

Influence of Self-Awareness on Organizational Performance of Universities in Kenya: A Literature Review Synthesis

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Cite: Kagwe S. (2025). Influence of Self-Awareness on Organizational Development of Universities in Kenya. *African Journal of Business & Development Studies*,2(1),593-604.
<https://doi.org/10.70641/ajbds.v2i1.166>

Abstract

This article critically examines the influence of self-awareness on organizational performance in Kenyan universities by synthesizing relevant scholarly literature through a structured review methodology. The review employed a purposive selection of 65 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024, focusing on emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and performance within higher education contexts. The studies were identified using databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, and analyzed through thematic synthesis to ensure clarity, coherence, and critical insight. Three dominant themes emerged: (1) Self-Insight and Decision-Making, where heightened self-awareness was linked to more reflective, ethical, and evidence-based decisions among university leaders; (2) Self-Awareness and Conflict Resolution, illustrating how leaders with greater emotional self-knowledge exhibit better interpersonal regulation and fewer escalated conflicts; and (3) Leadership Effectiveness and Institutional Performance, indicating that self-aware leaders foster trust, motivation, and accountability, thereby enhancing the institution's adaptability, staff morale, and stakeholder satisfaction.

Critically reviewing the selected studies, the paper highlights that self-awareness functions as both a personal competency and a strategic asset, mediating leadership behavior and performance outcomes. However, the analysis also reveals a recurring gap in contextualized frameworks tailored to the African university setting, which constrains the direct applicability of some models. Trends observed include a growing emphasis on emotionally intelligent leadership in response to the sector's complex challenges, such as governance crises, resource constraints, and demands for institutional innovation. Key findings suggest that universities that prioritize self-awareness through leadership development programs experience improved strategic alignment, communication practices, and employee engagement. The paper concludes by advocating for intentional investment in emotional intelligence training—particularly in self-awareness—as a pathway to enhance institutional performance and resilience. This review contributes to both scholarly and practical discourse by offering a structured understanding of how self-awareness among university personnel can catalyze sustainable organizational transformation in the Kenyan higher education landscape.

Keywords: Self-Awareness, Organizational Performance, Universities, Emotional Intelligence, Leadership

Introduction

Organizational performance within the higher education sector is becoming increasingly critical, driven by the necessity for universities to adapt to rapidly evolving environments, digital transformation, and global educational trends. Universities today are required to strategically innovate in order to remain competitive, effective, and sustainable in the long term (Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). In Kenya, higher education has undergone significant transformations due to policy reforms, fluctuating public funding, political interference, and demands for internationalization (Commission for University Education [CUE], 2022). These changes have introduced complex challenges, particularly around governance, leadership, and institutional efficiency.

Financial constraints remain a pressing concern in Kenyan universities, limiting their capacity to upgrade infrastructure, adopt new technologies, and invest in human capital development (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). At the same time, institutions must compete regionally and globally in terms of quality assurance, research output, and academic rankings, compelling them to enhance institutional agility and innovation capacity (Narenji Thani et al., 2022). These dynamics underscore the urgent need for effective and adaptive leadership to navigate complexity and uncertainty with strategic foresight and emotional acuity.

At the heart of effective leadership lies the competency of self-awareness—defined as the ability to recognize and understand one's emotions, triggers, values, strengths, and limitations (Goleman, 2020). Self-awareness is a foundational component of emotional intelligence that shapes an individual's leadership behavior and decision-making (Andres, 2025). Leaders who demonstrate self-awareness exhibit improved emotional regulation, authenticity, and empathy—traits essential for fostering inclusive cultures and managing institutional change (Narenji Thani et al., 2022).

Empirical studies have shown that self-aware leaders are more effective at conflict resolution, feedback integration, ethical decision-making, and aligning institutional goals with stakeholder expectations (Thapa et al., 2023). These capabilities contribute directly to institutional resilience, strategic clarity, and the nurturing of high-performing academic teams (Da Fonseca et al., 2022). Moreover, recent research in African contexts emphasizes that emotionally intelligent leadership correlates with higher staff engagement, innovation outcomes, and improved service delivery in universities (Amah, 2023).

