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MBA Sustainability Leadership

Embedding Sustainability within Organisations

Assessment Three

Critical Reflection

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3580 Words

Introduction

The Sustainability plan for the brand ETTE Covered a clear description of sustainability and how technology could play a part in the increasing sustainable initiative for the brand this was through the development of RFID technology a full sustainable value analysis tool was used to understand value uncovered uncaptured and where sustainability could have been improved the findings of the report showed that those values uncaptured in all stages of the product life of the brand are currently an opportunity and the following actions were suggested for the brand too undertake.

The beginning of life phase for the brand for the product had many opportunities such as finding collaborations with strategic partners to develop technological solutions they are less resource impactful examples of this could be using repurposed fabrics and sustainable fabrics or natural fabrics such as bamboo or hemp, they are not as resource heavy such as cotton or non-recyclable like polyester. Another partnership that the brand could embrace is partnerships around thought leaders within the sustainability and fashion face then space such as fashion revolution, fashion roundtable, centre for sustainable fashion and Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

Dewey's (1933) states that 'reflection is a complex process that is based on the openness to assess experience based on individual's current knowledge and subsequent skill'. In viewing my current skill set and cross-examining with the project deliverables, consisting of the management report and sustainability plan for my

brand ETTE, I will critically reflect on the prior two assignments and the viability of the sustainability plan, I have delved deeper into my own understanding of sustainable fashion and my critical reflection of the industry, I then have gone on to look deeper and more critically at myself and my skillset with a SWOT analysis and a self awareness exploration with a Johari Window shared with peers.

Earth Logic, Sustainable Fashion, SMEs and digitalisation.

Logical Compromise;

Earth Logic is a recently published Action Research Plan invitation for the fashion industry, inviting businesses, researchers and those in leadership positions to “Call out as fiction the idea that sustainability can be achieved within economic growth and instead to ‘stay with the trouble’ of envisioning fashion connected with nature, people and long term healthy futures” (Fletcher and Tham, 2019). I believe such an ambitious plan can be achieved, if by placing Earth first as a consideration before anything else it changes everything, this may seem simple but is rarely adopted because the compromise is research, innovation, potentially higher costs and longer lead times.

Compromise doesn't come easy to the fashion industry, is not always conducive to success as we have trained the consumer into demanding more, quicker, cheaper and often. As recently reinforced by a very prominent figure within the industry “You know, there is a dynamic here that we've trained the consumer to pursue, which is not consistent with the industry's supposed goals of becoming more sustainable. And I see an inherent contradiction there. It feels like the elephant in the room. And that seems like an area that we, as an industry, are really going to have to get our

heads around” Business of Fashion founder, CEO, and editor-in-chief Imran Amed on the McKinsey Podcast (McKinsey, 2020). This is something I have had dissonance with for the past six years of my academic journey, I personally initially entered the fashion industry wanting to create a business but soon after starting I learned about the devastating impact that the fashion industry has on our planet and its inhabitants. I think once you know you can never un-know, however I do think there is such a thing as turning a blind eye, the psychological and academic term is cognitive dissonance, it is the unhelpful truth so you just keep telling yourself comforting lies, this is sometimes how I see veganism, those who refuse to acknowledge that no animal wants to die, yet, it is a comforting lie for the meat eater to tell themselves, well, it was what they were bred for. I think this is the same with fast fashion and this throwaway culture, the person must know by now it takes a lot of resources, energy and human effort to make the garment all for it to just be discarded. Even if there is an element of awareness the consumer pacifies the throwaway by donating to charity or recycling. This has led to a surge in the resale and second hand market which is further discussed within this critical reflection.

Sustainable fashion;

Every year in the United Kingdom the average volume of textile products that ends up in landfill is estimated to accumulate to 1.1 million tonnes. I personally find this incredibly troublesome not least because of this throwaway culture we have developed but the inconsideration to the person who painstakingly farmed the cotton, dyed the fabric, cut the pattern, sew the material under pressure on a time sensitive scale, for the person who packaged drove, flew or sailed the garment to destinations far, to the shop assistants or warehouse workers on their feet for hours upon hours.

