



White paper

# Leadership excellence through self-awareness

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Even with a long résumé of successes and qualifications – success climbing organizational ladders, enviable technical expertise, a track record of visionary innovation – every leader has something they can't seem to master. Perhaps it's an inability to finally push signature initiatives over the finish line. Perhaps your organization's teams cannot consistently pull together and collaborate at top efficiency. Maybe it's a tendency to lose your cool in, or avoid altogether, stressful interactions with employees.

No matter what you have accomplished as a leader, these lingering pain points can limit your organization's accomplishments. What could be the cause? Most people have subtle, unexamined motivations or beliefs that can sabotage successful relationships and derail success as a leader. In other words, you're probably up against barriers in yourself you don't even know are there.

Unlocking those stubborn areas where you fall just short requires a deep, honest, objective examination and acceptance of your core self. That examination can reveal otherwise hidden root causes of your thoughts and behaviors – and the root causes of the results you are getting from the organization you lead. Improved self-awareness could be the key to reaching the pinnacle of success as a leader.

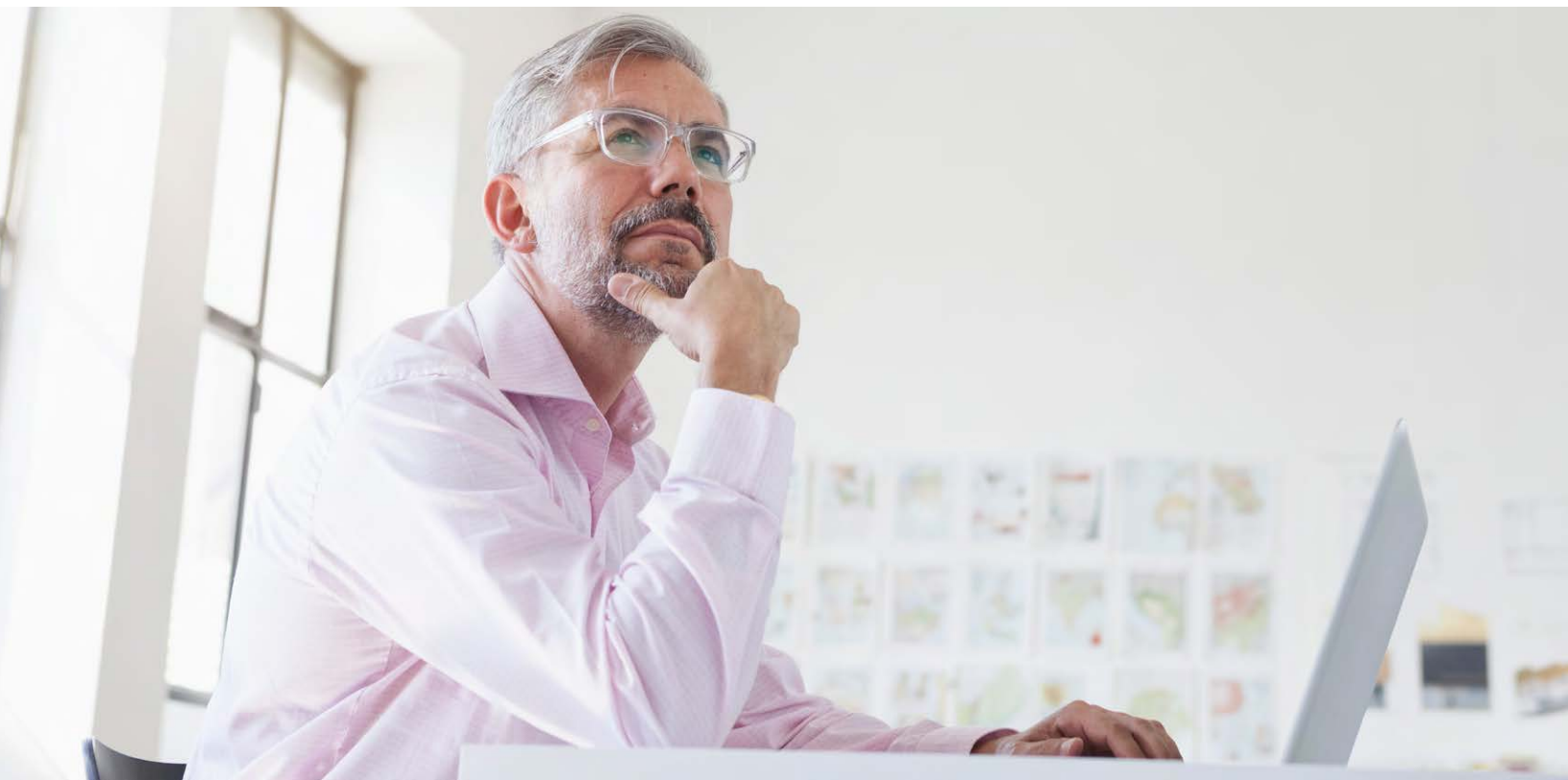
## **The increasing importance of self-awareness**

