

## **Creating a coaching culture through reflective practice to reduce organisational blame culture**

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### **Creating a coaching culture through reflective practice to reduce organisational blame culture**

#### **Abstract**

This paper draws on the use of reflective practice interventions with senior managers and the extent to which reflective practice has enabled participants to contribute to the development of a coaching culture within their organisations. Results came from a hermeneutic study exploring the use of reflective practice with practitioners who had all completed a part time professional degree programme. The research evidenced that by engaging with reflective practice and creating a coaching culture, there was a reduction in blame culture and improved team learning and engagement.

#### **Originality/value of your article for the readers (coaches, mentors, researchers, Human Resource professionals, training institutes)**

This paper offers a view on embedding reflective practice across business education to aid the practical application of reflective practice to enhance an organisational culture.

#### **Keywords (3 - 5).**

Coaching culture, reflective practice, organisational development

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand how a coaching culture can be created through reflective practice, alongside the teaching of reflective practice through professional education courses. The research focused on interviewing Estates and Facility managers (EFMs) who are responsible for the management of property, services and processes that support the core business of an organisation and ensure that an organisation has the most suitable working environment for its employees and their activities. The interviewees have all been engaged with a degree programme underpinned by reflective practice. The approach to the research has been through a qualitative investigation through the hermeneutic tradition. This has allowed the researcher to engage in the understanding of meaning of everyday language and to try to form some concepts from the social world (Giddens, 1991) or the "lived experience" (Lavery, 2003). It is an interpretation of the information as opposed to a translation.

The paper shall proceed as follows: discussion of the theoretical concepts of personal and organisational reflective practice, and the use of reflective practice in creating a coaching culture; an introduction to the research methods; an outline of the framework used to analyse the findings from a series of in-depth and email interviews, closing with a reflection on the findings and the implications for practice. The paper further contributes to the literature and impact of teaching reflective practice to professional management students. It develops the concept of a coaching culture by examining the practical benefits these students have found in the workplace.

## Individual & Organisational Reflective Practice

Bengtsson (1995) highlights four basic aspects of reflection: reflection as self-reflection, reflection as thinking, reflection as self-understanding and the distancing function of self-reflection. This is further reiterated by Boyd and Fales (1983), who see reflective learning as an individual process and internal examining resulting in a changed conceptual perspective. Bolton (2010:xix) explains the concepts of reflection and reflexivity alongside the concept of values. "Reflection is an in-depth consideration of events or situations: the people involved, what they experienced and how they felt about it." She also discusses that to fully engage in reflection, we have to be prepared to "relive or review the experience" and be able to "replay from diverse points of view". Osterman and Kootkamp (2004:13-14) refer to reflective practice being designed as a way to "facilitate identification, examination, and modification of the theories-in-use that shape behaviour... requiring change in deeply held action theories". This explanation identifies the active as opposed to passive engagement with this practice. It is not simply naval gazing but a way of changing our own inbuilt assumptions and behaviours. Vince and Reynolds (undated) have challenged the usual focus of reflection on self to a more focused organisational reflection; and in learning organisations, reflection is often encouraged.

Reflective practice, as referred to by Bolton (2010:3) can be considered as being "a state of mind", and therefore this is seen as something that individuals engage with. This is not just a tool or technique to be used at particular moments but more a way of living. Reflective practice allows exploration and questioning of personal values, beliefs, behaviours ideologies and assumptions not just in the workplace or in our home environment, but in everything we do. Reflective practice often leads to action or a deeper reflective exploration of 'self'. As discussed by Atkins and Murphy (1993) there is a strong link between the ability to engage with reflective practice and our own self-awareness. Self-awareness is a key element of an individual's ability, willingness and motivation to engage with reflective practice.

The concept of reflexivity according to Cunliffe (2009) takes reflective practice further in relation to not only understanding our practices but also how we relate with others. This is concerned with how organisational realities are created, through shared practice and language. Similarly, Bolton (2010) refers to reflexivity as an awareness of how I am experienced and perceived by others. She also discusses her use of reflective and reflexive practice as a "through-the-mirror" method to allow for a combined reflexive and reflective journey so as to enable changes in future practice. In the section below, we further explore this idea of organisational reflective practice and its links with coaching cultures and blame cultures.