All of this and that doesn't even cover the damage to the planet and wildlife through pesticides, chemicals, dyes, and emissions. On average, UK citizens wear a garment ten times before it is disposed of and it is predicted that more than half of the clothes produced are thrown away in under a year from when they were made (The Impacts of Clothing, 2020). The fast fashion model is what I believe to be one of the main causes of this, we have created a demand culture, this is a terrible strain on the planet and I sometimes wonder if there is a solution, the business model of ETTE I hope is part of the solution, if the business can contribute to the already incredible efforts of other sustainable fashion brands and then work to pioneer further then I will be incredibly proud and I would say that it has been a success, especially in aiding consumers to purchase better and less often, with the aim of passing the vegan silk scarf with messages of empowerment on to someone else. Although UK citizens overconsume, over two-thirds of consumers purchase or receive second-hand clothing (WARP, 2012); in 2014 it was estimated that approximately 650,000 tones of clothing were collected for recycling or re-use in the UK (The Impacts of Clothing, 2020), showing that the adoption of second hand or being given something to treasure by a friend or family member is a potential viable cause and option for ETTE to follow.

The reuse and recycling of clothing and textiles is becoming increasingly popular among consumers as more people not only become attracted to the lure of vintage shops but also aim to lead a more sustainable and eco-friendlier lifestyle. I feel that the rise of the second hand culture is by product of the overconsumption and throwaway culture, if people bought with more consideration and opted for products

that last longer or from businesses with less negative impact to the planet we would see a different story and climate.

Opportunity for growth;

The global apparel market is continuing to grow. As consumers become increasingly aware of the global climate crisis, they are shifting towards practicing more sustainable purchasing habits, meaning that ETTE as a business should implement the sustainable plan with confidence. This trend can be seen both in the UK and worldwide, as consumers have begun to support brands that put the environment at the forefront of their business, this again reinforcing the potential for increased revenue. From 2014-2018 ethical clothing sales revenue in the United Kingdom increased from 29 million British pounds in 2015 to 50 million British pounds in 2018 (Sabanoglu, 2020), the only critical consideration for the business is that the cost will increase to make the product and therefore the purchase price will reflect that. The growth of ethical personal products grew considerably in 2017; The market's overall increase was 15.7% and there was an exceptionally strong growth for ethical clothing (19.9%) and second-hand clothing (22.5%) (Ethical Consumer Market Report 2018, 2018) again showing some impressive growth in market share, reducing the difficult business decision on increasing the prices.

On the other hand, some consumers wish to consume more sustainably, but when sustainable fashion is compared to its fast-fashion counterparts, many consumers cannot afford to purchase clothes that are being sold at a much higher price point. I will need to look over the margins again to carefully consider the pricing. Additionally, apparel's global retail value currently equals \$1.4 trillion - that equates to every

person on the planet (7.7 billion people) each spending \$231 on clothing in 2019 (The Size of the Global Fashion Retail Market, 2020). At the same time, the fashion industry, which relies and lives off consumerism, continues to be on the rise, conflicting with any sustainability gains that are being made (Fletcher, 2014). The fashion industry remains a crowded market which creates pressure on brands to launch new lines every month or even every week, adding to the accumulation of fashion waste, I hope to draw in consumers who will buy once or twice, and who will form an attachment to the garment. I consider the manifesting and the fabric to be of a high standard to ensure the longevity of the garment, most brands utilise a complex web of suppliers for their materials, often searching for the cheapest materials they can find on the opposite end of the world, further harming the environment. I will not do this with ETTE, I have listed this a requirement to stick to within the sustainability plan.

Potential for SME's;

The potential for sustainable microbrands to have upcycling programs, I would like to push the sustainability plan further by introducing a buyback and upcycling program for the vegan silk scarves, I think the element of creativity and running workshops either in person or online as being a community led aspect to the business.

There is a growing interest in the UK fashion industry to upcycle clothes; in the UK for the past five years, the collection of clothing and textiles for reuse and recycling initiatives has grown enormously, with over two-thirds of the UK population opting to buy used clothes. This has resulted in a decrease in the overall number of textiles that end up in landfill (Fletcher, 2014). That being said, for smaller fashion start-up brands that have limited resources, reuse programs are difficult to have because it is

hard for these initiatives to be operated effectively and efficiently, I would have to further develop something to enable this process, this is part of what I would call phase two of the sustainability plan.

