

# **Self-Awareness and Personal Growth: A Core Training for New Leaders**

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# **Self-Awareness and Personal Growth:**

## **A Core Training for New Leaders**

### **ABSTRACT:**

In order to have a successful career, it is widely recognized that a leader needs to get core competencies in marketing, accountability, finance, strategic management, human resource management, management information systems, etc, during his education. These core competencies could be obtained by attending any good MBA programme over the world. But something essential and indispensable is missing: a sense of holistic view of the world, a sense of the self for itself and a sense of the self related to the others and to the environment.

We argue in this paper that Self-Awareness and Personal Growth courses are fundamental for future leaders. In a world dominated in the past years by corporate scandals (Enron, WorldCom, Parmalat, Societe Generale, Khalifa, etc... ) the role of education related to these phenomena is questioned by many scholars. Business Ethics is taught in some MBA programmes but it does not seem to be enough. We postulate that Self-Awareness courses may give to the student a sense of morality and ethics to act in the corporate world in a responsible manner.

Both authors teach Self-Awareness: C.S. Udhayakumar have been taught self-awareness in Amrita Vishva Vidyapeetham University in India for more than ten years, and F. Rodhain have been taught self-awareness in University of Montpellier in France for three years. Both practice guidance and counseling apart from the teaching.

After explaining what Self-Awareness is and why it is a relevant concept for today's good business, we will present in this paper what we teach in India and in France.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2007, in a report called “Leadership in the Social Economy”, the “School for Social Entrepreneurs” in England looked at 12 case studies in order to identify what makes people successful social leaders. Among the several key characteristics they found acute self-awareness (Neuberger 2007). In this report (Edwards-Stuart and Chambers 2007), the authors write that without self-awareness, positive characteristics such as focus, drive and interpersonal skills "become flaws that damage the person and the organisation and leave supporters and staff feeling manipulated". In the same way, “Entrepreneur Magazine” identifies Self-Awareness as one of the top skills for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leader (<http://www.entrepreneur.com/21stleader>).

In this article, we argue that Self-Awareness is a key competence that a leader needs to get during his/her education.

First of all, we will describe the state of the world. Then we will try to give explanations for this situation, using mainly non academic literature: a literature coming from some *spiritual masters*. Then we will present what could be taught in a class of Self-Awareness.

### **1 – STATE OF THE WORLD: FINANCIAL, ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES FOR LEADERS**

The absence of moralisation in financial practices has led to scandals of monumental proportions, as well as the serious sub primes crisis in the United States, itself the underlying cause of the current world crisis. Thus, the major challenges in terms of moralisation (or re-moralisation) of banking practices rest on the shoulders of the students currently being trained in management and entrepreneurship. Yet these challenges, which are fundamental if we consider the major risk of recession brought about by the crisis, are nothing, according to James Leape, compared to the ecological risks: “The world economy is going badly. In

financial terms, we are living beyond our means. But a financial recession is nothing in comparison with the threat of the tightening of our ecological credit [...]. The world must confront this frenzied consumption of the world's natural capital. Just as excessive spending is the source of the recession, Man's excessive consumption is depleting our natural resources to such an extent that we are putting our future prosperity at risk" (James Leape, General Director of WWF International, in the 2008 edition of the "Living Planet" report).

In the last millennium, temperatures have never attained such a rate of increase. Although for many years scientists long debated whether or not human activity has an effect on climate change, this impact is now scientifically recognised. The United Nations IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its activities, stated it explicitly in 2007 in the document "IPCC Summary for Policy Makers". With the report by Nicholas Stern, the former vice-president of the World Bank (<http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk>), it is no longer just scientists who are raising the alarm, but now also economists and financial experts. Most scientists and economists have thus started to become aware of what for too long remained the interest solely of "ecologists".

