

FEATURE ARTICLES

Creating Space to Think: The What, Why, and How of Deliberate Reflection for Effective Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Military leaders increasingly promote self-reflection as an important leadership capacity that furthers leader effectiveness. Similarly, military educational institutions are placing greater emphasis on reflection in their curricula. However, this advocacy of self-reflection for leaders seems to rest primarily upon personal and professional experiences, with limited insight into the mechanisms by which reflection enhances leadership. As such, this article draws upon research and practice to describe the “what, why, and how” of reflection. The discussion aligns reflection with knowing oneself, knowing others, and constructive engagements; along with other leader behaviors and processes. The aim is to affirm reflection as an established leader behavior and a foundational component of leader development for both military and civilian organizations.

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“If I was (sic) to sum up the single biggest problem of senior leadership in the Information Age, it’s a lack of reflection. Solitude allows you to reflect while others are reacting. We need solitude to refocus on prospective decision-making, rather than just reacting to problems as they arise.”

James Mattis, General (Ret), USMC
(Kethledge & Erwin, 2017)

Increasingly, senior military leaders point to reflection as a key leadership capacity, espousing the value of self-reflection for effective decision making. Similarly, military education institutions continue to expand the emphasis on self-reflection in their curricula, incorporating reflection as an integral component of the learning experience (Kirchner & O’Connor, 2018). Whether framed as solitude (Deresiewicz, 2010), journaling (Trottier, 2018), or mind mapping (Jackson, 2016), the underlying principal is some form of reflective practice that involves the mental processing of information, ideas, beliefs, and experiences to enable self-learning and sense-making. However, this advocacy of reflection as a valuable leadership capacity seems to rest primarily upon personal and professional experiences, with limited insight into the mechanisms by which reflection enhances leadership. Moreover, a request to define “reflection” is likely to yield numerous responses (e.g., Marshall, 2019). Consequently, there is a need to add clarity to the concept, utility, and practice of reflection. This is particularly important as both military and civilian organizations consider the efficacy and fuller integration of reflection in their leader development efforts.

Traditionally, reflection tends not to be listed among those leader behaviors highlighted as primary leadership requirements (e.g., Cole, 2018; “The Air Force Leader”). Taking time to engage in reflection can seem insubstantial and vague in comparison to more tangible, day-to-day leadership activities. This perception notwithstanding, research links deliberate reflection to a number of tangible leader behaviors and outcomes. Research shows that deliberate reflection:

- Supports leader self-awareness, empathy, and cultural competence (Branson, 2007; Cseh, Davis, & Khilji, 2013; Murthy, Dingman, & Mensch, 2011).
- Improves the quality and impact of leader relationships with followers (Lanaj, Foulk, & Erez, 2019).
- Enables leaders to gain the most from their experiences (DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck, & Workman, 2012; Thomas, 2008).
- Facilitates deeper processing of complex problems and more effective decision making (Donovan, Guss, & Naslund, 2015).
- Enhances moral consciousness, ethical decision making, and moral leadership (Branson, 2007; Thiel, Bagdasarov, Harkrider, Johnson, & Mumford, 2012).
- Provides a basis for cognitively and emotionally reenergizing leaders in their work (Lanaj et al., 2019).

Taken together, these many benefits indicate that a habit of reflection furthers leaders’ ability to lead more effectively.

Notably, a key barrier to developing a habit of reflection is time. For many leaders, time-management is a constant challenge. Given daily organizational pressures, creating the time and space to think seems a lesser priority than executing necessary (or directed) actions. However, the consequences of not taking time to reflect can result in sub-optimization of leadership actions and decisions; which may lead to poor judgment and perhaps even ethical lapses (Thiel, 2012). Furthermore, though counterintuitive, reflection may save time by helping leaders appropriately align priorities (Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, & Staats, 2015). Thus, setting aside time and space to think could be considered a leadership imperative.

