

What is the value of deep self-awareness for organisations?

T-minus
Events



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Session reminder:

Socrates' famous mantra 'to know thyself' – is often described as the most important thing we could ever learn, perhaps even as important as the meaning of life itself. But why should organisations care about the self-awareness of their workforce?



According to Gallup's 2022 [Global Workplace Report](#), only 21% of people are engaged at work, and since the pandemic, we've seen people quitting their jobs in record numbers. So how worried should we be and what can we do about it? We invited Jonny and Patricia to explore:

- ❓ Why should we care about the levels of emotional awareness in our leaders? What have we learnt from advances in neuroscience on this?
- ❓ What is the impact we can have on individuals, teams and organisations from encouraging and facilitating greater emotional awareness?
- ❓ What experience have we had with practical tools and activities to encourage more people to develop their emotional understanding of themselves? What are the lessons we can take away?

What is the value of deep self-awareness for organisations?

Date of event: Tuesday 16th August

Hosted by: [Jonny Miller](#), [Patricia Riddell](#) and [T-minus](#)

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Jonny Miller is a startup founder, emotional resilience masterclass facilitator, host of the Curious Humans podcast & nervous system specialist. Having worked with leaders at Slack, Google & Harvard Business School, he is passionate about helping people to develop their emotional awareness, and cultivate a sense of calm, agency, resilience, and fulfilment in the workplace.

Patricia Riddell is a Professor of Applied Neuroscience at the University of Reading & Henley business school, Phd from the University of Oxford, she is a Chartered Psychologist, Chartered Scientist and a member of the BPS SIG in Coaching. One of her main research interests is the ways in which neuroscience can be applied in the business world, supporting and extending our understanding of human behaviour.

T-minus is a leadership development consultancy and authors of the [Disruptive Leadership Report](#) – the new playbook for leaders of the 4th industrial revolution. T-minus helps start-ups scale up and corporates start-up at scale, bringing the mindsets and mechanics from both these worlds as a catalyst for growth.

The Session

A huge thanks to Jonny Miller, Patricia Riddell and the leaders that joined us from the likes of Astrazeneca, NHS, Harrods and more. The insights and combined expertise from Jonny and Patricia were thought provoking and enabled great discussion. We could have all stayed on Zoom for another few hours!

About T-minus

T-minus specialise in leadership development in the context of disruption, high growth and innovation. We work with startups, scaleups, leading technology companies and large corporates looking to develop new leadership capabilities which deliver business outcomes in the face of disruption.

Key themes that emerged:

#Theme 1: Understanding self awareness

- Benefits of self awareness
- Types of self awareness

#Theme 2: Self awareness sounds great, but how do we get people to take action?

- Understanding our rights & responsibilities
- Recognise key moments – before the catastrophe.
- Bringing in coaching / reflective questions

#Theme 3: How do we build a self-awareness culture?

- Creating the space
- Role modelling vulnerability

#Theme 4: How do you get leaders to recognise that their perceptions of the world are not reality?

- How our brains work
- Non violent communication framework
- Encourage people to experience it

#Theme 5: How do we sustain self awareness?

- A cycle not a permanent state
- Building rituals into our routines
- Toolkit of different approaches

The background of the slide is a dark blue field filled with a complex, web-like pattern of thin, glowing purple and blue lines. These lines are interconnected, forming a dense network that resembles a neural network or a complex data structure. Scattered throughout this network are numerous small, bright blue dots, some of which are slightly larger and more prominent than others. The overall effect is one of a dynamic, interconnected system.

Our discussions – what came out?

Theme #1 – Understanding Self Awareness

Types of self awareness

Reflexive vs voluntary

By helping leaders to differentiate between **reflexive** awareness and **voluntary** awareness, we allow our leaders to become more attuned to what is important and choose where to focus rather than being **reactive**. This helps in both being strategic, and reflecting forward, and also in understanding where we might be making errors of judgement.

Introspection vs external

Most of the time we are responding to what is going on **externally**, but if we take the time to **introspect**, rather like a chef can learn to finely attune their taste buds to taste different flavours, we can learn to acutely recognise the different sensations and emotions within ourselves.

We can also become aware of our awareness – and whether this is **expanded** (taking in the world around us) or **narrow** into a specific point of focus. All of this will have an impact on how we think, how we behave and the impact we will have on others.

Benefits of self awareness

Working well with others

We use our sense of self as **a way of interacting with others**, checking in on whether we are fitting in socially by noticing if we are doing the right things. Self awareness is really important for understanding how we can **cooperate** well with others, and understand how others are **interacting**.

Burnout

Our nervous system gives us feedback, but often we don't listen to it. This often comes in the **"feather – brick – dumptruck"** form, i.e. we get a small signal we ignore, then a bigger one, and ignore that, then our whole bodies almost literally shut down before we start to really pay attention. We build up **emotional debt** and if we don't recognise this and find positive ways to release it, we pay the price with our health, it increases fragility in our nervous system, makes us more reactive and ultimately this is really **expensive** for organisations!

