

Sheila Wherry

THE PINNACLE OF PRESENCE

How great leaders
connect, instil trust
& get the right results

Sheila is a coach and consultant with a 'secret weapon'
– the ability to use emotional intelligence to get to the
heart of people-performance.

Joshua Freedman, CEO of Six Seconds EQ Network

PART 2

THE PINNACLE OF PRESENCE



CHAPTER 3

CONNECTING WITH SELF

*We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring will be to
arrive where we started and know the place
for the first time.*

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To develop the capacity to connect with others, we must start by understanding and connecting with ourselves.

Being connected with self means becoming aware of our internal thoughts, feelings, behaviours and embodied sensations. This invites improved relationships with ourselves and with others, as well as our ability to perform.

Connecting with self begins with recognising what you are feeling and understanding why you are feeling it. This is emotional self-awareness. Understanding the

what and why behind your feelings gives you the power to *respond* to situations, as opposed to *react*. This is emotional regulation.

These go hand in hand: the more aware you are of your emotions the greater your ability to regulate them.

Emotional self-awareness and regulation are part of a larger framework called emotional intelligence, or EQ. Psychologists and authors Peter Salovey and John Mayer coined the term emotional intelligence in the 1990s, in their groundbreaking article *Emotional Intelligence* published in *Imagination, Cognition and Personality Journal*. They defined it as ‘the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth’.

Emotional self-awareness

Emotions are data: they can be used to inform your decision-making and to build more productive relationships with others. As Joshua Freedman, CEO of Six Seconds and EQ expert, says, ‘As humans we make decisions based on emotions and rationalize that decision after the fact’.

If you let your emotions slip by without reflecting on them, you are missing this valuable source of data.

Becoming aware of how they are running you puts you back in charge; you can navigate through your daily emotions with ease and learn to motivate and inspire others, as well as yourself. This is why I argue that connecting to self is a prerequisite to connecting with others.

Research by Tasha Eurich, an organisational psychologist and author of *Insight*, backs this up. Eurich found that managers who worked to improve their self-awareness became more effective and more promotable. They were less likely to erode trust and relationships, and more likely to build engagement and results. She argues that emotionally self-aware people are more successful, more confident, build better relationships and are more effective leaders.

This is echoed by research conducted by Fabio Sala, Principal at Organization Performance Partners and author of multiple articles. In a 2003 study of 1,214 executives and managers he found that those who failed to reach their expected level of achievement shared a common attribute: a lack of self-awareness.

I have the privilege of working with coaching clients who are ready to courageously sit with, understand and accept the emotional responses they have been bumping up against in their daily lives. The outcome? They break free from the shackles of these emotions and take back their power.

Asking you to 'look within' can bring up feelings of vulnerability. I get it. There are often parts we'd much

prefer to keep hidden; we don't want to bring them to the surface for others to see. In my workshops and coaching sessions I often use what I call the beach ball metaphor in response to this. Have you ever held a beach ball underwater? If you do this for long enough it will eventually pop up and smack you in the face! This is much the same as the parts of yourself you don't like. Avoiding them can lead to career roadblocks or missed opportunities to engage your team. It's highly likely that others can see these parts even if you can't or don't want to look at them yourself.

Let me give you an example. My client – let's call her 'Ainsley' – had not been offered a promotion. She felt the person chosen for the role was less experienced and capable than her. Overall, she was better equipped and had more industry knowledge. She was upset and frustrated. While she was aware of this, she was less attentive to the bigger impact this decision had had on her behaviour. She had become blunt and overtly direct in her approach. It wasn't until she stopped and reflected that she realised her frustration and disappointment was seeping into her daily interactions with key stakeholders. She was coming across as offensive at times, they told her. Once she saw this, instead of trying to push away the emotions she felt at not being selected for promotion, she stopped and reflected on them. She recognised the level of self-doubt this had caused. Was she good enough? Would she ever have the opportunity to

progress at her current organisation? Why had she not been chosen? Taking the time to process her emotions, gave her the space to start to reflect more objectively. She asked for feedback to understand where she could continue to develop, thus positioning herself for when the next promotional opportunity arose. Those around her noticed the difference in her behaviour and demeanour, and they acknowledged the strength of character it took to learn from her recent setback. She pursued opportunities to develop, adapt and evolve and, in response, they saw her as courageous and willing to learn.