As such, this article draws upon research and practice to describe the “what, why, and how” of reflection. The goal is to further illuminate the reflection concept, articulate the importance of reflection for leading effectively, offer suggestions for how to meaningfully engage in reflective practice, and provide some strategies for incorporating reflection into leader development efforts. Consistent with the focus of this journal’s current issue, the discussion aligns reflection with knowing oneself, knowing others, and constructive engagements; along with other leader behaviors and processes. In all, this article aims to affirm reflection as a proven leader behavior that should be fully integrated into leadership training and education as a foundational element of leader development – for both military and civilian organizations.

What Is Reflection?

Self-reflection, critical reflection, reflection, and reflective practice are terms often used interchangeably to represent the deliberate act of cognitively processing, exploring, or making meaning of information (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983). In other words, reflection is “brain

work” where we introspectively wrestle with our thoughts in order to make sense of our experiences, knowledge, and emotions (Kolb, 2015; Schön, 1983). More than casual thinking, the act of reflection is purposeful with the intent of arriving at increased understanding. While there is no generally agreed upon definition of reflection, a recent comprehensive examination of the literature highlights several themes that further describe the concept.

Marshall’s (2019) analysis of the reflection literature across professional contexts extracted and constructed definitions, language, and statements from methodically-selected articles to derive thematic characteristics. The analysis yielded four themes that depict reflection as cognitive, integrative, iterative, and active (see pp. 400-405, Tables 3-7, for complete list of excerpts and constructs).

Cognitive

At its core, reflection is a cognitive (e.g., thinking) process. Cognition undergirds all other aspects and purposes of reflective practice. Sample descriptions from Marshall’s (2019) analysis include: “Reflection is a higher cognitive process involving purposeful meaning making” (Duffy, 2007; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Jordi, 2011; Schön, 1983; Stodter & Cushion, 2017) and “Reflection differs from other thinking processes in that it also requires thinking aimed at one’s understanding of the problem [. . .] rather than aimed simply at trying to solve it” (Nguyen, Fernandez, Karsenti, & Charlin, 2014, p. 1181). In essence, reflection is deliberate, contemplative thinking.

Integrative

Reflection serves as an integrator and enables synthesis. Through reflection, we can weave together ideas, make connections among disparate information, discover

interrelationships, and assess interdependencies. As Marshall (2019) reveals: “Reflection integrates the ‘new and known’” (Stodter & Cushion, 2017) and “The wide variety of available knowledge requires practitioners to be reflective to synthesize and make sense of multiple sources of information” (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). Reflection, therefore, allows us to coalesce ideas and arrive at our own meaning making.

Iterative

Re-examining ideas or returning to conclusions after the introduction of new information positions reflection as an iterative process. Reflectively revisiting ideas and experiences generates deeper levels of learning; while also opening the door to forward-looking considerations. As highlighted by Marshall: “Reflection is cyclic with further experiences being guided by newly formed perspectives” (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2014; Stodter & Cushion, 2017) and “[C]ritical reflection is rather the constant returning to one’s own understanding of the problem at hand” (Jay & Johnson, 2002, p. 79). Thus, reflection is an iterative process that evolves over time and advances thinking.

Active

As a disciplined way of thinking, reflection requires deliberate action (Dewey, 1933). Reflection is a self-directed activity to intentionally engage and explore our thoughts. As described in the literature: “Reflection involves an active conscious effort” (Duffy, 2007) and “A critical component that drives individuals in the reflective process is their intent. Although others can intervene with strategies to facilitate their reflection, whether or not and how much they reflect are their own decisions” (Hong & Choi, 2011, p. 689). As such, reflection is a purposeful and deliberate act.

In all, Marshall’s (2019) analysis describes reflection as a self-driven, introspective, recurring, and synthesizing action that expands our knowledge, understanding, insights, and perspectives. Said differently, reflection is the intentional habit of creating space to think in order to pursue clarity of thought, learn from experiences, and proactively advance ideas.