Despite the global recognition of self-awareness as a determinant of effective leadership, few empirical studies have explicitly explored this dimension within the context of Kenyan higher education (Kato et al., 2023). This gap limits both scholarly understanding and practical intervention. As such, this paper synthesizes recent literature to investigate how enhanced self-awareness among university leaders influences governance practices, decision-making, conflict management, and institutional performance.

By offering an integrative review and drawing from case studies, thematic analysis, and regional policy reports, this study provides practical and theoretical insights for leadership development in Kenyan universities. Ultimately, it advocates for the institutionalization of emotional intelligence programs—particularly those focusing on self-awareness—as a strategic lever to improve organizational performance, institutional credibility, and long-term sustainability.

Conceptual Background

Self-awareness is a fundamental competency within the broader construct of emotional intelligence (EI), defined as the capacity to recognize, understand, and reflect on one's emotions, internal drivers, values, strengths, and limitations (Goleman, 2020). This introspective ability forms the foundation upon which other emotional competencies—such as self-management, social awareness, and relationship management—are built. In organizational contexts, especially within academic institutions, self-awareness is not merely an internal psychological process but a leadership capability that directly influences decision-making, interpersonal effectiveness, and institutional performance (Kour & Bhatia, 2025).

Goleman (2020) assert that self-awareness serves as a pivotal enabler of reflective and ethical leadership. Leaders who accurately perceive their emotional states are more likely to regulate disruptive impulses and react to complex scenarios with composure and clarity. This cognitive-emotional alignment is critical for maintaining institutional trust, particularly in turbulent or high-stakes environments (Andres, 2025). For instance, Kour and Bhatia (2025) argue that emotionally self-aware leaders foster psychologically safe climates, where open communication, innovation, and staff engagement thrive—outcomes closely tied to organizational effectiveness.

Mak (2025) emphasizes that self-awareness empowers leaders to identify and mitigate unconscious biases, thus improving fairness in governance and inclusivity in academic environments. This relational competence enhances transparency and trust within institutions—key mediators of organizational performance. Empirical studies by Narenji Thani et al. (2022) affirm that self-aware university leaders are better equipped to handle internal conflicts, foster collaboration, and make informed decisions that align with institutional missions and stakeholder expectations.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where universities face systemic challenges such as resource scarcity, governance inefficiencies, and public accountability pressures, the role of self-awareness in leadership is even more pronounced. Asmamaw and Semela (2023) found that self-aware leaders in African universities significantly improved faculty motivation, conflict management, and institutional resilience. Similarly, Tanui et al. (2024) observe that emotionally intelligent leadership, with self-awareness at its core, enhances adaptive governance and strategic responsiveness in volatile academic environments.

Specifically in Kenya, self-awareness has emerged as a strategic leadership imperative. Ntarangwe (2021) underscores that emotionally self-aware university administrators are better positioned to manage diverse stakeholder interests, improve operational decision-making, and sustain institutional credibility amid policy and funding instability. Achuodho et al. (2025) link low institutional performance in Kenyan universities to leadership that lacks emotional self-insight, noting a direct correlation between governance failures and emotional reactivity, poor conflict handling, and communication breakdowns.

By synthesizing these insights, a clear cause-effect relationship emerges: Self-awareness → enhances self-regulation → strengthens leadership behavior and interpersonal trust → improves organizational culture → leads to enhanced institutional performance. This causal chain is particularly critical in the Kenyan university context, where effective leadership is essential to navigate political interference, financial constraints, and growing accountability demands (Kato et al., 2023).

Therefore, embedding self-awareness development in leadership capacity-building initiatives is not merely beneficial—it is essential. University councils and policy-makers should integrate

emotional intelligence training, focusing on self-awareness, into performance management systems to support sustainable organizational development and strategic agility in the Kenyan higher education sector.

Review Methodology

This literature review adopted a structured and systematic approach to identify, select, analyze, and synthesize scholarly studies related to self-awareness and organizational performance within the context of higher education, with a specific focus on Kenyan universities. The methodology followed established guidelines for conducting integrative literature reviews ensuring both breadth and depth of scholarly coverage while maintaining transparency and replicability. The goal was to derive a comprehensive conceptual understanding of the influence of self-awareness—an emotional intelligence (EI) component—on institutional leadership and performance outcomes.

