The Use of Reflection as an Effective Leadership Practice: An Introduction[1]

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Introduction

Reflection is an important component of leadership. By learning the practice of reflection, leaders can be more effective. Reflective leadership can help leaders navigate their daily responsibilities. There are many resources available to guide this process. The idea of reflection was first conceptualized in an educational setting by John Dewey in 1904 when he defined reflection as the "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1904, p. 10). Since then, reflection has become a foundational component of understanding how individuals learn. Learning models indicate reflection is a bridge connecting knowledge, experiences, and ideas to conceptualization and action (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1990).

Reflection is also beneficial to leaders and organizations because "superior performance depends on superior learning" (Senge, 1990, p. 7). When considering a definition for reflection in the context of leadership development, Johnson (2020) says it well: "Reflection is the intentional habit of creating space to think in order to pursue clarity of thought, learn from experiences and proactively advance ideas" (p. 23). This leadership series discusses the importance of reflection, the benefits and barriers of reflection,

models of reflection, and methods for utilizing reflection in one's leadership practice.

Importance of Reflection in Leadership

As mentioned previously, the concept of reflection in an educational setting dates back to Dewey in 1904. In more contemporary times, reflection is also tied to positive leadership behaviors, with literature referring to leaders who utilize reflection and integrate reflection more into their habits as "reflective leaders" (Densten & Gray, 2001; Castelli, 2015). Reflective leaders are defined as individuals who are consistently aware of behaviors, situations, and consequences for the purpose of improving their organizations (Castelli, 2015). While reflective leadership is a theme in popular press, this Ask IFAS series will primarily examine reflection practices that benefit leaders and focus less on the qualities of reflective leaders.

Leaders who utilize reflection may be more important than ever due to increasingly complex challenges facing society and the fast pace with which these challenges are expected to be solved. Unfortunately, the most complicated challenges in recent history (climate change, artificial intelligence, global health crises) are occurring in a moment in time when results are expected immediately. Leadership in the twenty-first century has been described as a situation when

leaders have no time to think and often employ a "ready-fire-aim type of mentality" (Waddock & McIntosh, 2009, p. 312). This mindset is shaped, in part, by the expectation that leaders should be people "of action, not reflection" (Raelin, 2002, p. 66). Leaders who delay decisions, even for appropriate reasons, can appear weak. Leaders may also feel pressured to act quickly due to the technology available to them. Communication tools and technical resources are designed to increase efficiency; however, quick decisions are not always quality decisions.

Due to the nature of current dynamic and interconnected challenges, leaders must create time, space, and processes so they can thoughtfully consider the long-term outcomes of their decisions (Castelli, 2015). If decisions are made too quickly, leaders may not address the root causes of the issues and end up with solutions that are temporary and/or create collateral damage (Sostrin, 2017). Leaders who utilize reflection gain additional data points through the consideration of their own knowledge and insight as they make decisions.

Benefits of Reflection to Leadership

There are personal and organizational benefits for leaders who practice reflection. According to Walden University (2024), three benefits of reflection include awareness, adaptability, and action. Reflection allows a leader to enhance their self-awareness as well as their awareness of the organization's strengths and weaknesses. Through increased awareness of self and the organization, leaders can develop new insights about challenges and solutions to complex problems. New insights enable them to adapt their current strategies, leading to more effective action (Castelli, 2015). Self-aware leaders are also seen to contribute positively to the work environment through garnering trust from employees, communicating more effectively, and having overall positive experiences at work (Johnson, 2020). Reflection further encourages leaders to create environments that connect daily efforts to the larger organizational mission, ultimately increasing motivation in the workforce, renewing interest and effort from employees, and improving employee performance (Castelli, 2015).

Beyond self-awareness, reflection can also provide "insights into how to frame problems differently, to look at situations from multiple perspectives or to better understand followers" (Densten & Gray, 2001, p. 120). By reframing problems, leaders may consider new solution possibilities that can lead to a more desired outcome. With the ability

to examine a situation from multiple perspectives, leaders are demonstrating increased empathy and thus increase the likelihood of improved connections with peers and subordinates (Johnson, 2020).

Barriers to Reflection in Leadership

Despite the evidence for the importance and benefits of reflective leadership, there are both real and perceived barriers that prevent leaders from engaging in consistent reflection. One potential barrier to practicing reflective leadership is the frequent association of reflection with the idea of slowing down. Leaders may see the practice of reflection as an added time-consuming task in their already very full days (van der Steen, van Saane, & van Dijk, 2021). This barrier may be more of a perception than a reality. Efficiency and productivity are not the same. Thus, while reflection may appear to be an inefficient use of a leader's time, reflection can result in improved productivity if new insights emerge that lead to better actions. Additionally, research shows that individuals who spend even just 15 minutes a day reflecting improved their performance over counterparts who did not engage in intentional reflection (Di Stefano et al., 2015).

A second barrier to leader reflection is knowledge of the reflection process. While adults reflect to some extent on past experiences and present circumstances, studies suggest people devote only approximately 8% of their total thoughts to self-reflection (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982; Swann & Bosson, 2010). There are also few professional development opportunities available that teach the "methods, practices and processes for building knowledge from practice" (Amulya, 2011, p. 3). The perception of reflection taking up valuable time in a leader's day along with the lack of knowledge of how to effectively utilize reflection to strengthen leadership capacity are real barriers for reflective leadership.

Conclusion

Reflection has long been considered essential to effective learning models. As leadership theory evolves from bureaucratic frameworks, leaders will need to enhance their learning skills to be effective in the current knowledge age (van der Steen, van Saane, & van Dijk, 2021). The process of reflection is a tool that can equip leaders to make better decisions especially as they deal with complex problems in an increasingly dynamic environment. In the next article, types of reflective leadership models will be described.

Additionally, suggested practices will be outlined so leaders can implement reflection into their daily routines.

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