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Why Reflection Makes Us Better Leaders

As previously indicated, research shows that deliberate reflection strengthens a number of leadership behaviors and outcomes. The indication is that reflection serves as a means for improving leader effectiveness. Accordingly, the sections below further describe why engaging in deliberate reflection makes leaders more effective, highlighting the value of reflection among several facets of leadership.

Knowing Oneself and Others

An often-stated tenant of leadership is to “first know thyself”, stressing the importance of self-awareness for leader development and leader effectiveness. Understanding our strengths, limitations, and proclivities – as well as how others perceive us – creates self-knowledge and affirms self-identity (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005; Tekleab et al., 2008). Research shows that a self-aware leader is more likely to empower subordinates, engender trust, communicate effectively, lead transparently, and have

more positive work experiences (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Lanaj et al., 2019; Sutton, Williams, & Allinson, 2015; Tekleab et al., 2008). A key mechanism for facilitating self-awareness is self-reflection.

Through deliberate self-reflection leaders shine a light on their leadership abilities and experiences as well as surface any leadership challenges. Reflecting through the lens of self-awareness also reveals opportunities for leadership growth and development (Murthy et al., 2011). Likewise, deliberate reflection enhances the understanding of others. Purposefully reflecting upon others' perspectives, motivations, and actions fosters empathy, and in some cases, reveals biases and assumptions (Branson, 2007; Murthy et al., 2011). Gaining an appreciation for what drives the thoughts and behaviors of others enhances leaders' ability to successfully guide their followers (Gregory, Moates, & Gregory, 2011; Mahsud, Yukl, & Prussia, 2010). This capacity to understand others through reflection naturally translates into more constructive leader interactions and relationships.

Constructive Engagements

The concept of constructive engagements encompasses a leader's ability to recognize and respond to the uniqueness and interconnectedness of various peoples, cultures, and societies. In this regard, deliberate reflection provides an opportunity for leaders to introspectively consider the convergence or divergence of others' perspectives and cultural preferences in conjunction with their own viewpoints and cultural tendencies (Lee, Adair, & Seo, 2013). Reflection facilitates openness toward multiple perspectives and serves to highlight potential connections (Murthy et al., 2017). Having a better understanding of, and appreciation for, various viewpoints improves a leader's

ability to relate to others and leads to more beneficial interactions (Gregory et al., 2011; Mahsud et al., 2010).

Moreover, the iterative nature of reflection allows leaders to evolve and grow professional (and personal) relationships over time. Through reflection leaders can thoughtfully consider and build upon the nature of their relationships and reframe assumptions that shape their interactions as needed (e.g., Cousik, 2015). Deliberate reflection allows leaders to be more self-aware, balanced, and intentional in their interactions with others, often diminishing conflict and resulting in more positive leadership influence (Lanaj et al., 2019).

Learning from Experience

A classic maxim attributed to John Dewey highlights the connection between reflection and experience: "We don't learn from experience . . . We learn from reflecting on experience." Beyond developing knowledge and skillsets, reflection furthers experience-based learning by exploring how experiences shape, affirm, or transform thinking processes, working knowledge, belief systems, relationships, etc. (Kolb, 2015). Thoughtfully reflecting upon experiences engenders meaning making and advances the way leaders think and act (DeRue et al., 2012; Thomas, 2008). Such reflection is particularly valuable when leaders reflectively reframe past work experiences by placing them in their current context, which forms an organizing framework with which to consider new and novel circumstances (Thiel et al., 2012).

Importantly, reflecting upon prior life experiences yields important benefits for leaders as well. Reflecting on transformative experiences outside of professional circumstances (also referred to as "crucible experiences") often reveals their sustaining impact and leads to a deeper understanding of one's self,

values, beliefs, and assumptions (Thomas, 2008). This results in heightened self-discovery and self-identity that ultimately shapes how leaders choose to lead. Additionally, through deliberate reflection leaders can extract insights from their crucible experiences, which then hones their judgment and improves performance (Thomas, 2008).

Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

Deliberate reflection also extends the quality of leaders' problem-solving and decision-making, particularly in the context of complexity and ambiguity. Reflection provides a vehicle for leaders to grapple with the multifaceted intricacies and interconnectedness of dynamic problems and decisions (Donovan et al., 2015). Through reflection leaders integrate, synthesize, and build mental models in order to make sense of complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical information (Thiel, et al., 2012). Spending time thinking about a problem or proactively considering a context expands discernment, affects decision appropriateness, and increases options for decision outcomes (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2011; Wray, 2017). Additionally, the iterative aspect of reflection enables decision adaptability, which allows leaders to evaluate and adjust decisions as needed.

Self-reflection also helps leaders assess their own problem-solving and decision-making abilities. By introspectively exploring their thinking and decision-making processes, leaders ascertain their own strengths and limitations; potentially revealing the depths of their expertise, tacit knowledge, knowledge gaps, blind spots, and decision biases (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2011; Matthew & Sternberg, 2009; Wray, 2017). Reflective self-assessment of problem-solving and decision-making proclivities shapes the way leaders enact these key leadership responsibilities.

Leader Wellness and Well-being

Finally, there is evidence that reflection provides health benefits for leaders. For example, Bono et al.'s (2013) longitudinal study of nurses showed that a daily habit of writing about positive experiences reduced work stress and minimized physical and mental health complaints. In this instance, internally processing positive events through written reflection lessened the tendency to focus on the negative, thereby guarding against self-induced stressors.¹ Other studies similarly demonstrate that leaders with a higher propensity to self-reflect are better able to regulate their emotions and enact strategies to support greater well-being (e.g., Haga, Kraft, & Corby, 2009). Furthermore, conscious

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self-reflection is thought to strengthen the capacity for resilience, such that reflective processes contribute to the on-going development of resilient capacities and utilization of resilience strategies (Crane, Searle, Kangas, & Nwiran, 2019).

All told, reflection can enhance leader effectiveness through a number of mechanisms, each potentially adding to the growth and development of leaders. Next, then, is furthering our understanding of how to engage in meaningful reflection. Several considerations shape how leaders might approach the act of reflecting.

How To Engage in Meaningful Reflection

Schön (1983) identified two different categories of reflection: (a) reflection-in-action and (b) reflection-

¹ The opposite effect occurs when reflection takes the form of ruminating on negative experiences. Brooding on the negative has a reciprocally deleterious effect on employee well-being.

on-action. With reflection-in-action, leaders reflect in real-time, interpreting their experiences while engaged in their work. Real-time reflection sensitizes leaders to anomalies, dynamic changes, or new occurrences; thereby enabling flexibility and adaptability. Conversely, with reflection-on-action leaders reflect after-the-fact, thinking back on experiences after they have occurred. In this form, leaders critically examine and evaluate their actions and experiences retrospectively; potentially uncovering new insights, discovering relevant frameworks, and reframing assumptions (Kolb, 2015).

The distinction between reflecting in-action and reflecting on-action provides a useful overarching framework for reflective practice. Translating the framework into tangible action requires determining which reflection format (structured or unstructured) and reflection method (journaling, mind-mapping, solitude, etc.) best suit leaders' preferences for thinking and processing information.

Structured and Unstructured Reflection

Deliberate reflection can occur in both structured and unstructured ways. The regimented, planning-centric leader is likely to prefer the former, while the spontaneous, creative leader is likely to prefer the latter. Ideally, leaders will engage both approaches in order to gain the most from their experiences and stimulate adaptability and innovation.

Structured. Generally, structured reflection is organized around one or more questions, either evaluative or exploratory. Systematically reflecting on explicit questions focuses leaders' thinking. Reflection questions may be broad (e.g., "What do I now understand that I didn't understand before?") or central to the leadership activity (e.g., "How do these

many factors intersect and influence the problem at hand?").