### **Creating a Coaching Culture, Blame Culture and Reflective Practice**

We define a coaching culture here as an organisational context where coaching is seen as being integral to how the organisation works and is fully embedded in its leadership and management practices. In this sense, an organisation that is said to have a coaching culture is archetypal by definition, representing an ideal type of organisation which fully possess these characteristics. Hence, having an organisational context within which lots of coaching relationships exist is a necessary, but insufficient condition for having a coaching culture. A coaching culture is therefore a way of describing a way of leading & managing that has coaching principles at its core and transcends specialised coaching relationships and activities.

It is our view that there is a direct link between the process of organisational reflective practice and the use of coaching interventions within organisations. Within the coaching literature, there has been a movement towards coaching interventions that transcend one-to-one interventions, which seek to embed reflective practice within the fabric of an organisation (Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2018). This has been referred to as seeking to create a coaching culture. Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) have developed one such framework, grounded in the practices of major organizations, for creating a coaching culture. This study produced a model of four levels of depth against six main areas that are divided into four sub-areas to produce a 4 × 24 matrix for assessing a coaching culture (2005: 99–100). They describe the four levels as:

- Nascent
- Tactical
- Strategic
- Embedded.

This framework marks a multi-strand journey from:

- Having the idea of making an organizational impact
- Through to doing disjointed things to bring it about
- To doing integrated things
- To establishing these things in the DNA of the organization.

Similarly, Hawkins' (2012) framework is also the one most clearly focused on creating a coaching culture. It has added to Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) by presenting a larger number of case studies (30 compared with 8 in the earlier book). Hawkins' book is actuated by the question, 'What can coaching uniquely do that the world of tomorrow needs?' (Hawkins, 2012: 1). He sees coaching culture as being about informal, on the job learning (Hawkins, 2012: 15) and sees it as having three pillars:

- Coaching strategy
- Alignment with organizational culture change
- Coaching infrastructure (Hawkins, 2012: 24).

From this he develops a model which, in keeping with much of his earlier work in coaching, focuses on organizational learning as an outcome. This seven-step model is then spelt out in the second part of the book, picking up on many features of the Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) model outlined above. In the final part of the book he surveys pitfalls on the journey to a coaching culture, examines the link to continuous professional development and to his work on supervision (Hawkins and Smith, 2006), and positions evaluation and return on investment in the journey. More recent contributions to the creating coaching culture debate e.g. Lawrence (2015) have tended to focus, like Hawkins (2012) and Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005), on the pragmatic implementation of coaching cultures but Lawrence (2015), in particular, has emphasised that simply introducing coaching into an organisation is not sufficient. In order to move an organisation towards embeddedness (in Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005's terms), additional mechanisms, such as internal coaching skills training need to be introduced. It is our view that one of these additional mechanisms is the use of reflective practice processes.

Building on Cunliffe's (2009) work, we argue that creating coaching culture frameworks provide a useful theoretical bridge between models of reflective practice - which have tended to be individual in nature - and models of organisational learning, such as those originally proposed by, Argyris & Schon (1996) and Senge (2006). Tranfield et al. (2000) proposed the notion of organisational routines for learning as a way of understanding how such practices of reflective practice and organisational learning might become embedded into organisational life, in a way that transcends the activities of individual actors. They do this by identifying those organisational routines which make it possible for an organisation to do something different (enabling routines). Examples of these include mechanisms for envisioning the future of the organisation, benchmarking against the work of other organisations and, most importantly in terms of this study, routines that enable a deeper understanding of the current situation that the organisation faces.

