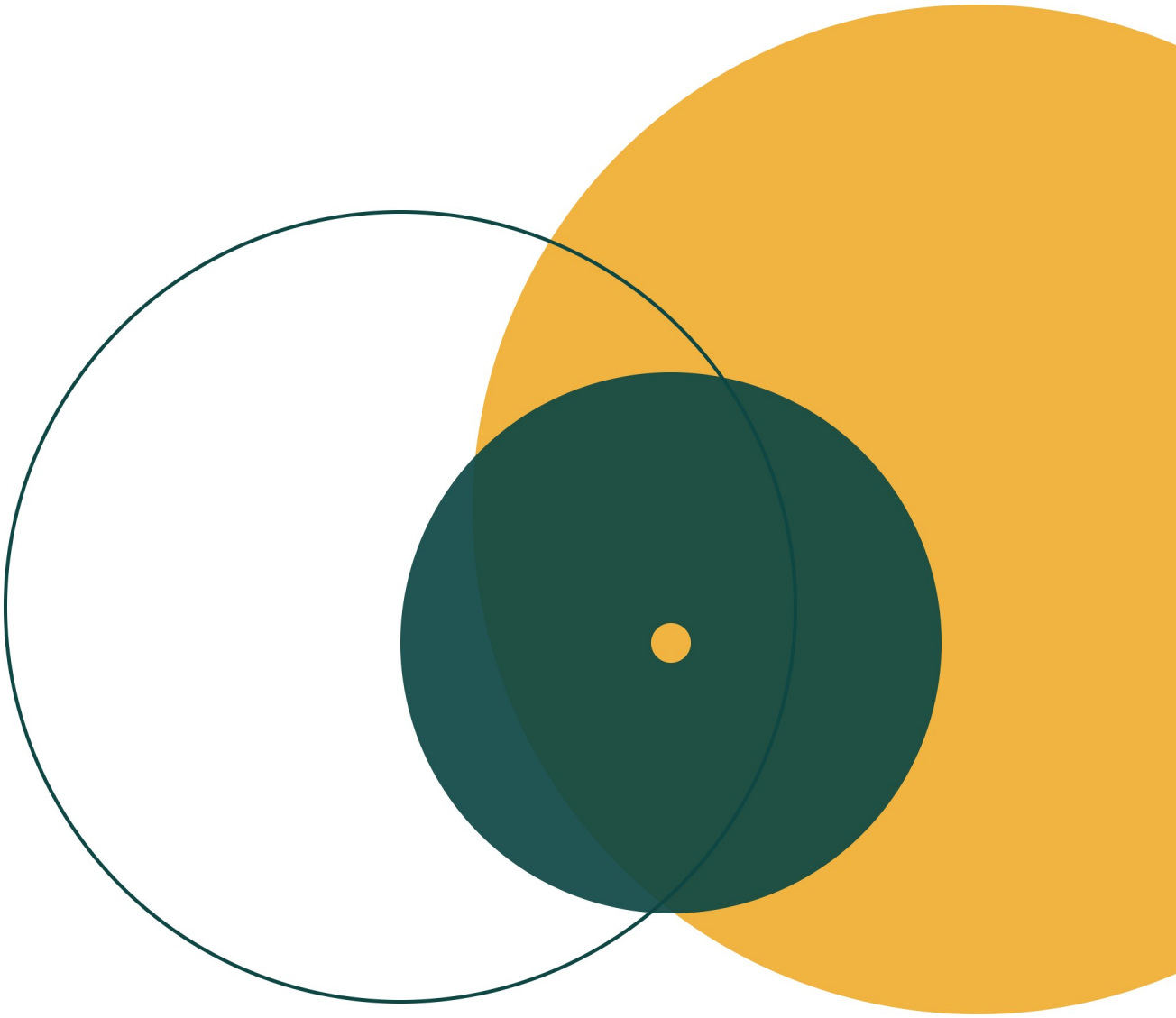
work[re]frame

RESEARCH & PERSPECTIVE PAPER



Self-Awareness

The performance currency that trumps all others?