Increasing levels of **introspection** are important for mitigating burnout. This also has a great side effect in that we are also better leaders, we are less reactive, and more aware of the potential for **emotional contagion** within our teams.

Theme #2 – Self awareness sounds great, but how do we get people to do something about it? *(Rather than shrug it off as a bit hippy!)*

Standout comments:



Don't call this soft skills! These are the hardest cognitive skills that we can develop



Focus on the benefit – competitive advantage over organisations comes from awareness



Knowledge is only a rumour until it lives in the muscle – we have to get people acting in a different way and experiencing it.

Some practical suggestions:

Check in circles – Where every 2 weeks 4 leaders get together for a check in. Empowering people to check in on whether they are getting into a state where anger or frustration starts to arise, they have access to tools to downregulate their nervous system and come back to a place of more groundedness.

A postmortem – During a crisis, or reflecting on a crisis is often the best time to build deeper self awareness, reflecting on triggers that caused the crisis.

Recognise the rights and responsibilities of people and organisations – We have a right not to be in toxic stress, but if that's true we also have a responsibility to know when we are moving towards a level of toxic stress. So if we want to avoid burnout, then we have to have mechanisms in place where they can sense what is going on and be able to report that without stigma.

Coaching – Bringing in external voices where others are asking you questions. We need to hold up a mirror – we can't do this alone!

Theme #3 – How do we build a self-awareness culture?

Standout comments:



This has opened up the conversations that people have been having in our organisation



We get a far greater level of depth and connection when sharing their feeling and being vulnerable"

Some practical suggestions:

We have to **create the space**, or the "slack in the system" to allow for reflection, to avoid being in execution mode the whole time. But also need to be aware that there is a **trade off between efficiency and resilience**.

Perhaps we need to use different words than "slack" but rather see this as elasticity or 'breakdown or mental health insurance'!

We can encourage more check-in questions at the start of meetings – such as how are you feeling, what is distracting you right now, and what do you hope to get out of this meeting?

Ultimately we need to **allow leaders to be vulnerable**. This takes time, effort and sometimes part of a big culture shift in an organisation.

Turn our empathetic voice on ourselves – Empathy is a response that wasn't designed for use on ourselves, which is why we find it so difficult to be self-compassionate, evolutionary we're not wired to do it. We have to help people develop their empathetic response by asking the question "**what would you say to a trusted friend?**" This puts the question on the outside, and allows us to hear our own empathetic voice and to reflect on our own emotional experience.

Theme #4 – How do you get leaders to realise that their perceptions of the world are not reality?

Because our brains don't have the bandwidth to process all the information in the world, they **build a model of reality which is filtered by what we believe** based on our experiences, and then we check for what doesn't fit with our representation.

But the best way of getting towards the truth is by talking to more people with very **diverse views and experiences**. We need to be able to **hold reality humbly**, and be able to talk with others and see where our model doesn't match.

For difficult / challenging people, we could ask the question: **"Are you open to hearing another perspective?"**

We could also use the **non-violent communication framework**:

- State observation based on facts of the situation
- Notice I felt [this emotion]
- Make a practical request

Ultimately we want people to **see the value in empathy** and in **communication** and **building relationships**. It's really about being a more well-rounded human being! There is so much we are missing out on by not investigating our internal selves.

VIEW Framework



If you can **inhabit these four states** when having a conversation then magic can happen!

If we're having a conversation with someone we perceive to be narrow minded, we are probably also coming with our own agenda. This creates a 'me vs you' ; 'us vs them' situation. Impartiality is probably the trickiest state. We need to let go of our need for anyone to be less narrow minded than they truly are! Really showing up in that state really can be **transformational**. It helps people to **feel safe**. Allows you to both enter a conversation from a place of mutual curiosity as opposed to a 'my perspective vs your perspective' approach.

Play the 'Perception Game' – where you ask people to count the number of times the word 'the' appears on a page – we often get wrong as our brains cancel out **extra words** (e.g. across different line breaks). This really helps people **experience** the different perceptions that our brains give us which aren't an accurate representation of reality.

Theme #5 – How do you sustain self awareness? How do you avoid people going into a fixed mindset?

Self awareness is not a state we're in 24/7 – rather we should think of it as a cycle of remembering and forgetting, but ideally over time the period of “forgetting” is reduced – **progress is when the half life of an emotional response is shorter**. Rather than being angry for four hours, we're angry for say 15 minutes.

The times that we need self awareness is often the time that we forget the most – when we're angry or triggered! **We don't rise to the moment, we fall to the level of our training**, so having certain practices will help us in these moments.