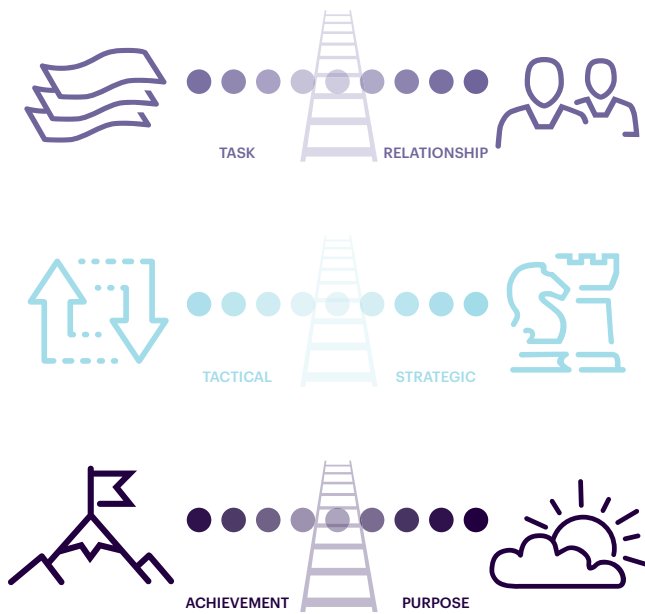
Deep self-awareness is important for health and success at any point in a career. It becomes progressively more crucial for rising leaders – it can even be the deciding factor in reaching the highest levels of achievement.

A leader needs to know the underlying causes of her or his leadership shortcomings and how to correct them. You may have shown a knack for strategic thinking, building relationships or even inspiring focus on purpose – these might be part of the reason you've advanced this far. But the criteria is no longer “has a knack” or “has great potential.” It is now “must deliver substantial results.” You might have advanced this far without deep self-awareness. But you likely cannot reach the highest level of achievement without it.

As you progress through your career and rise through the ranks of organizations, things change. The duties that make up your day-to-day work evolve. The expectations of you and your teams grow.

Leaders must shift their thinking away from tactical and toward strategic, their motivations away from a drive for achievement and toward a focus on purpose, and perhaps most importantly, their people skills from a task-management to a relationship-building orientation.





Each of these shifts requires the rising leader to acquire new sets of competencies and knowledge. The shifts challenge the leader to step out of her or his comfort zone and be subjected to more scrutiny and chances of failure. Mismanaging the shifts spells failure or stagnation for you, and worse, for your organization and its people.

Better self-awareness helps leaders navigate these shifts by uncovering patterns that perpetuate ingrained thoughts and behaviors. Understanding those patterns enables the leader to adapt and change in response to new challenges. Self-awareness can help you meet new demands by pushing your performance beyond what you assumed to be your limits.