I've included a few more case studies at the end of this chapter to illustrate the power of emotional self-awareness and regulation, but first let's take a look at emotional regulation.

Emotional regulation

Your feelings are a normal part of being human. Your behaviours and actions are a choice.

Think back to a time you reacted or were 'triggered' by something someone said or did, or by an event out of your control. Having replayed the event in the cool light of day you wish you'd responded differently. These situations can leave you feeling disempowered and disorientated, and it can be toxic for the people around you. Emotional self-awareness empowers you to recognise

the trigger and respond differently. This is called emotional regulation.

Emotional regulation helps you remain calm and composed in difficult situations. It helps you avoid emotional overwhelm, which is likely to lead to reactionary behaviour, and help you to respond appropriately. It doesn't mean you are suppressing your emotions, it means you are not letting them take over.

Let's take a moment to look at how our emotions work in the brain.

The amygdala is a primal area of our brain responsible for our fight-flight response. It is designed to support us in times of threat. For our cavemen ancestors, this kept them alive. If a lion was approaching, they did not need to think: they needed to react, and quickly! Today, we react in much the same way when we feel threatened. Yet the threats are not generally life endangering. For instance, if our boss yells at us, or a friend teases us, our amygdala instinctively reacts, bypassing the cognitive part of our brain. Unfortunately, our initial response is not always the 'correct' one. That experience of having a negative interaction, only to cool down later and wish you had responded differently, is an amygdala hijack, a term coined by EQ expert Daniel Goleman. Emotional regulation can help you avoid the hijack.

By taking the time to pause sufficiently and breath, when we have an emotional response to something, we enable the 'thinking' part of our brain to come on board.

This means utilising our cerebral cortex, our cognition, giving us the opportunity to offer a more thoughtful response. In short, the emotional and thinking parts of our brain start to work in unison.

This is what I am referring to as ‘emotional regulation’. You are aware of the emotion you are experiencing *and* you are able to regulate your response accordingly. Your emotional and cognitive states are working together. And the more you can develop emotional self-awareness, the greater your ability to understand and modulate your emotional responses.

With a dedicated, ongoing practice and a structured self-reflective process, you will start to bring your neo-cortex online in tough situations. I’d like to use myself as an example here.

My partner and son are surfers. Wanting to join them in the water rather than sitting on the beach and watching them, I decided to take up body boarding. All was going well until one particular outing when my partner suggested I stay close to the shore as there was a big swell. As I dived under one wave, then the next, I was enjoying the view until, quite suddenly, I was dragged at speed by a rip into the section of heavy waves. As I splashed around in the water, trying to navigate the large waves crashing over my head, my partner and son came to my rescue. My partner, a seasoned surfer, yelled clear instructions over the crashing waves, ‘Paddle with me into shore’. Off she went and was standing on the

beach in 30 seconds. I just didn't have the strength or the understanding of how to navigate my way through crashing waves and rip-fuelled water; I was out of my depth. I started to panic, which effected my ability to breath. I paddled wildly but I wasn't getting anywhere. My partner pointed directions from the beach and my son stayed close, talking calmly to me, reaffirming I would be ok. I knew I needed to get control over my rising anxiety and the negative thoughts that were swirling in my head. I paused. I stopped trying to get anywhere. I took a deep breath, then another and another, until I felt myself calm down. I told myself this is a new situation but if I follow guidance and take my time, I will be ok. I looked up, I breathed deeply, I surveyed the scene. You can do this, I told myself, just take your time. With that, I was able to absorb instructions, and my son and I paddled to shore.

Although I've never lived this story down, I was able to regulate my emotions in an environment I found highly stressful. You can too.

Connecting to self at a glance

What a gift it is to have the tools to explore ourselves, to know ourselves, and to be present and connected with ourselves.

This is the path to self-worth, to finding our authentic

voice, to freedom of choice and a place of calm. To clarity and direction, and a sense of achievement.

And once you can do this for yourself, you are able to do it with others.

This is why connecting to self is at the foundation of The Pinnacle of Presence framework.

Connecting to self in action

Let's look at how this plays out in some case studies of my clients (names changed.)

