

THE REFLECTIVE LEADER

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THE REFLECTIVE LEADER

Reflexivity in Practice

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This is for my grandparents who were from humble roots yet made me who I am today, gave me such love, encouragement and solid foundations for which

I am eternally grateful.

I will never forget.

Jack Hailes, Meg Hailes, Jim Robson, Lotte Robson.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Ian Robson is a Professor of Strategic Management at the University of Dundee. Originally from the Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Ian is a die-hard Newcastle United Football Club supporter and has been since attending his first game versus Rangers FC, 2-0 to NUFC in the 1969 Fairs cup tie. Moving north to Scotland in 1996, Ian lives with his family in the county of Angus, spending his leisure time walking, running, cycling and fishing in the nearby glens. His PhD concerned applied ethics in the UK food industry, and he graduated in 1999 from the University of Newcastle. His research is in the field of reflective leadership practice and he has focused more recently on ethics and decision-making in his recent publications. He has a long history of scholarship and academic leadership in several UK universities as well as significant experience of working in business schools across the world.

Ian has held Dean and Director positions in several universities including the University of Aberdeen, Dundee Business School, Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of St Andrews. Teaching Strategic Management and Business Ethics, Ian has expertise in research methodology and has supervised many research students over his career. His current research interests are in reflective practice and action research, hybridisation and research framing and strategic responses to organisational ethical crisis.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

The practitioner perspectives add a rich dimension to this book and I am most grateful to the contributors who agreed to be part of the journey. Reflective practice fundamentally concerns experiential learning, and I was able to draw on highly insightful and deep-thinking professionals to illuminate reflective practice. The contributors added a great deal of contextual information and raised some very important additional dimensions to each chapter. The process of developing the practitioner perspectives began with a long conversation with each contributor. Followed by transcription and the co-authoring of the piece. I include a short biography below for each contributor, all of whom are outstanding professionals and for whom I offer my sincere thanks.

Paul Collingwood is a prolific cricketer of the modern era who starred for and captained his home county of Durham County Cricket Club, retiring from the professional game in 2017 having moved into coaching roles with Scotland and Durham in 2015. A phenomenal batsman and fielder, Paul also excelled with the ball, particularly in the short versions of the game. He became the first cricketer to score 100 runs and take six wickets in the one-day international match against Bangladesh in 2005. At the height of his career, Paul was one of the best one-day international cricketers in the world, leading England to the ICC World Cup Championship as Captain in 2007. In that year, he also became the first cricketer since Wally Hammond in 1936 to score a double century versus Australia in Australia. He is established as an international coach in batting and fielding and was named interim head coach of England in February 2022. As a coach, he is immersed in the development of individual players and teams, employing a range of learning and development tools including video-based analysis and reflection. His contribution to this book makes very interesting reading.

Claire Copeland is Associate Medical Director at NHS Forth Valley in Scotland. She is a Geriatrician who both promotes and practices reflection in her medical role. This interview with Claire gives us a good account of the professional practice of reflection and in this we see its power and purpose. It is especially clear that reflective practice is embedded within mindsets in the

medical profession, where sharing learning can save lives, improve the welfare and well-being of patients and staff and potentially save money. The stakes are very high in this setting and the benefits of reflective practice are well known. Dr Copeland particularly highlights the softer side of reflection and its application in team contexts.

Kirsty Gunn is a New Zealander, educated at Victoria University and Oxford University. She is the author of six novels *Rain*, *The Keepsake*, *Featherstone*, *The Big Music*, *The Boy and the Sea* and her latest is *Caroline's Bikini*. She has also written several short stories and collections such as *44 Things*. Her last collection of short stories, *Infidelities*, won the Edge Hill Short Story Prize in 2015 and was shortlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. She is published by Faber and Faber and her work has been turned into films, theatre and dance. She has taught in creative writing at Oxford University and currently delivers modules at the University of Dundee in writing practice and study. She has developed creative writing workshops for several businesses and her contribution focuses on what creative writing and thinking can bring to leaders in organisations.

Joe Lafferty is an Executive Coach and Change Consultant. His contribution draws on his rich experiences of working with executives and senior leadership teams in a variety of organisations, most often regional health board teams. Using a combination of approaches and tools, Joe is an expert in psychodynamic approaches to team development and change programmes, specialising in team dynamics and leadership development. Joe has an MBA from Warwick University and is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Dundee. Joe's approach to work uses creative techniques such as Visual Explorer and World Café to highlight interpersonal challenges in high-pressure team contexts. His contribution is very deep and offers an excellent insight into the careful use of reflection to build trust and improve leadership performance.

Eddie Small was a Historian, Playwright, Creative Writing Tutor and Public Engagement Officer for the School of Humanities. His warmth, encouragement and vast knowledge of the history of Dundee made him the most wonderful company in any situation. His contribution shows us the care and love he gave to his work and the meticulous planning that went into his writing workshops. He worked with his writing across the University, in forensic science, history, the art college and the school of business. He sadly died a few weeks after my discussions with him about creative writing and this book project. He was delighted to be part of it, and I shall cherish his memory as long as I live. All the best Eddie and thank you so much.

Martin Svensson is an Associate Professor in Industrial Economics and Management at Blekinge Institute of Technology in Sweden. He holds degrees in Psychology and Economic Information Systems as well as a PhD in Industrial Economics and Management.

Martin's work focusses on the behavioral side of judgement and decision-making under uncertain and ambiguous conditions in industrial and managerial settings. Examples of contexts he studied are high reliability organisations (such as emergency operators, emergency physicians and the police), entrepreneurial and innovative economies. Primarily he publishes his research in management and social psychology related journals.

Martin is also a former professional hand-ball player and has experience of elite sports coaching, training and match performance. The practitioner perspective he contributes illuminates some interesting dimensions to the use of reflection and reflexive techniques in leadership development.

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FOREWORD

This is an important book. It seeks to explore reflection and its power to change behaviour with the pivotal role of the ‘leader’ as its focal point. Its premise rests in the idea that leaders and leadership are commonplace and that influential individuals in organisational life can do a much better job if they learn to reflect both by themselves and with others. Of note, it makes a significant contribution to the academic and practitioner literature on leadership — there are few studies that consider reflexivity and andragogy together in relation to leadership. As Professor Robson notes:

Leaders are far from flawless and can improve through learning. It is this learning process that we will focus on here. The focal context is to examine the leader in decision-making situations in order to observe the role of reflection.

Notwithstanding that I have known for a long time that I learn by reflection (although I did not always appreciate it), as a leadership academic Professor Robson contemplates and explains how leaders — formal and informal — make considered judgements. To date, in both academic and practitioner settings, we tend to study leaders, leading and leadership but rarely do we probe the reflection of the said leader when they lead (i.e. the verb/the ‘doing’ word). Thus, Professor Robson asks the reader to consider leaders beyond their traits, behaviours and philosophies to contemplate their reflective tendencies.

In detail, several thought-provoking (research) questions are asked:

- Do leaders consciously reflect on their past decisions?
- Do leaders understand fully the role of reflection in the process of making decisions?
- Can we investigate what potential there might be to exploit it (reflection) more fully as a decision-enhancing technique?
- If reflection can be embedded in the mindsets of decision-makers in organisations, does this improve decisions and performance and is reflective practice, therefore, something we should be consistently engaging in?

Such questions are not academic. In a world of uncertainly, complexity and abstraction, Professor Robson reminds us that decision-making — informed by reflection — will allow us to be ready to deal with unfamiliar circumstances. We do this by recognising connections between seemingly unrelated situations and questioning our assumptions and making better decisions.

This, then, has three benefits:

- When we are practiced enough at reflection we can start to reflect in the moment as a situation unfolds, making us more aware of our own and other people's actions, feelings and assumptions.
- If we are taking a reflective learning approach with our teams, we move from simply trying to fix problems and possibly attributing blame for things that went wrong, to creating joint insights and learning.
- As active reflectors, we function as role models for our teams who will benefit from this skill too, and in turn become more effective and faster learners. The ultimate benefit of reflective learning in a world driven by speed is acceleration: by slowing down and actively reflecting on past events we maximise learning and accelerate our own development and effectiveness as leaders.

In this respect, reflection has been named as one of the key competencies needed for effective leaders particularly as the workplace grows more complex and multicultural.

