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Self-reflection: the key to effective leadership

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Short bio

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Self-reflection – the key to effective leadership

Most authorities on leadership development understand the importance of assisting managers and leaders to engage in *self-discovery and self-reflection*. Recorded statements from philosophers about the need for *self-awareness* and reflection for those in leadership positions goes back thousands of years to ancient philosophers and teaches like Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Jesus and Mohammed. However, research has shown that self-reflection is possibly a manager's least favourite activity.

While much has been written on the need for self-reflection and for self-understanding by managers, little is available that points the way forward for managers on how to commence self-reflection, what are the processes involved and how one commences on the road to self discovery.

In this short article, I will endeavour to assist you to commence learning about yourself. There are two good reasons why managers and leaders should be concerned about learning about themselves. First, while some people, because of personality flaws, like narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychological personality disorders should never be allowed to lead others, most people can improve their leadership potential and performance by engaging in self-reflection. Second, research has shown there is no better bedrock for effective leadership than a secure understanding and sense of oneself. Self-understanding also provides a sound basis for understanding other people – how could a leader be conscious of another's need or have empathy

with others without first having awareness of their own self? In other words, you must first have a mature understanding of who you are and why you behave in the ways you do, and to be secure in self-acceptance, before leading other people.

If you are to improve your leadership skills and practice, then it is important that you are aware of your current level of skills, your strengths and weaknesses, your values and behavioural patterns and the predominant ways you attempt to influence others (that is your leadership style). Understanding these things is an integral part of being able to respond effectively in a range of leadership situations. Not being self-aware may lead to action that destroys confidence and trust - it may even lead followers into harm. Self-awareness is therefore a key to being a more effective leader.

There is a hierarchy of self-knowledge that a manager or leader might like to follow to commence on the path to self-awareness. Certain knowledge precedes other knowledge if it is to be useful and I will utilise this hierarchy to outline a process for you to follow. Word limits preclude a full exploration so I have chosen to concentrate on just a couple of aspects of self-awareness for you to pursue in order for you to commence on the road to self-discovery.

Personal values and organisational values

Understanding your personal values is the first step to self-awareness. It is important because the leader's personal values may be one of the most important determinants of how the leader's power is exercised or constrained. The leader's perceptions and behaviour will also set the tone for how the organisation conducts itself. Surprisingly, while a manager's personal values drive their behaviour each day, their values are unusually unconscious and many adults have not taken time to articulate their own personal values in any formal way.

Are a manager's personal values relevant in organisations? Business is no different from other sorts of social interaction where personal values form the foundation for how we deal with each other. Values-driven leadership is a term increasingly being used to emphasise values as the driving force behind successful leadership. This is not

a new idea but is increasingly being explored and emphasised as a way of offering coherence to leadership in a rapidly changing, diverse working environment.

Values are also closely related to ethics. Ethics concerns right and wrong and understanding how we decide on what is right and wrong is increasingly important in organisations if we are to avoid putting organisations at risk. The personal values that we have developed unconsciously will impact on how we respond to each of the issues we encounter day to day and the example we set for others as a leader in the organisation.

Values are personally held beliefs, not facts. Values are assessed, developed and revised throughout life, but many are relatively established by young adulthood. Values are developed by adopting the values of significant others such as our parents, teachers, family or friends. We adopt values portrayed in the media such as television, radio, internet, music, books and magazines. We mirror, often without being aware of it, the dominant values of our culture and sub-cultures.

It is possible to divide personal values into two sets: *instrumental values* and *end (terminal) values*. Instrumental values include the values that we use on a regular basis to make decisions about our life and work. These can include values like hard work, honesty, independence, capable, responsible, imaginative, forgiving, polite, clean, cheerful, courageous, logical. These values are given different weight by different individuals. They are a means to an end. End (terminal) values generally reflect life long aspirations such as gaining wisdom, bringing about peace or having a sustainable environment. These values include things like freedom, self respect, a comfortable life, social recognition, wisdom, contentedness, equality, a world at peace, national security and salvation.

Take a minute now to reflect upon your own personal values. Then, write a list of both the instrumental and terminal values that you hold dear. There are dozens of self diagnostic instruments available on the internet to assist you to articulate your personal values. Just type 'personal values test' into Google. Use different instruments until you find the set of 5-6 words each that accurately reflect your personal

instrumental and end values. It could take some weeks before you are comfortable with the list of values you settle on but persevere – it's so important!

