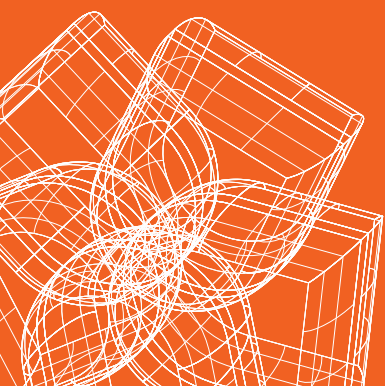
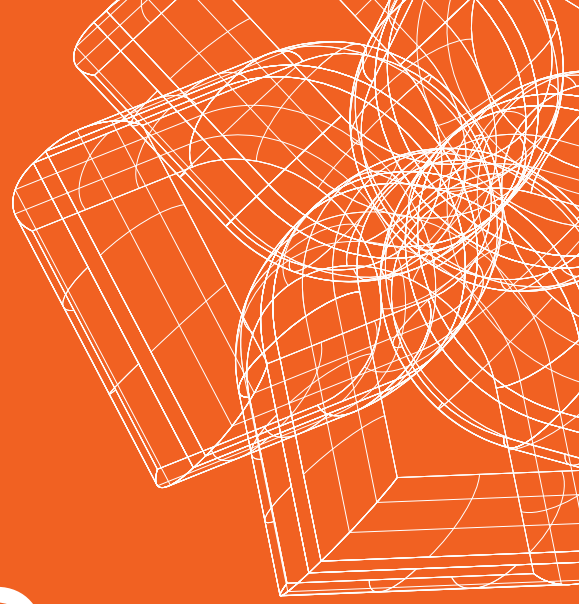


building leadership capital

reflective practice white paper



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Reflective practice white paper

Author: Deborah Evans

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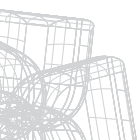
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Leadership



What is reflective practice?

A reflective practice is one that provides the learner with a process, framework or support tools for learning enhancement through reflection. This reflection may be individual and private (such as when journaling), verbal and undertaken with one other person (such as in a 'buddy' role) or in a group (as in an action learning set). A reflective practice enables a new level of learning.

Transformational learning practice emphasizes meaning making based on discourse and critical reflection. Such reflective learning depends on discovering and challenging one's own and other's assumptions as a step in establishing new meaning perspectives. These new perspectives can lead to more than just reframes of current ideas; they foster qualitatively more complex ways of understanding and knowing (Kegan 2000, cited in Taylor 2006, p. 79).

Three of the key reflective practices that we have incorporated into our Building Leadership Capital program are action learning, the establishment of a 'buddy' system, and the use of learning journals. In this paper we outline the role of reflective practice in learning and professional development, and the way the key practices used in the Building Leadership Capital program foster reflective thinking.

Definitions and concepts of reflection

Moon (2003), when introducing the concept of reflection, reminds us that there are common-sense meanings of reflection as well as the many more technical ones. She suggests that the:

... common usage of the word [implies] a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or an anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution. This suggests close association with, or involvement in, learning and the representation of learning' Moon (2003, p. 4).

Many of our current notions of *reflection* and *reflective thinking* have developed from the early work of writers such as John Dewey (1933) and Jürgen Habermas (1971), whose philosophical approaches to the role of reflection and reflective thinking in learning and the generation of knowledge have influenced many later writers, such as Donald Schön (1983, 1988), who applied the concept of reflection to professional development, and David Kolb (Kolb & Fry 1975, Kolb 1984), who incorporated reflection into his experiential learning cycle.

In more recent times, some of the most compelling descriptions of the significance of reflection as a key to changes in the brain, and hence to changes in behaviour and therefore to the processes of learning, have come from the field of neuroscience. In her article titled 'Brain function and adult learning', Taylor (2006) sees that reflecting on and questioning pre-suppositions brings about changes in how people understand aspects of themselves and their world.