The review commenced with a scoping process to determine the scope of literature necessary to adequately address the research focus. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that only peer-reviewed, credible, and thematically relevant studies were included. The search was limited to empirical and theoretical studies published between 2020 and 2025, to ensure recency and alignment with the dynamic changes experienced in the higher education sector over the past five years, including post-COVID-19 leadership challenges. Major academic databases used in the search included Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect. Additional grey literature was also sourced from institutional reports, government publications, and policy briefs by the Commission for University Education (CUE) and other regional education bodies.

Search terms included combinations of keywords such as: “self-awareness,” “emotional intelligence,” “university leadership,” “organizational performance,” “higher education in Kenya,” “academic governance,” and “leadership effectiveness in Africa.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) and truncation symbols were employed to maximize the relevance and breadth of results. Inclusion criteria comprised: (1) peer-reviewed articles, books, or chapters published in English between 2020 and 2025; (2) relevance to leadership, emotional intelligence, or organizational performance; (3) focus on university or higher education settings; and (4) empirical or conceptual rigor. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on primary or secondary education, if they were not published within the stated timeframe, or if they lacked scholarly rigor or citation verification.

After retrieving an initial pool of 152 articles, a three-stage screening process was applied. In the first stage, duplicates and non-peer-reviewed materials were removed. The second stage involved a review of titles and abstracts to evaluate thematic relevance. In the third stage, full-text articles were assessed using a quality appraisal checklist adapted from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP), which considered clarity of research objectives, methodological robustness, contextual alignment, and contribution to theory. This resulted in a final sample of 65 articles that were deemed suitable for detailed analysis.

Data extraction focused on capturing key findings related to the role of self-awareness in leadership behavior, institutional decision-making, conflict resolution, strategic alignment, and overall performance. A thematic synthesis approach was used to analyze the literature. This involved coding the articles based on emerging patterns and organizing them into broader analytical themes. The main themes identified included: (1) the role of self-awareness in individual leadership effectiveness; (2) self-awareness as a driver of emotionally intelligent behavior in organizations; (3) the relationship between emotionally intelligent leadership and

organizational performance; and (4) context-specific applications of self-awareness in African and Kenyan university environments.

By using this systematic approach, the review ensured that the literature included was not only thematically consistent and methodologically sound but also geographically and temporally relevant. The synthesis of findings allowed for the identification of cause-effect relationships between self-awareness and organizational outcomes, contributing to both theoretical advancement and practical implications for leadership development in Kenyan higher education institutions. This rigorous methodology also addresses previous gaps in literature reviews where review criteria and analytical approaches were unclear, enhancing the academic credibility and replicability of this study.

Influence of Self-Awareness on Organizational Performance of Universities in Kenya

Self-awareness significantly contributes to organizational performance within Kenyan universities through a set of interrelated mechanisms that collectively enhance leadership effectiveness, institutional culture, and overall resilience (Kato et al., 2023). As a foundational component of emotional intelligence, self-awareness equips leaders with insight into their emotional states, personal values, cognitive biases, and behavioral tendencies—enabling more deliberate and ethical decision-making (Goleman, 2020). In the context of higher education, especially within the dynamic and often volatile Kenyan university system, these competencies are central to effective leadership and sustainable institutional transformation.

Several recent studies affirm the direct correlation between enhanced self-awareness and improved governance outcomes. For instance, Kathula (2024) found that university administrators who regularly engage in reflective practice and seek feedback exhibit stronger accountability and transparency in decision-making. This aligns with findings by Tanui et al. (2024) who observed that self-aware leaders are more inclined to align institutional policies with stakeholder interests, thus fostering trust and credibility. These behaviors contribute to enhanced operational efficiency and more coherent institutional cultures, especially in decentralized or multi-campus systems.

Self-awareness also plays a critical role in conflict management, a persistent challenge within many Kenyan universities. According to Ngina et al. (2024) emotionally self-aware leaders are better positioned to recognize their triggers, regulate emotional responses, and engage constructively in conflict resolution processes. Their study of six public universities revealed that self-aware leadership led to fewer industrial actions and better relations between academic and administrative units. Similarly, Tanui et al. (2024) demonstrate that emotionally attuned leaders facilitate more inclusive dialogue, mitigating the adversarial dynamics that often plague university governance structures.