Unstructured. Unstructured reflection generally takes the form of stream of consciousness thinking. This more fluid reflective process lets thoughts flow without restriction, permitting ideas, insights, and connections to randomly surface. The randomness creates space for creativity, inspiration, and innovation. Additionally, the free-following nature of unstructured reflection removes the inhibitions that sometimes restrict thinking about feelings, making way for the exploration of emotions (Haga et al., 2009).

For both structured and unstructured reflection, it is important to capture thoughts in a concrete manner in order to extract the value of the reflective experience. Some form of transcription (e.g., handwritten or digital journals, voice recording, video, or jotted notes) helps document learning, serves as a reservoir of ideas, and provides an opportunity for analysis and revision. Periodically returning to and reviewing captured reflections enables leaders to track progress, evidencing the trajectory of thoughts and processes as well as personal and professional growth (Wear, Zarconi, Garden, & Jones, 2012).

Methods for Reflective Practice

There are multiple ways to engage in meaningful reflection. Again, the preferred method of reflective practice is a personal choice.

Reflective Writing. One of the most common ways to engage in reflection is through reflective writing such as journaling or written narratives (e.g., Frazier, & Eick, 2015; Schwind, Santa-Mina, Metersky, & Patterson, 2015). Putting words to experiences frees thinking, increases awareness, reduces inhibition, and promotes

self-understanding (Lanaj et al., 2019, p. 3). Writing provides the structure for disciplined thinking.

Mind-Mapping. A more methodical way of reflecting is mind-mapping. Mind-mapping is a visual presentation technique using colors, codes, and symbols to graphically represent, organize, and expand ideas (Mento, Martinelli, & Jones, 1999). Visualization aids in exploring relationships among concepts as well as refining and integrating ideas. While the original mind-mapping technique applied the process on a single sheet of paper, there now exists a plethora of mind-mapping apps, software, and online tools for reflecting digitally.

Solitude. Perhaps the simplest and least structured method of reflection is quiet time, where leaders spend time getting lost in their thoughts. Some people do their best thinking while running, walking, or during other physical activities. Others are content to think in silence, in set-aside spaces, or even during the daily commute. Solitude provides the mental space to disconnect from the immediacy of the work environment and the freedom to immerse in contemplation (Akrivou, Bourantas, & Papalois, 2011; Deresiewicz, 2010).

Collective Reflection. Reflecting with others is another option for reflective practice. Collective reflection might involve reflective conversations with others, team feedback reviews, or peer coaching (DeRue et al., 2012; Gurtner, Tschan, Semmer, & Nägele, 2007; Harford & MacRuairc, 2008). “Thinking out loud” with others helps leaders process their thoughts and provides an alternative space to reflectively articulate ideas (Deresiewicz, 2010).

How Long and How Often to Reflect?

For some, the notion of reflection presupposes a need to allocate lengthy periods of time to thinking activities. However, there is no set amount of time required to accrue benefits from reflection. Di Stefano et al. (2015), for instance, showed that employees who spent 15 minutes reflecting upon lessons learned at the end of the day over a 10-day period improved their performance over their counterparts who did not engage in deliberate reflection. Likewise, other studies have found that just a few minutes of daily reflection helped leaders stay motivated and enhanced their well-being (Bono, et. Al., 2013; Lanaj et al., 2019).

In a similar vein, the regularity with which leaders should reflect also varies. Regular reflection might occur daily, nightly, weekly, monthly, or situationally, depending on personal preference. The key is establishing – and adhering to – a routine of reflection. Additionally, a disciplined routine helps leaders avoid spending too much time reflecting, which can result in inaction. Setting parameters or utilizing time-limiting tools (such as a timer or an old-fashioned hourglass) secures the balance between thinking and doing.

Ultimately, in order to reap the value from reflection, leaders must commit to regularly creating space in their schedules and battle rhythms for reflective practice. Such intentionality cultivates a habit of reflection, accruing for leaders the benefits of deliberate and consistent introspection.

Fostering The Habit Of Reflection In Leader Development

Discipline is one of the most important aspects of reflective practice. While engaging in regular reflection may be an inherently natural process for some leaders, for others building the capacity for deliberate and

consistent reflection requires learning (Haga et al., 2009; Porter, 2017). A ready opportunity to begin or further the habit of reflection exists within the leader development learning environment, particularly in professional training and education.

