



OnGrowing

The Enneagram and Leadership, Part One: Cultivating Your Inner Observer

In this fourth issue of [OnGrowing](#), Cyndi and Ellen offer part one of a short series focused on how applying the Enneagram supports wise leadership. First up: honing our ability to witness “what is” with awareness and compassion.

[Cyndi Gueswel](#) and [Ellen Robinson](#) co-create a monthly newsletter primarily for our executive coaching clients, past and present. Through this joint venture, we continue conversations about your growth, relationships, and leadership.

- Because **you matter**.
- Because **how you are in the world matters** to those closest to you.
- Because **all the spheres you influence**, knowingly and unknowingly, **matter**.

Applying the Enneagram, a map of nine archetypes (or “types”) of human character, is a powerful way to wake up to the habits of your personality and the qualities of your true nature. The Enneagram offers a pathway for transformation that increases awareness and compassion. For leaders in particular, it provides insights that expand consciousness.

Since the Enneagram is a cornerstone framework for development, we’ve decided to write a short series of newsletters addressing three gifts the Enneagram offers:

- awareness of one’s inner life,
- increased self-regulation, and
- reconnection with essence.

If you are new or new-ish to the Enneagram, we suggest starting with Cyndi’s introductory post, which addresses the what and why of the Enneagram.

The first big step is to understand a bit about the system as a whole and where you see yourself within it. This means identifying your core Enneagram type, which gives you an entry point into learning about your ego structure. You learn your type to stretch beyond it, not to limit yourself.

Equipped with cognitive awareness about automatic patterns associated with type, the next leap is to deliberately notice how these patterns show up within you, and begin to see where patterns do and don’t serve you.

This step is the development of your inner observer - taking a witness stance, with great compassion. The practice in this issue focuses on this step: developing not just intellectual knowledge, but also detached, non-judgmental awareness of type.

Let’s look at an example.

Ellen is working with a client who has read a lot about what it means to have type Three as his dominant type. He understands, cognitively, that a Three’s automatic focus of attention goes to tasks, out of a motivation to receive recognition. He understands that as someone who leads with type Three, he is driven by an underlying fear of being worthless.

The table below shows this same high-level overview for all nine types.

Enneagram Types: Focus of Attention, Motivation, and Basic Fear

Type		Attention automatically goes to	from a motivation to	driven by a basic fear of
Body/Action Center	8	taking control	protect self and others from vulnerability	being harmed, controlled, violated
	9	others’ agendas	keep the peace	loss, separation, fragmentation
	1	disorder and error	reform and improve	being bad or defective
Heart Center	2	others’ needs	gain approval	being unloved
	3	tasks to do	receive recognition	being worthless
	4	what’s missing	feel and express with depth	having no identity or significance

Head Center	5	detaching and observing	maintain boundaries and privacy	being helpless or incompetent
	6	what could go wrong or be harmful	be safe and prepared	being without support and guidance
	7	best-case thinking	be stimulated	being trapped in pain and deprivation

For Ellen’s client, this knowledge had led him to some insights. He was able to see how many of his choices had been fueled by a less-than-conscious motivation to receive recognition and how frequently his attention felt consumed by tasks.

General awareness was a good starting point. However, he noticed significant shifts within a few days of taking up the *Cultivating your Inner Observer* practice (see below), inviting him to pause, notice, and witness his internal world.

A few days into the practice, he caught himself thinking in “orchestrating” mode, over breakfast. He wanted to barrage the kids with questions and orders: “Why aren't you here on time? Where are the napkins? Did you do your chores?” Yet, instead of saying these things out loud, his inner observer practice helped him pause. In the pause, he noticed his heart rate rising.

In a coaching session, he told Ellen, “My observer was working. I noticed the words running in my head and my elevated heart rate. I saw a choice to shift into my warmer parent mode. Once I did that, my tension and the tension in the room subsided a bit, and breakfast was a lot more fun!”

This client has also begun to bring his inner observer to work. He is recognizing how often he finds himself making judgments about difficult situations and his colleagues involved in these situations. With a more detached lens, he can see that he is focusing on the list of tasks he believes would shift the team into efficient and effective mode. What’s underneath the? Worry about his reputation.

He is realizing that what is actually needed is conversational skillfulness to improve his relationships with colleagues, so that they can resolve difficulties together. He is beginning to see choices he can make that will positively impact the team’s collaboration, allowing them to deliver better outcomes over the long term.

Cultivating your Inner Observer is liberating! The practice expands your consciousness by broadening what you are able to hold in your awareness. Leaders with expanded consciousness see more and *hold* more, with less reactivity. *This* is what we mean by the Enneagram serving as a pathway to transformation.

A Practice



Cultivating Your Inner Observer

Background

In all wisdom traditions, self-observation is a central inner life practice. The practice consists of consciously focusing your attention inward and becoming aware of your thoughts.

In Enneagram study, practitioners commonly call this capacity cultivating your inner observer. It's vital to development, since you need to know your own habits of mind to recognize your ego's structure and activity (i.e., your Enneagram type).

Pausing to observe your inner world from the perspective of a detached observer creates the possibility of shifting your patterns and the behaviors that emanate from them.

Instructions

Commit to stopping 2-3 times per day, 10 minutes at a time, to engage in this practice. Set a timer for random times throughout your day, or identify routine times (like waking up and preparing for sleep).

1. With your journal, settle in and turn your attention inward. Follow your unique train of thought as it is occurring in this moment. No one but you has this particular set of thoughts. Only you know what you just did, are remembering, are planning to do next, or are dreaming about.
2. Create the sense of an inner observer who is gentle and accepting, dispassionate and compassionate. It might be visual, like a shadow version of yourself, or you may feel it as a color or energy. In any case, the observer is an awareness that sits beyond your sense of "self."
3. **From the stance of the observer, capture in writing your thoughts (or other objects of your attention), as literally and as completely as possible.**
4. When you feel finished, reflect on the questions below. Then capture another few sentences about what you notice:
 - a. What domains of your life are occupying your attention? Work? Relationship? Family? Self?
 - b. Are your thoughts related to tasks? Relationships? Other?
 - c. What "soft" (kind) or "hard" (critical) thoughts are you having? What feelings are showing up connected to these thoughts?
5. After a period of a week, look back at all you've written. What patterns do you see? Highlight them, or create a list.
6. Look back at the Enneagram Types table to recall your focus of attention, motivation, and basic fear. What connections do you notice, especially related to your leadership?

7. Is there a pattern in your outer behavior you want to interrupt that would serve you and those you influence? Name the pivot you'd like to make, and put it in writing.



Deeper Dive

- Download a [one-pager](#) of the Inner Observer practice and the Enneagram Types table.
- Renowned Enneagram teacher and author Helen Palmer is the master of inner observer work. A one-hour webinar of her discussing Type Patterns and Their Inner Observer is available for purchase [here](#).

Quote

“Awareness precedes choice and choice precedes change.”

- Robin S. Sharma

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CUSTOMIZED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT