship, and whether people will go the extra mile on their own to help you (and your company) reach success. Managers need to be very conscious of both short term and long term, and very often they are not.

As a manager, how do you get employees to be committed?

As a general point your people have to be convinced that their success matters to you. They have to view you as somebody who wants them to succeed, not just at the job, but also personally.

If people are loyal to you then that is good evidence they believe in the relationship. On the other hand, if you are getting surprised--surprised about the way people are behaving or surprised when somebody leaves-- then that signals a problem. Remember, your staff is reacting to your behavior. If you are surprised it means you are not aware of the impact your personal style is having on others.

If my people understand that I am committed to their success regardless of whether they work for this company or somewhere else, it frees them up to be honest with me. If people don't think you are committed to them, they will bail on you when it's inconvenient, leave your life unmanageable, and even lie to you, because there's nothing in it for them to be honest. When people start lying to you about their own performance or about the system's performance, life in an organization becomes unmanageable.

How do you convince people you are interested in their success?

By talking about it. Ask them about their goals at work and in life. What is it they value? As the boss, my job is to figure out how to take the organization's goals and the individual's goals and integrate the two. If I'm successful, then I have an individual who is performing at the top of his or her ability and contributing to the organization's performance. I don't even really have to manage this person because he or she is on fire doing what they really want to do. You cannot be a lazy manager and manage this way. It takes brainpower and effort to figure out how to design a job that will be a win-win for the person and the company.

You mentioned that one of the problems managers face is they are not aware of their own style. How would an individual become aware of their own style?

You need not just be open to feedback, but seek it out. We tend to live in our own little castle, well-defended from opposing views. We have to actively welcome feedback or we won't take it in. We have to look for feedback that is critical, that may not be pleasant, and that may be judgmental. Because of your position of authority you have to bend over backwards to get information in. People aren't going to tell you what

you need to know, but rather what they think you want to hear. We are so well defended within our castles that when we get information that doesn't jibe with what we already believe, we dismiss it. That's a mistake. If you can't make sense of it you should at least put it on the shelf for as many years as it takes until it finally makes sense to you. This demands a self-discipline that is beyond the grasp of most managers and separates the merely adequate manager from the excellent.

Do personality assessments help you become aware of your style?

Personality tests are one kind of feedback. I've been using the Hogan Personality Inventory lately, and fundamentally, the more assessments the merrier--although you shouldn't do a whole slew of them at one time. These tests do provide insights and fodder for reflection. We can't make sense of too much data at once. When starting out, I'd recommend a couple of tests the first year. Then one every few years is fine, to stay fine-tuned and thoughtful about your style.

You have said that breadth of behavior is an important characteristic for managers. Is it possible to expand your own breadth of behavior?

You can expand your breadth by choosing not to act out of habit; choosing not to act thoughtlessly and without consciousness. Imagine a situation where someone says, 'We think that there has been some fabrication in the most recent reports.' You have a choice to either fly off the handle; to act like a 14-year-old that's been unfairly treated; a chance to act like a bully; or any number of other unthinking reactions. Or you can act as a fully functioning adult by choice. You take the news and then calmly decide what to do.

So the issue is not so much that people aren't capable of a wide breadth of behaviors, the problem is that people often don't take time to think about the situation, then choose their behaviors.

Yes. A mature manager needs to step away from automatic reactions. The knee-jerk stuff comes from the emotionally immature manager.

From the organization's point of view should I use an assessment of a person's awareness of their own style and breadth of behavior as criterion in hiring and promotion?

I would. But to be realistic my observation of typical management decisions comes down to hiring and promoting whom they like. It's more emotional than anyone cares to admit. The HR group screens for basic education, competence and having had success in an area. Then managers get a short list and they go with the person they like. Managers delude themselves that management is a rational, objective and logical process. We use those things, but when all is said and done there is that emotional component that no one wants to talk about. We use the word 'comfortable' to blanket a number of emotional responses. I'm 'comfortable with that' or 'uncomfortable with that' is code for an acceptable way to talk about an emotional reaction.

Managers are wary of emotion. They are concerned about showing vulnerability in organizations. They fear they'll be viewed as weak. In fact, as long as you aren't whimpering when speaking of something emotional, you are actually viewed with awe because you have the guts to talk about it. Everyone else is too afraid. If you can talk about being disappointed in something, or being passionate about something, people are impressed. Of course, if you talk about how you are feeling and you are all wimpy about it, people will dismiss you. Once again, your personal style and the choices you make about what to share will either build your credibility or destroy it. When you pull it off you will be viewed as charismatic and powerful.

Any advice for individuals who wants to be more successful in their career?

Observe your impact on other people. If you are in a meeting, what happens after you talk? Do they ignore it? Do they get inspired and energized? Are they rolling their eyes and looking the other way? We are not taught to look at the impact we have on people. That's a skill managers ought to develop. Seeing your impact and adjusting your personal style accordingly is the best predictor of management success that I know.