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INTERNAL RESEARCH

**CONTINGENCY APPROACH TOWARD THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN SELF-AWARENESS AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS**



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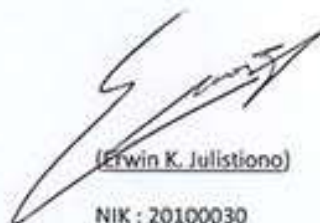
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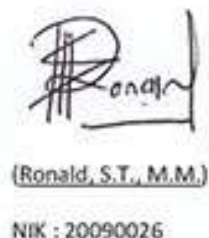
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### Abstract

Some authors in the academic and management areas argue that self-awareness is the central point in developing management skills. However, the definition of self-awareness among different literatures is not consistent, and its limitation is vague. Besides, most of the arguments are not based on the empirical evidence. Therefore, this essay attempts to resolve the problem by providing a different approach toward the argument. The essay utilizes contingency approach in explaining that self-awareness could be the major predictor only if it is supported by particular contingency factors. In doing so, the essay firstly provides a broad definition of both self-awareness and management skills. Next, it illustrates several situations which support and oppose the utilization of self-awareness in building management skills. After that, the essay exercises those situations in discussing and justifying its main argument. Finally, it concludes the argument by providing recommendation toward further studies of relationship between self-awareness and management skills.



## Introduction

Since the introduction of management concept, it has been arguable what crafts excellent managers. In essence, excellent managers are those who possess superior management skills. In their book, Whetten and Cameron (1995) argues that the central component for enhancing management skills is to possess knowledge about ourselves. In other literatures, this knowledge is often called self-awareness. Some articles and studies seem to be supporting this statement. However, this is not always the case. This essay uses contingency approach in dealing with the statement. It argues that self-awareness may or may not be the main factor in enhancing management skills. It depends on the situation faced by and condition of the managers, as well as their responses toward the importance of self-awareness.

In presenting the argument, this essay is divided into several parts. The first part discusses self-awareness in general, including its definition, importance, and correlation with other personal characteristics. The second part describes management skills and their contents, as well as a generic method to develop them. It also mentions the relationship between self-awareness and management skills within the leadership framework. In the third part, the essay firstly explains the concept of contingency approach. After that, it presents supporting situations in which self-awareness indeed become the crux for improving managerial skills. The next part illustrates the counterpart situations, in which the effects of self-awareness trivially and negligibly occur. Finally, some discussions and recommendations are provided, followed by the conclusion.

## Self-awareness

In general, self-awareness is a characteristic which enables someone to understand the self. The understanding includes strengths, weaknesses, emotional traits, needs, and sources of motivation (Latif, 2004). In addition, it also influences the reaction toward other people and situation (Cathcart, 1999). From clinical perspective, self-awareness can be defined as a capacity to objectively identify the self at the same time as sustaining specific knowledge about the self (Prigatano & Schacter, 1991). Within these definitions, Zornada (2005) argues that self-awareness is mainly based on personality traits. However, some authors explain the term as an ability instead of a talent, which can be learned through trainings, studies, experiments, etc (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Varner & Palmer, 2005). Within this later concept, self-awareness can be classified as a skill, either inside or outside of the scope of management skills.



In essence, self-awareness leads to the development of self-knowledge. By having sufficient knowledge about their self, people do not need to change themselves toward a certain role model, they just need to explore their self and realize their individual styles and preferences (Andersson, 2003). By doing so, people would reduce internal pressures toward their self regarding their effort in copying other role models. Cathcart (1999) mentioned that it is possible to have a "fulfilling and meaningful life" without running away from our original characteristics. Within the organization perspective, these individuals reveal better performance in both their jobs and social relationships. Within their professions, highly self-aware individuals tend to be more stable in performing their tasks (Latif, 2004). Moreover, strong emphasis of self-awareness in the organization might lead to new organizational identity, which later influence other individuals' attributes within the organization (Andersson, 2003).

In relation to other personal characteristics, Latif (2004) describes self-awareness as one component of Emotional Intelligence (EI). Similarly, Serio & Epperly (2006) place self-awareness under Emotional Quotient (EQ) competencies, together with self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. They argue that self-awareness is crucial in mirroring oneself in order to take daily improvement steps. Furthermore, as part of EQ competencies, self-awareness is more valid than IQ in predicting future successes (Goleman, 1995). On the other side, as shown in figure 1, self-awareness includes values, cognitive style, orientation toward change, and locus of control (Carlopio, Andrewartha, & Armstrong, 2005). The value, for example, suggests that individuals conduct their task in consistency with their values. If their value matches the organization's value, they would be motivated to have a high performance (Latif, 2004). Besides, perceived value toward skills and the organizational profession would enhance their professional identity and reputation (Evans, 2005).

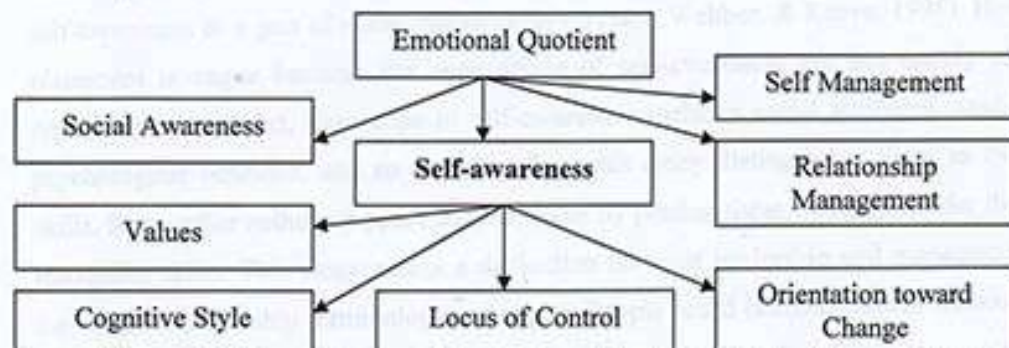


Figure 1: Self-awareness and its relation with other individual characteristics



### Management Skills

Management skills are often described within the organizational perspective. They are defined as superior competencies to accomplish tasks, to influence people, and to control their surroundings (Carlopio et al., 2005). Management skills are crucial requirement for managers and leaders in order to be successful. The skills consist of expressing and communicating visions, setting objectives, planning, delegating, providing feedbacks, and controlling (Zornada, 2005). In the current dynamic and complex environment, management skills also include managing organizational changes (Evans, 2005). In addition, some authors predict that the future management paradigm would be based on coaching, recognizing, and empowering employees, as well as communicating essential organizational knowledge, teamwork, and specific functional skills (Fogli & Whitney, 1998). All these skills can be grouped into personal and interpersonal skills.

In order to improve managerial expertise, managers can exercise both conceptual learning and behavioral practices (Latif, 2004). Conceptual learning is basically learned from other sources, such as training sessions, books, formal degree, discussions, etc; while behavioral practices are conducted through daily activities either inside or outside the organizational environments. Several authors recommends 5-step model for management development; those are skill assessment, skill learning, skill analysis, skill practice, and skill application (Latif, 2004; Whetten & Cameron, 1983). The fundamental of the model says that managers have to acknowledge their weaknesses, learn to overcome these weaknesses, and engage in day-to-day practices. Management development can be implemented for varieties of skills, such as knowledge, planning, analytical, creativity, or other interpersonal qualities (Evans, 2005).

The relationship between self-awareness and management skills is arguable. Some authors place self-awareness as a part of management skills (O'Hara, Webber, & Reeve, 1996). However, this placement is vague because the applications of self-awareness are not merely related with organizational context. The scope of self-awareness includes social attributes, medical scenes, psychological behavior, and so on. Therefore, this essay distinguishes them as two different skills. Some other authors support this statement by placing these two skills under the banner of leadership skills. This essay makes a distinction between leadership and management because the range of leadership terminology is broader. People could become leaders without becoming managers. Thus, leadership skills are consequently broader than management skills.



Nevertheless, both self-awareness and management skills are the core of leadership skills, which enable leaders to outperform their counterparts (Serio & Epperly, 2006; Zornada, 2005).