An important concept in understanding the role of reflection is that of *epistemic cognition*. Referring to the work of Kitchener (1983), Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009) describe thinking as occurring on three levels:

1. *cognition, which describes the basic processing of thought;*
2. *meta-cognition, in which an individual can monitor one's progress in learning;*
and
3. *epistemic cognition, which describes an understanding of the limits, certainty, and criteria of thought (Day, Harrison & Halpin 2009, p. 86).*

The practices of reflection and reflective thinking are essential if an individual is to develop through these levels of thinking. Empirical studies by Perry (1970) and King and Kitchener (1994, 2002) introduce the idea of stages by which intellect and *reflective judgment* are developed, with the ability to make reflective judgments seen by King and Kitchener as the advanced stages that indicate 'that individuals have reached an understanding that enables them to cope in situations of uncertain information' (Moon 2003, p. 7).

Reflective practice

Examples of how reflective practices have been applied to professional and leadership development programs include Schön's (1983) 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action', and the interest in and use of storytelling and narrative in the corporate education space, particularly in change management and leadership development programs. Norman Doidge (2007), a research psychiatrist and psychoanalyst from Columbia University also proposes that reflecting and narrating to another person allows for learning and development, because 'language and significant social relationships build and shape the brain'.

As indicated earlier in this paper, it is the processes, frameworks and support tools of reflective practice that enhance an individual's ability to learn through reflection on their experiences and which support their development towards reflective judgment.

Journaling – individual reflection

Learning journals are used to record a learner's experiences and integrate them with current and past learning, knowledge, thoughts and insights in order to create new meaning about their work.

The objectives of keeping a learning journal are:

- to increase self-awareness and acknowledge what has been learnt and how learning has progressed
- to disrupt habitual ways of thinking through the development of reflective judgment
- to identify problems and enable the learner to consider possible solutions/resolutions.

Learning journals help participants to learn and increase the probability of using what they have learned.

A journal is not merely a flow of impressions. It records impressions set in a context of description of circumstances, others, the self, motives, thoughts and feelings. Taken further, it can be used as a tool for analysis and introspection. It is a chronicle of events as they happen, a dialogue with the facts (objective) and interpretations (subjective), and perhaps most important, it provides a basis for developing an awareness of the difference between facts and interpretations. A journal becomes a dialogue with oneself over time. To review journal entries is to return to events and their interpretation with the perspective of time. Over time, patterns and relationships emerge that were previously isolated events 'just lived'. Time provides perspective and momentum, and enables deeper levels of insight to take place (Holly 2003, p. 5).

Moon (2003, pp. 189–92) provides a discussion of 18 purposes that different writers have suggested for journaling and the ways in which these writers have used journaling in various contexts. The most relevant of these to reflective practice and action learning are:

- to record and facilitate learning from experience
- to deepen the quality of learning, in the form of critical thinking or developing a questioning attitude
- to increase the ability to reflect and improve the quality of learning
- to enable the learner to understand their own learning process
- to increase active involvement in learning and personal ownership of learning
- to enhance problem-solving skills
- to foster reflective and creative interaction in a group
- to free-up writing and the representation of learning.

Holly (2003, p. 8) expands on how journaling contributes to reflection:

Writing to reflect involves a cyclical pattern of reflection: first, reflecting on experiences before or as you write; and then, reflecting on the journal entries themselves at some later stage, which may provide material for further reflection and writing, and so on.

Buddying – paired reflection

The role of a buddy in a leadership development program is similar to an *informal coaching* role or to the use of *peer mentoring*, where the mentor is not assumed to have greater experience than the mentoree, either in the job role or within the organisation. Buddies take on a reciprocal role, being both reactive, for example in providing support, and proactive, in using thoughtful, open questioning to encourage the other to reflect on the learning from their experiences. The buddy pairs thus provide a more private and informal opportunity for dialogue, complementing the more structured discussions of group support for reflection such as through an action learning set.

Much of what takes place in a 'coaching conversation' can be mirrored by the buddy relationship and involves questioning by the coach/buddy to facilitate reflection on the part of their partner. When adults are given the space and time to describe their experiences and feelings about a topic, to simply work through their own process of thinking and not to come up with the "right" answer, they are engaging in 'narrative procedure' (Cozolino & Sprokay 2006). The buddy might ask their partner to talk about a professional experience, providing a springboard to reflection, ongoing self-examination and discussion.

Although self-reflection can encourage awareness and growth, learning experiences such as these are most effective when they take place within a supportive relationship. This is where coaching/buddying can produce accelerated outcomes in terms of personal and professional development. Individuals can use reflection 'on' and 'in' action to increase their awareness of self and others, but it is in the buddying environment where the buddy can explore the individual's underlying assumptions and facilitate the next steps in response to that awareness.