Taken together, incorporating reflection into course design and employing reflection activities in the learning environment provide a foundation for developing a habit of reflection. Such habit-forming reflective experiences enable leaders to internalize the benefits of self-reflection.

In practical terms, this process might translate into a course that includes case studies or class activities (CE), learners journaling about their experiences with – and learning from – the cases or activities (RO), class discussions that surface new ideas or understanding as a result of the reflection (AC), and assignments that requires learners to apply the new learning to their own experiences (AE). In essence, the Kolb model allows course designers to intentionally build in opportunities for reflection as a necessary facet of the learning process. In this way, structuring course design to incorporate reflection not only enhances learning, but also sets a foundation for furthering a habit of reflection.

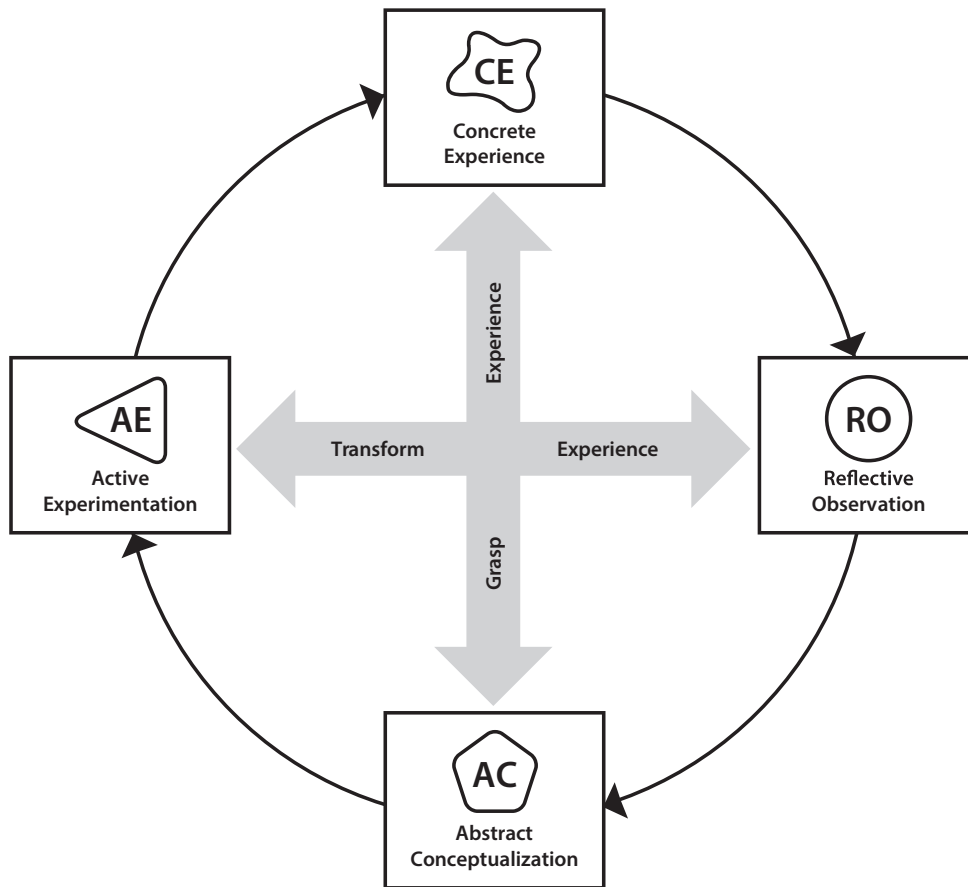
Incorporating Reflection in Course Design

Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle provides a useful framework for incorporating reflection in training and education curricula. Briefly, Kolb posits that knowledge is created through a process in which learners grasp and transform information through experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Thus, reflection is an integral component of the learning process. Figure 1 depicts the four facets of the Kolb Learning Cycle: Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). At the beginning of the cycle, concrete experiences serve as the basis for observations and reflections. Reflections on these experiences are then assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which to draw new implications. Next, the implications are tested or applied, which then serve as guides for creating new learning experiences (Kolb, 2015, p. 50).

