Performance Techniques: Reflective Practice and Action Learning as Leadership Developmental Tools in the Pursuit to Improve Project Performance within the Project Organisation.

By

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is, using a literature review, to discuss the processes of
Reflective Practice and Action Learning using a project based organisation as a case
study and to discuss the advantages and importance of these processes to improving
project performance through leadership development. Some of the barriers to effective
implementation within such workplaces will also be discussed. The article will first
provide the definition and importance of both Reflective Practice and Action Learning.
This is then followed by linking these processes with the concept of the Learning
Organisation in order to create an environment where leadership development is
encouraged as part of employee engagement attract and retain strategies and the overall
continuous improvement process.

The organisation used for this article is an Australian medium sized oil and gas company.
A project based organisation undertaking exploration, construction and eventually
operations of assets. The organisation does not currently undertake Action Learning,
however realises that if it is to attract and retain skilled project managers, then it must
offer a strong leadership development program, because a high salary is no longer the
sole motivating factor for many project managers. It is my belief that this case study
organisation will benefit from implementing a leadership development program based on
Reflective Practice and Action Learning because the future of improving their projects is
not just going to be through traditional technical training of their project managers but
raising it to the next level.

Introduction
In today's competitive and ever changing environment, organisations are more and more
frequently and without notice required to change at the drop of a hat and adapt at a
moments notice or face their demise. No longer do organisations have the luxury of
developing sustainable long term business plans or comfortably predicting the future
(Daudelin 1998) but in fact, face increasing pressure to please their stakeholders and
shareholders through positive market analysis, ethical undertakings and positive returns
on their investment. Organisations therefore need to have in place highly skilled leaders
that demonstrate strong leadership, successfully guiding their teams through times of
pressure and ever increasing changes.

Daudelin (1998):
> "Recent studies have shown that the day to day experiences of managers as they
> confront challenges and problems on the job are rich sources of learning. Perhaps
> more appropriate classrooms than the traditional."

To do this, an organisation must have implemented the correct leadership development
programs that are going to assist their project managers. Action Learning through
Reflective Practice is one of the tools in which to do this. To further demonstrate the
point, Revans 1983, when introducing Action Learning, states:
> "If conditions change more rapidly than you can learn (or adapt) you will be in
> trouble as are all organisms facing change. Adapt or die is today's motto…when
> the rate of change is faster than that of learning, the organism fails. And when the

rate of learning is as fast as (or faster than) that of change, the organism is likely to adapt, to survive and even to grow."

Reflective Practice
This purpose of this section is to provide a definition of Reflective Practice and show why it is important not only to the development of a project manager's career but also to the sustained competitive advantage of an organisation. Current literature clearly shows that there are many definitions of reflective practice but the commonalities that exist include that there are benefits to organisations from implementing a reflection strategy as part of development programs and to individuals who take the time to stop, reflect and make changes in order to enhance their skills and improve on their projects and overall careers.

Reflection, used as development process for project managers within an organisation, is very much a personal experience and is a highly cognitive process where an individual uses their past experiences mixed with their own values and beliefs to examine and process their meaning within their own mind (Daudelin 1996). This process is meant to then create 'lessons learned' for the individual so that they may then change or make positive improvements and modifications to their future leadership style and approach towards managing projects within the organisation. Some organisations that have implemented reflective style programs as part of the leadership development include AT&T, PepsiCo, and Aetna International (Daudelin 1996).

Daudelin (1996):
> "Reflection is a process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently its meaning to the self through the development of inferences, learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behaviour."

Smith (2001) further defines Reflection as the:
> "Ability to think things through and de-brief experiences at non-trivial personal and contextual levels."

Table 1 Reasons why we reflect

• Natural element of learning	• Personal mastery
• Gain insight and understanding	• Overcome resistance
• Foresee consequences	• Apportion blame
• Solve problem(s)	• Explore responsibility
• Justify action	• Increase self-confidence
• Achieve control	• Get new ideas
• Improve decisions	• Part of thinking
• Increase options	• Conflict resolution
• Clarification	• Negotiation
• Detect errors	• Cultural expectations
• Forced to do it	• Be more successful
• Seek 'truth'	• Enhance performance
• Explore mindsets	• Gain multiple viewpoints
• Identify 'right' problem	• Intuitive element in adaption
• Challenge norms	• Gain an edge
• Gain new perspectives	• Uncover discrepant reasoning
• Self-insight	• Shift blame (distancing)
• Self-development	• Make the tacit explicit

Table 1.0 (above), referenced from the studies that Smith 2001 (page 33) has undertaken and written about, shows the many reasons why individuals reflect.

