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Introspection and Emotional Vulnerability as Leader Development and Team Building Tools

by Steven Rotkoff

All of us have gone through the process of changing stations and being confronted with the question “tell me a little about you”. Invariably our answer revolves around some form of our military resume, “I’ve served here, had these jobs, worked for these bosses, have this education and by the way I’m married, have 2.1 kids and a dog named fluffy.” While this approach conveys a lot of information in reality it tells someone almost nothing about what you believe, how you lead, or who you truly are. There is another more effective way of having this conversation. It is called ‘Who am I?’ (WAI).

WAI is a tool designed to help leaders and small groups to first raise individual member’s self-awareness through introspection, and then increase group-level trust through the intentional practice of emotional vulnerability. *FM 6-22, Army Leadership* describes self-awareness as a meta-competency that supports all other leadership competencies. Self-awareness requires serious introspection. It provides a single reference point for you about one’s own system of beliefs and values. The more confident you are of your reference point, the easier it is to “step outside yourself” and examine another’s frame of reference. This allows you to take another’s perspective long enough to begin to understand them and potentially trust and respect them more easily. Knowing your own culture, reflecting on your own experiences and understanding why you believe and value what you do, provides for an easier “compare and contrast” that enables one to better accept alternative perspectives. This short article describes what WAI is, how it evolved, how to run one, and what you can expect from this simple, leader facilitated exercise.

Six years ago the Army started a Red Team program to train and educate leaders who would be charged with providing alternative perspectives inside their organizations. The program leaders struggled with finding an ‘ice-breaking’ exercise that would create an atmosphere where participants would not only know each other better but also be more open to different ways of looking at problems. The complexity underlying the operational environment requires leaders who can look at problems through different lenses and understand the inter-relationship among people and things effecting that environment. The exercise that evolved from this search was WAI. This exercise has proved to be an enormously powerful leader development and group networking tool because it allows participants to connect very quickly in a more meaningful way. It has migrated from the Red team program into the Army’s Starfish Program and informally into some sections within the Intermediate Leadership Education program, and is spreading to many organizations which Red Team or Starfish graduates have since moved on to.

Introspection and emotional vulnerability are fundamentally leader development tools. Admittedly, when we speak about leader development we don’t generally think of people sharing personal stories of deep challenges or emotionally trying experiences with those with whom they

will subsequently work or even lead. Simply put, fully-evolved leadership requires knowing oneself and connecting with others to inspire and motivate. WAI enables this development. The basic premise of the exercise is that each participant share ‘watershed events’ in their life that shaped how they engage with the world.

The Tool

There is a relatively simple set of rules for conducting this exercise as described below:

1. There are two critical elements to the WAI exercise: Private preparation through solo reflection, and group sharing. Individuals first must do the hard work of reflection, of recalling the seminal life events that were critical in shaping their current personalities and deeper values. One might think of these events as the crucibles—both difficult and triumphant—that forged the individual’s character. In essence, this private preparation is intended to encourage them to be introspective. Such deep reflection takes time, and should be built into the structure of the entire exercise.

What exactly participants later choose to share with their classmates in the verbal WAI is a different question. It is important during preparation that participants be completely honest with themselves as to how they developed into the person they are today. This preparation can take an hour or longer, and is ideally conducted at least one day prior to the group sharing.

2. In the second step of WAI the group sits together in a private setting, and one by one the individuals hold the floor, sharing aloud their “Who Am I?” story. Participants are allowed to take as long as they want and are uninterrupted while providing their WAI. This enables some degree of rambling which intentionally creates an environment where many people end up sharing more than they originally planned to. This open time frame can be very liberating, as for many this is the first opportunity they have ever had to share out loud with others why they are who they are.

As such, any interruptions in the form of questions or time limits tend to kill the magic of the moment. To mitigate the abuse of this open ended opportunity to talk, facilitators are encouraged to get their WAI down under 15 minutes, as this then sets an example that most others will naturally follow. WAI should be conducted entirely as narrative – no power point slides or film clips etc. – nothing to distract from the story each person is telling the group, and nothing to hide behind. This activity should be like telling stories around the campfire – but the story we tell is about ourselves.