Conversely, they also identified from their research into defensive routines, those mechanisms which divert responsibility for action elsewhere and hence inhibit ownership of problems and, indeed, reflective practice. They claim that is often done in the form of projecting the issue onto something inanimate or ephemeral such as organisational culture e.g. "That won't work around here - our culture is too toxic for that!". They are careful, however, to argue that the issue is not whether the projection/attribution is accurate or not. Rather, the point is that, when successful, the responsibility for taking action is removed from those doing the projecting. We argue that this sort of defensive organisational behaviour is typical of organisations which have a blame culture. Thus, we are defining blame culture as representing an organisational context within which individuals and groups seek to protect themselves from embarrassment or threat by diverting responsibility, for mistakes, elsewhere. Rather than seeing mistakes or failures as an opportunity for learning and development, the most prevalent behaviour within blame cultures is to reject any responsibility for these errors and, where possible, shift that responsibility elsewhere. In this sense, a blame culture is the antithesis of organisational reflective practice in that there is a discouragement of reflexivity and ownership.

Tranfield et al (2000) argue that by consciously exercising enabling routines for learning, organisations might successfully militate against the development of a blame culture by replacing defensive routines with those that enable learning. In a similar fashion, those who advocate for the creation of a coaching culture within organisations are seeking to replace

processes of leadership & management which seem to apportion blame with those that seek to raise awareness and encourage the development of professional competence.

In order to better explain the link between organisational reflective practice, coaching culture and blame culture further, we will, in the following sections, describe an empirical study which sought to examine these issues in practice.

## **Research Methods**

The research used a hermeneutic exploration; often defined as the study of interpretation (Follesdal, 2001). The research has been a study focusing on engagement with reflective practice and the creation of a coaching culture from both a personal and organisational context. The approach to the research was through a qualitative investigation employing the hermeneutic tradition. Hermeneutics allows for a bottom up approach by adopting the position of the researcher as the learner rather than expert; therefore the learning will be taken from the experiences of the social actors (Schutz, 1962; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Weber, 1969). The research has taken an emergent format within the tradition of interpretative research.

The participants chosen to take part in the study were all working as Estates and Facility managers (EFMs) who are responsible for the management of property, services and processes. These were alumni from the University's part time Facilities Management programmes. The research was carried out via a mix of email, telephone and face to face interviews. The research included 34 email interviews, 7 face to face interviews and 5 telephone interviews and at this point theoretical saturation was deemed to have been achieved as there were no new themes emerging from the interviews (Blaikie, 2010).

The method used was done in two stages, firstly email interviews, which were sent to alumni and included open ended questions in relation to using reflective practice in the workplace ; followed by interviews which were carried out through unstructured discussions.

The interviews were open discussions starting with a simple question of 'tell me about yourself and your career'; this open question relaxed the participants and allowed them to start talking. Following this open question, further exploration of their life histories was explored, and this moved into more discussion of their current practice. Some of the respondents explored reflective practice in the workplace without a direct question, whilst others needed a prompt to understand if they had engaged with reflection post the course. The interviewees were from a mix of public and private sector companies. Their names have been anonymised and pseudonym initials applied.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

This section will explore the commentary from the participants alongside reflections and theoretical context. The concept of blame emerged from the discussions as some of the participants started to use the term "blame" and "blame culture" within their interviews. Reflective practice encourages learning from mistakes, and this can improve team dynamics and in time help to lessen blame culture if everyone feels able to be open and honest with each other (Vince and Saleem, 2004). There was no specific question asked about blame, but the view of the participants was that by engaging in reflective practice and a coaching culture it could be reduced, as evidenced in the data below.

The following section will focus on two key themes: theme 1 is on power and structure and theme 2 focuses on reflective practice as an enabling routine for learning.

## Theme 1: Power and Structure

There is a requirement for not only personal engagement but also organisational engagement and responsibility to help to reduce blame culture through reflective and reflexive practice. Vince and Saleem (2004) argue constant use of blame can limit collective learning, as it is bound by the organisational constraints of power and structure. However, there also needs to be recognition of what went well too and Verdonchot (2006) would argue that this is equally as crucial as recognising the limitations.

