

# Reflective leadership review: a framework for improving organisational performance

Reflective  
leadership  
review

217

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to describe, examine and discuss scholarly literature on reflective leadership, a topic gaining momentum as a result of globalization. Despite the growing popularity of reflective leadership techniques, current and aspiring leaders are struggling to find ways in which to effectively practice reflection as a consequence of a lack of tangible available guidance.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Scholarly literature on reflective leadership was examined and presented in this paper. Discussion on the potential efficacy of reflective leadership is also included as the available literature on the topic is scarce in comparison to other more established leadership techniques.

**Findings** – Reflective leadership has been shown to improve organizational performance. The advent of globalization further intensifies the need for an effective approach leaders may deploy when assessing the long-term consequences of their actions and decisions. Therefore, methods to extend the theory and effective practice of reflective leadership are necessary to enable the future development of leaders.

**Practical implications** – This paper provides leaders with strategies for improving their leadership effectiveness. Practical techniques for utilizing reflective leadership are offered.

**Originality/value** – This paper describes the challenges faced by leaders when adopting reflective leadership as a way to improve organizational performance. A universal framework is presented for the effective practice of reflective leadership. This framework provides a basis for future research to test the efficacy of the model.

**Keywords** Motivation, Globalization, Leadership, Leadership development, Organizational performance, Reflective leadership

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Globalization has caused organizations to look for ways to compete more effectively on a worldwide scale. Outdated business models, archaic leadership practices and traditional thinking will not propel growth in an ever-changing and highly perplexing transnational marketplace. According to Waddock and McIntosh (2009), “Too much action in today’s fast-paced globalized economy is action without thinking, with a ready-aim-fire kind of mentality” (p. 312). Leaders have become overwhelmed by the increased demands of globalization and are struggling because “business as usual” is no longer effective. Thus, a principled and thoughtful approach to making meaningful change is needed so that leaders can think about the long-term consequences of their actions and decisions.

Reflective leadership offers a viable solution and is gaining momentum as organizations strive to better understand the cultures and values of the people and the markets they serve. Reflective leadership is the consistent practice of reflection, which involves conscious awareness of behaviours, situations and consequences with the goal of improving organizational performance. Reflective practice helps leaders make sense of uncertain, unique or conflicted situations (De Dea Roglio and Light, 2009). Reflection also promotes



clarity with respect to one's values, identity, emotions, motives and goals (Gardner *et al.*, 2005) and leads to improved thinking, information collection, goal setting and visualization of success with enhanced leadership behaviour and results (McDaniel and DiBella-McCarthy, 2012). By visualizing varying outcomes, new insights can be revealed. Thus, the act of reflection makes possible the determination of an organization's best course of action before the execution of a potentially flawed plan.

This paper delves into the history of reflective leadership, providing insights into its core ideas and development over time. The theory and characteristics of reflective leadership are described, as are the hurdles and potential benefits of its implementation. As a result of reviewing the current literature available, this paper identifies six components which constitute reflective leadership. Each of these components is outlined, offering supportive literature from many of the proponents of reflective leadership. And finally, a framework for the practical implementation of reflective leadership is presented with the goal of assisting leaders in practicing reflection in order to improve organizational performance.

### **The underpinnings of reflective practice**

Jack Mezirow (1978) introduced the concept of transformative learning to the field of adult education in 1978 and viewed it as an approach to teaching based on promoting change. Reflective learning, critical reflective learning and transformative learning are often used interchangeably, and all imply change. There are many foundational theories that influenced and shaped transformative learning. Most notable of these include elements from adult learning theory, experiential learning, psychology and the social sciences. Knowledge of these theories provides the context for understanding reflective leadership.

In the leadership realm, change management and transformational leadership theories relate most closely to reflective learning. Change management involves undertaking large cultural shifts required at the organizational level whereas transformational leadership refers to the relationships established between the leader and followers. Both leadership theories rely heavily on employee commitment, communicating a strong vision for change and building supportive relationships with followers (Herold *et al.*, 2008). Other related leadership theories include authentic leadership, servant leadership and emotional intelligence. These theories parallel reflective leadership as they rely heavily on self-awareness, mindfulness, wisdom and good judgement, and can be viewed as more intrinsic or intuitive leadership characteristics.

Reflective leaders understand, value and trust their internal thought processes. However, too often the focus of leadership is on external characteristics such as knowledge, experience and intelligence without any regard to the internal processes that are equally vital for success. Focusing on external characteristics of leaders provides only a partial view of leadership and limits the development of reflective leaders who are needed to build cultures that expand human potential. Looman (2003) argues that leaders must challenge the status quo and become reflective by seeking universal truths and listening to their inner, intuitive voice. Further, she believes there are significant changes in the environment that call for a more reflective style of leadership that will "integrate human potential rather than splinter it" (p. 216). Internal characteristics such as critical thinking, long-term planning and finding innovative ways to solve problems with an equal focus on people and profit is the basis for reflective leadership. This is important since it implies that a holistic view of leadership (vs the traditional compartmentalized view of leadership) is required.