Action learning – group reflection

Action learning is a process in which a small group of people (known as an 'action learning set') meet regularly to explore an opportunity or problem and to learn from their reflections on the actions they are taking to solve the problem.

The key elements of action learning are:

- tackling real tasks and issues in the real world
- learning with and through each other
- taking individual responsibility, and supporting each other
- actually implementing solutions and plans.

Action learning is built on a pedagogical theory developed by Prof. Reg Revans (1982) for use in industry. He proposes that we have two sources of learning: learning from 'experts' and learning from thinking about our own (shared) experience. He summarised this in the equation:

$$L = P + Q$$

where

L = learning

P = programmed knowledge. That is, what we have been told or shown; our knowledge in current use. This knowledge, Revans argues, is not enough for dealing with our complex and ever-changing environment.

Q = questioning insight. That is, the learning that comes from what we can think for ourselves; tacit knowledge developed to make sense of our own unique experiences, as well as the world in which we live.

Questioning insight is a process of reflective practice.

The knowledge and experience of a small group of people, combined with skilled questioning techniques, means that participants in action learning can re-interpret old and familiar knowledge to produce fresh ideas. Real solutions to real-world problems, and a way to take action and learn at the same time, are the major benefits of action learning. Other documented benefits include the development of the individuals in the action learning set in areas of critical thinking and emotional intelligence.



Applications of action learning

Marquardt (1999) writes:

For many organizations around the world, action learning has quietly become one of the most powerful action-oriented, problem-solving tools, as well as their key approach to individual, team, and organization development. Organizations as diverse as Exxon, General Electric, TRW, Motorola, Arthur Andersen, General Motors, the U.S. Army, Marriott, and British Airways now use action learning for solving problems, developing global executives, identifying strategic competitive advantages, reducing operating costs, creating performance management systems, and becoming learning organizations.

Effective practice

For reflective practice to be effective it is most important that it is situated within the context of experiential learning. This is clearly the underlying principle of:

- Schön's concepts of reflection in and on action
- Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which incorporates concrete experiencing of an experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualising and active experimentation
- and of the action-learning sets.

Core values that underpin action learning apply equally to the roles of buddy pairs and to the integration of learning journals into the action learning process. These core values (as identified by Professor Tom Bourner and colleagues at Brighton University, and described in Weinstein 2002) are as follows:

- learning for the purpose of making a difference (rather than learning for its own sake or for the sake of intellectual curiosity)
- feedback (rather than protecting own knowledge from the challenge of action or from the responses of other set members)
- support and challenge of peers (rather than solitary learning)
- self-responsibility and proactivity (rather than passivity or reactivity)
- learning from action and action informed by learning (rather than action and learning being separate domains with learning as the passive one)
- giving and receiving (the commitment to an action learning set is based on this) (Weinstein 2002, p. 16)

It is also evident that the roles of buddies and of participants in action learning sets have much in common with those of coaches and mentors, most particularly in the need for the development of good listening and questioning skills.

Value and benefits

Moving towards a reflective practice offers a number of benefits to individuals, teams and the organisation.

For the individual – reflective practice encourages the development of:

- meta-cognition—learning to learn through a cycle (such as the Kolb cycle) of action and reflection
- epistemic cognition
- reflective judgment and critical thinking
- emotional intelligence
- writing skills and the ability to provide representations of learning through journaling.

As Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009, p. 102) argue:

Cognitive demands (e.g. situation assessment and decision making) in complex novel and ill-structured problems would seem to require mature epistemic cognition, reflective judgment, and well developed critical thinking skills. Leaders cannot rely solely on prior training and experience to solve such problems. These aspects of cognitive development should be a significant focus as part of team leader development ...'

For the team or group – reflective practice, through action learning in particular, enables the development of problem-solving skills and innovative solutions to team projects.

For the organisation – the use of reflective practices as part of leadership and other development programs enhances the learnings from the program as participants are actively applying new learnings in real world contexts and developing their skills as learners in the process. In addition, building individual skills such as good listening and open questioning is good preparation for roles as coaches and mentors within the organisation. Facilitation skills acquired during action learning programs also assist in the development of effective coaches, mentors and team leaders. The application of action learning to organisational problem-solving is another clear benefit.



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