

DOORS
To
Action and Reflection

**Examining some of the impacts and outcomes of what happens
when a leader attempts to shift focus from action to deep
reflection**

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Of the requirements
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by
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Certificate of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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This dissertation has been a journey of discovery about others and myself. The path opened Doors to further understanding and insight about leadership and the many other hats I wear.

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And a man said speak to us of self-knowledge.

And he answered saying:

Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and nights.

But your ears thirst for the sound of your heart's knowledge.

You would know in words that which you have always known in thought.

You would touch with your fingers the naked body of your dreams.

And it is well you should.

The hidden well-spring of your soul must needs rise and run murmuring to the sea;

And the treasure of your infinite depths would be revealed to your eyes.

But let there be no scales to weigh your unknown treasure;

And seek not the depths of your knowledge with staff or sounding line.

For self is a sea boundless and measureless.

Say not, "I have found the truth," but rather, "I have found a truth."

Say not, "I have found the path of the soul."

Say rather, "I have met the soul walking upon my path."

For the soul walks upon all paths.

The soul walks not upon a line neither does it grow like a reed.

The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals.

(Gibran 1998, p.65)

Abstract

In today's busy and complex world, leaders can become mired in action and activity driven by a strong desire to achieve. Increasingly this drive for action and achievement coupled with the pace of life can preclude—or severely limit—time for reflection, which, in turn, can impact adversely on the quality of decisions made and on the lives of people at work.

I have been involved for over a decade in designing and facilitating training programs to improve reflection and leadership skills. Much has been written about the practices of reflection and leadership, and reflection as a practice of leadership, with a wide community of researchers and practitioners using different lenses and traditions. As a leadership consultant, I came to realise that while there is much written and taught about the topics, leaders seem to practise associated reflection skills to a limited extent once they leave the boundaries of the training program.

I also noticed, eventually, that in my professional and personal life, my own behaviour was enacting those very behaviours that I was encouraging leaders to change, bringing to mind the phrase, 'You teach best what you most need to learn' (Bach 1977). As I became aware of my own habits I also realised there is limited research chronicling the iterative journey of the practitioner attempting to model and learn from the practice of reflection as a leader, whilst simultaneously enabling such a process for other leaders.

This doctoral research is, therefore, essentially a self-study of my own learning about being a leader and a reflective practitioner, within the context of designing and facilitating programs to improve leadership via reflective practice for senior managers in corporate organizations. In essence, it reports how I have approached the task of emulating and representing what I encourage others to do as leaders and reflective practitioners. To explicate the objective of analyzing my own reflective practice I decided to explore two research questions: 'How can I as a leader shift my focus from action to deep reflection?' and 'What are the impacts and outcomes of my endeavors to make such a shift?' and as the research unfolded I found myself also

addressing a third question – ‘How do I undertake to role model and represent what I encourage others to do as leaders and reflective practitioners?’

Specifically, the research chronicles and documents learning and insights gained from designing and facilitating two leadership development programs, based on action research with senior managers within Feedsmoore (a pseudonym) a global food business. The research draws on my learning and insights associated with implementing programs as a program director within a top ranking business school.

The research methodology is primarily autoethnography and action research supported by relevant literature and interspersed with a genre that I created and titled, called ‘Pictoems’. These are pictures combined with poems capturing moments in time, providing opportunities to reflect metaphorically and symbolically on issues explored through my work on the research questions, as well as upon my awareness of life's essence.

As a direct consequence of the research, a model evolved over time framing the practice of reflection within a broader more holistic cosmology. I have called this the ‘DOOR’ model, with its name being a mnemonic, for the metaphoric and literal means of ‘opening’ doorways to understanding. The model draws on—and in a way, renames—the more familiar action learning/action research approach to exploring and documenting resolution of complex problems. The ‘D’ in DOOR stands for ‘Design’, the First ‘Q’ stands for ‘Qperate’, the second ‘Q’ stands for ‘Qbserve’ and the ‘R’ stands for ‘Reflect’.

As I worked at understanding my research question through the journey of the Doctorate, another model emerged which I have called the Four Frames of Learning. The Four Frames are a means to locate an organisation’s readiness and maturity for introducing deeper learning and change processes.

Each of the eight chapters in the thesis applies the mnemonic of the DOOR to facilitate reporting of my evolving process of learning about being both a leader and a reflective practitioner in modern organizations and in my own life.

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