The concept of power was particularly highlighted by BS who discussed the previous management within their department, who just drove for targets and achievements but did not allow for any ways of thinking differently. This felt, from the subjective interpretation of the language he used and his body language when he spoke about it, like quite a bullying environment with a need to just keep your head down and get on! Post the change of manager he stated:

*'Now I think they have come to a time where we have got to reflect ... I think people, if they get under these umbrellas where they don't have to do it; it just gets sucked out of them... We all want to do things better the next time don't we, but I think sometimes when you are not allowed to, you just get it knocked out of you'. (Male, middle manager, NHS).*

This quote from BS evidenced the need to empower staff more, rather than focusing on control, thus liberating staff to achieve individual and organisational goals (French, 2011). Based on his experiences, he felt demotivated and disempowered by management and did not have the energy or motivation to reflect on and improve performance. The management structure at the time prevented the use of reflection in action, learning from experiences, recognising improvements of process and understanding what works and what doesn't (Zuber-Skerritt and Cendon, 2013).

The organisational behaviour appeared to be based on an autocratic management position, with little encouragement for innovation and change (Jones, 2003). The language, based on his perception, lends itself to downtrodden workers who don't want to stand out for 'fear of retribution', the opposite of the concept of a coaching culture. This had a huge impact on BS and his colleagues during the old manager's reign; impacting on motivation and empowerment of the staff (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2013; Foot and Hook, 2016).

Once the old manager left the organisation, BS worked hard with his team to encourage open conversations, and team reflection to improve the service and to innovate, he also took away the "negative threat" that had been associated with learning from mistakes. He created a more balanced approach with his management team; it took approximately 7 months, post the old Director leaving, for his managers to start to feel confident to suggest changes and improvements, through their weekly catch up meetings. These meetings always had a section for recognition of what could be improved, but also what had been done well that week; thus creating a balance between learning and celebration of achievement (Verdonchot, 2006).

There was further discussion in terms of power and structure from JG who found using reflective practice had enabled him to also cope with critique better from his manager, as he has recognised this is both for individual and organisational improvement

*'I would always take this as a negative and probably stress about it and dwell on it for days, I now take this as a positive and on which something I can improve on.'*  
(Male, senior manager, FM company)

This evidenced the need to understand how to work with reflective practice for himself as a manager which he could then translate to his team. This is further highlighted by Ramani et al (2019) who referred to 'feedback culture' and the need to ensure participants are

empowered to engage with feedback in a productive manner. Another participant from the NHS (FS) referred to some of the issue with blame as being 'embedded in the organisation' as the organisation liked having someone to point the finger at. She discussed no-one wanting to accept blame, and to change the phraseology to being more one of learning she tried to encourage her team to focus on

*"How could we have done it better, how should we have done it better, how will we do it next time, why did we do it? It is about being open and honest, but not in an accusatory or in a blame way." (Female, senior manager, NHS).*

FS also recognised that she has to work on herself as a manager and 'not lose her rag' or use her power to influence. She reflected on her own self-awareness as a leader, and how she has learned this behaviour, even though it may not have been her default position a few years ago. The learning has then transcended from her, as the manager, to her team and she still challenges herself on the way she has handled difficult situations with her own staff, recognising this as a constant learning process.

In terms of blame, BF supports the importance of psychological safety at an organisational level. Referring to staff in his own organisation, he said:

*'I think they feel safe that they could go 'well, we could have done this better'. It is all about working together, the same direction, and getting stuff done better. Plus, I think [my current organisation] has a culture of process improvement. So once they get that over, everybody quite rightly, should be able to express failure and success safely and say this is how we could do it.' (Male, senior manager, Pharmaceutical)*

Again, BF as a senior manager has recognised that this learning has been over time and that he has significantly changed as he has moved to more senior positions and acknowledged that he has previously managed staff with a blame orientated approach before he engaged with individual reflective practice. The shift in his own behaviour, to a more people focused manager, has seen the move to the position he has now with a colleague in HR saying they would not have offered him the position 2 years ago as it was not 'in keeping with the organisational culture'.

