

Reflection: Transforming Experience into Learning

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It is a pleasure to be here and to share ideas about my passion. Many institutions are talking about student outcomes, but you are doing something about it.

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“Reflection is simply another word for learning. What distinguishes it from some other forms of learning is that ‘reflection’ grows out of experience.”

Anonymous

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Experience is transformed into genuine learning through reflection and critical thinking. Although reflection may not be your preferred learning style, using as many learning styles as possible enhances personal and professional development. Reflection for most people is a skill that needs to be learned—it gets easier with time and practice when it is embedded in one’s educational process. Unfortunately most people just don’t learn from experience; thus these are lost opportunities for sense making.

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Through reflection individuals analyze concepts, evaluate experiences, and form opinions. Reflection also allows the opportunity to examine and question beliefs and values. We know that unless thoughts and feelings are articulated through speech or writing, learning is not concrete. Reflection is thinking about thinking. It is not just “touchy-feely;” feelings and thoughts need to merge with conceptual frameworks.

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Reflection involves observation, asking questions, and putting facts, ideas, and experiences together to derive new meaning and new knowledge. Thus, reflection encourages creativity by making better use of intuitive understanding. The reflection process often begins with vague description, becomes more detailed,

then includes personal opinion, expands to multiple perspectives, and finally moves toward theoretical and philosophic themes.

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An added benefit is that reflection allows the opportunity to look back on the implications of actions taken, good or bad, to determine what has been gained, lost, or achieved and to connect these conclusions to future actions. Reflection, thus, requires personal disclosure. But each person needs an environment of trust in order to reach depth of reflection.

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Activity: In dyads, describe a time you benefited from reflection. What did you learn?
Share in large group.

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Activity for dyads: From experience, develop guidelines for encouraging reflection.
Share in large group.

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Reflection connects conclusions to future actions. Thus reflection is both process and product. The achievement of this stage of reflection takes time and commitment. In a sense, reflection is really about becoming comfortable with owning and disclosing thoughts and feelings so that both process and product of reflection reaches an advanced stage of development. This bridge between experiences and learning is achieved through hard work.

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LeBoeuf (2006, p. 43) holds that “Reflection and the consistent application of a reflective practice are critical to leadership development.” He refers to the Socratic notion that an unexamined life is not worth living. Believe me, it takes some maturity to accept that maxim, but hopefully everyone here today will reach that understanding some day. My position is that the best education helps us become leaders—at work, in the professions, in the community at every level, and at

home. So if we don't learn how to learn and learn to be leaders, we have failed to achieve our human potential. What is needed to create a culture where leadership development is critical to higher education?

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A culture of leadership development is described as having four components:

- A champion—both an institutional and personal commitment
- Organizationally directed outcomes and articulated values
- A systematic process—not a series of episodic events
- Measures of accountability—ownership for development

Pathways to Leadership Workshop, a recent leadership development project I managed, included follow-up activities for two years to support a culture of development. LeBoeuf concluded that

We need all the leaders we can get. Leaders are our hedges against the uncertainty in our world, and they are the anchors we need in the storm of change that continuously surrounds today's modern organizations. We cannot simply hope that we will get the leaders we need. We must develop our leaders intentionally, with care, and with a commitment not only to get things done but to improve the organization and people in it! (2006, p. 46)

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Before we go further with reflection, I would like to share my Reflective Human Action Leadership Development Model to create a framework for leadership and a platform for reflection and measuring outcomes.

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This leadership development model raises the question: Leadership for what? Leadership is about going somewhere—personally and in concert with others in an organization. *Organization* refers to all kinds of informal and formal groups: neighborhoods, communities, agencies, professions, institutions, corporations—even families.

Although leadership, especially position leadership, either elected or appointed, is often discussed in terms of leader qualities and skills, the matter of leadership as a responsibility of each professional receives little attention. Organizations and programs do not flourish with one leader in a group. Thus, more attention has to be paid to the definition of leader as anyone willing to help (Wheatley, 2005). Leadership is not about position only, but about taking responsibility as a member

of a group (whether 2-person or 60-person) to share leadership for the organization's well-being.

Despite the investments in time, money, and energy, leadership development programs in many organizations are piecemeal, focused on aspects in isolation (Ready, 2004). Too often they focus on the latest book or a program built around available speakers and facilitators known to the leadership development committee. These approaches can focus on local issues to the exclusion of broad, sweeping issues of importance to the organization's national or international perspective. Then, too, we live in a world that is different and changing so fast that earlier approaches just don't serve the current and future needs of organizations.

If the premise is accepted that an organization cannot succeed without position leadership and group members sharing leadership responsibilities, it is then incumbent upon each organization to establish an intentional program to develop leadership skills at all levels. Each organization needs to learn how to grow its own leaders, but it needs a theoretical framework to accomplish this worthy objective. The South American poet Machados declared, "The road is your footsteps, nothing else" (Wheatley, 2005, p. 43). This leadership development model is intended to guide your footsteps in a direction that clarifies your personal and professional journey and shares responsibility among colleagues for the well-being of an organization. The following slides will discuss the philosophy, basic components of the leadership development model, leadership principles and core features, issue framing, and a concluding section to summarize.