Digitalisation;

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been unprecedented impact on the entirety of the global economy (Carven et al, 2000), it has had a significant effect on consumers behaviour towards retail and in turn, has forced consumers to become increasingly reliant on e-commerce, this is a potential issue for the brand ETTE not least because I have relied on in person sales in the past due to the fabrics and the story of the brand being so personal, but because of the digital footprint consideration that often get overlooked. The dissolution of physical stores and thus the disruption of immersive technologies, include AR and VR (Huang & Rust, 2018), has led to significant changes in the consumption of fashion within an accelerated digitalised world, as much as ETTE needs to keep up with the trends of the fashion landscape I will need to consider the offset of the digital footprint, though I can see some benefits, for example there is competitor brand Emma Shipley Scarves who worked with a innovation agency to develop an app called Scarfi, where the user turned their camera on and there was a series of filters overlaying the silk scarves onto the users neck and shoulders, this is similar to the technology used by Snapchat, the benefit I see is historically we as fashion business owners have relied heavily on PR gifting, resulting in waste, increased costs of production and the potential for no return in kind, whereas a simple overlay in an app would have a carbon footprint and a 'virtual try on mechanism' potentially resulting in less returns. Whilst comparing the various facets of immersive technology such as virtual and

augmented reality, research has showcased that VR is the 'complete immersion into a virtual world' whereas 'AR is a form of technology that can be easily adapted into a physical store' (Xue, Parker & Hart, 2020) this could also be a future consideration for ETTE within a sustainability plan 2.0.

Does the sustainability plan for ETTE go far enough?

To answer this, I need to look at myself as the owner of the business and my own values, capabilities, strengths, weaknesses and areas for development. I believe the sustainability plan is achievable right now with some hard work and effort to source the right kind of materials and transportation, however, if I was to aim to go further, I could look to carbon offsetting, this is where any excess transportation or making emissions will be offset by donating to a carbon offsetting company who would plant trees.

Jarvis (1992) stated that we learn something in relation to our prior experience guiding how we respond to present experience, which was evident within this specific situation of creating a sustainability plan with the Sustainability Value Analysis Tool I had been introduced to a few months prior on a workshop with the Cambridge Institute of Sustainability Leadership. This is a skill I will take with in the future, leveraging enterprise and the mindset of creating opportunities through being resourceful, applying this attribute and the success demonstrates the effectiveness of the acquired attribute.

If ETTE was to embed Nature as a Stakeholder, it would further develop the sustainable goals of the brand and also act as a tool for a voice of the brand. If the first question or considerations of the brand is how does this affect Nature? Almost humanising nature, giving it a voice and a persona then the development of ETTE would be somewhat hypocritical, I think by the very nature of adding to consumption it is not aligned with sustainable efforts, however, I can aim to go further with 'more sustainable actions' going forward.

To look towards any pitfalls or opportunities for success within my personal attributes or accolades that might contribute to the execution or further progress of the sustainability plan for ETTE I have completed a personal professional SWOT.

SWOT; Personal Analysis

Strengths – ability to connect with others in the industry, not relying entirely on the financial success of the business, meaning if making the business as sustainable as possible actually is not viable then I can close the business or try something else to contribute to sustainable fashion such as creating educational materials. My academic experiences within fashion business and sustainable fashion deepened with this current study in MBA Sustainability Leadership is also a strength, this is due to continually discovering information and testing my assumptions.

Weaknesses – lack of capital to execute the proposed plan, lack of knowledge of some aspects of the industry such as natural fabric dyes, compositions of some repurposed fabrics. Ability to manage my time effectively, I do not prioritise scoping

out the potential to make ETTE's sustainability goals come to fruition due to not marking out time in the calendar, this is now something I can work on and I can put in my SMART goals or Action Plan.

Opportunities – significant changes within the industry that can be taken advantage of such as technological advances to repurpose materials, the voices of change leaders has grown such as Raeburn, Stella McCartney, I hope to join some of the entry level sustainable fashion. The rise of slow fashion is a huge opportunity, having consumers that already appreciate buying once and buying to keep or treasure as a opposed to throwaway fashion.. My skillset is an opportunity, I have skills in marketing, sales and enterprise.