## Unawareness

To appreciate the vital importance of self-awareness, it helps to consider unawareness and its consequences.

Self-limiting beliefs are fundamental, often unconscious, beliefs about your abilities that stunt your achievement. We all have a set of beliefs about what we do well, what we can achieve and where our abilities fall short.<sup>1</sup> Many of these beliefs can be accurate. Some, however, were picked up during particularly formative years, perhaps early in childhood, and are not necessarily true. It could be a parent believed you would never achieve the highest levels of success, and you internalized that belief. You may have been particularly hurt by a failure early in life and have since avoided challenges that could end in such failure.

You likely never even think about and examine these beliefs. Self-limiting beliefs, however, subtly color perceptions, thoughts and behaviors. The net effect of these subtle influences is consistent patterns of thought, judgment, decision-making and behaviors. For example, you might have gotten in the habit of avoiding those career moments that challenge you to rise to a new level. You might have missed out on hundreds of opportunities to advance in your career because you've avoided all but "sure things." Or the behavior pattern can be interpersonal – peers, managers and

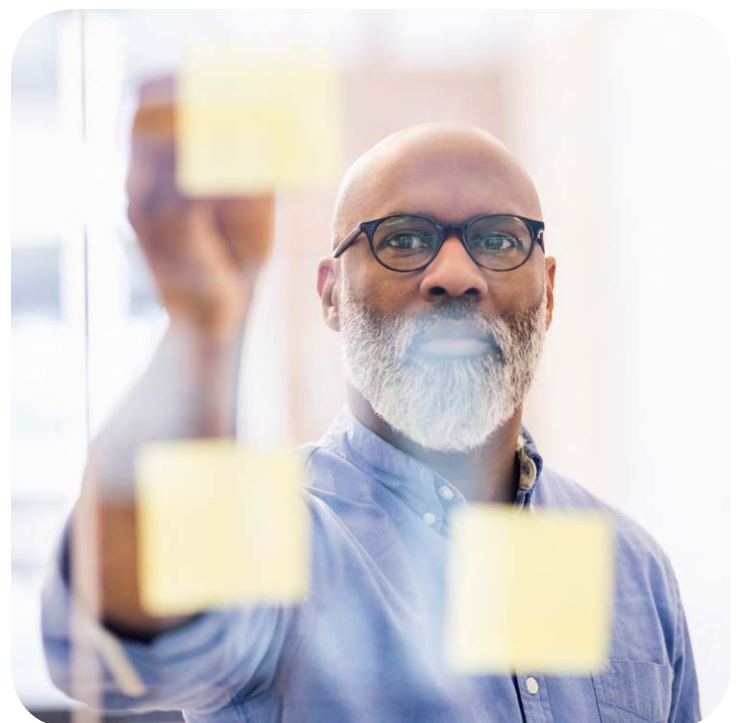
employees could have a negative perception of your character you cannot see or understand. You might avoid collaborating with that colleague who could accelerate an important project but might outshine you in the process. You might lose your composure in a pressurized situation, raising questions in executives' minds about your potential and losing the faith of your teams.

In short, self-limiting beliefs can close off pathways to grow and achieve. They can blind you, and your organization, to opportunities to succeed.

Automatic behaviors are everyday autopilot habits that unfold outside of our awareness. Research suggests 40% of everyday behaviors are automatic – they happen without thought or deliberation.<sup>2</sup> Think about the routine that unfolds when you sit down to start work each day. Do you open your email first? Check your to-do list? Check your social media outlets on your phone? Your routine probably unfolds without your consciously thinking about each action and deciding to take it.

Over time, routine, automatic behaviors and thoughts become harder to change. In fact, the brain is set up to form automatic behaviors. Effortful thinking demands resources, so routine behaviors are relegated to parts of the brain that run without having to consciously think.<sup>3</sup> Over time, these patterns become ingrained, and automatic behaviors become harder and harder to change.

