The role of reflective diaries in leadership development

While classroom-based courses and workshops afford valuable opportunities for leadership development, there is another source of learning which, if not entirely overlooked, is seldom used to maximum effect. This is the learning that can be derived from exploring one’s day-to-day practice as a leader and manager. It has been claimed that this represents the most important source of management learning and development (Mintzberg 2004): an assessment that chimes with a group of interviews I conducted (as part of a recent MBA) with university managers (Raven 2005). In these, references were made to practices informed and honed by knowledge gained from work-based experiences.

However, such learning can take years to acquire – one interviewee mentioned drawing on some 30 years of practice. Moreover, given heavy workloads and the relentless pace of change, learning opportunities may not always be recognised or explored to their full potential. Yet it is possible to enhance the pace and quality of learning that derives from workplace experiences by reflecting upon practice. Indeed, reflection is a prominent feature of the models of experiential learning developed by Kolb (1984) and Schon (1987).

Some leaders and managers may already be familiar with a number of methods used to reflect on practice, including talking to colleagues after meetings, mulling things over during the journey from work, or thinking things through in the bath or even over a glass of wine (Boud 2001). However, the kind of reflection likely to occur on such occasions has its limitations. It will tend to be unstructured and ad hoc in nature. In addition, it may not attain the level of reflection necessary for the critical analysis of practice (Hedberg 2009).

One method less prone to these limitations is the reflective diary, which involves regular, dated written accounts dedicated to the exploration of one’s practice. Its credentials as a method of facilitating experiential learning are well established in fields such as healthcare and teaching. However, so far little use has been made of this approach by managers and leaders, although recent studies have hinted at its potential (Shepherd 2005, Foskett et al 2005, Gray 2007).

While diary writing is a highly individual pursuit, there is a rich vein of literature to be tapped in seeking guidance on effective approaches to it. An initial suggestion is to begin with a description of the working day, or a particular experience on that day (a learning episode), for instance a meeting, presentation or discussion with colleagues. Attention can then be turned to identifying aspects of practice that proved successful along with those elements that were less effective, before exploring the underlying reasons for each. From this vantage point a set of actions may be identified, with subsequent diary entries incorporating a consideration of the progress made towards implementing these actions.

It is also possible to develop analysis further and place one’s practice into a broader critical framework by exploring the value of current practices and addressing questions of why things are done the way they are, and whether they could be done differently and to more desirable ends. This, Greenwood (1998) notes, requires identifying “the values and norms underpinning described practices and behaviours”, along with the interests they serve, and then considering the constraints which limit what is judged feasible.

Whatever the level of analysis chosen, various practical steps can be taken to ensure that the quality of diary entries is maximised. First, it is worth identifying the medium best suited to the ordering of one’s thoughts, be it notepad or laptop, as well as determining the most appropriate time of the day or week to write, along with the best environment to work in. Research suggests that it is only when removed from the constant mental stimuli of a busy office and electronic devices that the brain is able to recall and begin the process of sense-making (Richtel 2010). In terms of the frequency of diary entries, the framework discussed has the potential to be quite demanding. One option is to include daily descriptions along with initial thoughts and assessments, and then to devote more in-depth analysis to one or two particular learning episodes each week.

While reflective diaries may be employed as a distinct developmental tool, they can also be used to complement other forms of learning. Practice can be reflected upon in the context of what has been learned from one’s reading, as well as from participation in workshops, seminars and action learning sets. Indeed, reflective diaries present a way of monitoring progress in the application of this learning, as well as revealing how practice deviates from theory.

The reflective diary represents a potentially powerful tool for leadership development. First-hand experience suggests that the time and energy devoted to writing a reflective diary is a very worthwhile investment and that,
over time, the process will become valued as an integral part of everyday practice. I would welcome your thoughts on the subject.

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References


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