Threats – peers doing a better job taking their products to market. Fighting for the same consumer (ethical, sustainable) in a competitive market. Lack of time and focus to execute the sustainability plan due to paying work taking priority. Cheaper products similar to mine entering the market, this actually can be a good thing as it means there is demand within the industry, showing there is a potential consumer base.

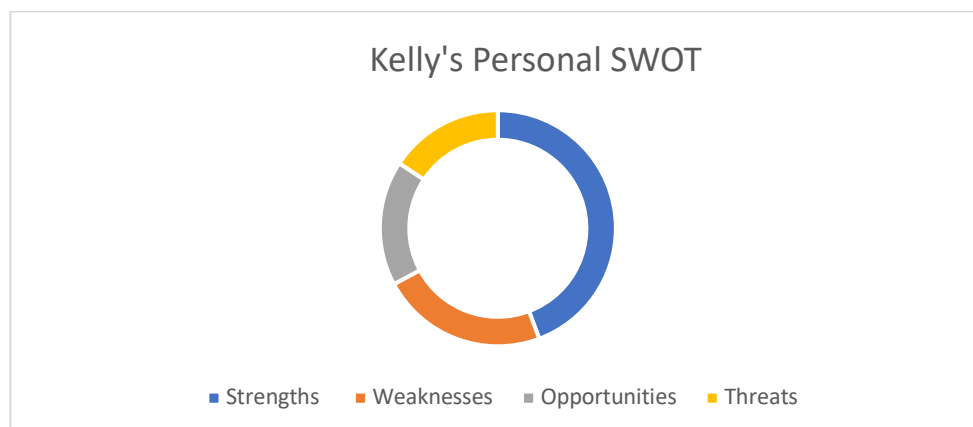


Fig 1 (Authors Own, 2021)

The personal SWOT exercise has been very helpful as a way to reflect on the approach to this business and the sustainability plan, I initially had some barriers to some factors within the business such as finding a supplier with eco-friendly digital dyes, I think I have found one now and dependent on quantities it might be accomplishable. I decided to give myself a rough score of where I thought I was in each area and used the Fig 1 above to demonstrate visually.

The Johari Window;

To follow on from the personal SWOT in relation to business I was inspired to delve deeper into my self awareness by asking some peers to assist me in responding to a Johari Window test. The Johari Window was invented by two psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham, it is a tool to help you understand self awareness, and interactions that result from our personal self awareness. It is interesting because we are often unaware of how others perceive us; the model was designed to show the notion that what happens in our life depends upon our own self awareness and the awareness others have of us.

Surprisingly the results as seen in Fig 2 showed that my sense of self in the areas of being adaptable and extroverted are known to others and known to myself, reinforcing this knowledge of those adjectives can contribute to the development of the sustainability plan, I agree that I am adaptable and can recall many previous examples of where I have utilised this skill, such as changing the colours of the brand because the initial branding was gold foiled and was the least

environmentally friendly. Perhaps the extraversion is handy for being a willing spokesperson within fashion sustainability.

The Johari window did some 'blind spots' those attributes known to others but not to the self, such as bravery, giving, independent, intelligent and kind. I think these are all attributes that will ensure the fruition of the sustainability plan I created for ETTE.

There are some attributes I have to stay I can't see within myself utilising to execute the sustainability plan like being powerful, spontaneous or self-assertive, I feel that to being others on board with a plan you have to make them feel like they have the power, the voice and they expect consistency.