Reflective leadership requires the conscious activity of purposeful reflection. As an internal thought process, regular and focused practice is necessary. Reflective practice includes self-awareness, mindfulness and personal wisdom.

### *Self-awareness*

Self-awareness is central to reflective leadership and involves actively focusing on some aspect of the self instead of the external environment. By focusing on our own behaviours through candid self-evaluation, we can more accurately assess our strengths and weaknesses. As a result, attempts to make positive improvements and meaningful change can occur.

Self-awareness has been shown to increase leadership effectiveness (Gatling *et al.*, 2013; Showry and Manasa, 2014; Taylor *et al.*, 2012; Tekleab *et al.*, 2008), and is also a necessary attribute for authentic leadership (Gardner *et al.*, 2005), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and emotional intelligence (Salovey and Mayer, 1997). According to Gatling *et al.*, ways to increase self-awareness include: first, understanding psychological strengths and emotional triggers; second, recognizing how dark side personality traits (such as gregariousness, need for approval, tendency to be judgemental, need for perfection and control) adversely affect relationships; third, knowing how family-of-origin, race, class, religion and gender issues shape attitudes; and fourth, identifying feelings and emotions (e.g. frustration, vulnerability, elation) and the role these play in both easy and difficult interactions. Being mindful or conscious of one's thoughts or feelings is necessary for reflection. Waddock (2007), states that "mindfulness is based on self-awareness and full presence of the sort that includes not just the mind, but also the emotions, creativity, soulfulness and spirit" (p. 554).

### *Mindfulness*

Mindfulness is a state of awareness or the conscious practice that promotes awareness and has been shown to increase leader effectiveness (Apple, 2015; Atkinson and Duncan, 2013; Kearney *et al.*, 2013). According to George (2012):

The practice of mindful leadership gives you tools to measure and manage your life as you're living it. It teaches you to pay attention to the present moment, recognizing your feelings and emotions and keeping them under control, especially when faced with highly stressful situations. When you are mindful, you're aware of your presence and the ways you impact other people. You're able to both observe and participate in each moment, while recognizing the implications of your actions for the longer term. And that prevents you from slipping into a life that pulls you away from your values (para. 7).

This is reinforced by Dunoon and Langer (2011) who state that practicing mindfulness causes alertness to multiple perspectives, active self-reappraisal and attentiveness to our use of language. When the mind can rest and is free from judgements, insights and new ways of thinking are seen as a beneficial outcome (Hill and Castonguay, 2007). In this state, new approaches and solutions to existing problems can be created and acted upon. As dynamic insights are revealed, change occurs quickly – often in real time. Further, scientific research from Boyatzis (2014) and Siegel (2007, 2009) has proposed a neurological basis for the connection between mindfulness and insight. Other empirically supported benefits of mindfulness include effective emotion regulation strategies, improved intrapersonal well-being and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of empathy (Davis and Hayes, 2011).

*Personal wisdom*

Reflection and mindfulness are often associated with good judgement and wisdom. Balliett and Kelloway (2011) found strengthened relationships between leader wisdom and employee affective commitment and trust. According to Ardel (2004), personal wisdom is comprised of three components: advanced cognitive, reflective and affective personality attributes. The cognitive component involves superior knowledge, understanding and acceptance of life and human nature. The reflective component refers to abilities for self-insight and self-examination and the capacity to perceive events from multiple perspectives. The affective component captures an individual's consideration and empathy for others.

Since personal wisdom has positively predicted life satisfaction, physical health, quality of family relationship, psychological well-being and forgiveness of self, others and situations (Ardelt, 2011), this concept is of great significance. Ackoff (1999) states that wisdom is the capacity to think through the consequences of decisions; reflection causes the activity of thought to occur. Reflection and wisdom therefore occur simultaneously. Zacher *et al.* (2014) found that leaders' personal wisdom was positively related to individualized consideration (e.g. caring, nurturing and supportive behaviours). Whittington *et al.* (2005) presents logic for a causal model of spiritual leadership that represents evidence of legacy leadership in terms of the changed lives of followers. In other words, the legacy of the leader's influence is perpetuated through the followers' incorporation of legacy principles into their lives as they become leaders. Loehr and Schwartz (2001) and Tredget (2010) state that a spiritual orientation that incorporates important life values with reflection is necessary for performance in today's world. Furthermore, empirical research has found that post-conventional thinking, often referred to as wisdom, is enhanced by contemplative or reflective practices (Adler, 2010; Nidich *et al.*, 2000, cited in Waddock, 2007).

The outcomes of the shift to reflective leadership practices are:

- motivated workforce;
- renewed interest and effort; and
- improved performance.

