

The inner game of leadership: Mastering your character and ego

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There is a blunt but effective thought experiment for anyone in a leadership role: if you see yourself as the village hero, but everyone you lead sees you as the village idiot, you have a problem. This gap—the chasm between our intent and our impact, between our self-perception and how we are actually perceived—is where leadership potential goes to die. It's a blind spot that can render even the most brilliant strategies useless, because leadership is ultimately a human endeavour. Put simply, if your team doesn't trust you, respect you, or understand you, they won't follow you.

The journey to becoming an effective leader, therefore, doesn't start with learning management techniques; it starts with the rigorous, often uncomfortable, work of looking in the mirror. It's about moving beyond romantic ideologies of what a leader *should* be and grounding your practice in an evidence-based understanding of yourself. This is the inner game of leadership. It's about building a foundation of self-awareness so solid that it can support the weight of responsibility, withstand the pressure of tough decisions, and earn the trust of those you lead.

This blog explores the foundational elements of the inner game of leadership. It will provide practical frameworks for building self-awareness, understanding the critical difference between a healthy and an unhealthy ego, and embracing the principles of authentic leadership.

A practical model for seeing yourself clearly: The Johari Window

The first step in closing the 'hero-idiot' gap is to get an honest assessment of your own blind spots. A powerful tool for this is the **Johari Window**, a model developed by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (1955), designed to improve self-awareness and interpersonal relationships (Gardiner, 2023). The Johari Window maps our personality and behaviours into four distinct areas as shown in **Figure 1**:

1. **The Arena:** This represents the traits, behaviours, and knowledge that are known to both you and to others. This is the space of transparency, trust, and effective communication. The goal of a developing leader is to expand this area, creating a culture of openness.
2. **The Blind Spot:** This contains information that others know about you, but you don't know about yourself. This is where your unintended impact resides—the way your tone shuts down discussion, or the nervous habit that undermines your credibility. As leadership expert Ed Batista notes, "We can't just sit back and wait for feedback to be offered, particularly when we're in a leadership role" (Digital Leaders, 2024)
3. **The Facade:** This includes what you know about yourself but choose to keep hidden from others. While some privacy is necessary, an overly large hidden area can signal a lack of trust and prevent genuine connection.

4. **The Unknown Area:** This represents aspects of the self—like untapped potential or unconscious motives—that are unknown to both you and to others.

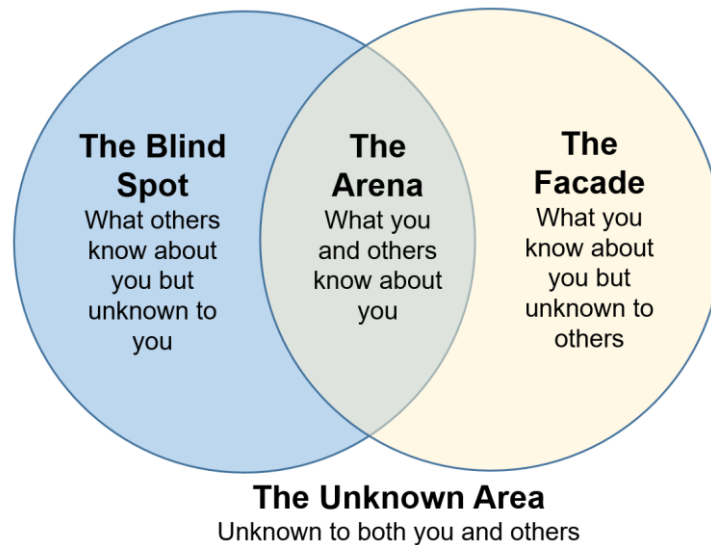


Figure 1. A Venn diagram representation of The Johari Window (Adapted from BiteSize Learning (n.d.))

The Johari Window is not a static personality test; it is a dynamic model for growth. A leader can intentionally expand their arena by engaging in two courageous behaviours: actively and consistently **soliciting feedback** from others to shrink their blind spot, and practising appropriate and willing **self-disclosure** to reduce their facade (Gardiner, 2023). This transforms self-awareness from a passive state into an active, continuous discipline, aligning with the first ADF Leadership Principle: “Know yourself and seek self-improvement” (Australian Defence Force, 2021). This active pursuit of self-awareness is not only about seeing ourselves clearly—it is also the primary tool for confronting the biggest obstacle to effective leadership: our own ego.

Mastering the double-edged sword of the ego

Of course, any discussion of the self must confront the ego. A **healthy ego** is the source of the self-confidence and resilience needed to make tough calls and persevere through adversity. The danger lies in the **unhealthy ego**, which is often an inflated sense of self-importance that masks deep-seated insecurity and fear (All-in strategies, 2025; Staik, 2012). When this unhealthy ego is in the driver's seat, the consequences are invariably destructive. Research has identified several key indicators of an unhealthy, ego-driven leader (White, 2024; Westover, 2024; Pham, 2025; Hagburg, 2024):

- **Poor Decision-Making:** The need to be right overrides the need to get it right.
- **Resistance to Feedback:** Constructive criticism is interpreted as a personal attack.
- **Stifled Collaboration:** Ego-driven leaders create a competitive environment where their voice dominates and others' input is disregarded.
- **Self-Aggrandisement:** A constant need for validation leads to taking all the credit for successes while blaming others for failures.