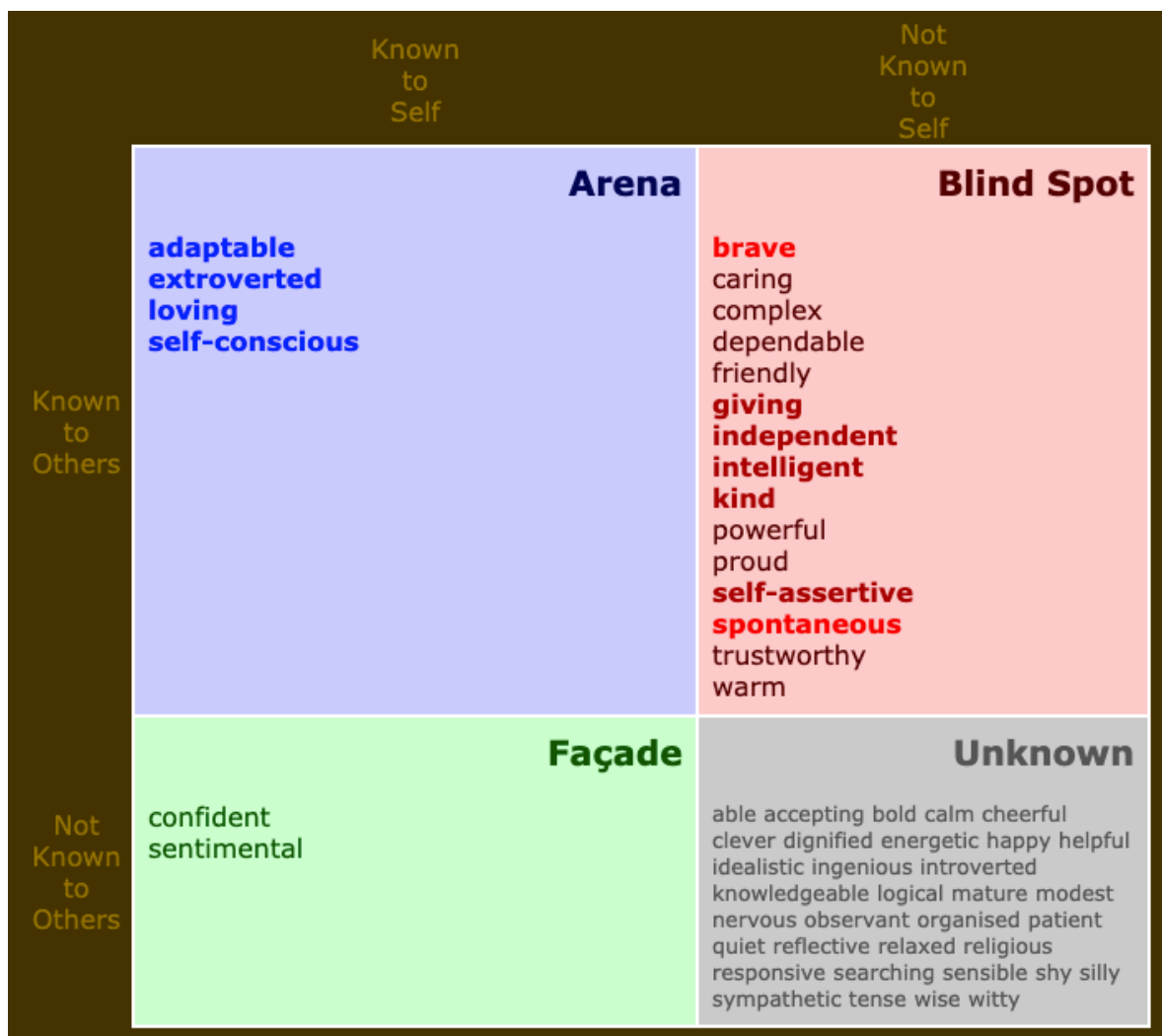


Fig 2 Adapted Johari Window (Johari Window - KDARCY's Window, 2021)

The success of the sustainability initiatives relies in organisational culture and consumer culture.

The conscious competence ladder is a reflective tool however, I actually found it incredibly useful to think about in the terms of both my own skill set but the 'consumer mindset' in relation to consumption and sustainability.