This concept of power and structure has been identified in organisations where a blame culture was prevalent. The above discussion highlights the benefits of the use of productive reflection on an organisational level, but also the need for engagement throughout the organisation (Boud et al, 2006). Argyris & Schön's (1996) work on organisational learning reinforces the need for an open and safe structure of learning. The practice of productive reflection was also drawn on as being dynamic and related to both work and learning.

## **Theme 2: Reflective practice as an enabling routine**

We argue here that reflective practice can be seen as an enabling routine (Tranfield et al, 2000) that helps leaders and managers develop and learn in relation to their work with their teams and with their wider organisations. We have argued above that blame cultures are defensive routines which militate against learning and development and are intimately tied up with power and structure. We see reflective practice as being a mechanism through which self and team awareness is raised (much like in coaching) and where patterns of behaviour that are more conducive to learning and development are enacted.

For effective reflective practice to occur, there needs to be safety for the individual engaging in reflection and, as Vince and Reynolds (undated) discussed it is not just about operationalization in the service of management but more of a developmental opportunity within a team. One of the participants (IH) stated that reflective practice:

*'can improve an individual's performance in many different ways, personal and professional, but help and support is needed to ensure the correct interpretation of*



*reflective thinking and channelling the results into something positive. The danger is to use it to just increase productivity' (Male, senior manager, central government).*

IH's approach evidenced the need to be people focused, not just process orientated which concurs with Caplan's (2003) view that managers need to use a coaching style in the way staff are managed daily, and also that management have a responsibility to develop their staff and to create a learning environment. As we have suggested above, this is also intrinsic to the notion of a coaching culture.

There was recognition that people had to learn how to reflect individually and organisationally throughout the participant interviews. TSC discussed not only his personal use of reflective practice but also the engagement with his team, whereby it had become a 'lived practice' in their daily roles (Dewey, 1933). His first comments related to his own reflective practice and evidenced the changes in his approach in that initially it may have been more about being aware of getting into trouble in the workplace. However, his focus is now more on understanding the mistakes made and the ways forward.

*"I use it as a tool now rather than before it was 'if I do that next time I might not get my backside kicked', whereas now it is a tool I look at and really analyse what we are doing and the way forward." (Male, middle manager, charity sector)*

There was a definite shift in his approach and how he engaged with improvement through individual reflective practice. This resonates with what Megginson & Clutterbuck (2005) refer to as a systemic perspective, characterised by a less confrontational approach to challenging situations where more emphasis is placed on knowledge sharing, empowerment and collaboration. There is also a strong link with the views and practice of the 'management' and the environment to create a reflective and reflexive coaching culture (Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2018).

TSC has also embedded the practice into his management style with his team:

*'What I try to do with reflective thinking is take away the blame culture. I think there is too much.... who is the scapegoat? By reflective thinking we now do it as a team... we look at what happened, why did it happen, how did we change it and how can we all learn from it and then take it forward' (Male, middle manager, charity sector)*

By doing this he has reduced the need to create a scapegoat, and created a safe environment to learn; which is supported by Megginson & Clutterbuck's (2005) view of the line manager taking responsibility for the coaching culture within their particular team, creating an enabling routine with the group. Subsequently, TSC adapted a change of approach, almost as the "action researcher" and this aided the process, and allowed awareness of the politics internally to the team, and the wider organisation, thus allowing a safe environment to be able to be critical and therefore learn from experiences and to make the necessary changes (Reynolds and Vince, 2004)

This enabling routine, as described by Tranfield et al. (2000), enabled a joint envisioning of the future. PO discussed attempting to engage and embed the reflective process within her team, but is also aware of her own shortfalls

*'reflective practice has enabled me to widen the scope of my thinking with regard to the area under consideration; I have also requested this deeper thought process of my team. Decisions to be made are more informed as, as far as possible, all options are considered, and this not only reduces mistakes but more importantly prepares the manager (and team) for the possible outcomes.'* (Female, senior manager, higher education).

Also, Raelin (2001) would refer to PO's practice being within 'public reflection'. The concept of 'public reflection' allows individuals to come together collectively to consider ways of improving without fear of being reprimanded. This connects to what Hunt et al (2007: 27)

refer to as "relationship-facilitated on the job learning", in the coaching literature. The idea is to create an open and honest, safe environment to allow options to be explored. Therefore, the reflection goes further than the individual and becomes an organisational norm.

