

**Helping managers to discover the value of
reflection: Professional and academic
approaches contrasted**

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Abstract

The concepts of reflective practice and of “reflection in action” (Schön, 1987, Dewey, 1997) have been widely embraced by HRD practitioners. Reflection as part of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) is treated as a key concept within practical training design and delivery. Yet the literature is a little sparser when it comes to identifying how to engage practising managers in active and frequent reflection. Since busy managers will only find the time for activities to which they are strongly committed, reflection as a professional habit is one which is less commonly seen in today’s organisations than academics and professional trainers might like.

This paper includes brief case studies of three contrasting approaches (corporate and academic) to developing managerial reflective practice. A series of systematic reflective techniques is applied to generate data for the study. These techniques include the concept of theories of practice to explore personal anchors and mindsets (Jacobs, 2005), reflective frames (Bolman and Deal, 1997) to reflect on the wider picture or context of the examples, a simple repertory grid approach (Pedler et al., 1994) and Bourner’s Reflective Questions (Bourner, 2002) to summarise this personal reflection on the interventions.

While there can be no one right way to reflect; the study sets out to explore the implications of different interventions applicable to different contexts and seeks suggestions which may assist the closing of the gap between what is taught and written about and what is achieved by managers.

“By encouraging managers to reflect critically on their assumptions and beliefs, reflective approaches aid managers in achieving emancipation from perspective-limiting assumptions.”

(Kayes, 2002 p138)

Background

To what extent is reflection part of management? We reflect as part of our natural thinking behaviours (Hall’s “everyday reflective practice” (1997)) and as part of what makes us human. Bandura identifies “self-reflection” as a uniquely human ability and made it a vital part of his Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986); he saw it as a way in which people could think, learn and take control of their own actions. Mezirow sees personal reflection as seeking "understanding of the historical, cultural and biographical reasons for one's needs, wants and interests..." (Mezirow, 2000 p27). Schön (1987) introduces the ideas of “reflection in action” and “reflection on action”, distinguishing between that which is done during action and can alter our behaviours in real time, and that which takes place after an action is completed, where new views of reality can be made, producing post facto learning. Dewey and Habermas advocate a deliberate and systematic approach to reflection (Dewey, 1997, Morrison, 1995).

It is this deliberate or strategic approach to reflection, which can underpin transformational learning (Moon, 2000, Mezirow, 1978) and develop knowledge (Dewey, 1997). Nonaka, writing about knowledge management in organizations, discusses tacit knowledge, which forms a key part of the expertise used in managerial decision-making:

"It is hard to formalize and therefore difficult to communicate to others... tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in action and in an individual's commitment to a specific context...tacit knowledge consists partly of technical skills (and partly) of mental models, beliefs and perspectives so ingrained that we take them for granted and cannot easily articulate them" (Nonaka, 1991 p98)

This paper proposes that we should try to articulate such tacit knowledge through reflection and in doing so, will come to understand better how we can improve our

understanding of organizational operations, and what underlies our thinking processes, which offers us a way to critique and improve managerial practice.

Systematic reflective methods used in this paper

1. Theories of practice, personal anchors and mindsets

The first reflection explores personal anchors and mindsets, based on a practical approach set out by Jacobs of Villanova University (Jacobs, 2005). Jacobs discusses a layered structure for reflection, which he attributes largely to the professional practitioner approaches of Sergiovanni and Aviolo (Sergiovanni, 1986, Aviolo, 1999) starting with “practice episodes”, which are defined by intentions, actions and realities. Underneath the practice episodes sit “theories of practice”. These relate to Schön’s “reflection-in-action”, also developed by Seibert (1999), in that they usually guide practice episodes unconsciously but may also be used in the midst of action, as if we were consulting a personal knowledge database to determine our next move. Theories of practice include what Jacobs refers to as “mindsets and platforms for action” – the instant self-guide in times of need, but these mindsets in turn are based on a personal accumulation of beliefs, assumptions and knowledge gained from planned learning events plus knowledge gained from experience.

The deepest layer comprises the personal beliefs or anchors, “antecedents”, which underpin the whole structure. These antecedents stem from our personal educational, social, religious, economic and historical background, which will have affected our formation as individuals. Also sitting along with these antecedents will be elements we have added ourselves, our self-knowledge, tacit knowledge and understanding, the way we have made sense of life for ourselves in the past. Exploring with this technique surfaces assumptions about learning and decision-making.

