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PAPER**

**An Action Research Inquiry to Explore the Relevance and Value of
Executive Reflection to Leaders in a Global, Virtual and Diverse World**

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with Coaching Supervision Academy | International Centre for Reflective Practice**



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Abstract

An Inductive Action Research Methodology was co-designed and co-created. Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data. The study found that Executive Reflection was valuable and relevant to the Volunteer Leaders in a global virtual and diverse world. Reflection was found to be a vital, invaluable and imperative oasis for leaders to enable them to learn how to adapt, evolve and transform themselves, in order to lead themselves and their teams or organisations in fast moving environments. A refined definition of Executive Reflection was created and it is recommended that the practice is formally recognized. New thinking on the resourcing of practitioners to offer Executive Reflection to global leaders recommended.

Key Words

Leaders; Executive Reflection; Leadership Supervision; Executive Coaching; Action Research; Reflection

1. Introduction

Our paper explores how three colleagues co-designed and co-created an Action Research Inquiry to explore the relevance and value of Executive Reflection in a global, diverse and virtual world.

2. Background

Jackie Arnold and Elaine Patterson (The Researchers) came together early in 2016 because of a shared curiosity about the potential relevance and value of Executive Reflection as a distinct practice, sometimes referred to as Leadership Supervision – to resource and support leaders particularly those leading in a global, virtual and diverse (GVD) world.

The term and emerging practice of “Executive Reflection” was evolving from the course content, approaches and methodology of the Coaching Supervision Academy’s Diploma in Coaching Supervision. The Researchers coined the phrase “GVD” Global Virtual Diverse (instead of the more commonly used acronym VUCA from Johansen (2012) as it was felt to better represent the realities of leading today.

At that time, there had been little research into how the ‘Executive Reflection’ conversation could help leaders working in GVD environments. This research was intended to fill that gap, taking an inductive approach to establish what is happening in this field.

3. Context

The Researchers noticed that Leaders are working in ever more volatile, fast paced, diverse and complex circumstances. They also noticed that Leaders are increasingly required to support staff in multi-cultural contexts, working both virtually and globally. This required new ways of thinking, relating, working and innovating, not only to manage day to day but also to create the future.

In the Researchers’ respective practices they noticed that, increasingly, their clients in leadership roles were:

1. looking to do more with fewer resources in less time
2. wanting themselves and their employees to be more resourceful and resilient
3. needing safe confidential spaces to think clearly to make effective decisions
4. wanting to inspire and motivate their people (in a world where “command and control” no longer works
and
5. keen to understand how best to lead people who are working in global, virtual and diverse environments

The findings from their literature review spurred the Researchers on to see if it was possible to take the best from these three interconnected worlds of coaching, coaching supervision and reflective practice to create a “hybrid” practice which could better meet the questions and challenges which today’s leaders encounter while working in a GVD world.

4. Working Definitions

“Executive Reflection”

“Executive Reflection (sometimes called Leadership Supervision) is a distinct practice. It provides a creative and reflective space and generative oasis for Leaders to gain a “Helicopter-Vision” which includes themselves, their work, their relationships with themselves, with others and with their wider environment at work”

“GVD”

The terms “Global”, “Virtual” and “Diverse” aims to capture the essence of business and organizational life today that leaders now need to attend to as they shape vision, goals, deliverables and inspire performance.

- Global - the worldwide nature, stretch and web of work which can cross continents, time zones, cultures and language
- Virtual - computers, the web and digital technology have enabled leaders to reach, communicate, co-ordinate and deliver work to customers and clients globally
- Diverse - the cultural mix and blending of many different countries, languages, identities, cultures, races and languages which can exist in just one person, in a team and in an organisation.

5. Research Question

Our research question was framed as follows:

*“An Action Research inquiry to Explore the Relevance and Value of Executive Reflection to Leaders
in a Global, Virtual and Diverse World”*

The aim was to identify and understand more fully how to provide and support executive and leadership development in a GVD world.

6. Research Methodology

The Researchers developed the project using Action Research Methodology, at the heart of which is inquiry into and changes to practice and the wider system in which the work takes place (McNiff, 2017).

Lewin first coined the term "action research" (1944). He described action research as "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action" that uses "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action" (1946). This Methodology invited the Researchers to take a collaborative and co-operative approach, informed by inquiry and curiosity. The choice of methodology was also congruent with the process and methods of Executive Reflection and coaching supervision practice (Murdoch & Arnold Eds, 2012).

