

Reflection in a fast-paced world

It helps under-pressure managers make “good decisions quickly”, says **David G Altman**

“Reflection: a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution.”
(J Moon, 1999)

Harry stared at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original, silvery white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

“What is it?” Harry asked shakily.

“This? It is called a Pensieve,” said Dumbledore. “I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind.”

“Err,” said Harry, who couldn’t truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

“At these times,” said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, “I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into a basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.”

J K Rowling *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

Managers often have to make decisions without having complete information, and their decisions are expected to be timely and right. Reflective techniques can help them mobilise their intuition to make good decisions quickly. Developing these techniques may seem time-consuming but is well worth the investment. It will pay back both in the time saved and in the quality of the decisions made.

The higher up in the organisation a manager is, the more complex and critical the decisions, and

the more essential intuition becomes. Yet people at the top of organisations often find themselves isolated from the usual information channels. From its work with thousands of executives, the Center for Creative Leadership has discovered that, in such circumstances, managers at the top often develop a stronger preference for using their intuition than do people further down.

As a rule, Westerners value the ability to make *quick* decisions. Compared with some Asian cultures, they don’t put as much stock in processes that are deliberate, slow and reflective. But slowing down and reflecting, deliberately and conscientiously, helps us develop confidence in using our own intuition – to trust that ‘gut instinct’ that enables us to make quick decisions that have a good chance of being correct.

Managers often question their intuition. →

Long-term thinking

The need to think deep is a common theme for business leaders. In the mid-1980s, Liu Chuanzhi, along with several colleagues, founded what was to become the Chinese conglomerate Legend Holdings. The group includes Lenovo, the giant computer manufacturer which acquired IBM’s PC division in 2005.

Although he ended up studying science at university, Mr Liu says that from an early age he also read history, literature and philosophy, and developed a habit of thinking and meditating about a wide range of topics.

This approach has stayed with him. Every 10 or 15 days, he says, he likes to retreat somewhere, such as a park, where he can be on his own. He then spends time considering recent decisions, and planning for both the near and distant future.

His ambition is for Lenovo to become one of the top dozen companies in the world, a goal he concedes that may have to be accomplished by his successors.

Neil Koenig, series producer ‘CEO Guru’, BBC Business News

They wonder whether they have it, whether they can trust it, and whether they use it enough. This is hardly surprising since, on their way to the top, they have been rewarded for their analytical skills and rational approach. Often, those are the very skills and approaches that reject intuitive thinking. A manager may think that because intuition cannot be counted or named, it cannot be relied on.

But there are now other tools, techniques and ways of thinking that support intuitive thinking so that it becomes an effective reasoning tool. Some of these reflective techniques may be unfamiliar to you, which makes it harder to practise and adopt them. A certain amount of scepticism is inevitable. However, managers who are open-minded about using these reflective practices can boost their confidence in their intuitive thinking. They can learn to trust their instincts when critical situations demand quick decisions and when complex problems defy easy answers.

Bringing it all together

Reflective practices are what you might call 'whole-brain' activities. They are different from analytical practices, which used to be called 'left-brain' activities and are still sometimes referred to as 'L-mode' thinking (magnetic resonance imaging has challenged the assumption that this kind of thinking has a specific location in the brain).

Reflective practices are deliberate attempts to access 'R-mode' thinking (formerly called right-brain thinking), emphasising such non-rational responses as metaphor and imagery. They work by connecting the two modes of thinking – 'L-mode' and 'R-mode' – providing access to data, facts, values, experiences, hunches, analysis, evaluation, intuition, different perspectives and feelings. This process of connecting and accessing is what makes reflection a whole-brain activity.

Slowing down and reflecting, deliberately and conscientiously, helps us develop confidence in using our own intuition

Before diving into activities that aim to connect the rational with the intuitive, it's worth asking some basic questions: *are there people who have intuition and people who don't? And where does it come from?* It has often been described as a person apprehending something without having a full understanding of how or why.