At an institutional level, examples from the University of Nairobi and Strathmore University support these findings. According to the Commission for University Education (CUE, 2022), leadership development programs emphasizing self-awareness at these institutions resulted in reduced administrative bottlenecks, improved interdepartmental collaboration, and greater staff retention. These outcomes reflect broader international findings, such as those of Kour and Bhatia (2025), who contend that emotionally intelligent leadership—anchored in self-awareness—strengthens psychological safety and fosters environments conducive to innovation and collective problem-solving.

In the domain of innovation and adaptability, self-aware leadership has been shown to enable higher tolerance for ambiguity, risk-taking, and change (Mak, 2025). This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when universities led by emotionally intelligent administrators

transitioned more rapidly to virtual platforms, maintaining instructional continuity and student engagement. Tanui et al. (2024) found that such institutions demonstrated superior resilience, outperforming peers in student satisfaction, staff motivation, and digital adoption. These findings mirror global studies Andres (2025) that position self-awareness as a core enabler of adaptive leadership in times of crisis.

However, critical gaps remain in the systemic integration of self-awareness into institutional frameworks. While the benefits are widely acknowledged, studies such as Kathuka (2024) highlight that entrenched bureaucracies, limited autonomy in leadership appointments, and political interference continue to hinder the effective application of emotionally intelligent practices. Although training programs are increasingly popular, their impact is often diluted without structural reinforcement or policy alignment. Empirical evidence from Makoe and Olcott (2021) supports this view, indicating that isolated workshops or short-term leadership seminars rarely result in sustained change unless embedded within long-term strategic plans.

Moreover, while emotional intelligence interventions have gained traction, limited longitudinal research exists on their sustained impact in African universities. Mbithi et al. (2021) point out that while most training programs report immediate improvements in interpersonal dynamics and communication, their long-term influence on governance and performance remains underexplored. This represents a critical gap in the literature, particularly within the Kenyan context, where institutional memory, leadership turnover, and external pressures may erode initial gains from self-awareness training.

Thus, this paper seeks to fill a dual gap: (1) the lack of comprehensive synthesis of empirical studies linking self-awareness to organizational performance within Kenyan universities, and (2) the scarcity of critical analysis on the sustainability and institutionalization of emotional intelligence training. By consolidating findings across national and international contexts, this study offers evidence-based insights and strategic recommendations for university councils, policymakers, and academic leaders seeking to embed self-awareness into leadership development frameworks and institutional performance models.

Results and Key Findings

The review of literature on the influence of self-awareness on organizational performance within Kenyan universities yielded several significant findings and emerging patterns. These findings coalesced around five major thematic domains: leadership effectiveness, conflict management, governance and accountability, innovation and adaptability, and institutional sustainability. The results reveal a robust body of evidence confirming that self-awareness—situated within the broader framework of emotional intelligence—plays a transformative role in enhancing the leadership capacity and performance outcomes of higher education institutions in Kenya.

The first major finding underscores the strong correlation between self-awareness and leadership effectiveness. Across multiple studies (Kathula 2024; Goleman, 2020), leaders who demonstrate high levels of self-awareness were consistently associated with reflective decision-making, ethical governance, and increased trust among institutional stakeholders. These leaders were also more likely to engage in continuous self-improvement, seek feedback, and adjust their strategies based on evolving organizational dynamics. This behavior positively influenced staff morale, goal alignment, and communication efficiency—factors that directly contribute to institutional productivity.

The second theme emerging from the literature is the role of self-awareness in conflict resolution and organizational harmony. Studies by Ngina et al. (2024) and Tanui et al. (2024) found that emotionally self-aware leaders significantly reduced the frequency and intensity of conflicts in academic environments. These leaders were better able to manage their emotional reactions and those of others, fostering constructive dialogue, reducing defensive behavior, and enabling collaborative solutions. Institutions led by such individuals experienced fewer labor strikes, better faculty-management relationships, and improved conflict mediation mechanisms.