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At the base of the model is the philosophy:

Leadership is not about position only, but about taking responsibility as a member of a group to share leadership for its well-being. The focus is on a belief in people—their capacity, energy, creativity, and commitment; on coherence, not control; and on taking action.

People, coherent values, action—these are the hallmarks of the philosophic base.

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There are four basic components of this leadership development model.

I. Strengthening self-awareness

People live in their own, often untested, world of self-generating beliefs (Ross, 1994). These beliefs are the product of past experience and inferences from observations. Argyris (1990) labeled this phenomenon the “ladder of inference,” a mental pathway based upon observable data and experiences and composed of the data selected, the meanings assigned, the assumptions made, conclusions drawn, beliefs adopted, and actions taken. If all of these components are unquestioned and untested, these inferences may lead to misguided beliefs. But one’s self-awareness can be strengthened by reflection (becoming more aware of one’s own thinking and reasoning), by advocacy (making one’s thinking and reasoning more visible to others), and by inquiry (inquiring into other’s thinking and reasoning) (adapted from Ross, 1994, p. 245).

II. Developing relationships and teamwork

By definition, collaborative leadership within an organization requires that one’s self-knowledge be applied in interaction with others to develop relationships and teamwork. Collaboration is a worthy skill because it provides many benefits: a unified approach, effective internal decision making, reduced costs through shared resources, and more creative outcomes (Weiss & Hughes, 2005). However, collaboration is not easily achieved. To improve the team’s chance of success, the issue of conflict must be addressed. Differences in perspective, competencies, access to information, and strategic focus cause conflict, so acknowledgement and development of processes to manage it are necessary precursors to effective collaboration. By exploring all of the differences, conflict situations produce benefits by providing new insights and possibilities for improving organizational decisions and outcomes.

Effective collaboration requires both individual and network expertise. Connectivity gained through networks produces synergistic outcomes, but it has its downside as well: countless meetings can drain time and energy. For this reason, there is a “need to develop a strategic, sophisticated view of collaboration . . .” (Cross, Liedtka, & Weiss, 2005). The appropriate degree of connectivity must be determined in order to achieve the specific results required of the organization. Some tasks will require all players while others can be assigned to specific networks, all the while maintaining openness and communication to ensure understanding and transparency.

III. Understanding alliances and political realities

Relations between and among people are often uncertain, fluid, and complex. These relationships often include alliances formed around the values and interests held by a core of like-minded individuals. Thus, an organization needs to examine the alliances in the group to find the mutual points of agreement upon which to build trust. Although these alliances may be political realities, it isn't useful to label their activities as political. So-called political intelligence, however, is needed to identify how relationships are likely to affect success (Ciampa, 2005). Political skills include the use of power and influence to enhance or protect interests. To that end, group members must be encouraged to go out of their way to help the group to be sensitive to various points of view and to be respectful of diverse spheres of interest. Efforts need to be made to ensure that interactions and group processes are transparent so that trust can build.

IV. Understanding the elements of a promising future

Vision, opportunity, and risk could be called the hallmarks for establishing promising futures (Price, 2004). Vision and direction need to be well understood if organizations are to have a clear sense of where they are going, and if they are to focus attention on this vision. With vision, smart choices can be made with the end result in mind. Short-term goals are geared to the larger picture. "Vision allows for a long-term proactive stance—creating what we want—rather than a short-term reactive stance—getting rid of what we don't want" (Blanchard & Stoner, 2004, p. 22).

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These four principles were derived from Margaret Wheatley's book, *Leadership and the New Science* (1994).

- Accept chaos – despite new and chaotic information, there is an unerring ability to find order, to retain an essential identity.
- Share information – information is the creative energy of the universe—the substance, the invisible workings, of creation.
- Develop relationships – nothing is known except in relation to persons, ideas, and events.
- Embrace vision – clarity about purpose and direction is derived from values and vision.

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The Core features according to Robert Terry in *Authentic Leadership: Courage in Action* (1993) include

- Authenticity – being true to one’s own personality, spirit, and character
- Ethical Sensibility – imperative for leadership to be intellectually and morally defensible
- Spirituality – not a reference to any specific religion or faith but to depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance.

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The core features include Terry’s framework for human action—the seven features of action:

- Mission – What is the ultimate action?
- Meaning – What is at stake?
- Existence – What is the setting for human action?
- Resources – What are the critical assets to accomplish the mission?
- Structure – What are the plans and processes through which action is accomplished?
- Power – What is the decision, the passion, and the will to provide energy for action?
- Fulfillment – The completed action—change.