Research on ecology (Rodhain 2005) has shown that the specialists do agree on their findings more and more. The specialists are now formal in their declarations (United Nations 2003, Lee 2002, Global Environment Facility 2002, World watch Institute 2006, WWF 2008): the levels of ecological imbalance are unprecedented in the whole of humanity's history. Thus, the rate at which species become extinct is 10,000 times higher than in the last 65 million years. The number of cases of cancer is increasing rapidly –  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them are directly linked to Man's degradation of the environment (Belpomme 2004). In addition, the number of natural catastrophes associated with the climate increased by 160% between 1975 and 2001. Finally, we can expect there to be millions of climate-based refugees in the coming years. Such disturbances risk creating social situations of crisis, at a time when a great many individuals

around the world already suffer considerably from the imbalance in the distribution of wealth (it is well known that 20% of the world's population absorbs 90% of world consumption, and that 2/3 of the world's population lives on less than 2 dollars a day, that the number of poor people increased by 100 million in the 1990s and that in 40 years, the number of people suffering from starvation has doubled, from 400 million in 1965 to 842 million in 2005 (Ramonet 2004)). These poor populations in particular, made fragile by their lack of ability to raise funds, risk being the first in line when the violent ecological crises announced finally hit. The issue then will be to be able to work under emergency conditions and develop cooperation between nations.

The latest estimations (see WWF 2008) state that by 2030, if no measures are taken to regulate current lifestyles, the earth's populations will need two planets in order to satisfy their needs.

In 2032, in the hypothesis that no draconian measures will have been taken to regulate the coming problems, some 70% of the planet will have been destroyed and we will be privy to the collapse of social organisation in many countries in the world (conclusions of a United Nations report prepared by 1,100 internationally renowned scientists – see United Nations, 2003).

## **2 – WHY DO WE EXPERIENCE SUCH A DIFFICULT ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMICAL TIME? SOME EXPLANATIONS FROM SPIRITUAL MASTERS**

In order to explain the present state of the world, its problems and solutions, we have borrowed and quoted selected insights and teachings from a few *sages* of the world, both from the East (Krishnamurti, Nisargadatta Mahajaj, Sri Aurobindo and The Mother) as well as the West (Gurdjieff, Tolle).

Once when someone asked why is the world the way it is, George Gurdjieff (1965), a Russian Master said: “As human beings, so the world”. According to him, the external world is a direct result of the inner states of man. Society or the present social conditions on the planet with all its violence, terrorism, humans against humans in the name of nationality, religion, language, political identifications, corruption and its fall-outs, corporate greed, human-induced environmental catastrophes and pollutions of all kinds - in fact the list is seemingly endless – is all the by-product of the way people live, their conditioned attitudes and sheer lack of self-knowledge and a heart bereft of love (Krishnamurti 1958, 1960, 1970, 1973a).

According to Krishnamurti, all talk of progress and achievements, be it scientific or otherwise, is utterly meaningless and immature, as long as human beings are bound by their own beliefs, idiosyncrasies, thoughts and peculiar attitudes; as long as they are the victims of their own delusions and illusions. Most of people spend their life brooding over the past, worrying about the future, bleakly staring at the present, knowing not what to do or not do. Humans are constantly engaged all their lives, preparing, preparing and preparing only to meet life unprepared (Krishnamurti 1953, 1964).

According to the *spiritual masters*, human beings spend their life looking outside for happiness, when happiness has to be found inside. People search for happiness and peace in everything, in every person, in every place, situation, in every passing experience, in every corner of the world except the one place where it really is – within their own selves! This race creates tremendous amount of stress within and without, which leads to dissatisfaction and utter frustration eventually giving rise to human automations, more dead than alive, completely drained of all physical and mental energy, incapable of clarity and right perception and therefore right understanding (Krishnamurti 1954, 1973b).

In this maddening rush towards a non-existent destination, do people, even once, pause and ask themselves why they are living the way they live? Why is it that in spite of all their

sincere efforts to be happy, they never really remain so? always asks Krishnamurti in his public talks.

According to him, if humanity has to awaken to its own transcendental, boundless nature thus paving way for an enlightened, highly evolved life and culture on planet earth, it is absolutely essential and imperative that humans take a 180-degree turn, re-look at themselves and their lives and consciously, deliberately put aside, drop or destroy all their religious, national, communal, racial, linguistic and every other identifications and trappings within themselves that imprison them and has been imprisoning them for a long time.