The primary task of an authentic leader is not to suppress their ego, but to manage it through conscious self-regulation. This requires **humility**—the essential counterbalance that keeps the ego in its healthy, productive range (Westover, 2024). The conscious self-regulation required to manage the ego is not an isolated skill, it is a central component of a

broader, evidence-based approach to leadership known as Authentic Leadership Theory, which provides a complete framework for leading with integrity.

From vague 'Character' to the science of authentic leadership

The discipline of self-awareness is the cornerstone of **Authentic Leadership Theory** (Field, 2021; Emuwa, 2013; Western Governors University, 2020). This isn't pseudo-science; it's a robust framework that defines leadership as a pattern of behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate (Duarte, Ribeiro, Semedo, & Gomes, 2021; Celestine, 2021). It provides a scientifically validated path to developing 'character'—"the set of personal qualities that are unique to you and inform motivation and guide conduct (Australian Defence Force, 2023)".

Character is fundamentally "who you are when no one is watching, (Australian Defence Force, 2021)"—**the daily choice of right and wrong**. This moral quality acts as the "psychological muscle that moral conduct requires. (Australian Defence Force, 2023)" It is built on core virtues such as **courage, integrity, and respect**. Ultimately, character in the profession of arms is about developing **practical wisdom**. It enables leaders to transcend self-interest (me versus us) and overcome biases (us versus them) (Australian Defence Force, 2023).

Research has identified four core components of authentic leadership (Emuwa, 2013; Western Governors University, 2020; Johnson, 2019):

1. **Self-awareness:** A deep understanding of one's own values, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses.
2. **Relational transparency:** Presenting your genuine self to others, sharing information, and expressing true thoughts and feelings as appropriate to build trust.
3. **Internalised moral perspective:** Being guided by internal moral standards and values, rather than by external pressures.
4. **Balanced processing:** Objectively analysing all relevant data before making a decision, including actively soliciting views that challenge your own.

By adopting this framework, a leader's development moves from a vague aspiration of 'building character' to a concrete practice of expanding self-awareness, seeking feedback, practising transparency, and making decisions that are both principled and well-informed.

A cautionary tale

I have to admit, my time as a leader has, on occasion, been marred by letting my ego infect my thoughts and poison my decisions. This has manifested through me at times prioritising being 'one of the boys' and leading poor behaviour from the front. As the senior member in many instances, **not only was I 'top cover,' I was top contributor**. Having this spelt out to me by not one but two astute (and angry) Commanding Officers was a jarring experience; however, their 'counsel' afforded me an opportunity to **understand my blind spots** (and attitude). From my painful leadership experience, I have learnt that character and ego are constantly vying for dominance within us:

The more we submit to the demands of ego, the larger the ego grows, and the more control we give to the ego, the more irritable, restless, and frustrated we become. This is because things will inevitably not always turn out as we would like them to (Kelly, 2021).

The above stark example describes a time where I let my unhealthy ego dictate my behaviour, directly creating the **'hero-idiot' gap**. Viewed through the theoretical framework lens, here are the key takeaways I learnt the hard way:

1. **The unhealthy ego and the Blind Spot:** My desire to be seen as 'one of the boys' led

me to not only condone but lead poor behaviour from the front. This was my unhealthy ego in the driver's seat, manifesting in several destructive ways identified by researchers. My judgment was clouded by poor decision-making, where the ego's need for social validation overrode the need to uphold standards. This behaviour existed squarely in my blind spot; it was obvious to my superiors how my actions were undermining my credibility, but I was deliberately ignoring the negative impact I was having.

2. **The jarring feedback and the Johari Window:** The experience of being counselled by two angry COs was the Johari Window operating in the most direct way imaginable. It was unwelcome and, to me, unwarranted—a classic sign of resistance to feedback from an unhealthy ego. However, their counsel forced information from my blind spot into the arena, the space of shared knowledge where growth can occur. This fulfilled the first ADF Leadership Principle: I was forced to 'know myself and seek self-improvement.'
3. **The turn towards authentic leadership:** This painful leadership lesson was a catalyst for me to focus on the core components of authentic leadership:
 - It demanded a radical increase in self-awareness by forcing me to confront the chasm between my intent and my impact.
 - It taught me the necessity of balanced processing—the ability to objectively analyse feedback—especially views that challenged my ego.
 - Most importantly, it strengthened my internalised moral perspective, making it clear that leadership character is defined by who you are when no one is watching, and by having the courage to transcend self-interest for the good of the team.

From this experience, I learned that character and ego are in constant tension. An unmanaged ego will always enlarge your blind spots and resist the very feedback needed to become a better leader. Embracing authenticity means having the humility to listen, learn, and close the gap between the leader you think you are and the leader your team needs you to be. The work of knowing yourself, embracing authenticity, and managing your ego is the essential, non-negotiable foundation for effective leadership. It's the internal alignment that enables you to consistently show up with integrity and the strength to lead others. If you've got this far, what are you going to do with this knowledge? Here's a tip, take time this week to ask two colleagues for some honest feedback and reflect on one blind spot. Oh, and do the same next week...

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