The problem is some of your automatic behaviors could be barriers to your leadership objectives. They are, by definition, outside of your awareness – their very nature makes them hard to see and change.



## Blind spots

Blind spots are stubborn biases or cognitive tendencies that lead to repeated mistakes. A host of well-documented thinking biases color the decisions we make daily (see the popular books *Thinking, Fast and Slow*,<sup>4</sup> and *Predictably Irrational*<sup>5</sup>). One striking example of such a bias that influences daily interactions is the confirmation bias. This is an unconscious tendency to perceive and remember information that supports the opinions you already have and selectively ignore opposing information.<sup>6</sup> The confirmation bias happens outside of your awareness – so even if you have the best intentions to be objective, your brain can still filter out opposing information or over-weight supporting information.

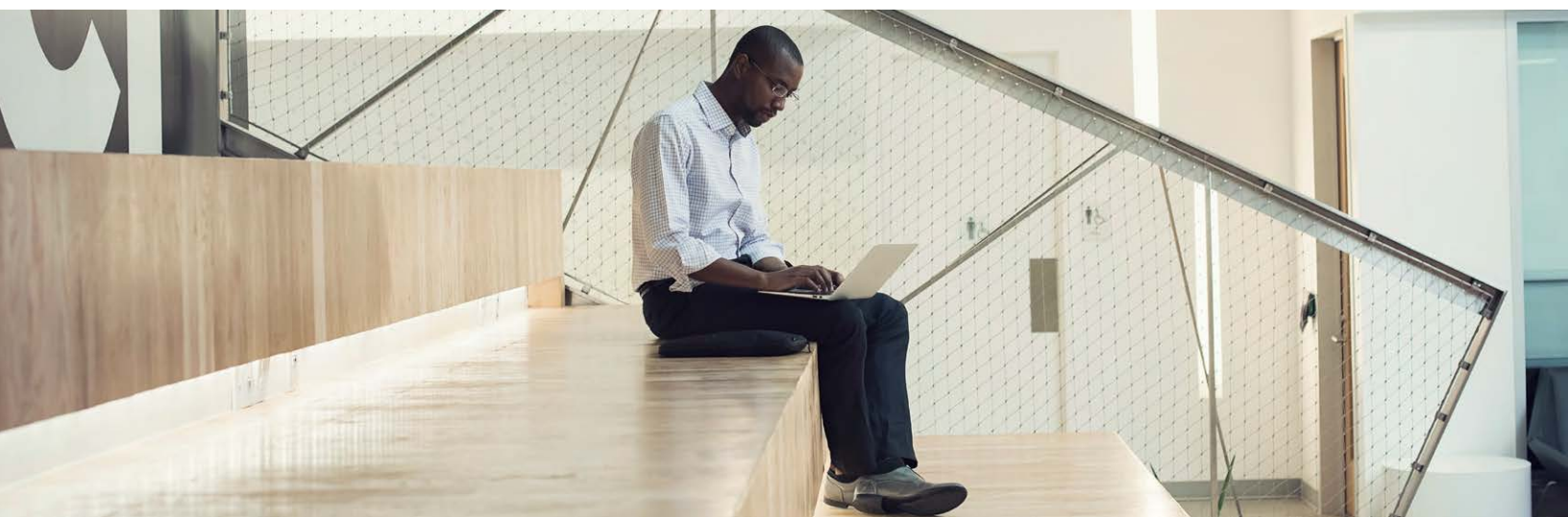
Another insidious property of the human brain is the tendency to underestimate how biased we are or falsely believe we are not biased at all.<sup>7</sup> This “bias blind spot” works as another barrier to identifying, and changing, some fundamental aspects of yourself that could be limiting your growth. Biases are fundamental properties of the human brain – they make it easier to navigate through the many decisions and judgments we have to make each day, because they help us avoid reanalyzing every situation. The bias blind spot, however, prevents us from recognizing when and how biases negatively influence us. It makes it harder to correct when biases could be negatively influencing our decisions and careers.

