Environmental Awareness Defined

In the *American Heritage Dictionary*, *environment* is defined as the complex of social and cultural conditions affecting the nature of an individual or community.

The larger system, or environment, directly influences an individual’s ability to lead. Aspects of the environment affect the psychological and interpersonal dynamics of any human interaction. Emotionally intelligent leaders are in tune with a variety of factors such as community traditions and customs, the political environment, and major institutions (e.g., religion, government). Demonstrating environmental awareness means having the ability to observe these dynamics and factors present in the environment as they occur. Being aware of one’s environment enables a person to use that knowledge to determine a course of action with greater perspective and insight.

Developing environmental awareness can be difficult. It is a skill that must be practiced intentionally. Why? It is simply human nature to react to stimuli rather than consciously observe. We also tend to focus only on ourselves: what is
happening to us or what might influence us. Learning how to take a step back and observe what is going on around us comes with experience. Environmental awareness includes noticing the influences from outside the group or the situation that affect how people interact—for instance, how a group approaches its work during a high-stress time versus when the group first comes together after a successful event. Leaders who are aware of their environment use that knowledge to determine a course of action as well as anticipate potential challenges.

Too Much Environmental Awareness

Individuals focused too much on environmental awareness may get lost in the many dimensions of the environment and find themselves stuck in a labyrinth of possibilities. In other words, it is easy to become so focused on the larger system that little action occurs. Too much attention to the environment may translate into spending too much time thinking about the external influences and subsequent hypothetical situations (the “what ifs”), instead of paying attention to what is happening in reality. In essence, a person can become immobilized by analyzing the external forces (real and potential) at play. This focus may take the person away from interacting with others or attending to responsibilities. As such, a leader too focused on this capacity may be perceived by others as being in the clouds and unable to make things happen on the ground and in real time.

Too Little Environmental Awareness

People with low levels of environmental awareness may find themselves blindsided by external factors that were previously invisible to them. In essence, a person who does not see the
whole picture may make decisions that do not mesh with the broader reality of the situation. Opportunities may be lost or distorted because of the person’s narrow perspective. This person also may not understand the dynamics of the group because of not noticing the impact of external forces. In addition, a leader with a low level of environmental awareness may lose sight of the organization’s alignment with its intended purpose and its place in the larger community. How the organization links to the larger community is an important element that will affect the leader’s ability to be successful.

**Student Quotes**

An environment that I feel comfortable in is a huge factor in my ability to lead. If I feel that I am in the kind of place where I can say what I want and take charge, then I am more likely to lead. However, if a teacher, advisor, or another student is imposing or not inviting, I often have the feeling that I want to just sit back and not be noticed.

The environment has everything to do with one’s ability to lead. Everyone has a leadership style which comes naturally. Each style has positives and negatives. If the environment requires a leadership style not mastered by the leader, it becomes difficult to impact what goes on.

[The] environment can either make or break leadership ability. If you are working with others in an environment where they fully support your duties, you will succeed many times over.
If you are constantly battling for credibility, it will start to feel troublesome or hopeless.

After this past summer, environment has a new meaning to me. If an environment has an established culture, it is harder to get adjusted and bring the people along with you. In an office, the environment describes the mood, almost to what I want to call the “integrity” of the company. If it’s a positive environment, that’s great, but when it lacks support and communication, there is room for error and even failure.

🌐 Online Articles and Resources

- [http://managementhelp.org](http://managementhelp.org)—Organizational Culture
- [http://dayton.bizjournals.com](http://dayton.bizjournals.com)—Strong culture can be a “double-edged sword”
- [http://www.ericdigests.org](http://www.ericdigests.org)—Organizational Culture and Institutional Transformation
- [http://www.iroconhcm.co.uk/](http://www.iroconhcm.co.uk/)—What Is Organisational Culture and How Can You Change It?

📚 Suggested Books

- *Group Dynamics* by Donelson R. Forsyth
- *Leadership on the Line* by Martin Linsky and Ronald A. Heifetz
- *Leadership Without Easy Answers* by Ronald A. Heifetz
- *Leadership Can Be Taught* by Sharon Daloz Parks
- *Organizational Culture and Leadership* by Edgar H. Schein
• *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal
• *How the Mighty Fall and Why Some Companies Never Give Up* by Jim Collins

**Suggested Films**

The following films highlight the capacity of environmental awareness. Some characters may overuse this capacity; others may lack the ability to use it successfully.

• *Primary Colors*
• *Wall Street*
• *Avatar*
• *Milk*
• *Norma Rae*
• *North Country*
• *Boiler Room*
• *The Smartest Guys in the Room*
• *Remember the Titans*
• *A League of Their Own*
• *Harry Potter series*
• *Gandhi*

**Potential Courses That Relate to This Capacity**

• *Cultural anthropology courses*
• *Business courses*—organizational behavior, leadership or management skills
• *Communication courses*—interpersonal communication, small group communications
• Leadership courses
• Psychology courses—small group dynamics, social psychology, organizational psychology, identity development
• Sociology courses—organizations, social institutions, community

Notable Quotes

I will argue that the term “culture” should be reserved for the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic “taken for granted” fashion an organization’s view of itself and its environment.—Edgar Schein, author, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*

In order to understand people, we have to understand their way of life and approach. If we wish to convince them, we have to use their language in the narrow sense of the mind. Something that goes even much further than that is not the appeal to logic and reason, but some kind of emotional awareness of the other people.—Nehru, Indian statesman

Culture hides more than it reveals and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand foreign culture but to understand our own.—Edward T. Hall, anthropologist
Reflection Questions

Think about an organization or group that you are a part of:

• Is the organization doing a good job of doing what it is intended to do? Are its activities and mission (reason for existence) consistent with each other? How do you know this is true?
• How is the organization known by others outside of this group? How do you know this?
• How would you describe the level of acceptance from the campus or school community?
• What are the external challenges facing the group? Are there forces from outside the group that are helpful to the group? If so, what are they? If not, what would benefit the group?
• Is the organization seen as a benefit or detriment to the community? Explain.