### **Contingency - Supporting Situations**

Contingency theory is firstly introduced in the late 1960s by Fred Fiedler, in order to response toward preceding theories of Weber's bureaucracy and Taylor's scientific management (Wikipedia, 2006). This theory puts forward contingency factors which uniquely influence organizational circumstances. As a result, managers could not use one standar style or method for every managerial situation in every period of times. The best approach is to identify and make adjustment toward current environmental and managerial variables (Luthans & Stewart, 1977). This essay utilizes contingency theory in order to argue that self-awareness could or could not be a critical factor to enhance management skills. It depends on the contingency factors which exist within the workplace, as well as managers' responses toward them. Several situations are given below in order to support the first statement.

The first situation is to develop management skills by personal learning orientation. High level of self-awareness contributes to a better understanding toward personal learning preference, which leads toward a proactive learning orientation (Porter & Tansky, 1999). People with this orientation consider that individual characteristics and skills are not stagnant and can be well-improved by learning activities. One of these expandable skills is management skills. In addition, Andersson (2003) argues that both personal and interpersonal aspects of management skills are based on self-awareness. People need to understand their self before trying to understand others. In other words, managers need to have knowledge of their self in order to increase personal styles and preferences which later lead to development of interpersonal competencies (Latif, 2004).

The second situation is to improve management skills by learning from others. It could be in the forms of feedbacks, discussions, teamwork, etc. In these situations, self-awareness determines the individuals' willingness and openness toward the external inputs. McCabe (2005) claims that leaders need to develop a "fierce self-awareness" in order to improve their management skills regarding the commonly perceived drawbacks of their managerial style. For example, a soft manager who emphasizes on empowering employees might be perceived as a weak and incapable manager. Moreover, McCabe suggests 360-degree feedbacks in order to diminish this problem, which might come from supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates. However, the



success of the feedbacks all depends on the individual self-awareness in digesting and reflecting upon these feedbacks. Additionally, a previous study designed for MBA students with engineering degree reveals that self-awareness helps them in participating with peer discussions and feedbacks (O'Hara et al., 1996), by which they can advance their management skills.

The third situation is using self-awareness to adjust with dynamic environments. The organizational designs are continuously changing overtime. This nature of employment demands managers to be flexible toward the complex environmental factors. Managers have to constantly learning and adjusting in order to compete within their roles (Fogli & Whitney, 1998). Self-awareness enables managers to acknowledge the gap between individual capacities and environmental demands. This acknowledgement helps managers to learn specific management skills which are needed to narrow the gap. The study of expatriates in Singapore exposes self-awareness as the key success of expatriation (Varner & Palmer, 2005). This study concludes that self-awareness has to be an integral part of expatriate training before and during the overseas placement, so that expatriates can hold a better focus on specific aspects of target culture.

The last supporting situation is particularly for micro industries, with a very small number of employees and the owner holds the role as the manager. These owner-managers learn management skills mostly from their experience and self-reflection, instead of formal education (Schaper, Campo, & Imukuka, 2005). Learning from experience is a sign of a strong internal locus of control, which is a part of self-awareness skills. This self learning often based on practical activities and reflections upon them (Choueke & Armstrong, 1998). Besides, self-awareness in this situation helps the owner-managers to evaluate feedback and learn from other successful partners or competitors.

### **Opposing Situations**

The previous situations reinforce self-awareness as the fundamental requirement in developing management competencies. However, there are other situations where personal understanding can be neglected. The next opposing situations suggest that successful managers with excellence managerial skills are not always based on self-awareness. It does not imply that self-awareness contributes nothing nor even brings negative influences toward the development of management skills. Nevertheless, the positive influences are minor and insignificant. In various situations, there are some contingency factors which prevent self-awareness to become the core influence toward managerial skill developments.



This first situation based on the study conducted by Wood and Vilkinas (2005) regarding characteristics of successful CEOs. In this case, successful CEOs are representatives of people who possess high-quality management skills. In this study, the authors have surveyed 20 CEOs and recognized 7 characteristics, in which self-awareness has been ranked as the last one. The major predictors of success seem to be achievement orientation, which is well supported by previous researchers (Kets de Vries & Florent-Treacy, 2002). The study concludes that self-awareness is merely to be a reflective individual quality. Thus, it doesn't have an immediate impact upon managers' performance. The CEOs failed to acknowledge direct link between their perceived self-awareness and their abilities. In this situation, self-awareness is still recognized as one contributor, even though it only offers a minor impact toward management skills' expansion.

The second situation is occurred in the previously established management concept of Taylorism. Nowadays, Tylor's scientific management is still applicable, especially for manufacturing function of an organization where highly standardize procedures applied. Within this stable environment and centralized functional design, managers' qualifications are mainly based on technical skills, instead of personal or relational skills. Thus, self-awareness for these particular managerial roles is less significant for improving management skills. Within this type of managerial roles, the most important skills are mechanical skills, administrative skills, consistency, and controlling outputs.

The third situation deals with dilemmatic circumstances, where positive influences from self-awareness like values are contradicted with the professionalism of the managerial position. Many cases regarding this situation are related with ethical dilemma. On one hand, self-awareness leads managers to act and react based on their personal values and preferences. On the other hand, individuals' perceived values sometimes articulate an opposite argument toward organizational values and preferences. For instance, a dilemmatic case in White Lumber company forces its salesperson, to sell woods based on a customer order, even though he knows that the woods might be misused by the end user (Jones, 2004). Professionalism of his position demands him to ignore his personal value of harmony or moral rights. In this kind of situations, self-awareness might prohibit managers in taking objective and professional decisions, which is a crucial part of management skills.



### Discussion & Recommendation

Nowadays, most of the literatures and journals agree with supporting situations. Many authors argue how self-awareness being the central of personal and interpersonal quality development including management skills. However, most of the arguments are merely based on the common sense. It is rational that people need to understand what lies beneath their self before reaching other individuals' territory. Nevertheless, most of today's articles fail to provide empirical evidence and research regarding this argument. Besides, there is no standard definition and limitation of self-awareness. Therefore, different arguments possibly use different definitions and might have different implications toward the final results. In other words, similarity of arguments between authors could be based on different perspective toward either self-awareness or management skills.

On the other hand, the counter situations are somehow failed to objectively explain the relationship between self-awareness and management skills. They argue based on a narrow perspective where self-awareness does not have immediate impact upon management skills. For instance, in the first opposing situation, self-awareness is classified as a distinctive characteristic of CEOs. However, it is highly possible that self-awareness is actually an integral part of the achievement orientation or other characteristics. Thus, self-awareness can still be considered as one of the main components for increasing the level of management skills. Once again, the problem lies within the classification of the author toward self-awareness. In addition, the second situation of the scientific management model fails to realize that self-awareness also contributes in the learning process of technical skills. The cognitive style aspect of self-awareness determines the best individual methods in gathering and evaluation information (Carlopio et al., 2005).

Either position presented above is arguable. It depends on how individual managers perceive their personal self-awareness. Different individuals might have a different perception based on their existing contingency factors. Therefore, this essay recommends that the next step for resolving this argument is to develop a fixed limitation for both self-awareness and management skills. After that, detail studies can be conducted to link each component of self-awareness with each of management skills. The next recommendation is to identify types of potential contingency factors in this scope, such as organizational structure, culture, social relationship, individual understanding toward the importance of self-awareness, etc. By doing so, individual managers are able to analyze their own condition.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, self-awareness is essentially self knowledge of personal strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. While, management skills are described as necessary skills for managers in the organizational environments, both personal and interpersonal qualities. The different situations presented above deny that self-awareness would always be the central component in developing management skills. However, those situations above are only limited samples of the real circumstances in the organizational background. In a specific workplace environment, more varieties of contingency factors might apply. Thus, every single case would response differently toward the main argument of the essay, whether self-awareness could or could not be the main factor of developing managerial skills. Therefore, the essay concludes that self-awareness could become the key predictor of success in developing management skills only if the associated manager perceive so and the external factors allow it. Further studies need to be conducted in order to explore different components of both self-awareness and management skills, and the potential relationships between those components.

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