To learn and develop oneself, in order to improve their leadership of projects, requires that a workplace have supportive tools and programs in place that allow this to happen, however, an individual must take on the majority of the responsibility and drive for gaining benefits from this process. Smith (2001) believes that reflective practice processes are essential to any leader who wishes to continuously develop themselves. They must first look within themselves and understand their own weaknesses, strengths and opportunities for improvement before they can truly evolve their career or to make any significantly sustainable changes. To do this requires critical self reflection.

As an example, to demonstrate the importance of implementing an efficient Reflective program within an organisation, Daudelin (1996), undertook a study of 48 managers from different functional departments within a fortune 500 corporation with the aim of finding the most effective way for leaders to develop lessons learned from challenging work experiences through Reflection. Daudelin was able to conclude her study with solid findings showing that it can take only one hour of a leader undertaking Reflection of a challenging situation they have experienced to notably boost the learning they can gain from having had gone through the experience.

It is now common place for organisations to have a training budget and / or leadership training programs in place. The study undertaken by Daudelin shows that there are advantages and significant benefits from having leaders stop and learn from their experiences and that if an organisation were to take a relatively small proportion of the allocated training budget and put it toward reflection practice that this may well be money well spent.

Examples of solitary reflection	Examples of reflection with helper or small group
■ Spontaneous thinking during rhythmic, repetitive, mindless physical exercise (jogging, swimming laps, mowing the lawn) or routine habits (driving an established route, showering, shaving)	■ Performance appraisal discussions
	■ Counseling sessions
	■ Individual or group therapy
	■ Problem-solving meetings
■ Meditation	■ Project review sessions
■ Prayer	■ Informal discussions with friends/colleagues
■ Journal writing	■ Interviews
■ Business writing (project reports, professional papers, evaluations)	■ Mentoring
■ Assessment instruments	■ Feedback discussions

Table 2.0 (above), referenced from Daudelin (1996), shows the different methods that can be used for the purposes of undertaking Reflective Practice.

Action Learning
Action Learning was introduced by Professor R.W. Revans in the 1940s when he observed that leaders within the British mining industry would sit around after work and discuss their workplace issues over drinks but never really pursue any changes into the workplace. Revans realised that this concept could be brought into the workplace and leaders could solve real problems within groups of peers, also known as 'sets', however without the drinking (Revans 1983). Action Learning is now used by many large organisations around the world including Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, Whirlpool, Ikea and AT&T to name just a few (Smith, 2001).

Action Learning is where an organisation creates a supportive learning environment whereby its individuals can, and are encouraged to, critically assess themselves and workplace challenges and come up with a solution for managing them (Eskerod 2010).

Smith (2001), quotes Revans:
> "Action Learning embodies an approach based on comrades in adversity learning from and with each other through discriminating questioning, fresh experience and reflective insight."

Eskerod (2010) quotes Peddler and Abbott (2008) that:
> "Action Learning is a maturing approach to management, leadership and organisational development, yet it has no single definition and varies considerably in practice. It is not a simple methodology with universal procedures but an approach or discipline with core values and principles which are applied by various practitioners in differing ways in diverse situations."

This statement is in line with Revans (1983) beliefs whereby Action Learning is not easily defined and should not be "packaged" into a traditional style training course within a classroom because an individual and organisation will better understand it's principles and gain more benefit the more they put it into practice.

Action Learning would suit the needs of the case study organisation because they do face uncertainty and times of unpredictable change which needs their project managers to act strongly and swiftly to solve problems and learn lessons from previous experiences. Revans believes that if leaders are not allowed to do this then during challenging times, all they have to rely on is their traditionally learned technical skills, and this would be detrimental to an organisation where leaders need develop and adapt to change by consistently learning through questioning, discussing and most of all from their different on the job experiences (Revans 1983). The case study organisation has in the past relied on the traditionally learned technical skills of its project managers but will benefit from implementing Action Learning through a tool such as Reflective Practice to raise their leaders to the next level and improve their projects in the future.
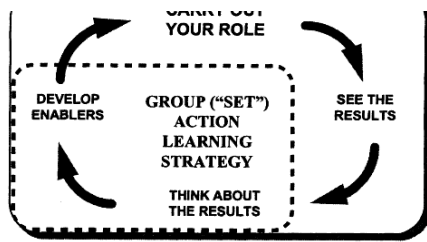
Figure 1.0 (above), referenced from an article written by Smith 2001 (page 39), illustrates the continuous process of Action Learning and Reflection strategy through stopping to analyse the results and experiences and develop enablers in order to improve how they carry out their role in the future.

An example of where Action Learning has been successful can be found in a study undertaken by Eskerod (2010) using a Danish engineering consultancy company going from a relatively sheltered domestic market to now trying to keep up with the ever changing global market it finds itself in. Top management supported the implementation of an Action Learning program to enhance the organisation's project management capabilities with successful outcomes both through better financial project results and project managers reporting increased confidence and job satisfaction.