These outcomes surfaced from the literature review and are cited later in the paper.

**Design/methodology/approach**

The purpose of this paper was to identify the common elements that underpin the broad body of work that may be characterized as reflective leadership. Since reflective leadership was derived from education, specifically transformative learning theory, literature from a wide variety of fields were used in conducting this research. These fields include adult learning, experiential learning, psychology and the social sciences as well as leadership and management theories. Second, this paper aimed to uncover any lack of pertinent information on the effective utilization of reflective leadership as its importance as a tool for effective leadership has seemingly been downplayed and oftentimes ignored in the realm of leadership and management. Therefore, the approach to this research was to rely on multiple sources of evidence in a variety of domains.

Since reflection is central to this paper, Smyth's (2012) critical reflection practices (CRP) method, written primarily for teachers, is quite appropriate for this review.

Smyth's methodology process outlines four sequential stages that were adapted for the method used for this study:

- (1) Describing – what does the literature say?
- (2) Informing – what does it mean?
- (3) Confronting – what did it uncover?
- (4) Reconstructing – how can this be seen differently?

Similar to case study descriptive approach and the ethnographic approach, CRP seeks to contextualize the problem in broader circumstances. CRP also looks for patterns that describe relationships, understandings and meanings, and tries to make sense of a phenomena within multiple areas like ethnography. By combining similar yet multiple approaches, valuable insights can emerge from the process (Parthasarathy, 2008).

The basic question of this review was: what are the common elements that characterize reflective leadership? To answer that question, the following approach was taken:

- a search of the literature was conducted using the words “reflective leadership”;
- articles were selected when research studies were employed;
- patterns in the research emerged and themes were sorted accordingly;
- if the theme contained a minimum of 15 substantiated findings, it was then concluded that it is a common element of reflective leadership; and
- each component was provided a descriptor phrase that accurately defined the construct.

A critical examination of the research included over 100 studies across several disciplines (leadership and management, organizational development, organizational behaviour, education, sociology, psychology and neurology). Electronic databases included Business Source Complete+, Proquest Business Collection, Emerald Management Xtra and TechCat+.

The following section identifies the common components that emerged as a result of the literature review on reflective leadership.

### **Findings from the literature review**

Each sub-section of this segment identifies one component from the literature. For the sake of presentation in this paper, the literature review identified the components ethnographically and has been split into sections post-literature review.

#### *Creates a safe environment that promotes trust*

According to Sarros *et al.* (2014), the ability to motivate others is one of the key skills required by leaders. This is accomplished by the leader's ability to create an open atmosphere that promotes trust, provide direction in a non-threatening manner and build relationships where opposing views are valued. This is supported by Kudonoo *et al.* (2012) whose research showed that conflict can be healthy and necessary in a culture that values opposing views. Schwartz and Castelli's (2014) research found that followers will produce more effort if they perceive their leader as a positive role model whose actions demonstrate integrity. This aligns with Kraemer's (2011) principles of values-based leadership (self-reflection, balance, self-confidence and humility) and helps promote an

ethical workplace. Further, Hsieh and Wang (2015) found that employee trust fully mediates authentic leadership and employee engagement and is heightened through a leader's transparent communications (Men and Stacks, 2014). Conversely, when a leader violates trust, it is rarely restored, causing followers to withdraw from the relationship (Chughtai *et al.*, 2015; Grover *et al.*, 2014; Klaussner, 2012).

According to Savolainen and Lopez-Fresno (2012) trust creates vitality, enables innovation, and promotes social order and cooperation in workplace relationships. Reflective leaders consciously create an environment of trust since they understand that followers rarely feel safe or secure in their positions without it. This corresponds to Maslow's (1943, 1954) theory of motivation which states that without feeling safe or secure (a basic or lower-level need), employees cannot advance to their higher-level needs: (belonging, esteem and self-actualization). Sidani (2007) states, "The role of leadership is to produce momentum, motivation, and enthusiasm for the organization's goals" (p. 719). He postulates that the leader's success in any given situation could simply be related to his or her ability to foster an impression of trustworthiness. This is supported by Sparrow's (2013) research whereby the leader's ability to build trust results in high-performance cultures characterized by motivated and engaged employees. When a leader is candid with his or her life experiences, credibility is increased. Sharing experiences and admitting mistakes shows the human side of leaders. Followers respond most favourably to what they perceive to be honest and authentic dialogue that reflects the true feelings of the leader. This suggests that the key to creating a safe environment may be integrity and therefore we may conclude that a component of reflective leadership is a leader who:

- creates a safe environment that promotes trust.

#### *Values open communications*

Johansson *et al.* (2014) describe a communicative leader as someone who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision making, and is perceived as open and involved. The manner in which messages are communicated is vital in creating a culture of trust. An encouraging tone on the part of the leader is more likely to gain the attention and trust of followers than distant and impersonal exchanges. Followers admire leaders who practice transparency, engage in active listening and have an open door policy.