Examining awareness, interference, attention, and the conditions that shape performance, learning, and enjoyment at work.

A research-informed perspective on the difference between possessing capability and being able to use it.

OCTOBER 2026 · FIRST EDITION

EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVE

THE CENTRAL PROPOSITION

Performance depends on more than the capabilities people possess. It also depends on their awareness of the conditions influencing their ability to use those capabilities.

WRITTEN FOR

People leaders and HR and L&D practitioners. Individuals will find Sections 1–4 and 8 useful for their own reflection.

IN THIS PAPER

1 The performance paradox
2 Defining self-awareness
3 Attention can help or hinder
4 Learning and adjustment
5 The conditions around the person
6 From awareness to agency
7 Implications
8 Sustainable success

Capability is only part of the performance story

Organizations invest in knowledge, skill, experience, systems, and measurement because each can improve results. Yet a person can possess substantial capability and still be unable to use it effectively in a particular situation. Attention may be consumed by self-judgment; expectations may be unclear; authority may be insufficient; or a familiar way of working may no longer fit the problem.

This paper examines whether awareness of these conditions is itself a consequential performance capability. It treats self-awareness as more than introspection: a disciplined capacity to notice relevant internal reactions and external circumstances, interpret them cautiously, and recognize available choices.

The research supports a qualified proposition. Feedback can help or hinder depending on where it directs attention [1]. Self-regulated learning draws on several related processes, including goal-setting, persistence, and self-efficacy [2]. Research on self-monitoring suggests that adjusting one's social presentation is not a simple proxy for effective work [3].

So the short answer to the question in this paper's title is no: self-awareness does not outrank every other determinant of performance. That answer is the useful part. Awareness can make capability more available by helping people recognize what supports its expression and what interferes with it. Whether recognition becomes action depends on skill, opportunity, relationships, and organizational conditions.

The paper ends by asking what makes success sustainable. Using Gallwey's triangle of performance, learning, and enjoyment, Section 8 argues that awareness helps keep all three in view, so that results are not bought at the expense of growth or energy.

SECTION

01

The performance paradox

It is tempting to assume that a more capable person will produce a better result. In practice, performance is contingent. The same experienced professional may work with unusual clarity in one setting and struggle in another. A person who solves difficult problems confidently may hesitate when the social consequences of being wrong feel high. Someone may continue delivering strong results while paying a growing personal cost to sustain them, a pattern Section 8 returns to.

The difference is not necessarily a deficit of skill or motivation. It may be found in the relationship between the person, the task, and the environment. The practical question becomes: *what is happening here that allows capability to be expressed, or makes it harder to use?*

Tim Gallwey's Inner Game offers a memorable conceptual formulation: Performance = Potential − Interference [4]. Its enduring contribution is to direct attention toward interference that additional training alone may not resolve.

HOW TO READ THIS PAPER

Numbered references mark research findings. The rest is interpretation, and the paper does not repeat that caveat at every turn. In particular, Gallwey's formula and work triangle are teaching models. The awareness → understanding → agency sequence is a Work Reframe lens, not a validated scale or causal model. The applications to review conversations and to sustainable success are Work Reframe interpretations. Most findings cited are correlational.

FIGURE 1 · THE INNER GAME FORMULATION



After Gallwey [4]. Its value lies in where it points attention.

SECTION

02

What do we mean by self-awareness?

The term covers several ideas that are often treated as interchangeable. Internal self-awareness concerns recognition of our own patterns, reactions, values, and assumptions. External self-awareness concerns how our behavior is experienced by other people. Tasha Eurich's practitioner research makes this distinction explicit and suggests that confidence in one's own self-awareness can exceed demonstrated insight [5]. Her widely cited estimates should not be treated as population prevalence statistics.

Self-monitoring, by contrast, usually refers to regulating self-presentation in response to social cues. A 2026 meta-analysis found a modest association with job performance (r = .12) and raised questions about the influence of supervisor ratings [3]. That is an important boundary: behaving adaptively in social settings is related to, but different from, understanding what is shaping one's performance.