2. Frames (Bolman and Deal, 1997)

The second systematic reflection uses four frames or perspectives to question experience. These frames ask similar questions about emerging problems and underpinning issues but from the perspective of a structural frame, a human resources

frame, a political frame and a symbolic frame. Questions are broadly about problems found, evidence for them and constructive changes proposed, but force the reflection to take on board the organizational context of the events, in this case, the organisational context, rather than the personal thinking and attitudes revealed.

3. *Backwards Review (Pedler et al., 1994)*

This reflective exercise is based on a repertory grid approach originating with Kelly (1955) and offers a mechanical sequence of steps, which make reflection on personal characteristic behaviours accessible, i.e. bringing them into awareness and then questioning them. This involves identifying a number of meaningful events on which to reflect – in this case, elements of the three cases of reflection programmes. The second step is to pick three of these elements at random. With the first, and each subsequent, group of three elements (they should not be exclusive, most if not all combinations should be tried in turn), each group of three is compared to find dimensions of difference, which relate two of the elements but exclude a third. For example, in this reflection one of these dimensions of difference was whether the elements involved individual reflection or socially mediated reflection. The extremes of each dimension are simply labelled A or B. This process is iterated until at least 6 dimensions of difference are identified, all of which are then set out in table format and each event is then interrogated and coded A or B on each dimension.

The final two steps compare row patterns of As and Bs looking for relationships, especially identity or mirror image, then analyse what these patterns could mean. This process can be time-consuming and sometimes furnish relatively little analysis, although in this case, it is possible that revisiting the dimensions and adding to or adapting them appropriately may yield further information. This reflective technique can focus on the specific detail of events and bring to light patterns of behaviour which were previously unnoticed.

4. *Bourner's Reflective Questions (Bourner, 2002)*

Bourner's reflective questions, which the author uses regularly with students for developing reflective practice, are used to summarise the reflective section. It is

particularly interesting to compare the systematic processes above, with this set of searching questions. They seem to work as a silent interviewer, because they ask for personal information and are framed in direct, accessible language, they personify in some way a reflective and supportive listener.

Context for this reflection

The author works as an HRD consultant and as an academic, and is thus in a position to reflect on both professional and academic approaches to managerial reflection. The paper gives the opportunity to tease out incongruities between how we teach reflective practice in a Business School and how reflective practice is seen in corporate contexts.

The first case was CarCo, in which there was a demand for a fairly traditional management development programme for aspiring junior professionals. The programme was designed to span nine months, with four short residential events, interspersed with day long skills development events and underpinned with a before and after 360° appraisal, in-house mentoring and a real-time company project as a vehicle for skills application and professional development. Reflective practice was built in to the residential events, particularly using the 360 input, and the mentoring sessions. Delegates were given two follow-up sessions after the programme to support continued development of reflective practice in relation to contemporary company challenges.

The second case was BuildCo, where there was an explicit demand for a development intervention for middle managers to encourage reflective practice. The stated aim was to offer techniques and practical reasons for developing reflective activities as a leadership and management tool and to develop personal reflective practice. In response to strong concerns about time management, the programme was designed around two workshops, six months apart. In between the workshops, a series of three reflective assignments was planned to enable broad time periods in which work could be fitted in. In this case, the first three systematic reflective techniques used in this paper were presented and applied for assignment work.

The third and final case, UniCourse, was the introduction of reflective practice over the first year of a part-time postgraduate course. Students, most of whom were, or aspired to be, HR managers, were introduced to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Continuing Professional Development standards and encouraged to negotiate a personal learning contract in their first year, with a personal tutor. Session time was given to the setting up and progress of this contract, allowing students to discuss learning from objectives they had set. In addition, students were required to complete four reflective statements on aspects of management in an assessed portfolio in the first semester, supported by feedback and guidance from the module tutor. In the second semester, another module requirement included a reflective review of learning about content and process during a group assignment.

Systematic reflection

1. Theories of practice

Reflecting on the development events, which make up the three programmes, the intentions were always made explicit but the reflective agenda was not always central to the event. In CarCo, reflection was discussed as an approach associated with residential courses, but this message was not always clearly received by delegates and sponsors of the course. Similarly, the reflective intention of 360° feedback was evident to the author, but possibly less evident to delegates despite these words being used in briefing sessions at selection. This meant that actions taken by the facilitator during residentials, both to support 360 feedback, and to stimulate reflection on course, were sometimes misunderstood, as delegates sought action-oriented solutions to current problems, rather than an exploratory journey towards self-development.