According to Sidani (2007), the act of trusting and admiring the organizational leader could also lead to trust in, and commitment to, the organization. Sarros *et al.* (2014) state that using empathic language allows leaders to show their affective side when communicating with followers to the extent that levels of trust and job satisfaction are the major focus of their attention. Therefore, they advise that leaders: first, encourage followers to achieve to the best of their abilities; second, show concern for followers' levels of job satisfaction; and third, promote the professional development of their followers. In contrast, leaders who express negative emotions (e.g. disapproval, anger, disappointment) may cause followers to become resistant, resentful and demotivated (Blume *et al.*, 2013; Collins and Jackson, 2015; Riggio and Reichard, 2008).

While reflective leaders provide reinforcing and supportive behaviours, reflective leadership does not ignore or conceal poor performance. Though not concerned with winning followers' admiration, reflective leaders are generally associated with referent power (French and Raven, 1959). Viewed as double-loop learners, reflective leaders desire, invite and actively elicit constructive criticism to improve their performance (Argyris and

Schön, 1974). Followers can also deliver constructive criticism because it is important that their ideas be correctly understood as efforts to improve the organization rather than attempts to undermine the leader. Constructive criticisms initiate a positive feedback loop whereby leaders and followers may respond more openly because they do not feel personally criticized. On the other hand, passive corrective leadership can lead to uncivil interpersonal interactions (Lee and Jensen, 2014).

Cameron (2012) observed that employees perform better in a work climate of emotionally supportive communication. A leader who is empathetic is viewed as a credible communicator. Badea and Pană (2010) state that empathy is a prerequisite for both effective communication and for the optimization of the follower/leader relationship. Empathy is closely related to emotional intelligence skills and transformational leadership. Salovey and Mayer (1997) define emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive, access and regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Skinner and Spurgeon (2005) found that followers who perceive their managers as possessing a range of empathic traits may well be prepared to work beyond their normal expectations and put in extra effort. Given the strong emotional tie between leader and follower, they contend that Bass's (1985) transformational leadership behaviours (individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and idealized influence) are related to emotional expression and consideration. Further, the global economy has created new realities for businesses, and the need for understanding differing communication practices and cultural values is greater than ever. According to Aritz and Walker (2014), working in multicultural work groups is a new workplace reality that has created a greater need to understand how to lead these groups to maximize the quality and effectiveness of multicultural group work. With cultural security and a good mix of communication, different operational principles are accepted and, as a result, the majority of organizational members perform better (Duden, 2014). In light of these findings, we may conclude that a component of reflective leadership is a leader who:

- values open communications.

#### *Connects work to organization mission*

Lawrence (2008) states that effective international organizations must be given an appropriate mission, be given the means to accomplish its mission and be viewed as legitimate when carrying out the mission. It is important that the mission and vision be expressed in simple terms that enable everyone related to the organization to understand the challenges stated in it, and at the same time inspire the members to achieve them (Bogler and Nir, 2004). According to Carton *et al.* (2014), one key role of leaders involves communicating visions and values that help followers understand the ultimate purpose of their work. This is critical since failure to connect followers' work to the organization mission can leave the workforce demotivated and unsure of how their roles contribute to the organization's success.

Sullivan's (1988) concept of motivating language theory (MLT), later tested by Mayfield *et al.* (2015), asserts that three particular leader language dimensions (direction-giving, meaning-making and empathetic language) serve to better engage, motivate, build commitment and create a shared organizational vision with followers, thus improving firm-level performance and quality of work life. When a leader is providing direction, he or she is clarifying purpose so that employees understand the specifics of what needs to be done and what will be gained as a result of

excellent performance. For meaning-making, the leader emphasizes each employee's contribution/purpose with respect to organizational goals. The third component is empathetic language which occurs when a leader shows appreciation for a follower's efforts. The dimensions of MLT provide an ideal example of ways in which leaders can effectively connect followers' work to the organization's mission. Conversely, research suggests that the inability of a leader to set direction and vision for the organization may impede a collaborative workplace culture (Bogler and Nir, 2004; Lawrence, 2008; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005).

Encouraging behaviours from the leader such as praise for a job well done and other forms of recognition reinforces to followers that they are meeting goals and contributing to the betterment of the organization. This supports earlier research by Hackman and Oldham's (1975) job characteristics theory and Herzberg's (1964) two-factor theory which state that when followers view their work as relevant and purposeful to the organization, job satisfaction and motivation to perform increase. This aligns with Perryer and Jordan's (2005) research findings that an increase in supportive leader behaviours together with a decrease in extinction leader behaviours leads to a proportionate increase in levels of organizational commitment and therefore we may conclude that a component of reflective leadership is a leader who:

- connects work to organization mission.

