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Reflective Leadership

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"The salvation of the world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human modesty, and in human responsibility."

--Vaclav Havel, Art of the Impossible

The Reflective Leadership Center at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs over the last 20 years has designed its seminars and workshops around the idea that people engaged in or aspiring to leadership will benefit from structured opportunities for reflection. Our programs – whether aimed at midcareer professionals, 20-something graduate students, or undergraduates from around the world -- combine opportunities to reflect on connections among:

- Personal experience
- Leadership frameworks, theories, and tools
- Public issues
- The common good

In our programs, reflection is tied strongly to action (in the tradition of Donald Schön's "reflective practitioner"). That is, we view participants as novice or experienced practitioners who seek new knowledge and opportunities to experiment with and reconstruct that knowledge so it is useful in their leadership practice. The aim of reflective exercises and assignments is to help participants plan and prepare for wise, effective action in diverse organizational and interorganizational settings. Our understanding is that individual and group reflection are vital to linking theory and practice and improving both.

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This paper will describe more fully the roots of the reflective leadership approach and explain how reflection is woven into the Reflective Leadership Center's seminars and workshops. The paper also will link reflective leadership to constructivist and transformational views of adult education and explore reflection's role in creating learning organizations and communities. Finally, the paper will consider several tension points in reflective leadership and suggest responses to those tension points.

Roots of Reflective Leadership

When Harlan Cleveland founded the Reflective Leadership Center 20 years ago, his aim was "to take busy people and slow them down." He wanted to bring them to the Humphrey Institute to reflect, to turn their attention back to their experiences and concerns, in light of new ideas from distinguished speakers and of the diverse views of co-participants. He hoped that they then would look to the future with a renewed sense of what should and could be done about complex public issues.

Harlan Cleveland was then, as now, a paradoxical thinker. In a world where everything seemed to be rapidly speeding up, he understood the need to slow people down to re-think what they were up to and why, to grasp the big picture even as details and demands for action were piling up faster and faster. He talked about a shared-power, no-one-in-charge world where leadership as it traditionally had been understood was increasingly outmoded, yet where the need for leadership was greater than ever (Cleveland, 1972). He inspired those of us at the Reflective Leadership Center to re-think leadership itself.

We sorted through the work of other leadership scholars, identified major schools of leadership thought, and put together a comprehensive leadership framework that drew from all the schools yet offered a new, systematic approach to contemporary leadership challenges. The framework (elaborated in *Authentic Leadership* by Robert Terry [1993] and in *Leadership for the Common Good* by John Bryson and myself [1992]) has been tested and refined over the years in the courses, seminars, and workshops of the Reflective Leadership Center.

Partly because so many of the participants in our programs were midcareer professionals and because we were not just interested in talking about leadership but also in promoting wise and effective leadership actions, we were attracted to Donald Schön's notion of the "reflective practitioner." We believed that leaders in chaotic, shared-power worlds, needed to be reflective practitioners – that is people who were able to improvise and innovate in "messy, indeterminate situations" (Schön, 1987, p. 4).

Schön argued that those who would educate reflective practitioners would initiate them into the "traditions of the calling" and coach them in paying attention to important aspects of problems, framing problems, experimenting, and reflecting on outcomes in order to improve future practice. He saw such education as training in "professional artistry." Fundamental to professional artistry, he noted, is design: as designers, practitioners "juggle variables, reconcile conflicting values, and maneuver around constraints" to make indeterminate situations determinate (p. 41). Their attention oscillates between whole and part, global and local (p. 56).

To promote reflective practice, students and teachers also should be able to view a problem from other people's perspectives. (Schön noted that such cognitive risk-taking requires a strong sense of self.)

Use of Reflection in Seminars and Workshops

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When participants begin a seminar or workshop offered by the Reflective Leadership Center, the instructors view them as already in the stream of leadership practice as either novices or veterans. To acquaint them with the traditions of the "leadership calling" (what Harlan Cleveland has labeled the "get-it-all-together profession"), we introduce them to important schools of thought about leadership and we ask them to surface their own leadership views and connect them to the schools. We also ask participants to do some exercises (from Anderson, Bryson, and Crosby, 1999) that help them develop a stronger understanding of themselves as leaders.