Everybody, all of life, every form of life and manifestation continuously seek that which can give complete fulfillment, a very deep sense of fulfillment (Krishnamurti 1956). People crave for love, to be loved, to be cared for most of their lives, they want to be tightly hugged, to be showered with affection, to know that there is someone or others who will really miss them when they are no more. Every human being, nay all life, is ever in search of that lasting peace and love for which they roam around the whole world, only to return in vain (Krishnamurti 1974).

We may be wealthy beyond compare, have umpteen degrees behind our names, have a top, secure position in an already degenerating society but without self – knowledge, without this deep understanding of oneself and therefore radical transformation of the human psyche, according to Krishnamurti, our life is in vain.

### **3 – WHY SELF-AWARENESS CLASSES FOR NEW ENTREPRENEURS?**

Tolle (2008) says that a new world is coming. According to him, the mankind will either evolve dramatically or not survive. According to the *sages*, everyone needs Self-Awareness, because only a total transformation in the human may therefore conduct to a total

transformation in the world, which is needed, not only according to the *spiritual masters* but also according to scientists in the field of ecology.

One is a human being first and then only manager, executive, scientist, businessperson, doctor, teacher, engineer and so on. But, if researchers on ecology are right, entrepreneurs may have to be more exposed to the dramatic changes that may happen in the society. They will have to make decision very fast on what should be done to affront the ecological and social changes. If they don't know much about themselves, they may not efficiently deal with stress and interact with other people.

According to the masters, until and unless one understands himself/herself, he/she can never understand another. If one understands himself/herself, he/she understands everything, and then can make better decisions and deal better with people.

#### **4 – HOW TO TEACH SELF-AWARENESS: SOME CUES FROM TWO DIFFERENT CULTURAL TEACHING ENVIRONMENTS**

The two authors of this article teach Self-Awareness and Personal Growth, one in the East and one in the West. We will first present what is taught in an Indian University and then in a French University.

We both try, in our teaching, to be holistic and all encompassing. Our attempt is to lead to harmonious development and growth of the total human being which will eventually give rise to individuals who are whole and integrated.

#### **SELF-AWARENESS CLASSES IN AN INDIA MBA PROGRAM**

This course on Self Awareness is taught for all the PG students of the Amrita Viswa Vidyapeetham University, Coimbatore and is a part of their academic curriculum. Each contact class or session lasts anywhere from 90 to about 150 minutes duration and is

scheduled once a week for about six months (one semester) to about one and half years (three semesters). This unique programme is in existence in the University for than 12 years now.

The course on Self-Awareness is essentially an experiential learning programme based on the teachings and revelations of enlightened minds of the past and present of different countries/places, especially, Bharatavarsha. In this course the primary emphasis is on the individual, the person and his/her entire personality structure, both the inner as well as the outer. The course endeavours to instill a firm foundation for the holistic development and growth of the individuals in all spheres and dimensions of existence. This course, in its interactive proceedings, is an attempt to create a congenial ambience, in which both the teacher and the taught ask, nourish and sustain fundamental questions with an abiding sense of urgency, concern and openness without being carried away by superficial explanations and verbal wranglings. By offering a variety of inputs drawn from different sources from all over the world, the course strives to bring about a conscious shift of focus from the ordinary to the extraordinary; unreal to the real; transitory to the eternal; mediocrity to excellence through a process of dynamic dialogues and penetrating insights. This course is an effort to revive the deep felt need for self-knowledge first and foremost before anything else.

### **SELF-AWARENESS CLASSES IN A FRENCH UNIVERSITY**

The word education comes from the Greek work “educare” which means “to draw out”, “unfold”, “to bring forth”, etc. Unfortunately, modern day education, in most institutions the world over can be appropriately called “headucation”, which simply means “information overload”, “stuffing one’s head with all kinds of data” and so on. In this class we do not give much information or data to the students. Instead, we talk very little, and try to make them talk and make them express whatever they understand for themselves.