The reality demonstrated the need for constant reinforcement of the reflective message, once established, and a more personally supported approach to reflection throughout the programme. Reflection was not a natural response for these delegates in their sales and deadline driven world. However, once the concept was understood and the practice of reflection began to reveal personal benefits of understanding a wider picture and alternative perspectives of corporate reality, delegates began to demand more time off site on residentials, and longer skills day sessions to build in

time for reflection. There was also an increased demand for one-to-one feedback through the programme, as understanding grew of the potential value of different perspectives of their function, competencies and context.

The BuildCo programme was more explicitly focussed on reflection from the beginning, but again showed a lack of understanding about what that really meant to delegates. Explicit words from the programme's corporate sponsor (the delegates' senior manager) and the facilitator about the reflective intention, conveyed a false impression to delegates that here would be something they would be taught, as if the process of reflection could somehow be packaged as a technical solution with one right way to achieve it. In action, the programme quickly delivered a shock to delegates, that this was a prolonged activity in which they would have to engage personally; this did not fit the preferences of most delegates, who approached the programme as something which could be fitted in between conference calls and flights around the UK and ticked off as a job done by attending the first workshop.

So the reality from the start of this programme was a polarisation of delegates between those who saw potential benefits from reflection and those who would give no time for it. Resistance for some was thus built in at the beginning and proved a challenge to address, when the next few months meant those delegates had to make time for personal reflective assignments. The delegates' habitual action orientation (the reason for the introduction of the programme) tended for some to obscure the beneficial outcomes of reflection and provided excuses for not handing work in on time. By the end of the programme, most of the delegates had experienced personal benefits from the reflective tools used, and some had developed reflective strategies to apply in the workplace. Those still resistant, however, were probably those delegates who most needed to develop a reflective habit to gain perspective on their decision-making processes. They were the most likely to blame others for work which went wrong, and least likely to accept any personal responsibility for such problems.

In the UniCourse context, the intention was again made explicit as part of the learning outcomes identified at the course start. In this case, however, there was much more acceptance of the concept of reflection as a necessary part of management education. Students did experience considerable anxiety in practice, when they attempted to

produce objectives for CPD learning and were required to record their reflections on that learning process. Acceptance of the theoretical benefits of reflection would not quell such anxieties, only one-to-one reassurance and feedback helped students to approach professional reflection with confidence. This meant that the reality of introducing reflective practice on the course was time and labour intensive for personal tutors, as individuals found their own way towards an understanding of processes and beneficial outcomes.

It is clear from this brief reflection that the prevailing theory of practice for the author was grounded in reading and personal experience of the benefits of reflection, which explicit learning outcomes and course programmes could not convey, either to delegates or to students. There was evidence of both delegates and students having to make personal journeys towards their own understanding of reflection, and where there was significant resistance to the idea, this would take longer to achieve, or in some cases not be achievable.

From the author's perspective, the antecedents for this theory of practice demonstrated an academic familiarity with the application of concepts to real situations, which was not a common experience for management learners. Some of the learners' reactions suggested they had learned to distrust introspection of any kind and only rated externally validated courses of action. In the students' case, there was a familiarity with the jargon of reflection, but this was superficial and when tested in practice revealed low confidence with the idea of building their own ideas about reality. Like some of the BuildCo and CarCo delegates, they had learned to depend on others' views as more important than their own and experienced strong emotions when required to build knowledge and understanding for themselves.

2. *Frames*

Through the structural frame, the problems encountered in corporate development were evidenced by delegates resisting reflection, on the basis that in the workplace no time would be made available for this activity. Delegates took some time to understand that the development events themselves were evidence of a structure being built, which enabled reflection, and which senior managers had approved and

financed. The time taken in development events to help managers understand and undertake reflective processes was seen as not transferable to the workplace.

In CarCo and BuildCo, sponsoring managers emphasised to delegates the need for reflective activity, but these messages fell on deaf ears where the same managers demanded more attention to target achievements back in the workplace. The way jobs were structured made it difficult for delegates to see how reflection could effectively become part of what they did. Similar problems were encountered by the students, but by the second semester, they were producing increasing evidence of application of reflective practice in the workplace. In their case, the professional institute's espousal of reflective practice gave them a structure on which to build personal loyalty, sometimes despite workplace demands.