“Leadership . . . is grounded in the wisdom of knowing what is really happening, which often means moving beyond fixing and managing” (Terry, 2003, p. 34). Leaders need to understand and interpret what is going on in an organization and how individuals should relate to it; these actions define issue framing. The particular means of accomplishing these two tasks has either a beneficial or a negative impact on what is done about the issue or conflict. Thus, in an effective collaborative leadership style, a core skill is the ability to name and frame issues in organization. This requires a process to learn the concerns people have about an issue; identify the consequences, costs, and benefits associated with various options for action regarding the issue; work through inherent conflicts; and find shared direction or common ground for action. Although framing is a hot topic in political circles, it often seeks to *win* the “framing game.” In contrast, this skill fulfills a powerful role in groups by evoking greater understanding of diverse perspectives, embracing a wider range of views, and finding intelligent choices about a shared future. Terry (1993, 2003) made a significant contribution by focusing on the importance in leadership of answering the question of what is really going on.

Framing could be described as a communication tool for everyone working on an issue or conflict. The objective is to redefine the perspectives, values, and

assumptions about issues to become more inclusive and mobilizing to individuals in the group. The social context is created for win/win choices about direction.

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The four components of the model have been explored and juxtaposed with philosophy, leadership theory, and the overarching skill of issue framing. When responsibility is widely shared, leadership efforts are successful for at least ten reasons (adapted from Terry, 1993, pp. 286-287):

- A consensus is formed around desired outcomes.
- No one loses.
- Ownership is pooled.
- Fear and hope combine to motivate cooperation.
- People make things happen.
- Non-positional leaders fill key roles.
- Reliable information is gathered.
- A flexible system of self-direction is used.
- Individual talents are tapped.
- Individuals with initiative and entrepreneurial spirit are involved.

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With the leadership development model in mind, how do we use the theory of reflection to monitor outcomes of courses and programs? In other words, how do we ensure accountability of educational efforts? of leadership development? As you will remember, reflection can monitor both process and product.

My work with content analysis of reflection papers demonstrates one means of assessment of learning progress and behavioral change. The open-ended nature of this kind of writing encourages self-directed reflection and expression of both feelings and thoughts. Categories for assessment reflect the objectives of the educational initiative. The Content Analysis Evaluation Form (Mitstifer, 1976) classifies learning according to the Awareness – Acceptance – Action (A-A-A) paradigm.

Awareness – Statements imply that persons have made attempts to discover who they are and what they wish to become. This is usually expressed in second or third person only.

Acceptance – Persons make positive and/or consistent statements in the first person. Statements must show commitment and some decisions toward action.

Action – The person makes specific statements of initiated behaviors that have been carried out in the now. Persons are able to see alternatives and choose one.

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Sample 1: Leadership – Awareness and Acceptance Statements

Objective: Self-Awareness – Statements indicate participation in the evaluation of self. Persons reflect on their own thinking and reasoning and participate in advocacy and inquiry.

Awareness – The way individuals handle issues affects others.

Acceptance – I am beginning to examine my assumptions and conclusions so that I can be more comfortable in advocating my point of view.

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Sample 1: Leadership - Action Statements

Objective: Genuine personal disclosure of growth choices – Congruence of thoughts and feelings about self is evidenced in ownership of behaviors. Behaviors are specifically stated and explained.

Action – In the past I have kept my true feelings locked up inside me, but lately I have changed because I decided true friends would be able to accept my opinion.

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Sample 2: Service Learning – Awareness and Acceptance Statements

Objective: Collaboration – Statements indicate that one’s self-knowledge is applied in interaction with others to develop relationships and teams.

Awareness – It is obvious that relationships are key to collaboration and teamwork.

Acceptance – I realize I need to learn more about dealing with conflicting opinions in a team situation.

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Sample 2: Service Learning – Action Statements

Objective: Build capacity - Statements indicate development in leading efforts to enhance infrastructure and human resources.

Action – My team members and I need more skills in listening, so we have scheduled a workshop to increase our effectiveness.

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Activity

In dyads, examine sample CAEF forms.

Develop a strategy for designing your own CAEF. What will you do first, second, third.

Share with large group.

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Activity

Form groups to develop a plan to use reflection for a specific course or program.

- Write objectives for awareness & action.
- Write example statements for each objective.
- Write objectives for action.
- Write example statements for each.

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What's Next

- Institution objectives
- Action Plan
 - Task
 - Responsibility of Workshop Participants
 - Timeline for Next Steps
- What do you need from Consultant?
- What other resources are needed?

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Appreciations

I'd like to give you an opportunity to be self-disclosing about what this day has meant to you by either making some general statements or by thanking specific persons.

I will begin by saying that I appreciate this opportunity, which Jim Walters initiated, to gather all my work and thoughts into a specific presentation on reflection. Although I've written about it and used content analysis in examining outcomes of courses and workshops, this is my first opportunity to conduct a workshop about it. I've been impressed today with your commitment and I challenge you to follow-through. I admire the institution's commitment to reflection, and I hope the practice grows and impacts the educational mission.

Now, I will open up the floor for your appreciations. I do need to say that this opportunity is voluntary and some of you may not be ready to publicly say thank you or share gratitude for learning. I would like to say, as well, that ending a group with public appreciations is a good way to leave a positive impact on the minds of the participants. Certainly the opportunity to give other written feedback is important, but evaluations often fail to capture learning.

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