For this paper, useful awareness means noticing information relevant to the work: shifts in attention, patterns of hesitation, sources of energy or strain, mismatches between responsibility and authority, and changes in the surrounding conditions. It does not mean continuous self-scrutiny.

RELATED, BUT DISTINCT

Internal
Recognizing our own patterns, reactions, values, and assumptions.

External
Understanding how our behavior is experienced by others.

Self-monitoring
Regulating self-presentation in response to social cues.

Useful awareness
Noticing information relevant to the work, not continuous self-scrutiny.

r = .12

Self-monitoring and job performance: a modest association, with questions raised about the role of supervisor ratings [3].

SECTION

03

KLUGER & DENISI [1]

607
feedback effect sizes

23,663
observations

>1 in 3
effects were negative: feedback lowered performance

Attention can help or hinder

The distinction between awareness and self-preoccupation is central. Kluger and DeNisi's meta-analysis examined 607 feedback effect sizes and 23,663 observations. Feedback improved performance on average, but more than one-third of the effects were negative [1]. Their feedback intervention theory proposed that effects depend partly on where attention moves: toward task learning, task motivation, or self-related processes.

While this does not show that self-awareness causes better performance, it does show why the quality and direction of attention matter. A person noticing that they are second-guessing a decision may recover attention for the task. A person repeatedly evaluating whether they appear competent may lose attention that the task requires.

The implication is counterintuitive. More reflection is not automatically better. Reflection is useful when it helps someone see relevant conditions more clearly and respond intelligently. It becomes less useful when it increases rumination, self-judgment, or paralysis.

More reflection is not automatically better. Its value depends on where it sends attention.

RESEARCH APPLICATION · THE PERFORMER'S PERSPECTIVE

When feedback becomes interference

Kluger and DeNisi found that more than one-third of the feedback effects they examined were negative [1]. Their theory suggests that feedback may undermine performance when it shifts attention away from the task and toward self-related concerns.

In a performance review, a conversation dominated by evaluation can draw attention toward defending results or managing impressions. Inviting the performer to describe the conditions supporting or hindering their contribution adds a perspective that the manager may not otherwise see.

WHERE ATTENTION CAN DRIFT	WHERE ATTENTION CAN RETURN
An evaluation-led conversation	**A conditions-led conversation**
Defending past results	What supported the contribution
Managing impressions	What hindered it
Judging whether one appears competent	What the manager may not otherwise see

The quality of a performance conversation may depend as much on where it directs attention as on the feedback it provides.

SECTION

04

SITZMANN & ELY [2]

430
samples

90,380
participants in work training and education

Particularly strong learning effects for

- Goal level
- Persistence
- Effort
- Self-efficacy

Awareness, learning, and adjustment

Learning research offers a complementary perspective. Sitzmann and Ely synthesized 430 samples involving 90,380 participants in work-related training and educational settings. Their analysis identified interrelated self-regulation constructs and found particularly strong learning effects for goal level, persistence, effort, and self-efficacy [2]. These results concern self-regulated learning, not a single measure of self-awareness.

Still, they suggest why noticing matters. People must often recognize whether an approach is working before they can adjust it. Monitoring without interpretation can be unproductive; interpretation without an opportunity to act may change little. A capable person learns to distinguish the situation that calls for more practice from the situation that calls for a different method or a change in conditions.

This is also where experience can complicate awareness. Familiar routines are efficient precisely because they require less deliberate attention. Their efficiency is valuable, but it can make assumptions less visible when circumstances change.

WHEN AN APPROACH ISN'T WORKING, IT MAY CALL FOR

A	B	C
More practice	**A different method**	**A change in conditions**

SECTION

05

SEEING IS NOT THE SAME AS ACTING

Customer service

Understands the problem.

> Lacks the authority to resolve it.

Nurse

Recognizes a concern.