Ava

Ava came into our first session wanting something to change. She was apprehensive but open, knowing it was time to let her guard down, time to stop exerting power with her peers and management team. For years she had worked under a boss she didn't get along with. This boss, she told me, used bullying tactics. Ava responded to this in kind and over time developed a habit of being aggressive with those around her. She earned a reputation for being difficult.

Finally, her boss moved on. Ava had her opportunity for a new start. Her new boss arrived and

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showed her nothing but respect, empowering her to make decisions and manage her team as she saw fit. Her boss listened, he empathised, he supported, he set clear direction and purpose. This stopped Ava in her tracks, 'I've become the person that mistreated and bullied me. I've become my ex-boss. People fear me. I don't want to be that person'.

Ava had connected to self. She had recognised that her way of being in the world was no longer working. Not for her, nor those around her. She was empowered to change.

Luca

Luca, a general manager with 20 years' experience, is about to head into a tough meeting. He knows that many of his peers are not aligned with his direction on a particular project he is leading. He knows the organisation is looking for him to get an outcome, and quickly. Before he enters the room he pauses. He is aware of a well-known mindfulness practice – STOP – and takes a moment to practice it quietly. STOP is an acronym: Stop. Take a moment. Observe what you're thinking, feeling, doing. Proceed.

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This exercise, which took Luca less than ten seconds to complete, is one he's become practised at as he knows it supports him in feeling grounded and at ease. He smiles and enters the room with presence.

By Luca taking this moment to check in with his emotional state, he is able to get a sense of what he needs to refine within himself. He makes any necessary changes to his thinking patterns, his posture, how he's breathing, his body language and so on, and then he lets go of anything that is not serving him or relevant to the outcome he's seeking. As a result, he is able to actively turn his attention to the coming agenda.

Joe

In Joe's initial coaching session he shared how he had a history of losing control, getting angry and demonstrating frustration at work. In a recent incident this had escalated to the point he was shouting at his manager and making derogatory comments towards her. Joe's organisation had stepped in at this point and scheduled a mediation session between Joe and his boss.

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Hearing the impact of his behaviour directly from his colleague during the mediation session was the impetus that motivated Joe to change his behaviour. Rather than continuing to blame others around him, he looked inwards, working to understand what was driving his reactions and subsequent behaviour. He wanted to break the cycle and agreed to undertake an emotional intelligence coaching program. As he did the work of introspection, he started to see **patterns**. In particular he noticed his anger would surface when he felt he wasn't being treated with respect. From there he was able to **observe himself** having the reaction, and could **choose a different response**, rather than react on autopilot, as he would have done in the past. As a result, he transformed his relationships with his manager and other co-workers.

Genevieve

Genevieve came into her first session feeling very demotivated. She had loved her job for a long time, but was at the point where she was considering quitting and taking another role. This wasn't what she wanted. Not really. She wanted to reignite her passion for her current role.

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She took the time in our coaching sessions to dig deep, to challenge her negative spiral. She started to recognise patterns. The most telling being how she had lost connection with her geographically dispersed team, and just how central connection had been to her motivation. She also saw the possibilities that would open up if she reconnected with her team out in the field. Rather than having to come up with all the solutions herself, her team would be able to share their ideas and provide invaluable input.

Until this point she hadn't stopped and taken time to reflect on this. She'd been moving through her days and hadn't understood how much this mattered to her. As the end of the year drew to a close, she built more time in her diary for the following year to focus on connecting with her team. She spent time learning how to connect and collaborate virtually, as well as face to face and her confidence grew in this space. Her energy returned, she was revitalised.

Developing emotional self-awareness and regulation

Developing self-awareness is an ongoing process and takes work. Human beings are like onions. Remove one layer and there's a whole new layer beneath. The key is to develop a regular self-reflective habit.

It's like going to the gym. Everyone can talk about getting fit and healthy, but if you don't do the work of lifting those dumbbells or running on the treadmill *consistently*, nothing will shift. Instead it is the regular, tiny nudges that will ultimately transform you. You may not see the benefits overnight, in the same way you don't see the benefits of regular exercise on a day to day basis. However, as you compare yourself *over time*, you will clearly see the difference.

A self-reflective habit: the pathway to emotional self-awareness and regulation

Step 1. Observe and name your emotions

External stimuli (an event) can generate unconscious thoughts, feelings, and actions. At this point you have a *choice*. You can:

- A. Pause and reflect (observe your reaction), or
- B. React (not consciously choosing how to respond).