Reflection Activities

Below are just three examples of reflection activities that can be incorporated in professional training and education. For additional examples, management education scholars present numerous methods for effectively utilizing individual and collective reflection in the learning processes as well as in practice (cf. Albert & Grzeda, 2015; Gray, 2007; Hedberg, 2009; Raelin, 2001; Schedlitzki, Jarvis, & MacInnes, 2015).

In-Class Reflection. In-class reflection activities hew to the notion that reflective practice can happen in short timeframes. One such activity is “15-minute White Space”, which is administered during a class session. With this activity, learners are given a blank sheet of paper to write down their thoughts for 15-minutes on a specific topic, question, or experience as a reflection-in-action opportunity. For example, during a lesson on decision making, learners might be prompted to spend 15-minutes reflecting upon the

Figure 1. Kolb (2015) Experiential Learning Cycle

similar yet divergent concepts of complicated decisions versus complex decisions in their own leadership contexts. Or, after reading an emotionally difficult case (e.g., an accounting of war crimes), learners might spend 15-minutes reflecting upon their emotions and the reasons for their emotional reaction. The format is unstructured such that learners may write stream of consciousness paragraphs or bulleted lists. The reflections can then be voluntarily shared as a basis for furthering class discussion.

Another in-class reflection activity involves providing learners' pre-printed reflection questions

related to their individual learning and personal experiences. The questions are completed in-class at the end of a learning section or the end of the course as a reflection-on-action opportunity. Sample questions might include: "How has your thinking and decision-making expanded by what you have learned?" or "What will be the biggest challenge in applying what you have learned in your leadership role?" Such questions allow learners to synthesize information and apply their learning. These written reflections may be maintained by learners for their professional development and/or shared with the instructor – anonymously, if preferred – to assess developmental progress.

On-Line Journaling. On-line learning and course management systems are a useful way to add a reflection component to course curricula. These systems typically include a journaling function (not discussion board), which allows learners to post individual reflection entries. On-line journaling can serve as a personal space outside of the classroom or learning environment to reflect upon learning, emotions, beliefs, etc. Instructors dictate the focus of the reflection as well as determine the required routine for reflection, whether daily, weekly, or some other time period, depending on the length and format of the course. Importantly, with on-line journaling instructors should consider and protect personal privacy, limiting who may view individual entries.

Taken together, incorporating reflection into course design and employing reflection activities in the learning environment provide a foundation for developing a habit of reflection. Such habit-forming reflective experiences enable leaders to internalize the benefits of self-reflection.

Conclusion

In sum, this article aimed to illuminate the “what, why, and how” of reflection. By further explaining the concept, its impact on leader effectiveness, methods for engaging in reflective practices, and ways to incorporate reflection in leader development, this article hopefully adds clarity to what may be viewed as a nebulous concept. In linking reflection to effective leadership, the discussion counters the perception that reflection is an abstract process of limited leadership value, while also refuting the notion that leaders lack time to reflect – especially in high tempo military settings. Fundamentally, leaders must choose to embrace reflection as a factor in their ability to lead effectively and decide to enact reflective practices on a regular

basis. Reflection is most meaningful when accepted as a valuable leadership process and routinely performed.

This discussion also underscores the value of incorporating deliberate reflection as an integral component of leader development. Professional training and education can serve as a practice field for engaging in personal reflection. While reflective activities centered upon “just thinking” might be viewed as academic exercises, this discussion shows that such opportunities lay the groundwork for establishing a habit of reflection. Such a habit helps leaders gain the most from their experiences and prepares them to lead more effectively in their leadership roles. In this regard, deliberately creating space to think serves as a valuable leader behavior and a leadership imperative.

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