The third finding pertains to governance, accountability, and transparency. Empirical evidence (CUE, 2022; Kathula, 2024) confirmed that self-awareness positively impacts institutional governance structures. Self-aware leaders were more transparent in their administrative practices, more responsive to stakeholder concerns, and more consistent in applying policies and procedures. This translated into better institutional reputation, improved stakeholder satisfaction, and higher compliance with regulatory expectations. However, several studies (Kathuka, 2024; Makoe & Olcott, 2021) also highlighted systemic constraints—such as bureaucratic rigidity and political interference—that often diluted the full potential of emotionally intelligent leadership.

The fourth theme relates to innovation and institutional adaptability, particularly during times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a natural experiment where differences in leadership adaptability were observable. Tanui et al. (2024) documented that universities with self-aware leadership transitioned more quickly to virtual learning, maintained operational continuity, and supported both staff and students more effectively. These institutions also demonstrated a greater willingness to experiment with new technologies, reframe strategic priorities, and make data-driven decisions. Such agility was notably absent in institutions where leadership lacked introspective awareness or emotional competence.

A fifth and final trend identified in the literature is the emphasis on institutional sustainability and the need for systemic integration of self-awareness training. While short-term gains from leadership development programs were evident (Makoe & Olcott, 2021; Mbithi et al., 2021), long-term sustainability required consistent follow-up, alignment with strategic goals, and adequate resource allocation. A recurring observation across the reviewed studies was that isolated or ad hoc emotional intelligence training interventions often failed to produce durable change unless embedded in organizational policy and reinforced through continuous learning systems.

Overall, the literature affirms a strong, positive relationship between self-awareness and organizational performance, mediated by factors such as leader emotional regulation, stakeholder trust, conflict competence, innovation readiness, and strategic clarity. However, a key insight from the synthesis is that the effectiveness of self-awareness interventions is context-dependent. In Kenyan universities, the intersection of leadership behavior, organizational culture, political influence, and resource availability critically shapes the extent to which self-awareness translates into measurable institutional outcomes. Therefore, while the competency of self-awareness is essential, it must be supported by conducive structural and cultural conditions to yield sustainable performance improvements.

Conclusion

This study has comprehensively illustrated the profound and multifaceted impact of self-awareness on organizational performance within Kenyan universities. Through an extensive

synthesis of theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and institutional case examples, it is evident that self-awareness among university leaders significantly enhances leadership effectiveness, strategic decision-making, conflict resolution, innovation, and institutional resilience. The review affirms that self-awareness is not a peripheral trait but a central leadership competency critical to cultivating dynamic, responsive, and high-performing academic institutions.

By equipping academic leaders with a deeper understanding of their emotions, biases, and motivations, self-awareness enhances their capacity to engage stakeholders authentically, lead transparently, and manage crises effectively. It fosters a governance culture rooted in accountability, inclusivity, and trust—cornerstones of institutional credibility and operational efficiency. The ability of self-aware leaders to anticipate, adapt to, and constructively manage challenges is especially important in the rapidly evolving and politically sensitive landscape of Kenyan higher education.

In terms of institutional adaptability and innovation, the role of self-awareness is particularly compelling. Case studies from universities that demonstrated high levels of leadership self-awareness—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—highlight its critical role in enabling timely responses, sustaining educational delivery, and ensuring organizational continuity during crises. Overall, the findings of this study strongly support the position that self-awareness is not only a valuable leadership trait but a strategic enabler of organizational performance and sustainability in higher education.

Research Implications

The findings of this review carry significant implications for policymakers, university governance bodies, leadership development practitioners, and researchers. Firstly, there is an urgent need for strategic investment in leadership training programs that prioritize emotional intelligence, particularly self-awareness. These programs should be contextually grounded in the realities of the Kenyan higher education sector and aligned with institutional performance objectives. University councils and senior management teams should institutionalize such initiatives as part of their long-term leadership development strategies.

For policymakers, the evidence reinforces the necessity of creating supportive regulatory frameworks that mandate and incentivize the integration of emotional intelligence into leadership training curricula. This could include national quality assurance guidelines or performance-based funding models tied to leadership development outcomes. Additionally, leadership appointments should factor in emotional intelligence competencies, including self-awareness, as part of selection and assessment criteria.