Research shows that managers with a strong sense of right and wrong do appear to be better leaders and that a leader's personal values correlate positively with leadership effectiveness. Also, when managers understand their values clearly, they tend to act more consistently and this consistency in behaviour is a key to building trust from others. Trust is the glue that leaders need to lead effectively.

Once you determine your own personal values, it is a good exercise to compare them with the values stated by your organisation (or if there are not any, the values clearly in use in the organisation). Understanding the organisation's values is very important for managers. Organisational values are the fundamental beliefs of the organisation. An organisation's values, as articulated in a *values statement*, are much like that of an individual. The organisation's value statement is meant to define the basic shared beliefs within the organisation and the basis on which every action and decision in the organisation is taken. It helps shape a common and enduring identity within the organisation. While the value statement is meant to guide decisions and goals within the organisation, one cannot assume however, that each and every member of the organisation is going to share the values of the organisation.

The two sets of values (your own personal values and those of the organisation) will never be an identical match, but it is incredibly important that managers in the organisation have some alignment between their personal values and those of the organisation. How can a manager effectively fit into an organisation and lead it by role modeling behaviour and attitudes when their own personal values clash with those of the organisation? Many organisations now recruit managers predominantly on the basis of the manager's value system because of its significance. Research has found that employees, who hold values that are congruent with their organisation's values, are more productive and satisfied.

Personality dimensions and types

Having established your personal value system and that of your organisation, its time to investigate your *personality type*. Over many years, psychologists have developed theories to explain how and why people behave as they do. Psychological testing has been around for centuries and is also widespread among different cultures. It is used extensively in modern organisations for staff selection and development activities and for the development of leaders. A widely known model of personality is the ‘the big five’ model.

As a part of gaining self awareness, leaders need to understand their basic personality type. Once they understand their own type, they can extend this awareness to the understanding the personality types of others, particularly those who follow them. Knowing and understanding the personality types of others assists leaders to predict the likely behaviour and job performance of team members and take actions that are appropriate to the different personality types in a team. This leads to more effective communication and effective outcomes.

The big five model of personality allows us to reliably categorise most of the known traits into one of five dimensions:

- *Surgency* (also known as self confidence, the need for power and extraversion),
- *Agreeableness* (also known as empathy and need for affiliation),
- *Adjustment* (also known as emotional stability or self control),
- *Conscientiousness* (also known as dependability or prudence), and
- *Openness to experience* (also known as curiosity, intellect and learning approach).

The dimensions are not personality types as in some other forms of personality trait measurement (for example the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)), so people vary continuously on them, with most people falling in between the extremes. The dimensions provide a unifying personality framework and research has established relationships between the personality dimensions and job performance.

You can find hundreds of personality type instruments free to use on the internet. Just type 'big five personality test' into Google. While some are more valid than others, they provide a way to become aware of your own personality type and the type of those you lead. Other more valid and reliable instruments like the MBTI are available through trained assessors. These are excellent for gaining self-awareness, leadership development and team building.

Cognitive factors

Separate from your personality type is your *cognitive style*. A person's cognitive (or thinking) style is the natural strategy or preference they use to gather, process, interpret, evaluate and respond to data and information. There has been strong research linking a leader's thinking style to their behaviour and cognitive style is said to be one of the building blocks of a person's self-concept. In the modern organisation, leaders and their followers are faced with increasing amounts of data and information that must be processed and used as the basis for decision making.

It is known that people have preferred styles to process this information and will approach problems and decisions using different decision-making strategies. In other words, people have different learning styles and will take different meanings from the same data or experience. If leaders are to get the most out of the people in their teams, they must learn the way in which they and their team members prefer to process information and relate and interact with them in accordance with their preferred styles.

There are literally hundreds of ways of measuring cognitive style and researchers use many different dimensions to measure the concept. However, two major dimensions of thinking style dominate the research. These are:

- information gathering, and
- information analysing

The theory underpinning these two dimensions is based on the work of Carl Jung (1923), a Swiss psychiatrist and influential thinker and the founder of Analytical Psychology. Many typology tests and personality indicators are based on his work.

