

Editorial Section Journal of Reflective Practice

Why reflect? Recognising the link between learning and reflection

David Higgins
University of Huddersfield

A large amount of material has been written over the years on management development relating to the issues of learning, training, and education. This special issue moves beyond previous studies, by exploring rationales for a management development approach that focuses on the practices of reflective learning which are most effective for management development and education. The articles contained in this special issue have sought to explore the challenges and opportunities for expediting reflection, as a practice, in the development of managers, professionals and students within the business community. The term reflective practice conveys meanings that range from the questioning of presuppositions and assumptions, through to more explicit engagement in the process of critical and creative thinking in order to make connections between experience and learning in practice and practical action. The practices of reflection suggest a method of inquiry which is characterised by engagement, pondering alternatives, drawing inferences and taking diverse perspectives, especially in situations which are complex and novel, calling for situational awareness and understanding. The development of reflective practices for managerial development and learning programmes is underpinned by an ability and willingness to question and explore ways of acting and thinking as we engage in business activities. This process of reflecting for, in and on action, makes it possible to change our current understanding of action by framing the issue or encounter in a different or novel way, or by improvising on new ways to solve the issue at hand.

The term reflection could be considered as a representation of human consciousness. Reflection as process or act refers to the means by which the human mind has knowing of itself and its thinking. Such a process is deeply embedded in the continuous relationship between action and reflection. In this sense one can conceptualise reflection as the action of turning (back) or fixing the thoughts on some subject, in order to learn. In terms of management development and learning, as illustrated in all the articles presented in this special issue it is quite apparent that reflection is one of the most important building blocks and drivers of human learning.

The appeal of such thinking to the process of management development and learning is the linking of learning with action, which is in direct contrast to some traditional academic approaches where these are disconnected. This is a key theme in this special issue. The sense of closeness between problems, challenges and practicalities of business and education, against the opportunities which can be gained by learning in and through experience, has resulted in the current importance of experiential learning and reflective practices, particularly in management development and learning. The influence of these ideas is evidenced in the articles presented which illustrate situations where reflections, on differing educational and practical experiences, can be used to underpin attempts to improve practice.

The process of reflection is of critical importance in terms of management development as it allows one to critique taken-for-granted assumptions, in order to become more open to differing ways of inquiry, points of view opinions and behaviours. In this special issue, reflection is seen as much more than simply understanding. It involves the inclusion of a process into ones cognitive structures, relating these to other forms of experience and understanding. Management development and learning can be enhanced through the use of reflection by surfacing and critiquing tacit understanding or taken-for-granted mental structures. An important role of reflection then is that of

reviewing practice, taking time to step back and to ponder the meaning of what has happened, the impact of it and the direction one is taking.

The use of reflective practices in management development and learning is appealing as it raises the likelihood of learning being relevant, particularly in the day to day practice of business, therefore situated and meaningful to those who engage in it. The challenge, in my view, for readers of the special edition and the wider field of academia in general, is the assumption that learning based on the systematic, rigorous and public reflection on experience, represents a fundamental change in emphasis in thinking about how people learn in particular business situations.

The role of this special issue is to both explore, challenge and offer opportunities for advancing the process of reflective practices in managerial development and learning. The issue presents to the reader a number of articles which integrate reflective practices into their work as researchers and practitioners within organization based development programmes, as well as contributing to research development. The issue represents value to those who are contemplating the use of reflection within managerial development and learning processes as well as to those who may be seeking to make sense of their own experiences. Taken together the articles are a celebration of not only new research agendas but some strong forward thinking about the use of reflective practices in this particular field.