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## Awareness

Building true self-awareness requires a deliberate, frank examination of deep beliefs, cognitive patterns and automatic behaviors. This is unlikely to happen naturally in the course of the typical executive’s career path, and it cannot be accomplished in a quick lesson. A program of building self-awareness needs to be based in sound psychological science and best practices in training and assessment. Such a program requires several core components.

- 1 A self-awareness program should identify some beliefs, biases and blind spots influencing your career. This normally requires getting out of the normal work context and spending time thinking about topics that don't get attention in the normal workday. It requires substantial introspection, which should be guided by experienced facilitators. This exercise should examine what others might be seeing that you are not aware of and connect unwanted results to your own unconscious patterns of thought and behavior.
- 2 Building self-awareness then requires an understanding of the consequences of your self-limiting beliefs for your relationships. This requires feedback from the people with whom you interact at work. A focused 360° evaluation that assesses key competencies can provide this feedback. This feedback should be analyzed in the context of your biases and automatic behaviors. The goal is to uncover how self-limiting beliefs and biases manifest themselves in your behavior and influence others’ perceptions of you.
- 3 Next, a self-awareness program should analyze how self-limiting beliefs and blind spots are operating day to day. It should identify the energy that is poorly deployed supporting erroneous beliefs, protecting oneself from exposure or maintaining the barriers around insecurities. Such analysis should expose how those unseen barriers have been hindering success, be they small relationship successes or larger, longer-term career successes. This process should also expose how biases or self-limiting beliefs are sabotaging your productivity, relationships with others or achievement potential.
- 4 Finally, it's vital that a self-awareness-building program results in an action plan to correct the effects of self-limiting beliefs. There are many effective behavior change strategies that can counteract biases, shed light on blind spots and interrupt the automatic chains of behaviors that unfold when a self-limiting belief is triggered. Self-awareness includes matching the best corrective action plans to individuals’ unique needs. The goals for these behavior changes are to help improve the quality of decisions, relationships, and leadership effectiveness by helping leaders feel and act more genuine and sincerely connect with others.



## Conclusion

Self-limiting beliefs, cognitive biases and blind spots can stunt a leader's career. Self-awareness is a key competency that helps leaders overcome these otherwise stubborn barriers. A science-based, immersive, introspective process is necessary to make sustainable gains in your level of self-awareness.

Ultimately, gaining self-awareness opens up the potential for successes in all areas, especially those aspects of leadership that depend on relationship skills. Self-awareness improves leaders' ability to form valuable collaborative relationships with people all around their organization. It accelerates innovation by allowing leaders to be more comfortable with risking one's self-image. It connects leaders more deeply with organizational goals.

Improved self-awareness and its consequences can make the difference in rising leaders' successful mastery of the shifting priorities in professional life.

## References

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**Steve Swavely, Ph.D.**

Senior Vice President  
Corporate Leadership Consulting Manager

Steve Swavely brings over 35 years of experience to his role of leading development and delivery of corporate leadership development consulting services to the Truist Leadership Institute's clients. Swavely earned his Ph.D. in clinical neuropsychology from Georgia State University.



**Patrick Gallagher, Ph.D.**

Vice President  
Director of Research

Patrick Gallagher leads the Truist Leadership Institute's program of original research, including measurement of employee engagement and the impact of all programs. Gallagher earned a bachelor's degree from The University of Greensboro, a master's in experimental psychology from Wake Forest University and a Ph.D. in social psychology from Duke University, and he has been applying behavioral science in clinical and business settings for eight years.

## Truist Leadership Institute

During the past half-century, Truist Leadership Institute, and its predecessor firm Farr Associates, have developed and refined approaches to business leadership through collaborative work with clients throughout the United States. The Truist Leadership Institute provides organizations with a leadership development partner who helps create dynamic and effective leaders, increase employee retention and improve the bottom line.