#### *Builds self-esteem and confidence*

The leader's role in raising the self-esteem and confidence levels of followers is an important aspect of reflective leadership. McDaniel and DiBella-McCarthy (2012) state that self-efficacy is the result of social cognition and is modifiable. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to succeed in obtaining a goal and is responsive to learning and experience. It is modifiable, they argue, since the leader can influence a follower's motivation to perform. Therefore, the leader who serves as coach and mentor by providing positive reinforcement and displaying supportive behaviours helps build followers' self-esteem and confidence (Castelli, 2008). Supportive behaviours include trustworthiness, providing direction and feedback, and recognizing and rewarding follower contributions. Inversely, excessive coaching on the part of the leader may not only be a waste of time and energy, but may even harm follower efficiency (Buljac-Samardzic and van Woerkom, 2015). Therefore, leaders would be wise to adjust their coaching strategies based on awareness of individual and team needs.

There is much evidence indicating that attempts to build self-esteem, self-worth or feelings of competence motivate people to take action (Castelli, 2008; Collins and Amabile, 1999; House and Shamir, 1993; Redmond *et al.*, 1993; Schyns and Wolfram, 2008; Schoel *et al.*, 2011). Castelli's (2008) research investigated the relationship between achievement motive and motivating strategies. Findings indicate that regardless of achievement motive (low- or high-need achievers), both groups desire a leader who builds their self-esteem. Further, effort may decline if the leader fails to establish trust or undermines the capabilities of the followers' worth. These findings align with the principles of individualized leadership (Dansereau *et al.*, 1998; Mumford *et al.*, 2000) wherein building the self-worth of the follower is paramount. This increased quality of the relationship has a positive influence on trust in leadership (Ceasar and Zivnuska, 2008) and can lead to stronger bonds between followers and their leaders.

Conversely, research by de Cerner *et al.* (2005) and Schoel *et al.* (2011), suggests that leaders who do not adopt a style of rewarding behaviour for a job well done may erode



the self-esteem of their followers. Other studies by Avey *et al.* (2011) and Hinrichs (2007) found that deviant behaviours are less prevalent when followers' self-esteem is high vs low. Therefore, it is important for leaders to find meaningful ways to raise the self-esteem and confidence of their followers, and we may conclude that a component of reflective leadership is a leader who:

- builds self-esteem and confidence.

### *Respects diverse cultures and customs*

According to Glover and Friedman (2014), transcultural competence involves more than recognizing and respecting cultural differences. It also involves reconciliation and realization, creating new ways for dealing with and resolving cultural dilemmas. Tröster and Van Knippenberg's (2012) study on multinational management teams showed that openness is a leadership behaviour that encourages minority employees' voice. Their research found that leaders who are open to the suggestions of minority members are more approachable and, hence, are more likely to receive new ideas on how to improve operations and to find genuinely novel solutions. Castelli *et al.* (2014), found that leaders who value and practice diversity showed increased performance metrics in the areas of sales and profits. Leaders who are sensitive and self-monitoring are better able to adapt to varying cultures, customs and values. However, leaders who fail to respect and accept other cultures can create a lack of collaboration amongst their work teams (Odrakiewicz and Zator-Peljan, 2012; Ramthun and Matkin, 2012).

According to years of supported research by McKinsey & Company from 2007 through 2014, practicing diversity management has a positive impact on key organizational performance indices such as increased talent pool and employee satisfaction, improved decision making, strengthened customer orientation, and enhanced company image (Green, 2010; McKinsey & Company, 2014). Lisak and Erez (2015) found that emergent leaders in multicultural teams scored higher than non-leaders in terms of the three global characteristics of cultural intelligence, global identity and openness to cultural diversity. Further research by Hunt *et al.* (2015) and Richard (2000) showed that companies with ethnically diverse workforces outperform companies that disregard ethnic diversity.

Mirvis and Ayas (2003) describe the power of reflective dialogue and its importance in raising group consciousness. The use of reflective dialogue (i.e. sharing experiences and lessons learned) promotes increased empathy, trust and bonding, and reduces barriers between diverse groups of people. In this forum, leaders and followers can feel comfortable enough to express themselves freely regarding the influence of differing cultural norms and values. As a result of becoming more reflective, individuals are better able to challenge culturally learned assumptions and feel more self-assured when trying out new behaviours. Thus, reflective practice promotes collaboration, commonality of purpose and a shared sense of community despite differences (Osterman, 1990). Therefore, we may surmise that a component of reflective leadership is a leader who:

- respects diverse cultures and customs.

### *Challenges beliefs and assumptions*

O'Brien (2012) states that the science of global change may itself need to change and suggests a need to become more reflective about assumptions and paradigms. She argues that change involves more than the objective, measurable indicators of success

that are typically associated with effective leadership. Change also includes subjective elements such as conscious and unconscious assumptions, beliefs, values, and emotions that can influence organizational outcomes, both positive and negative. Therefore, the need for reflective leadership is undeniable in the attainment of an organization's success.