Young or inexperienced managers are accustomed to relying on data and often don't trust their inner voices and feelings, their 'hunches'. Business schools train them to be analytical and, early in their careers, organisations reward them for their analytical prowess. As they move up in the organisation, however, another facet comes into play: experience. Intuition comes from this background of experiences and the lessons learned from them. It develops over years of trying different solutions and achieving good and bad results. Reflective practices bring that background to the forefront.

Learning to reflect: keeping a diary/journal

When your brain is working on an intuitive level, it sorts through all kinds of information: emotions, events, data, logic, images, facts, assurances, goals, plans, to-do lists and anything else that's available to it. This mode of mental processing is unique because your brain goes through these gyrations while you're not even aware of it. Think about how often a new idea has surprised you while taking a shower, digging in the garden or driving to work. Suddenly you have an answer to a problem you've been struggling with or a name you've been trying to remember. These flashes of intuition result from your brain's constant working, even if it doesn't tell you why you are right.

Keeping a diary or journal will greatly improve your chances of the experiences that are important to you, and gives you a place in which to reflect on them. Reflection connects our experiences and feelings to our intuitive senses so that the experiences are there when you have to make decisions without full information.

A journal is also useful for recording your intuitions so that you can review them later. Because managers often reject their own intuition, it is important to capture those ideas for later analysis.

Recording and revisiting are good ways to build trust in your intuition. The ideal way to record them is to write them down immediately, but that's not always possible. If you keep your journal handy, you increase your chances of achieving that ideal.

Also try taking your journal and drawing – yes, *drawing!* – the objects and people around you. Drawing exercises all of the basic perceptual skills, which are the same skills we need in problem-solving and decision-making. Drawing also slows down the process of perception, which is an excellent way to increase the information we get from our environment.

Learning to reflect: imaging

In their book *The Leader's Edge*, Charles Palus and David Horth, faculty members of the Center for Creative Leadership, argue for six creative competences that executives should develop in order to meet leadership's most complex challenges. Reflective practices that build confidence in intuition play a role in developing those competences:

- **paying attention** refers to using different modes of perception in order to examine all of a problem's facets
- **personalising** is about drawing on your (and others') life experiences and passions to gain new insight into a problem and to generate the energy needed to solve it
- **imaging** means using metaphor and visualising techniques to make sense of complicated information
- **serious play** encourages the generation of ideas and knowledge through improvisation and experimentation
- **collaborative enquiry** uses the strength of dialogue to cross community boundaries and discover different points of view
- **crafting** is a synthesis of events, ideas and experience into a meaningful end that can be applied by others.

Whether used in conjunction with a diary or independently, imaging – seeing with your mind's eye, or creating a mental picture – is another way to develop your intuition and gain confidence in using it. The simple act of looking out of your window, or closing your eyes and imagining a scene, are examples of directing your mind to its 'R-mode' thinking. It's very different from, say, reading a column of numbers on a spreadsheet.

As a part of your reflective practice, you can also write in your journal about images to stimulate your creative thinking, to increase your capability to learn from experience, and to give yourself more confidence.

A way of combining the imaging approach with your journal is to go out into your garden or

Reflective practices are deliberate attempts to access 'R-mode' thinking

a local park to find an object that you can use as inspiration. It will continue to inform you about your current challenge and invite insight into future challenges – it becomes a kind of anchor for some of the lessons you've gleaned from reflection. If you can't keep the object itself in your journal, photograph it or draw it.

Imaging can also help you improve your performance. Athletes routinely use imaging to picture themselves excelling at sports, a technique that has proven results. Prisoners of war and hostages have used imaging techniques to survive the conditions of their imprisonment. You can also use imaging as a reflective technique by making a drawing of the problem you are confronted with.