This concept of enabling was also referred to by DN through her email response

*'Working in an operational area, things often go wrong. Reflecting alone or reflecting with others is a useful way of determining if the procedure, action or resource should change.'* (Female, senior manager, higher education)

This ability to enable challenge and criticism as part of learning - without damaging interpersonal relationships - is very similar to what Megginson & Clutterbuck (2005) refer to as constructive confrontation, where ideas and concepts, as opposed to people, are challenged as part of the creation of a coaching culture.

## Themes Discussion

As we have asserted above, we see a link between reflective practice, reduction of a blame culture and creating a coaching culture. We stated that we saw a coaching culture as being a context where coaching is seen as being integral to the way the organisation in question, works, which transcends simply having specific coaching relationships. Whilst none of the participants in our study would claim to be trying to create a coaching culture (this language was not figural for them) the similarities are striking. Our participants point to the importance of having social structures that embed reflective thinking and awareness raising into their daily leadership & management practice. They also point to the importance of such structures and behaviours in terms of militating against blame cultures, where coercive power (French & Raven, 1957) was previously exercised. This has strong similarities to the creating culture literature, where, as we have argued above, the agenda is to embed coaching-like behaviours in leadership and management practices, thus replacing behaviours which are less conducive to learning and awareness-raising. In this sense, we argue that reflective practice is an example of an enabling routine (Tranfield et al, 2000) which, in turn, can be seen as a practical way of embedding coaching behaviours into the fabric of an organisation.

Following Megginson & Clutterbuck (2005) and Hawkins (2012), we argue that, if an organisation wishes to move towards having a coaching culture, change must occur at a systemic level, transcending traditional dyadic relationships and have impact at the team, group and organisational levels. We argue that organisational reflective practice (an enabling routine) can be seen as one vehicle for moving in this direction. However, as Tranfield et al (2000) argue, in order for such routines to be effective, three aspects of them must be aligned. These aspects are the cognitive element (referring the values/ thinking underpinning the activity), the behavioural element (referring to what is actually done in an activity) and the structural element (the way in space and resources are configured so that the activity can happen). For example, in our study, BS uses an existing social structure – the weekly catch up meeting – but changes the values and behaviours being exercised within that structure so that team members are encouraged to engage in collective reflection to learn from mistakes and make improvements to their practice. In this sense, the cognitive, behavioural and structural elements all align so that this change can take place. Hence, we argue that, by identifying opportunities to make changes in social structure e.g. introducing weekly meetings, workshops, scenario planning forums, these ideas might provide leaders and managers a practical way forward in terms of embedding reflective practice in their organisations. Assuming that the cognitive, behavioural and structural elements are aligned, this might provide a 'road map' for those wishing to move

towards creating a coaching culture by embedding reflective practice (an enabling routine) at a group, team and organisational level.

## Conclusion

In summary, the preceding analysis has shown that by individuals learning about reflective practice and then enacting this within their organisations and teams, it is possible to introduce ways of working that militate against a dominant blame culture. We argue that this also shows how it might be possible, drawing from research and literature on creating a coaching culture, to begin to develop the foundation for a coaching culture. This is based on drawing attention to the strong parallels between organisational and team reflective practice and coaching culture mechanisms. This research showed that through the teaching of reflective practice, these professionals had engaged in reflection in the workplace and had tried to instil this within their teams through developing group and team processes that seem closely aligned to individual and team coaching.

Organisations and individuals need to find a balance of openness and an encouragement from the organisation to constantly reflect and improve; and to not only be able to be open and honest about mistakes but also to learn from them. The level of openness appeared to vary from organisation to organisation; and there did appear to be a more embedded blame culture within the public sector. Without mistakes, does learning truly happen, and without learning do we stifle creativity? Organisationally, and individually as managers we should embrace the mistakes, encourage learning, and from this learning new and innovative ideas may emerge, like the phoenix from the ashes.

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