> Works within staffing and procedure.

Technician

Knows a better approach.

> Must follow a process with little discretion.

The conditions around the person

A performance discussion centered only on the individual can become misleading. A customer-service representative may understand the problem perfectly and still lack authority to resolve it. A nurse may recognize a concern but work within staffing and procedural constraints. A skilled technician may know a more effective approach but be required to follow a process that leaves little discretion.

In these cases, awareness may clarify the obstacle without removing it. Agency is constrained by power, resources, relationships, and the design of work. It would be unreasonable to ask employees to compensate for every organizational limitation through greater self-awareness.

Organizations therefore have a parallel responsibility: to understand how their systems shape attention, judgment, and the practical ability to act. Better performance measurement can reveal results, but understanding performance also requires inquiry into the conditions producing them.

Awareness may clarify the obstacle without removing it.

06 A WORK REFRAME PROPOSITION From awareness to agency

Taken together, the research suggests a practical sequence for turning noticing into action. Page 10 shows it at work.

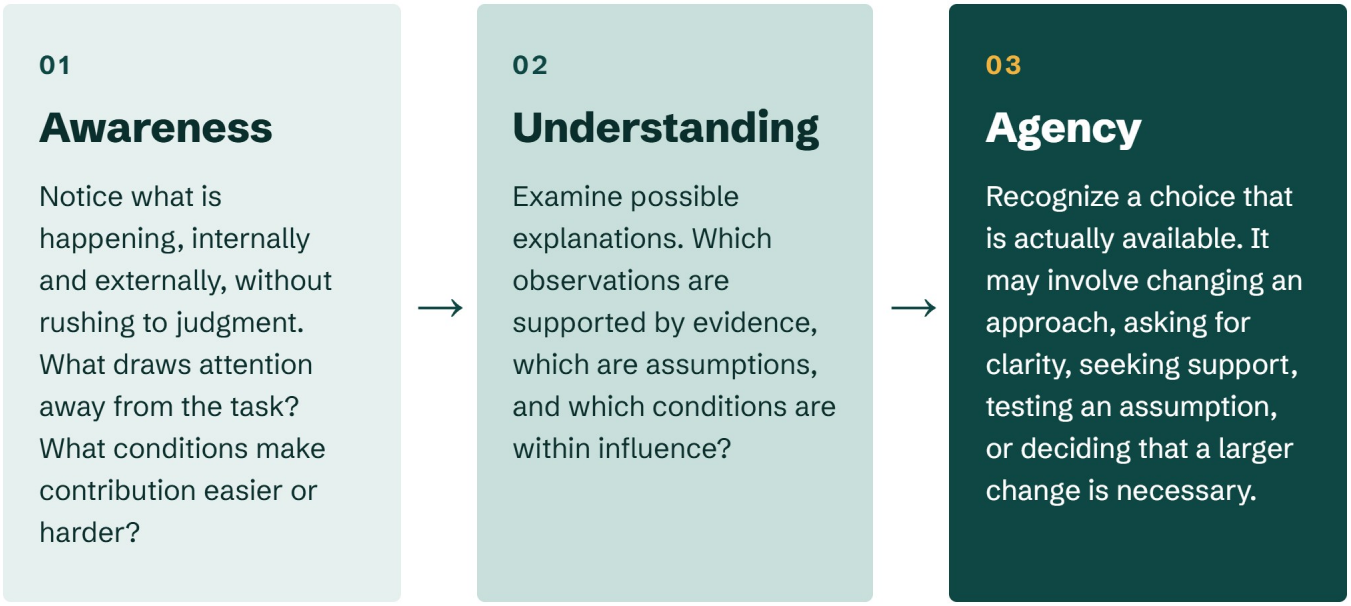


Figure 2 · From awareness to agency: a Work Reframe lens.

WHAT IT OFFERS

This sequence is deliberately modest. Awareness does not guarantee choice, and choice does not guarantee a preferred result. But the sequence helps explain why reflection may have practical value: it can improve the quality of the information on which decisions are made.