3. There is no question and answer period following the WAI so as to avoid any semblance of ‘interrogation’, and also to keep the playing field even...i.e if the facilitator were to ask one participant three questions and another only one it might leave the impression that the first participant’s story was more interesting, etc.

4. Every member of the group who is not sharing is asked to practice ‘full-body’ listening by giving their complete and unfettered attention to the person speaking. Receiving this attention while sharing is extremely powerful and the facilitator can both model this and suggest that participants “give the kind of attention you yourself would want to receive.”

5. Every participant must provide a WAI narrative, but the order of presentation is purely voluntary, an important factor in creating safety. While every participant must share something,

precisely how deep they go and how much they reveal about themselves is an individual decision. In this way the exercise entails individually manageable personal risk.

6. No more than three personal narratives are conducted in a row. If someone goes exceedingly long this may be shortened to two or even simply one. In order for the group to exercise ‘full-body’ listening and remain engaged, the entire group ‘who am I’ must be spaced out over time. Done right, WAI is often draining both for the listeners and the presenters. Each hour of WAI should be broken up with an hour or more of some other less emotionally investing activity.

7. It is highly recommended that the facilitator models their own WAI before the participants commence their solo reflection. (see my own WAI below for an example). What the facilitator shares will set the tone for what the participants share. Facilitators are urged to go out on a limb and reveal meaningful events in their life that genuinely shaped them as people. By taking action and modeling this openness first, the facilitator encourages participants to risk being personally vulnerable themselves.

During my experience with WAI, several participants have initially told the group that they had felt they did not know everyone well enough to completely share who they are and everything they had learned about themselves in preparing for the exercise. In most cases they came forward later and decided to redo WAI on their own initiative—sharing things they had learned through introspection but needed time to process. This methodology allows people to operate within their comfort zone while simultaneously establishing a group norm that encourages them to both reflect and share.

It should be clear by now that this exercise is most definitely NOT a normal biographical recitation. Positions held, size and composition of family, etc. are not important unless they are linked to some watershed event. In an army context, when someone commanded a company or held some other position of importance is not relevant UNLESS some critical event happened while in that position that has stayed with and continues to shape their daily outlook. Similarly, while the birth of a child is without question a significant event in anyone’s life it may or may not necessarily change your worldview about things like the nature of personal responsibility, what your values are, etc. Hence participants are ideally sharing events that were personally transformational on a fundamental level.

8. Finally, and most importantly, WAI requires a degree of confidentiality among the group. While not confession or protected speech, it is critical that if someone chooses to share personal vulnerabilities—e.g. current struggles at home or difficult events from the past—that this content does not become fodder for gossip. To gain buy-in on this, the facilitator should openly propose confidentiality as a WAI group norm, and foster a brief discussion about what this means. A good rule of thumb is “what happens in ‘Who Am I’, stays in ‘Who Am I’.”

Why it Works

WAI is a deceptively simple exercise that works on many levels simultaneously. Several outcomes are enumerated below:

1. Using introspection to better understand how one engages in the world allows participants to take time to think about themselves in profound ways at depths rarely encouraged

in the Army. The result is sometimes scary for those unlocking doors in their head that may have long been closed but it universally results in better self-understanding.

2. When participants share their WAI and listen as others share their own, it invariably dawns on them that they are not alone in coping with problems in life such as grief, prejudice, disappointment, relationship issues etc. This leaves participants feeling significantly more connected with the group and less alone in the world.

3. Practicing active listening is not something we routinely do or reward in leader development. In fact in some cases people are penalized for not contributing in volume to class discussions. This creates an environment where we reward the loudest who frequently crowd out and undermine efforts at collaboration. WAI is an exercise that reinforces listening to what people say, and more importantly it reinforces listening for a deeper understanding of what they mean. This understanding promotes a connection on an emotional level. This is an exceedingly important skill for leaders to develop. Organizations where leaders and those led are emotionally connected have higher morale, are more committed to the mission, can better discern intent in the absence of explicit orders, and are more adaptable in extreme circumstances.

4. This exercise creates an environment where alternative perspectives can be valued. When a participant hears another tell a personal story about encountering direct prejudice and how that shaped them, they are less like to think of that participant as simply 'hyper sensitive to race'. They understand *where* that person is coming from and *why* they see the world as they do—elements foundational to actual communication and education.