According to Handin and Steinwedel (2006), leaders working with colleagues from other cultures or heading multicultural teams may find themselves stymied by their own apparent ineffectiveness and bewildered by the reactions of others. Since humans have a tendency to think that their values and beliefs are valid, it is crucial that the reflective leader be open enough to challenge his or her assumptions to make meaningful change. Critical self-analysis and reflective learning capability play a central role in the development of effective managers (Vilkinas and Cartan, 2006). Only by being willing to change his or her own thinking can the leader connect with other people who are operating with alternative paradigms, with different mental models, and with certain assumptions and beliefs about how the world works. When blind spots are not revealed in current thinking, the same patterns occur over and over again with the faulty expectation that different outcomes will result. For example, some leaders may not consider what motivates followers to perform; instead, they focus purely on performance outcomes without regard to followers' needs.

McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Theory Y shows two opposing views of assumptions leaders hold about followers. Theory X assumes that people inherently do not like to work and further, require constant monitoring. On the contrary, Theory Y assumes people enjoy work and consistently produce well because they are challenged by their work. The impression the leader has of others shapes behaviours and limits his or her perceptions of reality. Reflective practices help to dispel these assumptions by questioning and challenging them, thus allowing for new insights to emerge; this is what Argyris (1976) calls double-loop learning. Conversely, single-loop learners rarely challenge their own belief systems. They are far less likely to seek feedback that questions or confronts their fundamental ideas or actions (Hughes *et al.*, 2015). Challenging assumptions, as well as the beliefs that support them, can play a critical role in change processes and is necessary for reflective leadership. Further, according to Kim (2002) and O'Brien (2012), it allows for accurate framings of both problems and solutions and thus provides an important step for moving beyond business as usual. These findings produce a strong argument for the conclusion that a component of reflective leadership is a leader who:

- challenges beliefs and assumptions.

This section described and elaborated on the components of reflective leadership and the related implications. The following segment highlights the associated behaviours and practices for each component.

### **Reflective leadership behaviours and practices**

While it is beneficial to incorporate reflective leadership into any leader's toolkit, the fact remains that, as Waddock and McIntosh (2009) stated, "Too much action in today's fast-paced globalized economy is action without thinking, with a ready-aim-fire kind of mentality" (p. 312). Hence, it appears that guidelines for the effective practice of reflective leadership for today's complex and ever-changing organizations would be useful. The following summarizes each component and provides supporting literature for the corresponding leader behaviours/practices:

- (1) Creates a safe environment that promotes trust.

The leader's ability to create a safe environment that promotes trust is paramount to reflective leadership. Characteristics include:

- consistent behaviour;
- serves as a role model;
- relationship builder;
- values opposing views; and
- shows integrity.

Supporting literature includes: Argyris and Schön (1974), Balliett and Kelloway (2011), Cameron (2012), Castelli (2008, 2011, 2012), Castelli *et al.* (2014), Ceasar and Zivnaska (2008), Chughtai *et al.* (2015), Grover *et al.* (2014), Hsieh and Wang (2015), Johansson *et al.* (2014), Klaussner (2012), Kraemer (2011), Kudonoo *et al.* (2012), Men and Stacks (2014), Mirvis and Ayas (2003), Sarros *et al.* (2014), Savolainen and Lopez-Fresno (2012), Schwartz and Castelli (2014), Sidani (2007), Sparrow (2013) and Zacher *et al.* (2014):

(2) Values open communications.

The leader sets the tone for the organization by demonstrating his/her commitment to open communications. Practices include:

- open door policy;
- displays transparency;
- active listener/empathetic;
- welcomes constructive criticism; and
- credible communicator.

Supporting literature includes: Argyris and Schön (1974), Aritz and Walker (2014), Badea and Pană (2010), Bass (1985), Blume *et al.* (2013), Cameron (2012), Castelli (2011, 2012), Castelli *et al.* (2014), Collins and Jackson (2015), Davis and Hayes (2011), Duden (2014), Hsieh and Wang (2015), Johansson *et al.* (2014), Lee and Jensen (2014), Men and Stacks (2014), Mirvis and Ayas (2003), Riggio and Reichard (2008), Salovey and Mayer (1997), Sarros *et al.* (2014), Sidani (2007), Skinner and Spurgeon (2005) and Zacher *et al.* (2014):

(3) Connects work to organization mission.

Leaders have a responsibility to not only communicate the organization's mission but to ensure all followers understand how their work relates to achieving organizational goals. Effective leaders:

- describe the task impact on the mission;
- explain how tasks contribute to goals;
- relate work to company objectives;
- acknowledge contributions; and
- view work as purposeful.