Barriers to Effective Reflective Practice and Action Learning
This article has established that the case study organisation will significantly benefit on many levels from implementing a leadership development program that will increase project manager's ability to stop, reflect on their experiences, discuss and question problems with their peers and implement actions to make real changes and improvements. However, the barriers to implementing successful programs must also be discussed in order for this organisation to be aware of the risks that exist.

There is a real risk that leaders will not be provided the support and time they need to undertake reflective practice and implement real changes as many managers, in general, have shown they place more value on action rather than reflection.

Henry Minztberg quoted in Daudelin (1998):
"Study after study has shown that managers work at an unrelenting pace, that their activities are characterised by brevity, variety and discontinuity and that they are strongly oriented to action and dislike reflective activities."

Therefore it is critical that management at all levels from senior to middle must be supportive of the program and dedicated to ensuring that their project managers are provided with the time required to undertake reflective practice, otherwise there is the risk that it will be seen as another management gimmick and a waste of resources which could potentially lead to frustration and disengagement by the project managers.

Yorks et al (1999) point to the fact that if an organisation is to implement a reflection program then management must be prepared in four key ways. Firstly that this would be significant change and transformational style of learning; secondly, there is the potential for "uncertainty and [a] level of noise that is likely to be generated by this approach"; thirdly, top management must walk the talk and get involved by undertaking their own reflective practice; fourthly the organisation's Development Specialists must be prepared to support leaders and to accept the initial challenges that the program could potentially create.

The case study organisation must use sound judgment and take the time to implement the most suitable Reflective and Action Learning program that will fit into the culture of the organisation. They need to be clear on the best approach and effectively consult and communicate with their project managers on the reasons for the program and make available suitable supportive tools such as coaches and mentors. If this is not undertaken then they risk spending time and money implementing a program that is not conducive with the culture and one that project managers are not going to be interested in nor gain any value from.

Furthermore Yorks et al (1999) writes that Action Learning within any organisation needs to form part of the overall strategy that the company has to leadership development in order for it to not be seen as an "add on" to the list of training courses. Gaining project manager buy in and commitment to the program is going to be essential because individuals will only learn what and when they wish to (Eskerod 2010).

An advantage of Action Learning is that participants will gain value from working on real life problems with their peers in order to come up with solutions they can take back into the workplace however the direct disadvantage of this is that working in a familiar setting on a familiar problem can lead to 'group think' which could see individuals unintentionally start agreeing with each other and heading down the one path instead of asking challenging questions and always asking "why?" A way around this situation occurring is to employ the use of a facilitator that can encourage questioning and reflection in order to avoid the situation occurring.

The Learning Organisation
This section discusses the link between establishing a Learning Organisation and Reflective Practice and Action Learning programs. The continued and sustained success of these programs will only be achieved if there is a safe environment where project managers feel they can, and are encouraged to, learn from experiences, including mistakes, in order to improve themselves and their projects.

To illustrate this point, Smith (2001) provides the following definition:
> "A learning organisation is a social system…for continually generating, retaining and leveraging individual and collective learning to improve performance of the organisational systems."

Furthermore, Smith believes that the organisation should become a "learning laboratory" so that over time learning as part of the continuous improvement process simply becomes a way of business and embedded within the culture. Eskerod (2010) quotes Bennet and Bennet:
> "with learning comes knowledge and with knowledge comes action and with action comes change."

Smith (2001) undertook a study where Action Learning had been implemented. Using the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC) as a case study in 1990, the bank was a traditional bank with hierarchical structures and heavily rule based driven. However it

had a goal to improve customer relationships by creating a culture of self directed leaders, by not forcing individuals to learn but by creating an environment where individuals wanted to learn. The bank was able to successfully reinvented itself by pursuing a learning organisation based on the Action Learning and Reflection concepts presented by Smith in his article.

The case study organisation would benefit from establishing a Learning Organisation as a way of showing support for the development of project managers through Action Learning and Reflective Practice. The organisation must ensure it creates the "Ba" – a safe and dynamic environment of people, a project team community, interacting and learning from each other to share learnings and create knowledge (Nonaka et al, 2000).

Conclusion
In conclusion, this article has discussed the definition and importance of Reflective Practice and Action Learning to any organisation and has sought to demonstrate these programs as effective tools that could be used by the case study organisation in its pursuit to improve its project performance through the development of leadership and project management capabilities. The article used other case studies as examples to show how these programs have been implemented and how they have been successful. On the flip side it has also discussed the barriers that exist which could risk the successful implementation of Reflective Practice and Action Learning within the case study organisation.

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