

Action—Reflection—Planning: a vital leadership skill

Introduction

Successful business leaders have for many decades understood the importance of evaluating performance. In recent years this practice is becoming more debated.

The notion of the reflection cycle is that we need to take action to learn. Then we need to reflect on the experience and also on what we have learnt from that experience. The last stage of the cycle is planning to improve, based on that learning. Then the cycle starts again.

The benefit of this cycle is that as an individual we are constantly improving our own performance, and that includes internal processes **and** external action and language, that then affect all those with whom we interact whether it is our peers or those whom we lead or manage. As more people within any organisation develop this leadership skill, the organisation can develop spaces in its processes that enable reflection to play a greater part and the organisation will constantly improve.

In an age where one of the only constants is change, all leaders need to be nimble and able to adapt. One key skill is thus reflection.

Having established the need for experiential knowledge that arises out of reflection, we can explore some of the models structures and frameworks that can facilitate the reflective process.



Reflection and action

Edgar Schon, an influential writer on reflection, described reflection in two main ways: reflection *in* action and reflection *on* action. Reflection *on* action is looking back after the event whilst reflection *in* action is happening during the event.

Reflection in action:

“To think about what one is doing whilst one is doing it; it is typically stimulated by surprise, by something which puzzled the practitioner concerned” (Greenwood, 1993).



Reflection can best be seen as:
Reflection before action
Reflection in action
Reflection after action

Reflection and action (continued)

Reflection in action allows the practitioner to redesign what he/ she is doing whilst he/ she is doing it. This is commonly associated with highly successful professionals but is often neglected in leadership training.

Reflection on action:

“The retrospective contemplation of practice undertaken in order to uncover the knowledge used in practical situations, by analysing and interpreting the information recalled” (Fitzgerald, 1994pp67). Reflection *on* action involves turning information into knowledge, by conducting a cognitive post mortem.

Boyd & Fales suggest reflection on action is:

“The process of creating and clarifying the meanings of experiences in terms of self in relation to both self and world. The outcome of this process is changed conceptual perspectives” (Boyd & Fales, 1983pp101)

The focus is on self development. Reflection does not only add to our knowledge but challenges the concepts and theories we hold. We thus see more **and** see differently. Atkins and Murphy (1994) suggest that for reflection to make a real difference to practice we need to add a commitment to *take action* as a result of the reflection. In order to enhance the results of reflection on action, by developing the cycle of action, reflection, planning, we add the important element of reflection *before* action. In other words – we plan before we act.



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Learning through reflection

“Reflection is an active process whereby the professional can gain an understanding of how historical, social, cultural and personal experiences have contributed to professional knowledge and practice”. (Wilkinson, 1996).

Duffy (2007) believes that reflective practice is an active deliberate process of critically examining practice where an individual is challenged and enabled to undertake the process of self-enquiry to empower the practitioner to realize desirable and effective practice within a reflexive spiral of personal transformation.

Consultation (a skill presented in Serene courses) can be used to reflect collectively. Indeed much can be gained from hearing the insights of others that further aid our contemplation of our own personal reflections on any situation.

Learning through reflection (continued)

Learning may be derived from experience but only if there is a will to become active agents of our own learning. For some, in order to make the most of the reflection cycle it needs to be recorded. In all cases, thinking about what we are doing and why we are doing it enables us to turn our own individual experiences into meaningful learning. By so doing we can each become a reflective practitioner and use that learning to increase our professional knowledge and skills to the benefit of all those with whom we interact.

Reflection as a vital skill

Reflection and thus learning through experience, is not a new concept. As humans, we naturally reflect on our surroundings and experiences. The conscious, deliberate and systematic process of using reflection as a learning tool in our professional and personal lives requires will and mindfulness however. According to Moon (1999) it is a complex activity that requires the individual to develop a set of skills required for problem solving. Reflection, therefore, encourages us to become aware of our thoughts (intellectual) and feelings (affective) which relate to a particular learning experience or area of our practice and thereafter to do something with this self-knowledge.



As we become more skilled in reflection it becomes habitual. We can then learn not only to retell our experiences to ourselves and others in a truly honest way, but we also develop the ability to elicit the best “learning” from that experience quicker. Additionally we become enabled to formulate questions that help others reflect more efficiently as we ourselves increase this skill.

Initially reflection may best occur in quiet time. Certainly reflection on a daily basis, often at the end of the day, is a boost to time management. We can also develop reflective writing. Berkeley University School of Law uses reflective writing as an integral part of their courses. Although some may view reflective writing as a challenging skill (in that it is not necessarily an instinctive process), it is one that can be learned and improved with practice (Jasper, 2001).



Serene learning frameworks use reflection, planning and action throughout all our courses.

Summary

<i>The purpose of reflection as a purposeful thoughtful activity is to</i>	<i>Reflection helps us to</i>
Gain new insights Gain new ideas Acquire new understanding Enhance professional practice	Stand back and think about a situation Gain a new perspective Make sense of our experiences Construct meaning and knowledge that guides actions in practice

Reflection as a leadership tool

- Reflection is the process that we consciously undertake to gain further understanding and add meaning to our daily lives.
- Reflection is associated with learning that has occurred through experience: it is an activity that helps us make sense of and learn from situations.
- Reflection is a means of assisting us to think, to explore our thoughts and feelings and to work through an experience, in an attempt to gain new understandings, fresh insights and self awareness.
- It is the active consideration of our thoughts and actions, plus the further use of these insights to develop reflective thinking, leading to changed and improved action.
- Reflective writing leads to gain in knowledge and also challenges the concepts and theories by which we make sense of knowledge. We therefore see more **and** differently. This different way of viewing a situation is then reflected in statements that lead to a commitment to action. Action then becomes an habitual part of the reflection cycle.
- Reflection, planning and action can transform our own way of behaving and can lead to vital improvements in personal and professional undertakings.



Case study

“Part of a ground-breaking movement that has quietly been taking hold in the legal profession over the past two decades: a movement to bring mindfulness—a meditative, moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, relationships, and external circumstances—into the practice of law and legal education, Berkeley law school teaches meditation.

Judges have been meditating before taking the bench, and opening their courtroom with a moment of meditative silence. Lawyers in tense divorce negotiations have been more effective by maintaining a perspective of mindful reflection throughout the process. Courses offered at a dozen law schools have given law students an introduction to meditation—an effort to help them sharpen their legal skills and make them more effective trial lawyers, negotiators, and mediators. For the full article see: http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/quiet_justice/



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