Sample exercises. Two exercises have proved very effective, and we usually include them early in the seminar or workshop. In the first exercise, called "Exploring Personal Highs and Lows," participants look back at their involvement in leadership efforts as well as at events in their personal lives. Each person individually maps his or her successes and failures, highs and lows along a time line and then teases out themes or patterns that emerge from considering the highs as a group and the lows as a group. In the final step, participants meet in dyads to share results and give each other advice for the future. The second exercise is called "Discovering Cares and Concerns" and prompts learners to identify what they truly care about in their family, occupational, and community lives. Learners also are asked to note the main concerns they have about their families, work, and community lives. Then, they are asked how their cares and concerns summon them to leadership.

A third exercise, "Analyzing Social Group Membership," enables participants to view themselves as part of key social groups, based on their gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability. They are asked how their membership in these groups both strengthens and limits their leadership. They are prompted to identify causes of negative stereotypes about groups other than their own and list strategies for understanding and connecting with people other than themselves. This exercise is often illuminating and sometimes unsettling for people, especially as they talk about their responses as a group. Perhaps a man realizes for the first time that his gender makes his leadership more difficult in some situations, or someone from a minority ethnic group reveals the leadership strengths rooted in her ethnicity. This exercise helps participants not only to develop a stronger sense of themselves as socially situated beings, but also exercises the ability of seeing through others' eyes, an essential problem-solving skill of the reflective practitioner.

Problem focus. In keeping with Donald Schön's guidance, we think that education for reflective leadership should include chances for learners to grapple with problems that they are likely to encounter. In our seminars, we ask everyone to develop a leadership case: "a situation or public problem in which you are currently involved or interested and which calls for inspiring and mobilizing others to pursue the common good" (Anderson, Bryson, and Crosby, 1999). Learners use their cases to experiment with the concepts, tools, and methods presented in the seminar. (Two examples are available at <http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/rlc/lcgtutor/lcgc.htm>. One focuses on leadership challenges facing a middle manager as she tries to help a local court system handle increased demands for services despite inadequate funding and technology systems. The second focuses on efforts to remedy teenage homelessness in Minnesota.)

In semester-long seminars, learners also have the opportunity to develop full-fledged leadership analyses of these cases and action plans as part of assigned research papers.

Other prompts for reflection. Course participants are often asked to do reflective writing about their learning from class sessions. One technique is a learning journal, consisting of participants' responses to a set of reflection questions after each session. The questions are:

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- What connections can you make between this week’s presentations, dialogue, or readings and the situations, ideas, and dilemmas you are encountering or have encountered?
- What insights do these connections offer?
- What changes, if any, are occurring in your feelings about leadership and its connection to your life?

Group reflection. Our courses and workshops usually include presentations or mini-lectures, but these incorporate opportunities for participants to ask questions that help them better understand how the information presented can be applied to issues or problems that interest them. Most presentations are followed by structured small group conversations or exercises that allow learners to reflect together on presenters’ ideas. These conversations also help learners see issues and problems from a variety of perspectives and consider tools and methods other than those they might habitually use for dealing with the issues or problems.

Often at the beginning of a class session, we ask participants to reflect on learning from the previous class session. We encourage them to describe how they have applied a concept or tool presented in the class or to explain what is still puzzling them about what they heard in the previous class.

Learning community. As participants share the results of exercises like those described above and as they participate in small group conversations, a learning community, or community of practice, develops. Also contributing to the development of community are informal social gatherings and the formation of study groups. Because participants have many opportunities to learn about each others’ experiences, perspectives, expertise, and aspirations, they begin to view each other as valuable resources and colleagues in leadership practice. They frequently bring additional resources to the class that they have found to be useful in dealing with leadership challenges.

Outcomes. Participants’ evaluations of our reflective leadership seminars and workshops indicate that these methods are successful in helping learners understand leadership theories and tools, develop useful strategies for their own leadership work, claim their own leadership potential, and build learning communities. (See Table 1 for evaluation data from six offerings of our flagship seminar Leadership for the Common Good.) Participants express appreciation for the opportunity to acquire a larger view, or systems understanding. They say that they had been able to see pieces of the system, but not how everything was connected, before participating in our programs. Recently we asked alumni of our programs to tell stories describing the long-term impacts of the programs. These stories (published in Reflective Leadership Center, 2001) revealed two main themes:

- Participants gained from the programs a heightened sense of their leadership potential and responsibility.
- They developed the courage to undertake new initiatives, ranging from an anti-racism campaign to a women’s leadership program.