Professor Robson then moves us from reflection to reflexivity to knowing (what is happening in an organisational situation, why it is happening, what the implications of this observation might be and how to improve matters). The structure is most clear. First, we explore (the traditional) reflective practice in leadership placing this discussion within theories of individual and organisational learning. Second, a review of traditional models of reflective leadership practice is offered that captures learning — critical incidents, systems and structures — asking the question 'what is reflection and how can you systematize it'? We also move from 'self' reflection to 'other' in team-based reflective practice. Third, we consider reflexivity (reflection on reflection) and its central role in reflective practice. In this respect, reflection has been named as one of the key competencies needed for effective leaders particularly as the workplace grows more complex and multicultural. In this regard, we contemplate how we can learn reflexively through team processes and change, integrating theory into reflexive learning. Fourth, more creative forms of reflection through the lenses of creative writing are considered, combining creative and reflective processes and using creative texts to unlock learning.

This is of great importance to leadership in, and of, organisations. For example, reflective practice is the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning. In its simplest form, it involves thinking about, or reflecting on, what you do. It is closely linked to the concept of learning from experience. Of course, most of us think about what has happened; however, the difference between casual ‘thinking’ and ‘reflective practice’ — as Professor Robson notes — is that reflective practice requires a conscious effort to think about events and develop insights into them. Reflective practice is a process by which you: pause and think about your practice; consciously analyse your decision-making; and draw on theory to relate it to what you did (or didn’t do) in practice. Reflexivity is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others. Reflexivity, therefore, offers a vital bridge between knowledge and action that potentially transforms the quality of learning and offers a validation of perspective that would support a journey toward more effective performance. The traditional reflective approach is believed to be rather passive in comparison to reflexive practice which is meant to be more transformational. You don’t just reflect on what went well/wrong. Your main goal is to improve your future practice. The best example of reflexive practice is when it is done in the moment.

What is particularly welcome in this book is the variety of organisational settings that provide contextualised exploration of leaders, leadership, decision-making and reflection. Of note, there are deep, rich and thought-provoking cases from an eclectic group of practitioners: a professional (elite) cricket player, a senior NHS Consultant doctor; two academics; an executive coach and change consultant; and a writer/playwright/poet. Each practice-based case is drawn from interviews with professionals who employ reflection and who have rich experiences to share with you — the reader. As I get somewhat irritated by the plethora of academic books written by academics about the latest theory, Professor Robson gives ‘voice’ to practitioners who have so much to offer the thinking and practice of leadership. This is important.

This book seeks to identify the systematic nature of reflection juxtaposed to the more immediate praxis of reflexivity. When we need a more considered, careful judgement in decision-making, perhaps reflective practice is more effective. The intuition embodied by reflexivity is more effective in the kind of pressured business performance contexts we highlighted earlier. For leaders, an opportunity exists to help reflective leaders to understand the difference between reflective action, systematised and collaborative, and reflexive action,

characterised by introspection and intuition. Leaders ought to develop a keen sense of the range of reflective and reflexive tools at their disposal, discerning between more complex problems and those are clearly delineated is a core challenge in developing authentically reflective leaders. Over the years, I have concluded that individuals cannot truly develop as leaders unless they are receptive to continuous and deep learning. In fact, learning is at the core of effective leadership development and deep learning is the process through which we can use our experiences to transform. Through this type of learning, we fundamentally change the way we see ourselves, others and the world around us.

To make decisions, leaders are required to have a wide range of competences including the ability to analyse several types of data, to understand current situations and to imagine future potential scenarios. This book does not focus entirely on this complex decision-making context, nor does it dwell on the multitude theories that concern leadership styles and traits. Rather, it focuses on how leaders improve their effectiveness, their decision-making abilities and ultimately, how they can use reflection and reflexive processes to see things differently, more wholly, and identify how they might engage with colleagues to improve decisions and hopefully performance.

I commend this book to you.

WBH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever grateful to the contributors to this book for the insights and support they have given me. The idea for this book came to me in my recent interviews with the head coaches of several elite football clubs in Scotland, when it became clear that reflection is a very strong element of building learning cultures and mindsets. With many thanks to the coaches. I was also encouraged by several people to write this book, colleagues at work, Professor Brian Howieson and others. At the top of the list of people to thank comes my wife, Nikki, who cajoled, persuaded and encouraged me to continue writing when it was the last thing on my mind. She is a marvellous editor and has kept me on track while continuing with her own writing career as a poet. Lastly to Emerald and the excellent staff who have supported me to the end. You know who you are!