The dimensions above are further reduced to sub-dimensions and most people have different degrees of intensity for each of the sub-dimensions of sensing, intuiting, thinking and feeling. No strategy or style is inherently better or worse than another but in any team environment, it is better to have team members from all styles so that the team is well balanced. Knowing your own overall preferred cognitive style and the intensity of each of the dimensions, and that of the people in your work team, will assist you to demonstrate the leadership behaviours that are more likely to be effective.

Once again, an internet search will enable you to undertake different cognitive style instruments. Just type 'cognitive style test' or 'learning style test' into Google. While some instruments are more valid and reliable than others, they provide a way to become aware of your own cognitive style and the style of those you lead. When leaders and team members have self-knowledge about their individual cognitive styles and the styles of those they work with, the team is more likely to achieve a more effective and balanced outcome. In other words, leaders need to behave in a way that meets the cognitive styles of all their team members and not to act as if everyone in the team has the same preferred style.

Emotional intelligence

Goleman (2002) brought the idea of emotional intelligence to the public consciousness, but researchers have long known that how well a person manages his or her emotions and those of others influences leadership effectiveness. For example, recognising anger in yourself and others, and being able to empathize with people, can help you be more effective at exerting influence. Influence is at the heart of leadership.

Emotional intelligence is an individual difference that is important for both leaders and followers. It is an individual difference that like many leadership skills is not fixed for life and can be improved by training and development.

Emotional intelligence refers to qualities like:

- understanding one's feelings,
- empathy for others, and
- the regulation of emotions to enhance living.

This type of intelligence has to do with the ability to connect with people and understand their emotions. These are not skills that form part of most formal curricula in schools or universities. Nor do they often get mentioned as something that needs to be developed in order to be effective in leadership or in life. Most good leaders are alike in one essential way - they all have a high degree of emotional intelligence.

The five key factors in emotional intelligence are:

- self-awareness,
- self regulation,
- motivation,
- empathy, and
- social skill.

Space does not permit an explanation of these factors here. However, an internet search will uncover many emotional intelligence tests that you can undertake. Just type 'emotional intelligence test' into Google. Try however, to find a test that is underpinned by good research and has been found to be statistically valid and reliable.

On-the-job reflective learning

Using self-administered instruments and tests is helpful to gain self-awareness, underpinning our understanding of the leadership process and the concept that 'to understand leadership is to understand yourself'. Effective leaders are aware of how they respond to different situations at work, they are aware of their impact on others, they understand human interaction and the role their behaviour and actions

play in bringing about effective outcomes. *Reflective learning* is a well grounded theory based on the capacity of an individual to reflect on their own words and actions and to undertake a learning process through such reflection. This can be done every day at work while you are on-the-job. There are various tools available to allow us to develop the skill of reflective learning.

One method to try reflective learning and to develop self-awareness is through the keeping of a reflective journal, recording personal events. Self-awareness and understanding are developed by reflecting or thinking about aspects of these events in terms of one's emotional reactions, and one's behaviours. Once again, the internet can provide you with examples of how to develop and keep a reflective journal. Just type 'reflective journal' into Google.

When using a reflective journal, one should endeavour to engage in *double-loop learning* which is an in-depth type of learning that occurs when people use feedback to confront the validity of the goal or values implicit in the situation. So when something occurs that makes you question your role in a particular situation, you not only observe the action, you actually ask yourself: 'What could I have done to improve the outcome?' Double-loop learning enables a leader to profit from setbacks; interpreting the reason why a setback occurs and learning from that experience so that it does not occur again is a desirable outcome.

Finally

Self-awareness is really about self-discovery and my aim in this article was to assist you to commence the path of self-discovery. However, genuine self-awareness can be confronting and will therefore require your patience and perseverance. Simple navel gazing will not produce the performance results you should be looking for. The reflection must be honest and frank, using validated tools to assist the process and to provide you with data to consider and digest. Using the data and interpretations you have gained from each of the self-diagnostic instruments mentioned above, write a statement of your own strengths and weaknesses. If you are game, show the statement to others (family, friends and work colleagues) to see if they agree with it. Use the statement and feedback on it as a starting point to commence a plan of leader

development.

Our new book titled '*The Leader in You: Developing your leadership potential*', has been designed to assist both individual leaders and organisations to achieve greater effectiveness in leader development. The book provides the validated tools and educational process necessary to assist leaders to become self-aware and to develop a three year leadership development plan. The book may be ordered by contacting UBDS Distribution SDN BHD, www.ubsd-dist.com or email enquiry@ubsd-dist.com.

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