Connection with Constructivism and Transformational Learning

Reflective leadership education resonates with a constructivist view of education. In this view, people are not passive recipients of information. Rather they construct personal understandings of a problem situation based on new information, their existing schemas or world

Table 1: Evaluation Results from Leadership for the Common Good Seminars 1996-2000

Participants were asked to rate each goal on a 7-point scale anchored by “strongly disagree” (1) “strongly agree” (7).

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Seminar Goal	Winter/Spring Quarters 1996	Winter Quarter 1997*	Winter/Spring Quarters 1998	Winter Quarter 1999 *	Fall Semester 1999**	Spring Semester 2000
The seminar has helped me understand theories, tools and strategies of leadership.	Mean = 6.2 N = 27/33	Mean = 5.97 N=31	Mean = 6.1 N = 17/19	Mean = 6.1 N = 27	Mean = 6.43 N = 23	Mean = 6.6 N = 15
The seminar is helping me understand how to develop my own leadership and that of others.	Mean = 6.0 N = 26/32	Mean = 5.84 N = 31	Mean = 6.1 N = 18/19	Mean = 5.9 N=26	Mean = 6.39 N = 23	Mean = 6.8 N = 15
The seminar constitutes a learning community.	Mean = 6.4 N = 27/32	Mean: 5.90 N=31	Mean = 6.5 N = 17/19	Mean = 6.2 N=26	Mean = 6.35 N = 23	Mean = 6.67 N = 15
The seminar is helping me develop strategies for my own leadership work.	Mean = 6.1 N = 27/32	Mean = 5.94 N=31	Mean = 6.2 N = 17/19	Mean = 6.2 N = 27	Mean = 6.25 N = 24	Mean = 6.67 N = 15

- Evaluations for spring quarter are unavailable.
- The University of Minnesota changed from a quarter to a semester system in fall 1999.

views, and experimentation. (See [http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/constructivism.html/.](http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/constructivism.html/))

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Reflective leadership education also fits with transformational views of education as developed by Jack Mezirow (Mezirow and Associates, 1990) and Robert Boyd (Boyd and Gordon, 1988). Education that is transformational helps learners become aware of and critically assess their own assumptions, schemas and worldviews, and revise their assumptions and views to improve the quality of future action. What Mezirow calls “critical reflection” is essential for the transformational process. “We become critically reflective by challenging the established definition of a problem being addressed, perhaps by finding a new metaphor that reorients problem-solving efforts in a more effective way.

. . . By far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection – reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting (Mezirow, 1990, 12-13).”

“Linking Problem Frames and Stakeholders,” another exercise we use in reflective leadership seminars and workshops, may be especially helpful in helping participants reassess the way that they have posed problems. We include it as a tool for enhancing visionary leadership, which we define as creating and communicating shared meaning in formal and informal forums. The first part of the exercise prompts participants to first describe the way the problem in their leadership cases is most commonly defined or framed. Then they consider proposed policy changes that flow from this framing and categorize stakeholders as weak opponents, strong opponents, weak supporters, or strong supporters of these changes. In the second part of the exercise, participants are urged to consider alternative ways of framing the problem and how stakeholders would react to policy changes based on those framings. Finally, participants are encouraged to develop complex frames that will optimize the numbers of strong supporters and minimize the numbers of strong opponents.

Tension Points

Along with the benefits of reflective leadership education come some inherent tension points. There is the difficulty of finding time to reflect carefully in an increasingly fast-paced, interconnected global society. Reflective education also may seem too unusual for learners who are used to receiving large doses of information in lecture format. Instructors, meanwhile, may have difficulty knowing how to be good coaches rather than, or in addition to, being presenters. Additionally, a lot of personal risk is involved in critical reflection.