Bateson (1980) distinguished three levels of learning. In the first level, learning appears as a direct consequence of absorbing the information transmitted which is interesting up to a point but does not have any long term impact on the learner's vision of the world or personality. In the second level, learning is re-appropriation of the information transmitted in such a way that the behaviour of the learner is able to evolve. The learner can thus change part of his vision of the world, but the change nevertheless remains limited to a single part. Finally, in the third level, learning takes place when the student becomes aware of his vision of the world in general, the way in which his representations have an influence on his personality, and the way in which he could change these representations, as well as the impact that these changes could have on both his identity and his personal development. The ambition of our approach is to be based on the third level of learning defined by Bateson. Like Galileo, who said: "You cannot *teach* a man anything; you can only help him *discover* it in himself", the trainer's approach consists in helping the learner discover himself, by himself. The tools used have two different natures: theoretical tools and practical tools. The theoretical tools are essentially focused on the transmission of system thinking (Le Moigne 1990a, 1990b), complex thinking (Morin 1977, 1980, 1986, 1991, 2001, 2004), and knowledge of knowledge – that is, the neurological processes at work when accessing reality. It is a question of transmitting to students the latest knowledge regarding the acquisition of knowledge in Man and the construction of knowledge phenomena, so that they might become aware of the way in which the representations they forge have an influence on their world vision. This means becoming aware of their own "subjectivity" in the approach to reality. Regarding system thinking and complex thinking, this means pushing learners to try and broaden their field of vision, but also to try and flush out all the simplifying thoughts and adopt as second nature an attitude consisting of systematically looking for a causal relationship in all relationships presented as linear. Subjectivity and complexity are intimately linked for two main reasons. First, the less

aware we are of our subjectivity, the greater the risk of adopting a mutilating approach that denies complexity. There is no such thing as neutrality in observation whilst the learner uses his intellect alone as a means of approaching reality. The less such consciousness is present in students, the more they will be able to resort with confidence to reductionist techniques and methods. Secondly, the intellect alone is only a fragment. If intellectual knowledge is mutilating, as we have hypothesised, it is because it is fragmentary. Learners who try to approach reality with their own subjectivity reduced to their intellect alone then risk finding it difficult to attain this reality as the intellect cannot take them to the whole (Damasio 2001).

Regarding the practical side, this consists of a series of practical situations (individual and in groups) that should allow students to: 1) Become aware of their emotions and the role they play in the perception of reality and day-to-day decision-making, 2) Become aware of their bodies and the role they play in the perception of reality and day-to-day decision-making, 3) Become aware of their representations (stored knowledge – static aspect) and the way in which they influence their perception of reality and how they also influence their decision-making, 4) Become aware of the psychological processes (dynamic aspect) used to understand the object and the way in which these processes have an influence on decision-making, and 5) Become aware of their communicational mode, the way in which the learners “listen” both to others in communication situations and to themselves, the way in which they express themselves, as well as the way this communicational mode has an influence on their perception of reality and decision-making.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the teachers and researchers in the fields of economics and management science have been forced to recognise the importance of the responsibility of leaders, entrepreneurs and decision makers in recent crises, and to identify as essential that executives and directors

use their power in a responsible and ethical manner (Freeman 1984, Näsi 1995, Carroll and Buchholtz 2000, Joyner and Payne 2002, Daft 2005, Pruzan *et al.* 2007), the question of training as a means of attaining these aims remains little studied.

Our ambition is to introduce subjects worthy of reflection so as to answer this crucial question and propose highly practical training courses, whilst keeping in mind that the most finely-tuned validation can only be made in the mid-, or even long, term when the students, once employed, have had the opportunity to use what they have learned in their places of work. This means, once they have been able to put into practice their capacity to identify true-life situations and avoid falling into the trap of their own functioning by not reducing complexity but instead confronting it without complex. This should result in them making enlightened, responsible and ethical decisions, at worst making it possible to avoid worsening the economic, ecological and social situation or, at best, improve it.

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