Learning to reflect: dreams

Dreams can be a deep source for reflection because, during sleep, analytical thought takes a backseat to the brain's sorting and sense-making processes. Intuitive thinking rules our sleeping hours with remarkable power and effectiveness. Dreams can present solutions and ideas in the form of metaphors and images. If you are one of the many people who have difficulty remembering their dreams, recording them will enhance your ability to recall them. Make it a habit to keep your journal at your bedside so that you don't have to move far to get it.

Try to 'seed' a dream by thinking about your problem or situation before you go to sleep. Some people do indeed use their sleeping hours to have dreams about problems they are trying to solve.

Learning to reflect: analysis

Developing your intuition as a means of expanding your problem-solving skills beyond

"Leaders need to see patterns before others see them. The ability to see links between personal experience and future possibilities will be essential. Great leaders have always had this ability but, in the future, the underlying patterns are likely to be more difficult to discern."

Bob Johansen, Institute for the Future, in *Leaders Make the Future*





analytical thinking doesn't mean you should set analysis aside altogether. There are ways to make your analytical skills available to your reflective practice. Analytical thinking is related to dividing things up, to separating them into parts or categories, whereas intuitive thinking tends to pull impressions and experiences together, weaving and combining them in different and sometimes novel ways. Connecting and integrating these two thought modes represents our most elegant way of thinking.

In fact, the best thinking is this 'dance' of these two processes. You can collect all the data available, but you can also brainstorm for

other options. You can analyse the problem, but you should also expose the decision to some emotional touchstone to see if it feels right to you. Good reflective practice will sprinkle elements of analytical thinking among the intuitive ones. Mixing the two different approaches plays them against each other, and can spark new perspectives and solutions.

Some examples of analytical thinking that you might put in your journal are lists of pros and cons, analyses of needs and wants compared with tradeoffs, scripts for difficult conversations, blueprints or sketches of problems you want to visualise, plans and itineraries, schedules and budgets, to-do lists, proposals, organisational classifications, decision trees, diagrams and graphs, questions and reminders.

Learning to reflect: emotions

Often the decisions managers make have an emotional component, for example when having to give notice to an employee. Conflict between a manager's personal values and a boss's orders or an organisational strategy can also

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cause emotional fallout. It's no accident that recent years have brought increased interest in emotional intelligence.

Effective managers don't ignore the emotional components of difficult situations, but remain calm because they have already thought through the issues, assessed their feelings and come to terms with what needs to be done for the people they lead and their organisations. Reflective practices give managers an opportunity to prepare themselves for difficult decisions.

Learning to reflect: the 'Star Model'

Most reflective practices are solitary and introspective, but a mediated dialogue is an effective way to involve others in your reflective practice. In such a dialogue, you ask a group of colleagues to talk about difficult personal challenges without discussing them directly (these challenges are often hard to address because they spark conflict, so they are often left unarticulated and unresolved).

This technique, the 'Star Model', invites input from others without revealing your personal

Intuitive thinking rules our sleeping hours with remarkable power and effectiveness

challenge. Each person in the community represents one point on the 'star'.

Reflection in the fast lane

Reflection may not seem like the right approach for managers accustomed to taking action, but it really is. It's a useful tool and even an essential one if you want to be a well-rounded and creative leader.

The paradox that managers learn as they grow accustomed to using reflective practices is that, even though these processes may seem time-consuming at first, they actually enable the savvy and seasoned leader to make decisions faster.

Finally, remember that collaborative and learning environments within organisations are particularly conducive to the development of reflective practices, so always look out for such situations.

In fact you, as a senior manager, can contribute to a culture of discovery and experiment that fosters these practices at all levels. In particular, by your example, you can encourage people to open their minds and to challenge the status quo positively and creatively. **TJ**

The approach adopted here draws inspiration from the groundbreaking research on collaborative working trends published in *Future Work* (www.FutureWorkBook.com), according to which the workplace of the 21st century will blend learning environments with working environments — leading to organisations that are agile, competitive, and capable of responding to changing market demands.

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