Time constraints. Ironically, in a world linked by high-speed telecommunications technology, the need to lead reflectively is more important than ever, since actions can have such widespread immediate impact. Yet nearly all the participants in Reflective Leadership courses or workshops seem themselves to have more and more demands that erode their time for reading, journaling, or participating in dialogue with their colleagues. If they are midcareer professionals, they are juggling the demands of caring for children and aging parents with high-pressure jobs; if they are undergraduates, they are stressed by the need to work to pay for their education while keeping up with coursework and extracurricular activities. Some of this pressure can be relieved by personal time management strategies – for example, focusing on what’s truly important and pruning away the less important. The very technology that is contributing to a more hectic world may also bring antidotes. For example, learners may be able to do their research more quickly by logging on to the Internet, or they can engage in dialogue via email or chatrooms. Leadership courses also could provide guidance about working smarter in the fast-paced interconnected world. Again, we might assist participants with using new technologies to diminish time pressures – for example, by using video conferencing to cut down on travel time. We may need to help participants become more comfortable with never really finishing a project or a product, and always being prepared to move to the next, more pressing or more promising project as conditions shift (Kull, 1999).

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Nontraditional format. Sometimes, participants in Reflective Leadership programs complain that the instructors simply are not presenting enough information and academic theory in the classroom. Our response is to emphasize the importance of relating information and theory to practice. We know that if participants are to be able to apply research findings and theory to actual leadership challenges in class, we must allocate some time to group exercises and discussion. (Of course, the instructors can sprinkle research findings and theory into the discussion or debriefing of group exercises. Additionally, we are very willing to meet individually with learners to link them with research and theory that is most applicable to their specific leadership work.) We also can point to newer theories of adult education (see Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, and Mezirow and Associates, 1990) indicating that adults learn best when they are able to link classroom instruction to their own experience and apply this instruction to developmental tasks and professional issues or problems. These theories cast passive learning (where learners are passive recipients of instructor-presented knowledge) as an oxymoron.

Instructors may also need special training to become learning coaches rather than mere presenters. We may need to practice being comfortable with drawing out the needs and concerns of learners in relation to a particular topic and then building our presentations around those needs and concerns. We have to be comfortable improvising and willing to ask more open-ended questions rather than the leading question to which we are seeking the right answers (that we already know). A participant in a reflective leadership seminar commented on what she experienced when the instructor acted as a learning coach. “[The instructor] always draws us out – facilitates discussion with a great deal of faith that adults carry vast knowledge, which when drawn out in dialogue will lead to the elevation of everyone’s critical thinking.”

Risk management. Merely surfacing, much less viewing critically, one’s deeply held assumptions can be unsettling. Personal worldviews, in effect, are anchors, providing stability in a chaotic world. Questioning assumptions can threaten worldviews to the point that a learner may feel unmoored and vulnerable. In Reflective Leadership seminars and workshops, instructors strive to build an atmosphere of classroom security. We use nametags and exercises to be sure participants feel included. We honor each participant by giving everyone the floor (in turn), by inviting everyone to share some part of his or her history with the class, by modeling respectful questioning and responding. We typically employ a norming exercise that prompts participants to develop a shared list of the informal rules that should govern the class. Invariably the list will include several versions of “respect differing views” and “appreciate differences.” We use mild-mannered humor to sustain a playful atmosphere in which no one, including the professors, are taken too seriously.

Providing a safe atmosphere may be even more crucial in an undergraduate classroom, where the “power gap” between participants and instructors can loom large. Undergraduates are more likely than older learners to worry about meeting the instructors’ expectations in a way that will result in a good grade. In my undergraduate course this fall, I asked students to help develop a list of criteria for grading their written assignments, so that they would have more control over the grading process. Interestingly, among the criteria that the students listed were risk-taking and deep thinking.

Summary and Conclusions

Reflective leadership education at the Humphrey Institute is rooted in the recognition that the practitioners of leadership will be better leaders if they have opportunities to take a step away from their practice and examine it in light of findings from leadership and policy research. The seminars and workshops offered by the Reflective Leadership Center acquaint participants with the traditions of leadership theory and practice, help participants develop a stronger sense of

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themselves as leaders, and give them new problem-solving tools, such as adopting multiple perspectives. The programs are problem-focused and give participants many opportunities to apply concepts and techniques to their own and others' leadership challenges. In courses that meet for an extended period, a learning community develops.

Further study is warranted into the ways that other leadership educators use reflection in their programs. Additionally, although participants give our reflective leadership programs high ratings, they still have many pointed suggestions for improvement. A challenge, certainly, for teachers of reflective leadership is how best to guide reflection and how to achieve the best balance between presentation of academic research and opportunities for application to specific cases.

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