Supporting literature includes: Bogler and Nir (2004), Carton *et al.* (2014), Castelli (2008, 2011, 2012), Castelli *et al.* (2014), Duden (2014), Hackman and

Oldham (1975), Herzberg (1964), Lawrence (2008), Leithwood and Jantzi (2005), Mayfield *et al.* (2015), McDaniel and DiBella-McCarthy (2012), Mirvis and Ayas (2003), Perryer and Jordan (2005), Savolainen and Lopez-Fresno (2012), Schwartz and Castelli (2014) and Sullivan (1988):

- (4) Builds self-esteem and confidence.

The leader's role in raising the self-esteem and confidence levels of followers is an important aspect of reflective leadership. Supportive leaders:

- are viewed as trustworthy;
- build supportive relationships;
- provide direction and feedback;
- serve as coach and mentor; and
- provide positive reinforcement.

Supporting literature includes: Avey *et al.* (2011), Badea and Pană (2010), Blume *et al.* (2013), Buljac-Samardzic and van Woerkom (2015), Castelli (2008), Ceasar and Zivnуска (2008), Collins and Amabile (1999), Collins and Jackson (2015), Dansereau *et al.* (1998), de Cerner *et al.* (2005), Hinrichs (2007), House and Shamir (1993), McDaniel and DiBella-McCarthy (2012), Mirvis and Ayas (2003), Mumford *et al.* (2000), Redmond *et al.* (1993), Riggio and Reichard (2008), Sarros *et al.* (2014), Schoel *et al.* (2011), Schwartz and Castelli (2014), Schyns and Wolfram (2008), Sidani (2007) and Zacher *et al.* (2014):

- (5) Respects diverse cultures and customs.

The leader sets the stage for how followers will treat others from different cultures with different customs. Therefore, it is critical that leaders embrace and practice diversity management. This is evidenced by a leader who:

- values diversity;
- respects varying customs/values;
- promotes inclusiveness;
- adapts to local policies and practices; and
- displays sensitive and self-monitoring behaviours.

Supporting literature includes: Aritz and Walker (2014), Badea and Pană (2010), Castelli *et al.* (2014), Duden (2014), Dunoon and Langer (2011), Folkes and Matta (2007), Gatling *et al.* (2013), Glover and Friedman (2014), Green Park (2010), Hunt *et al.* (2015), Lisak and Erez (2015), McKinsey & Company (2014), Mirvis and Ayas (2003), Odrakiewicz and Zator-Peljan (2012), Osterman (1990), Ramthun and Matkin (2012), Richard (2000), Sparrow (2013), Tröster and Van Knippenberg (2012) and Zacher *et al.* (2014):

- (6) Challenges beliefs and assumptions.

Leaders must challenge their own beliefs and assumptions and those of their followers. This is critical for the ever-changing organization globalization has created. Therefore, it is critical that the leader:

- questions assumptions;
- recognizes blind spots;

- is open to alternatives;
- shows willingness to change; and
- shares lessons learned.

Supporting literature includes: Argyris (1976), Argyris and Schön (1974), Aritz and Walker (2014), Balliett and Kelloway (2011), Castelli (2011, 2012), Castelli *et al.* (2014), Duden (2014), Dunoon and Langer (2011), Gatling *et al.* (2013), Handin and Steinwedel (2006), Hill and Castonguay (2007), Hughes *et al.* (2015), Johansson *et al.* (2014), Kim (2002), Kudonoo *et al.* (2012), McGregor (1960), Mirvis and Ayas (2003), O'Brien (2012), Savolainen and Lopez-Fresno (2012) and Vilkinas and Cartan (2006).

### The reflective leadership framework

Recurring themes in the literature, and particularly the empirical studies in the review, focused on three outcomes and corresponding results that occur with the effective use of reflective leadership.

The outcomes are:

- motivated workforce;
- renewed interest and effort; and
- improved performance.

The results are:

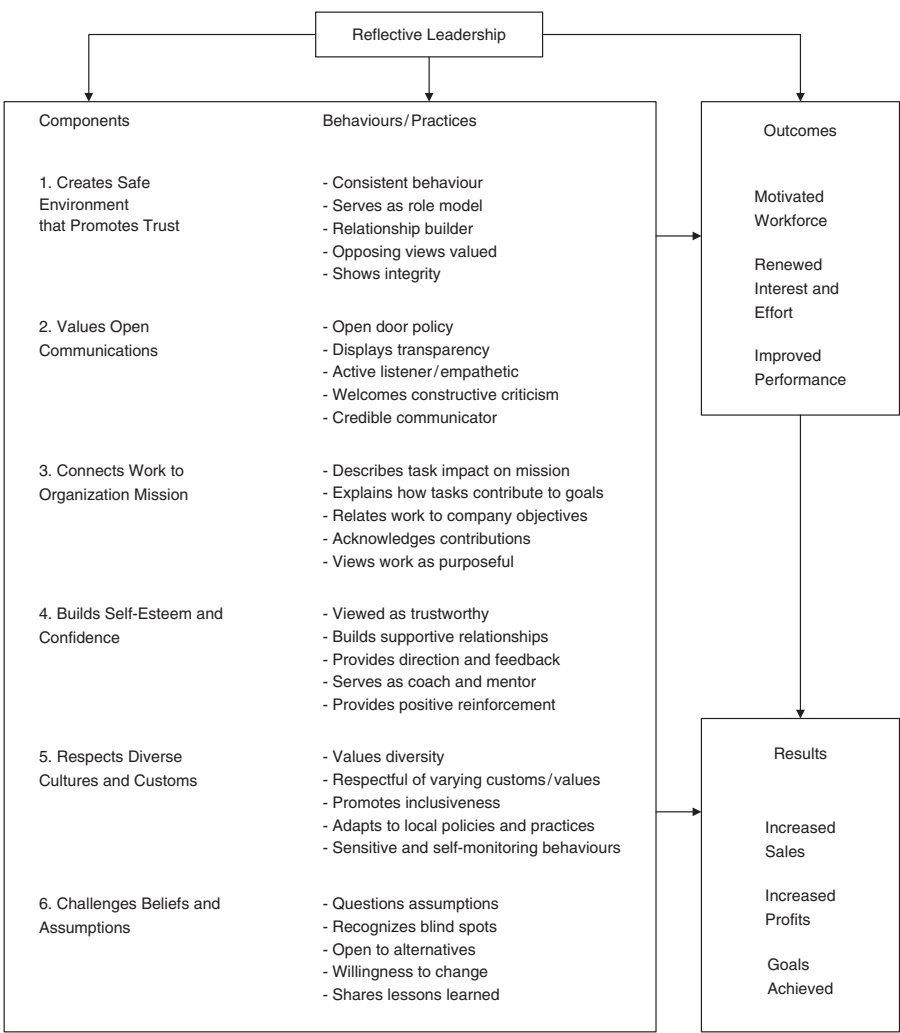
- increased sales;
- increased profits; and
- goals achieved.

As a consequence of this research, a framework emerged to assist leaders in the practical application of reflective leadership. Frameworks are useful as they provide an organized system for understanding theory in practice. Providing direction by creating a roadmap for concrete ways to improve performance is critical in any field. Proven theories need frameworks. For instance, transformational leadership is comprised of four components: individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and idealized influence (Bass, 1985). For each component (sometimes called skills, behaviours or characteristics), a framework outlines how to practice-related behaviours in order to become more effective.

Figure 1 provides a framework for practicing reflective leadership to improve organizational performance. This framework includes the six reflective leadership components, examples of leader behaviours and practices, and finally, the expected outcomes and results.

### Conclusions and future directions

Every leader's purpose is to ensure the success of their organization by motivating their workforce to achieve their goals. However, leaders can become overwhelmed with the demands of their jobs and may not know how to make meaningful change. A framework for reflective leadership provides an invaluable method for changing old behaviours and outdated practices that no longer allow for success in today's global environment. It is important to note that the practice of reflective leadership does not



**Figure 1.**  
Reflective leadership  
framework for  
improving  
organizational  
performance

replace the necessary skills and competencies required by effective leaders. However, if the leader does possess the needed technical expertise and knowledge in his/her field, reflective leadership can be of tremendous value for the optimization of organizational performance.

According to Osterman (1990), effective leadership requires an environment that values reflective practice and critical thought to enhance professional growth. An organization that encourages reflective practice creates a safe environment that promotes trust, values open communications, connects work to the organization mission, builds the confidence of the workforce, respects diverse cultures, and challenges beliefs and assumptions. This paper is significant in that it not only identifies the constructs associated with reflective leadership; it provides a viable framework for effectively practicing reflective leadership. Use of this framework can

serve as a beneficial developmental tool for leaders by closing the gap between actual and desired practices and behaviours necessary to flourish in a global economy. Further, it presents a starting point for future research to test the efficacy of the reflective leadership framework by validating the components and linkages within the framework. Therefore, additional research into its utility is needed.

The practice of reflection is a process that requires critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Reflection causes us to examine the ideas and assumptions that shape our behaviour which leads to greater self-awareness. Reflection increases understanding of obstacles and evokes critical thinking skills in order to arrive at meaningful solutions. By involving others in reflective practice, the leader is promoting a shared purpose that motivates and revitalizes the workforce, which is apt to result in renewed and improved performance. These outcomes allow leaders and followers to become more skilled, thus increasing organizational effectiveness. Increased sales, increased profits and achieving organizational goals benefit all stakeholders. Reflective leadership presents new, developing and established leaders with thoughtful and innovative ways to bring about positive change in order to thrive and succeed in a challenging and unpredictable new world.

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