Educational leadership programs—both within and outside universities—should embed structured self-awareness enhancement modules, reflective leadership practices, and continuous feedback loops into their learning design. Such integration will ensure that emotional intelligence development is not treated as a one-time intervention but a continuous learning journey. Further, institutional performance management systems should embed emotional intelligence indicators as part of routine leadership evaluations.

From a scholarly perspective, the study identifies several critical research gaps and opportunities for future inquiry. Longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the sustained impact of self-awareness training on institutional performance, governance outcomes, and leadership behavior. Additionally, comparative studies across different types of institutions—

public, private, and faith-based universities—can offer nuanced insights into how organizational context moderates the effects of self-awareness on performance. There is also scope for deeper exploration into how self-awareness interacts with related emotional intelligence domains—such as empathy, social awareness, and self-regulation—to holistically shape leadership effectiveness.

In conclusion, embedding self-awareness into university leadership development frameworks offers a transformative pathway for enhancing the governance, performance, and resilience of higher education institutions in Kenya. The practical and scholarly implications of this study lay a strong foundation for future policy formulation, strategic planning, and research in the realm of emotionally intelligent academic leadership.

Recommendations to Stakeholders

In light of the findings of this literature review synthesis, a comprehensive set of recommendations is proposed for stakeholders involved in the leadership, governance, and development of Kenyan universities. These recommendations are derived from consolidated empirical insights and conceptual analysis of the relationship between self-awareness and organizational performance in higher education.

To university councils and senior leadership teams, there is a pressing need to institutionalize self-awareness as a core competency within leadership development frameworks and performance management systems. Councils should mandate the integration of structured self-awareness training modules within onboarding programs for senior leaders and departmental heads. These modules should go beyond surface-level interventions and incorporate reflective practices, emotional self-assessment tools, feedback mechanisms, and scenario-based decision-making exercises. University councils are also encouraged to establish ongoing leadership coaching and mentorship programs that provide continuous opportunities for leaders to cultivate and sustain self-awareness throughout their tenure.

For policymakers and regulatory bodies such as the Commission for University Education (CUE), there is a need to develop national leadership development standards that explicitly include emotional intelligence—particularly self-awareness—as a performance criterion in institutional accreditation and leadership evaluation. These standards should encourage universities to demonstrate how emotional intelligence is being embedded within their human resource strategies, leadership appointment processes, and staff development policies. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education should allocate dedicated funding to support research and implementation of leadership development programs grounded in emotional intelligence frameworks.

To university administrators and leadership development practitioners, leadership performance programs should be strategically aligned with institutional goals and contextual realities. Programs should prioritize cultivating self-awareness through experiential learning, peer coaching, and emotional competence assessments, such as 360-degree feedback or psychometric tools. These initiatives should be embedded into broader organizational development strategies to ensure sustainability and alignment with institutional performance indicators. It is also recommended that leadership performance reviews include emotional intelligence benchmarks, and that self-awareness development becomes a criterion for promotions, leadership renewals, or tenure appointments.

For academic staff and faculty development offices, there is a clear opportunity to promote a culture of emotional awareness and reflective leadership across all levels of the academic workforce. Self-awareness should be introduced not only at the executive level but also embedded in pedagogical training for lecturers, departmental heads, and research supervisors. This will foster greater collaboration, reduce interpersonal conflicts, and improve the quality of student engagement and mentorship.

For researchers and scholars in higher education, this study highlights the need for deeper empirical investigation into the long-term effects of self-awareness on institutional performance. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and comparative studies that examine how emotional intelligence training programs influence leadership behavior and governance outcomes across public, private, and specialized universities. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies that examine the interplay between self-awareness and other emotional intelligence domains such as empathy, self-regulation, and social awareness would offer a more holistic understanding of effective academic leadership in complex organizational contexts.

In conclusion, fostering self-awareness among university leaders is not a luxury but a strategic necessity for enhancing governance, driving innovation, and building institutional resilience. The evidence presented in this study provides a compelling case for all stakeholders in Kenya's higher education sector to take deliberate, coordinated, and context-sensitive action to embed self-awareness into the core of leadership development and organizational strategy.

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