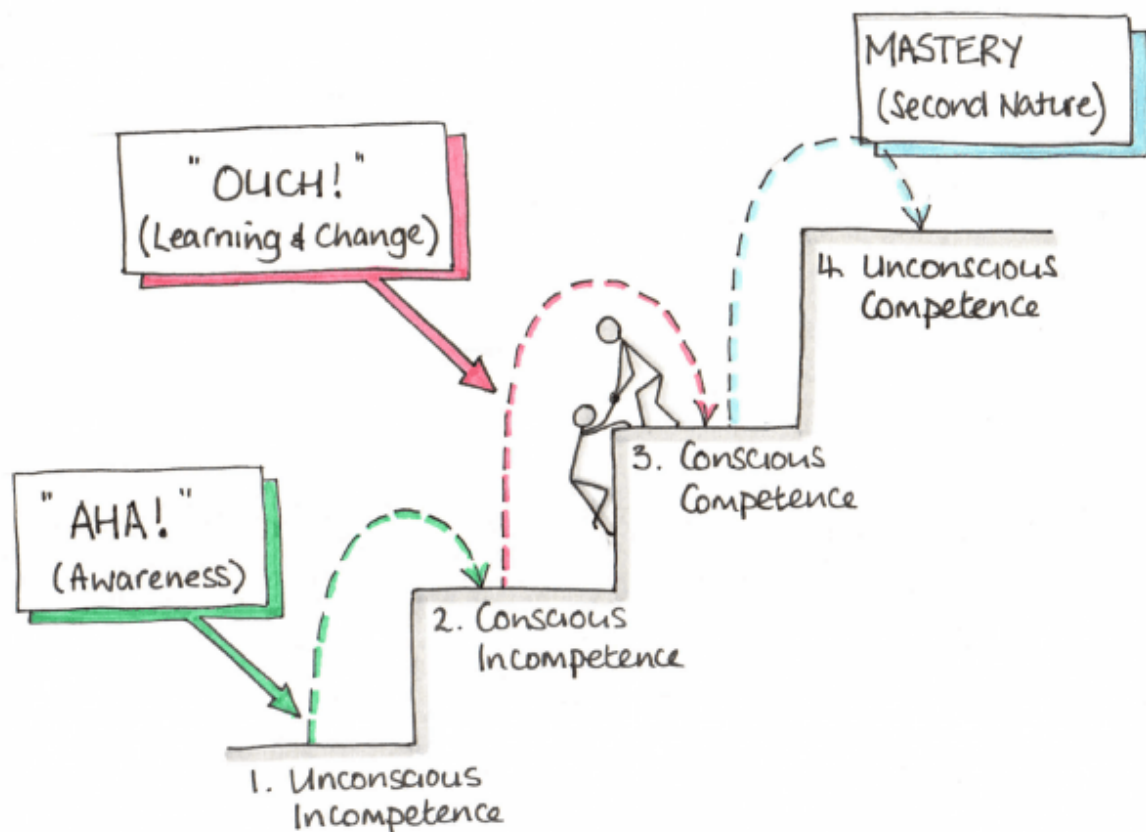


Fig 3 Adapted Conscious Competence Ladder (Richens, 2021) UKCPD, 2017

Unconsciously incompetent is characterised as 'ignorance is bliss' this is how I felt entering the fashion industry many years ago and how I think some consumers are when it comes to fast fashion.

Conscious Incompetence is where the discomfort comes from, the need for changing or learning is now apparent, I was aware of my shortcomings with the brand ETTE and required knowledge, planning and reflection to develop the sustainability plan. I also feel this is the stage where many consumers feel they have difficulty understanding the landscape and complexities of sustainable fashion.

Conscious Competence this is the level where I have acquired all the skills and knowledge I will need, and the confidence builds. New things will come up and need to be developed but the foundation is there, it becomes more automatic to think with nature as a stakeholder within ETTE, this I think can be true also of the consumer who may have a lot of knowledge of sustainable fashion and is strong willed enough to stick to their values, there is not much compromise.

Unconscious Competence is where the top of the ladder is, this is where I use my skills effortlessly embedding sustainability not just within my own business but consulting to others or being a voice within the industry, this level of mastery, the skill is now a habit and is a part of who I am, I hope I am nearing this level, I am aware that there are some challenges and a lot more to develop knowledge wise to get to this point but I see a path. This is where I think in relation to consumers and how they behave are the non-negotiable sustainable pioneers who are activist within the world, demanding for better.

Could ETTE be a Sustainability Leader within the fashion industry?

I think ETTE can be a sustainability leader, as the brand is founded by me and reflecting on the critical aspects of this assignment, I have the opportunity to act as a thought leader or spokesperson within the fashion industry on the topic of sustainable fashion and sustainable practices.

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Figures

Figure 1 – Authors own

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Figure 2 – Adapted Johari Window, (Johari Window - KDARCY's Window, 2021)

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Figure 3 - Conscious Competence Ladder (Richens, 2021)

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