By choosing option A you are on the path to emotional self-awareness.

Observe your reaction with *no judgement* (I do understand this is sometimes easier said than done. Practice. Be gentle on yourself).

Ask what am I thinking, feeling, doing?

Name the emotion.

Ask yourself what bodily sensations you recognise, for example a fast pulse, or the tightening of your throat. (See the Interoception section below in ‘Further exercises to support emotional self-awareness and regulation’.)

Step 2. Understand linkages or patterns of behaviour

Work to understand the reaction and driver of the emotion (i.e. recognise the pattern). To do this:

1. Once you notice a feeling, think about how you are reacting to that feeling.
2. By capturing that reaction, you can then start to see if there are any recurring themes.

Often, we react to the same things over and over again, unconsciously. By stopping and reflecting, *without judgement*, you may start to see links (i.e. certain situations or events) that cause us to react in the same way each time.

Make a note of these reflections either in a journal, in the notes section of your phone, or somewhere that suits you. It could look like:

Event:

Date:

I thought:

I felt:

I did:

Or draw a picture if you would rather not think about it too cognitively. Review these reflections periodically and look for themes and linkages. By understanding these links, you will start to recognise your patterns of behaviour, and have greater insight into what is causing you to react in these situations.

As an example, refer to the case study of Joe above. In his coaching program, Joe shared, ‘When I felt myself having an emotional reaction to something, I would make a quick note of the context and what I was saying to myself. Over time I noticed that I would say “that person doesn’t respect me”. I came to see this was an old thought pattern I’d created from my childhood experience. Now, when that thought comes up, I’m gentle with myself and say “thanks for sharing” and I don’t let it impact how I respond to the person in front of me, in the here and now’.

Consider making this a nightly activity, or set an alarm for a suitable time. Spend 15 minutes reflecting on your day and run through the various behaviours and actions that stand out to you.

Did you have a negative reaction? Did you interact in a way that you aren’t proud of, or regret? What can you learn from these experiences?

A regular practice helps you set up a reflective habit to develop emotional self-awareness.

Feedback from others

It isn't always easy to know when you aren't emotionally self-aware. Your own behaviour can be a blind spot. By gathering feedback from others and comparing this with your own reflection, you can start to see if there are any gaps in your understanding of your behaviour and how this is actually perceived by others. Significant gaps are likely to be limiting your performance and impacting on your relationships. We will cover this in much more detail in Chapter 5.

Feedback from your body

You experience emotions in your body, so when emotions are charged within you, you experience bodily sensations such as your pulse quickening, your muscles tensing, or your breath changing.

To loosen the grip this emotional response has on you, follow these steps:

- Notice your bodily reaction (this is called interoception – perception of internal signals in your body).
- Label the emotion (this is called emotional literacy).
- Take time to understand where this emotion comes from.

Exercises to quickly ground you in the present when you're busy

STOP

Stop

Take a break

Observe what you are thinking, feeling, doing

Proceed

Mindful eating or walking

Or washing up! Any activity can be used. Suspend attention in other areas and focus purely on that activity.

Five senses

The goal is to notice something that you are currently experiencing through each of your senses. What is the one thing you can see, feel, hear, smell and taste?

Breathing

Conscious breathing is so often underutilised, yet a powerful way for us to regulate our emotions.

Breathing techniques, such as box breathing and diaphragmatic breathing, allow you to activate your parasympathetic nervous system (the calming response in your body), as opposed to your autonomic nervous system (the fight/flight response).

Making bodily changes

For instance, you can slow your pace of speech, utilise more pauses, or slow the pace of your walk.

Proactive measures

Finally, take the time to consider what steps you can incorporate into your day to support ongoing emotional self-awareness and regulation. Two examples are physical activity and meditation.

It is much easier to emotionally regulate when you are taking care of your physical health. If regular exercise, a healthy diet and sufficient sleep aren't part of your daily routine, I encourage you to find ways to incorporate them. This will also support your mental health and wellbeing.

I have shared a couple of mindfulness activities above. You may also like to consider a meditation practice. There are a number of meditation apps you can download and try. Smiling Mind, Headspace and Ten Percent are three such examples.

What's next?

Having developed the capacity to connect with self, we now turn our attention to developing Inner Presence.