IN PRACTICE

An illustrative composite, not a case study, showing how the sequence in Section 6 can work on an ordinary week.

Noticing the cost of a strong result

Dana leads a team of analysts. Her results are strong, and nobody has raised a concern. But weekly status meetings have started to feel draining, and she has noticed that she is rewriting her team's reports late at night.

01

Awareness

Dana notices two things. In meetings, her attention goes to how her updates will be judged. And her effort on reports has risen while her interest in them has fallen.

02

Understanding

She separates evidence from assumption. The late-night rewriting is real. Her belief that leadership expects highly polished reports has never been tested. Her deadlines, by contrast, are set elsewhere and are outside her influence.

03

Agency

She asks her director what the reports actually need, and they agree on a shorter format. The deadlines stay. The evening revisions that nobody asked for stop.

WHAT CHANGED

Her results did not need rescuing. What changed was the cost of producing them. An untested assumption had been turning energy into extra effort, and noticing it early kept performance, learning, and enjoyment in better balance: the theme of Section 8.

SECTION

07

Implications for people and organizations

FOR

Individuals

For individuals, the most useful question may be less about whether they are sufficiently self-aware and more about what they have not yet noticed. A recurring frustration, an unexpected success, or an increase in effort can be information worth examining. The aim is to understand the experience of work well enough to make a more informed response.

FOR

Managers and organizations

For managers and organizations, the same logic argues against treating performance solely as an individual attribute. If results are disappointing, the relevant inquiry includes capability and effort, but also clarity, discretion, coordination, feedback, and the conditions under which people are expected to contribute.

FOR

Work Reframe

For Work Reframe, this perspective supports private reflection as a means of developing awareness. It does not establish that completing the Work Frame Reflection improves performance. That would require separate validation and outcome research.

A recurring frustration, an unexpected success, or an increase in effort can be information worth examining.

SECTION

08

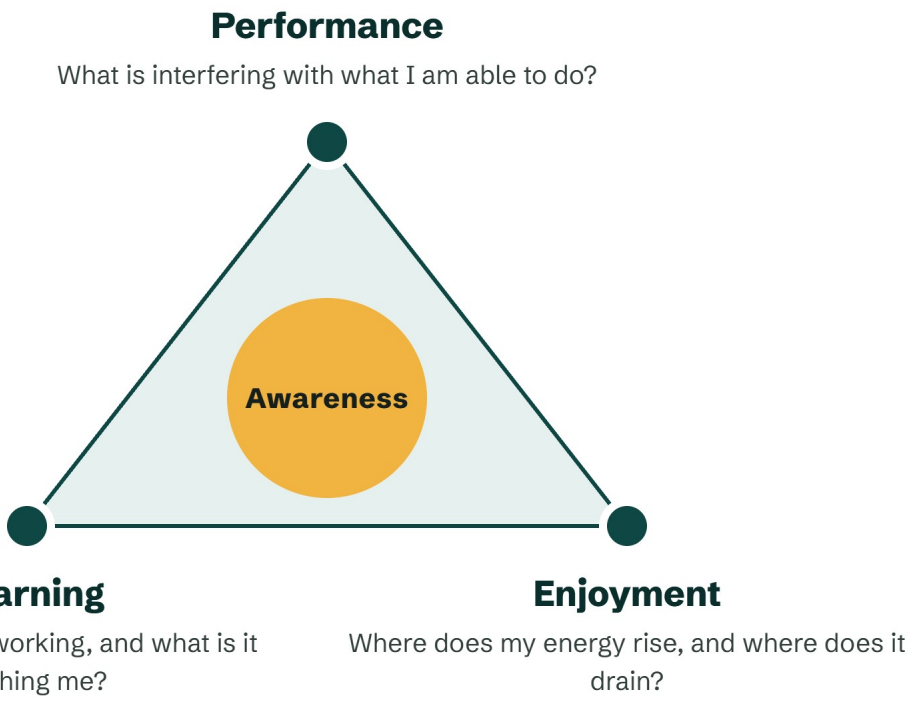
This section carries the argument one step further: beyond how capability is used, to whether success can be sustained.