Having rituals – weekly reflections, or check ins at the start of meetings, and encouraging a different **buffet of approaches or tools** that people can draw on helps people continually develop their self-awareness.



Thoughts from Jonny



I really enjoyed this wide-ranging discussion on self-awareness with Patricia ~ whose research and ideas dovetailed nicely with my own experience.

From my side, it seems that no-one really disagrees that 'self-awareness' is in principle a great idea ~ but when it comes to articulating exactly what this means, how to do it and perhaps most importantly how to justify allocating time and resources to do so... this is where the rubber meets the road.

My main take-away was that there seemed to be genuine enthusiasm and fierce curiosity from participants to explore this terrain for themselves and experiment with ideas to bring this emerging research to the workplace.

As a practical starting point for this I would point towards developing what neuroscientists refer to as 'interoception' ~ which is essentially learning to listen to the rich feedback coming from your body and internal landscape. This real-time somatic self-awareness I believe is most lacking in the workplace.

As a direct result, the risks are that emotional debt can build and as a consequence of that reactivity, fragility and the risks of burnout will all increase.

Thoughts from Patricia



This was a thoroughly enjoyable way to spend some time with interesting and engaged individuals who brought their expertise and experience to the discussion of self-awareness.

The neuroscience of self-awareness makes it clear that being aware of what is happening either internally (interoception) or externally (information from other senses including vision, hearing etc.) is quite hard work. Only by regular practice can we become competent at this. Leaders that want to improve their self-awareness therefore need to be willing to put in the work to benefit from this skill.

The benefits of increased self-awareness for leadership is that individuals with this skill will be much more perceptive to both their own and others' changing emotions and the behaviours that this can drive. This can lead to better social understanding and increased competitive advantage.

Noticing what currently attracts your attention and therefore drives you awareness is a good way to begin the journey of greater self-awareness. Are you driven by "busy" work - the incoming email, the person with a problem, or the latest crisis that requires you to react? Or have you chosen to place your awareness on tasks that are important but not urgent? How do you choose on a day-to-day basis where to place your attention? Deliberately reflecting on these questions might help you to build your self-awareness.

Extra Resources:

Further Reading:

['On Becoming a Resilient Leader'](#) ~ reflections on the definition of resilience

Research Deep Dive:

[The Emotional Resilience in Leadership Report'](#) ~ Jonny's research making the case to invest in 'burnout insurance'.

Practical Tool:

[Resilience Quarterly:](#) an editable Notion Template for self-reflection on resilience.

Podcast Episode:

A [conversation](#) between Jonny and the executive coach Joe Hudson who created the VIEW framework.

Upcoming Training:

A 5-week [Nervous System Mastery](#) bootcamp starting in November.

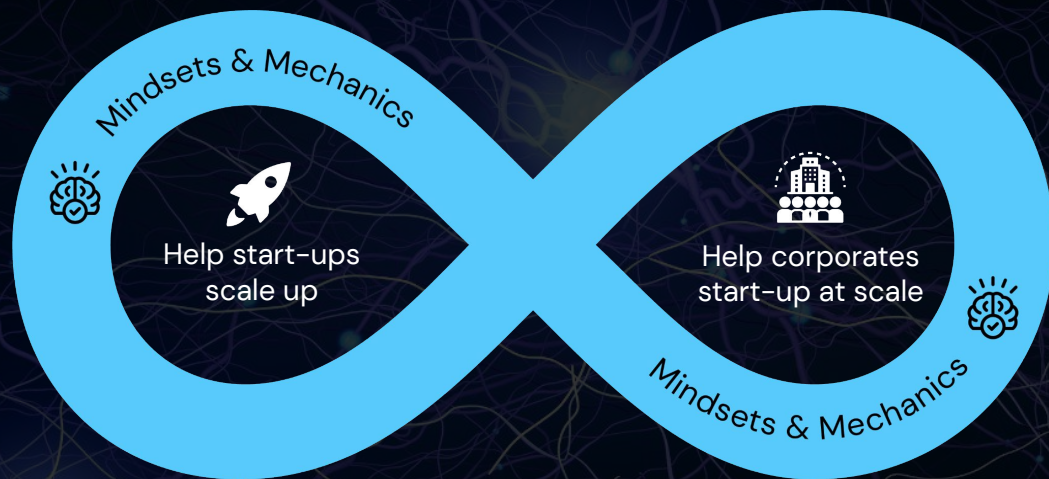
Applied Neuroscience Programme:

Run by Patricia Riddell. [Find out more here](#)



We are T-minus, we unleash the possible

We codify leadership capability from some of the world's most exciting startups and pioneering global businesses as a catalyst for growth



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T-minus Events

Learn more and get in touch

If you would like to explore any of the questions from the event or want to push the boundaries of innovation, leadership, learning, people and culture in your organisation, drop us a line at info@wearetminus.com and let's talk.