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

The idea for this book sprung from a lecture I attended during my teacher training in 1990 when my curiosity in andragogy and post-experience education was at its beginning. The lecture considered Donald Schon's 'Educating the Reflective Practitioner', and I remember vividly the examples we were given of how reflection is critical to learning and development in engineering, accountancy and most memorably, allotment gardening. This really struck home because of childhood memories of playing alongside my grandfather, Jack, at a young age while he weeded, propagated, fed and watered and administered blood and bone feed alongside pesticides in an impressive display of mastery. It occurs to me that reflection and learning are fundamental elements of the human condition without which, we would not have emerged as the dominant force on this planet. Perhaps with a greater attention to reflective practice we would make a better job of running the show.

Moving to more mundane settings, I have flirted with professional practice for much of my life, trialling for Northamptonshire County Cricket Club at a very young age to get a sense of the discipline, concentration and effort required to succeed. Then realising I didn't possess any of those qualities. Looking then at a life in the legal profession. Then finding I was better suited to academia. As a scholar of 30 plus years, I carried with me ideas of reflection and reflective practice and having interviewed hundreds of practitioners across the arts, software development, biotechnology, professional football and cricket and medicine. I have recently focused on seemingly opposing professions, the creative arts and elite sport.

The book re-introduces the idea of reflection and reflective practice, building on the work of Schon and Argyris among others and exploring its use and application. At its lowest level, reflection is essential in engendering an organisational learning culture and with leadership, encouraging a more considered and holistic form of decision-making. The

first two chapters critique the theory and practice of reflection, highlighting the professional practice and looking at the concepts of critical incidents and problematic events. My research identified several strengths in reflective practice including contributions to continuous improvement, solving problems and sharing learning via blogs and posts and vlogs, identification of skill deficits, alignment of tasks to organisational vision and mission. The practitioner perspectives introduced in each chapter begin with Paul Collingwood in Chapter 1, an international England cricketer and current England coach. His contribution was excellent in helping the reader see the link between reflection, learning and development and performance. Paul also introduces the idea of levels of reflection, both team and individual levels and the idea in competitive sport of reflecting on the opposition strengths and weaknesses. Chapter 2 looks at the medical profession and emergency services and professional elite handball. Dr Claire Copeland, an avid reflective blogger in the National Health Service, give us an excellent view of how reflective practice works in her profession, including some of the difficulties of finding time and being objective. Professor Martin Svensson provided us with an insightful view of pressured decision environments where emotion plays a strong role in how we view incidents, how much attention we pay to the detail of incidents, how we select learning opportunities and the attention we pay to our work. His major contribution was to elaborate on the notion of fundamental attribution error and the way in which we analyse cause and effect.

Chapters 3 and 4 take reflective practice into relatively new territories, considering reflexivity and creativity as areas of development in reflective practice. Reflexivity concerns reflection on reflection with a view to mitigating attribution error and bias and to enable practitioners to understand the dynamics of their workplace in terms of power, control and hierarchy. Reflexive processes can also introduce theory and external frameworks into the leadership culture with the benefit of distancing reflection for the context. Joe Lafferty's practitioner perspective regarding the use of psychoanalytic tools in executive coaching is highly enlightening. Grounding leadership and executive team development in multiple perspectives of reality was demonstrably powerful in Joe's reflection in his high-level practice across many national institutions. Chapter 4 focuses on creative writing approaches that utilise reflection. Accepting that writing is a core skill of any leader, I considered the benefits and uses of creative thinking and writing, exploring poetry and prose. Eddie Small and Kirsty Gunn provide strong views on how they work with companies

and with writing groups, emphasising the need for trust and safety in opening spaces to explore. Using scenarios and third-person narrative, the phrase ‘vicarious elaboration’ is used to explain the creative vehicle commonly used in these practices and the inherent power of these tools is crystal clear in this chapter. Throughout the book I have sought to use examples to illustrate points and personal perspectives I have gleaned from the many interviews I have had in recent years, particularly with elite football coaches, medical professional and software development companies.

The book is highly relevant to any reader who has leadership experience or aspirations and anyone who is curious about reflection and learning. My conclusions highlight further areas of interest and development, and the field of creative reflection features highly in my own list of future research projects.