5. Finally, WAI is a tremendous team building vehicle. Upon completion, each member of the group knows all other members in a deeper way and faster way than such knowledge normally develops. Often group members have expressed that they now know other participants of WAI better than long time neighbors or even some members of their own family.

Where It Fits

To date, with the exception of the author's personal use of this technique as a Battalion and Brigade commander, WAI has been introduced exclusively in academic environments where its success in achieving the outcomes described above are well documented. There is obviously some trepidation about sharing personal information or vulnerability among those with whom you are going into combat. However, feedback on WAI from the majority of the participants with extensive combat experience is that they intend to use this tool when they go back to the field.

Clearly the intensity and frequency of deployment in the current Army has resulted in myriad mental health problems reflected in statistics associated with suicide, divorce, spousal abuse, DUI/DWI, substance abuse etc. During his testimony on July 29, 2010 before the House Armed Services military personnel subcommittee, Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli told lawmakers of his concerns regarding soldiers. GEN Chiarelli said "We've been at war for nearly eight years, which has undeniably put a strain on our people and our equipment. Unfortunately, in a growing segment of the Army's population, we have seen increased stress and anxiety manifest itself through high-risk behavior, including acts of violence, excessive use of alcohol, drug abuse, and reckless driving."

The Army is a chain of command centric organization. One of our challenges is providing tools to junior leaders that help maintain the mental health of the organization. We train our leaders how to maintain property, lead PT, inspect and manage the bureaucracy that is the Army. Isn't it worth investing in training our CPTs, Majors, Commanders, ISGs and Sergeants Major in how to monitor and guide the emotional and mental health of their organizations without providing each company a clinical psychologist? "Who Am I" introduces a simple leader led tool that allows for a personal or public cathartic experience and is an idea worth introducing and tracking the resultant effect.

An Example

Obviously when shared orally my personal WAI is a little different than the outline I provide below. I try to lace my comments with some funny self-deprecating observations to break the tension. What is provided below is simply a bullet outline I use as a guide to key elements that make up my WAI. It is hard to capture the emotional content or the feedback loop from the others listening as I share the results of my introspection, but when experienced live what occurs is truly special. And each time I share my 'Who Am I' it is a little different, just as I am a little different for each rendition.

- Born and raised in NYC – a little rude, brusque, direct, in a hurry...I 'get' all the jokes in Seinfeld
- Grandparents lived the 'Fiddler on the Roof' story, escaping Pogroms in Eastern Europe
- Earliest memory is being told the story of my Grand uncle's death in a Pogrom in Russia. Had my grandparents family been skilled artisans or professionals (verses unskilled labor) they would not have been herded into the streets by the Cossacks and my namesake would not have been killed – moral of the story – *study hard and achieve*.
- Parents were children of the Depression who learned to 'spend it when you've got it' verses scrimp and save. Made me want a steady guaranteed income and forced me to look for a college scholarship – ended up going to West Point.
- West Point changed my life. Took me out of a narrow NY Jewish community and exposed me to America – I'd be a 400lb lawyer or judge in NY had I not gone.
- After Brigade command served as the Deputy C2 for CFLCC June 02-August 03. During this time I was witness to leader's repeated ignoring of highly informed people telling us of the insurgency to come. This event shapes my life today. I am emotionally driven to participate in programs that help decision makers listen better and be less captured by end state myopia and their own pre-conceived notions.

In sum, I am a 'type A' driven to excel to avoid the Pogrom. I believe in personal responsibility and am fiscally conservative. I've spent my career as somewhat of an outsider (relatively few NY Jews in our Army) with a different perspective than most of my peers. I am driven to make the Army better by my sense of personal responsibility for our misreading what the war in Iraq would become.

To conclude, "Who Am I?" can be an extremely powerful tool for both team and leader development. It creates a rapid, palpable shift in a group's culture, engendering emotional ties that foster the high-performance functionality detailed above. For it to be successful; facilitators must let participants know that this isn't everyday work. Leaders have to set a liberating context

(don't do this in the Battalion conference room – an offsite location will work much better) and will need to set the example by being personally vulnerable themselves. This requires an expanded notion of what it means to be courageous, of what it means to be a leader. Give it a try—you may find it is exactly what you are looking for to rapidly build trust based teams. Good Luck.

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