What makes success sustainable

Strong results can be produced in more than one way. Some ways are renewable; others quietly draw down the capability, curiosity, and energy that produced the results in the first place. The difference rarely shows in a single quarter. It shows later, as a plateau, a loss of interest, or a cost that can no longer be carried.

Gallwey's Inner Game of Work describes three interdependent outcomes of work: performance, learning, and enjoyment [4]. Organizations tend to manage the first and assume the other two. His argument is that when learning or enjoyment is neglected, performance eventually suffers, and that the usual response, pushing harder for results, squeezes learning and enjoyment further. Enjoyment here means energy and engagement in the work itself, not simply having fun.

FIGURE 3 · THREE OUTCOMES, ONE WAY OF NOTICING



Gallwey's performance, learning, and enjoyment triangle [4], with awareness at the center.

SECTION 08
continued

WHEN ONE SIDE IS NEGLECTED

Results without learning
Capability plateaus; familiar routines go unexamined.

Results without enjoyment
Output holds at a rising personal cost.

Learning and enjoyment without results
Growth that does not reach contribution, often a sign of unclear expectations or constraint.

Awareness keeps all three in view

Research on thriving at work points the same way. Spreitzer and colleagues define thriving as the joint experience of learning and vitality [6]. A meta-analysis by Kleine, Rudolph, and Zacher found thriving associated with stronger task performance, better health, and lower burnout [7]. Though largely correlational, the findings suggest that growth and energy travel with performance rather than competing with it.

Here the earlier sections converge. Each side of the triangle depends on a different kind of noticing.

Performance	Noticing interference, and telling it apart from constraints awareness alone cannot remove. Sections 1, 3, 5
Learning	Noticing whether an approach is working before investing more effort in it. Section 4
Enjoyment	Noticing sources of energy and strain: early signals that a pace or pattern may not last. Section 2

Results lag; experience leads

Results report on conditions that have been in place for some time. A person can keep delivering while learning stalls and energy drains, like the professional in Section 1 paying a growing personal cost. Noticing shifts in learning and enjoyment can offer an earlier signal that success is not being produced in a renewable way.

CONCLUSION

A valuable currency, not a universal answer

The claim that self-awareness trumps every other performance capability is too strong for the evidence reviewed here. Technical competence, health, resources, relationships, organizational design, and opportunity can each be decisive. Awareness cannot substitute for them.

Its distinctive value may lie in helping us recognize how those factors interact in the circumstances of our work. It can make assumptions visible, distinguish personal interference from external constraints, and help us decide what deserves attention before we invest more effort in the wrong solution.

We may never be able to measure awareness as the single most valuable performance currency. But we can take seriously the possibility that our ability to use what we know depends, in part, on how clearly we understand what is happening as we work.

SUCCESS THAT LASTS

Seen through the lens of Section 8, the question is not only whether someone is performing, but whether the way they are performing can last. Awareness helps keep performance, learning, and enjoyment in the same conversation. It lets individuals notice when results are being bought at the expense of growth or energy, and it invites organizations to ask about the conditions that make all three possible.

If self-awareness is a performance currency, its most distinctive value may be that it helps success stay renewable, rather than simply achieved.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Which kinds of reflection improve task performance without increasing self-focused interference?

Under what conditions does awareness lead to meaningful action?

How much of the effect depends on discretion, psychological safety, and organizational support?

Does attending to learning and enjoyment, as well as results, predict how long strong performance is sustained?

These are questions for future investigation, not claims answered by this paper.

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RESEARCH INTEGRITY NOTE

This publication synthesizes selected literature. It is not a systematic review, original empirical study, or validation of a Work Reframe assessment. Self-awareness, self-monitoring, feedback attention, self-regulated learning, and thriving are related but distinct constructs. Causal claims should not be inferred from correlational findings.

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