The Human Resources and Political frames produced less clear outcomes, perhaps because the individual contexts of delegates and students were so varied. The Symbolic frame led to the suggestion that reflection was not valued as a management skill in the work contexts of most of those involved. Lip service was often paid by delegates and students, at the outset of these development programmes, to the need for considered reflective practice, but there was no vision for how this fitted their approach to continuous improvement, change or quality decision making. By the end of the respective programmes, all delegates of CarCo, most students of UniCourse and some delegates from BuildCo had discovered their own vision of reflection in professional practice, which often diverged from their organisation's less empowering view.

3. *Repertory grid critical incident technique*

The backwards review or critical incident reflection identified six incidents, two from each of the programmes, and produced ten dimensions of difference including overt resistance to reflection and individual or socially mediated reflection. There was a tendency to link individual reflection with the use of formal reflective tools and written reflections, while group reflective processes were more likely to use informal methods and verbal discussions, not capturing these in writing. This may be associated with a need for more structured approaches, when individuals are trying to

find their way to improved reflection, whereas, in group processes, a shared focus of reflection and pooled expertise could support the process. However it also highlights the potential problem that group shared reflections may be more difficult to capture effectively and prove less likely to be a stepping stone for further personal reflection.

A link between higher resistance to reflection and an explicit focus on the concepts underpinning reflection suggested that a theoretical approach to reflection had less relevance for delegates and students, than a practical work-based focus, which allowed them to develop their understanding of the process by supported exploration of familiar events. Interestingly BuildCo, which had the clearly expressed need for reflective practice, also demonstrated the greatest resistance. A number of variables could account for this, not least that BuildCo had the least contact with a facilitator (not by design), involved the shortest programme and the more senior managers compared with the other two programmes.

4. Reflective questions

The 12 Bourner questions were summarised to provide a succinct view of the reflective process in this paper.

What most surprised you and contradicted prior beliefs?

First the evidence from these cases that a background understanding of theoretical concepts around reflection, such as those mentioned at the introduction to this paper, was less likely to lead to strong reflective outcomes. This did seem to be a demonstration of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where context and practice were all important. Also the suggestion that good reflective practice needed skilled facilitation and often intensive one-to-one intervention. This is perhaps not so surprising, but clearly sets reflective practice apart from a skill which can be taught and transferred, to a behaviour which must be modelled and personally experienced.

What patterns did we find in our reflection?

Reflective practice needs some good PR. The credibility of this learning approach takes time to develop, particularly in an action-oriented corporate context, and that is something which is perhaps better enabled through mentoring by senior known

managers, through facilitation in long-term corporate programmes by skilled and respected facilitators, or in the student context by academics as personal tutors, backed up by senior management and professional institute commitment. On this set of evidence, reflective development is a long-term commitment, although, unusually, the critical incident grid was capable of producing a dramatic shift in opinion, as demonstrated by one delegate from BuildCo. He had been fiercely skeptical of reflection until presented with insight from a grid commentary by the facilitator, which led him directly to a new understanding of his management behaviour. This individual believed the critical incident technique to hold a particular kind of magic: a fairly mechanical process which could suddenly offer something deep and meaningful. The grid technique rarely fails to provide new insights, provided sufficient effort is given to its serious use.

To what actions do these reflections lead us?

Seibert's discussion (1999 p57) of the divergence between coached reflection (requiring an intermediary and formal, out of workplace processes) and reflection-in-action (an individual, informal and ongoing behaviour) leads us to imagine a gulf between the two approaches. This paper has suggested there may be a middle way, which helps managers to develop a personal understanding of reflective practice, which can be done by the individual alone, but can access formal systematic tools for reflection.

Time is a critical issue for managers wishing to use reflective practice, this was evidenced clearly in the corporate contexts and sometimes proved problematic for management students when they expected reflection to involve a straightforward "stream of consciousness" and were surprised by purposive techniques. However there is evidence that, once tools are introduced and practised, both individual and group reflections can contribute to improved business choices and need not take too much time, see for example the account of Marilyn Wood Daudelin's work in Management Development Review (Daudelin, 1997). Bryans and Smith advocate reflection as one of the key principles underpinning learning at work to revitalise tired business models (2000). Perhaps it will be worth making the time to develop this productive behaviour.

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