7. Research Design

Two groups of global participants were invited to participate in the project: 10 Volunteer Leaders (VL) and 10 Volunteer Practitioners (VP). They were organized into 10 pairs (dyads). Each dyad engaged in three cycles of inquiry in the form of 'Executive Reflection' sessions of 1.5 hours' duration each. Each participant then engaged in a semi-structured interview with one of the Researchers to conclude the data gathering.

Recruitment of the participants involved two elements using the method of "snowballing" that involves "finding a small number of subjects who, in turn, identify others in the population" (Gray 2009).

The Researchers invited a number of VLs to participate from their own networks, based on differences in age, organizational contexts and geographical locations. At the same time, the Researchers offered an invitation to a (random) number of Volunteer Practitioners (VP) accredited as CSA Leadership Supervisors. Individuals who expressed an interest were sent the research design and protocol, at which point they were free to agree to participate or decline.

10 VLs and 10 VPs were recruited. Participants were located in the UK, France, Switzerland, Malaysia, China, Australia, America and Canada and worked globally with global reach. There were 12 women and 8 men. The Researchers then randomly allocated the VLs to VPs without formal matching through chemistry sessions but they did take into account any declared past or dual relationships, in which case new pairings were found. We chose this approach because the Researchers did not want to impose any of their own assumptions (about what). They also wanted to explore new approaches to matching. The risk was that the pairings had not chosen each other. However, there was a clear exit strategy in place for all participants.

8. Data Gathering

Data was collected from the Reflective Logs that each VL and VP submitted at the end of each cycle. The Reflective Logs invited the participants to respond to the following questions:

- What was the relevance of the session for you?
- What was the value of the session for you?
- What / how have your thinking, decision-making or relationships changed as a result of the session?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

After the 3rd session, the Researchers each conducted a recorded 30-minute, semi-structured telephone interview with each participant who shared their final reflections on the relevance and value of the process and outcomes of their encounters.

9. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to mine the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The Researchers met face to face to analyse the data from Cycles 1 to 3. Time constraints meant that they met virtually via Zoom to analyse the majority of Cycle 4 - the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews. Jackie Arnold took responsibility for writing up the findings for the VLs. Elaine Patterson took responsibility for writing up the findings for the VPs. The Researchers noticed what was continuous and what was unique to each Cycle and the patterns that recurred and new themes that emerged.

There was then a further final stage when the Researchers met to extract the final interpretation and conclusions from the data and to prepare the final report of the research findings for publication.

10. Conclusions

The overall conclusions are as follows:

a. Value and Relevance of Executive Reflection

From the data, Executive Reflection was found to be valuable and relevant to the VL's in a GVD world. It provides an invaluable and imperative oasis for leaders to enable them to learn how to adapt, evolve and transform themselves, in order to lead themselves and their teams or organisations in the face of fast moving external business environments.

b. GVD Acronym

This descriptor did not appear to impact on relationships or outcomes. The Researchers have therefore concluded that GVD should be used with the acronym VUCA as a shorthand to describe and capture the whole the experience of living and working today.

c. Definition of Executive Reflection

The Researchers' original definition of Executive Reflection was broadly validated but also needed to be refined in the light of the project's conclusions.

In essence Executive Reflection could be described as "super-vision" for leaders in the context of leadership. Executive Reflection is typically geared to the higher levels of change and works at the levels of mission, purpose and identity (Dilts 2012). Executive Reflection attends to the normative, formative and restorative functions of supervision (Proctor 1997).

Executive Reflection is an independently co-created learning partnership and distinct developmental practice built on trust, safety and service. Executive Reflection provides a uniquely creative, compassionate, resourceful and generative reflective oasis for Leaders to gain a robust Super-Vision of WHO they are, WHY they lead and HOW they lead. Executive Reflection attends to both their personal and professional development to resource leaders to lead wisely in turbulent times.

d. Practice Development

The Researchers' description of the work of the VP was validated and reads as follows:

The Practitioner works as an independent and confidential witness, companion, mirror and observer providing a creative space and non-judgmental container for deep thinking and reflection. The Practitioner creates the personal and environmental conditions for the Leader to gain profound insight, resourcing and learning to ignite personal, team and organizational change and wise action.

The research also revealed that the VPs required particular qualities and training for this practice. A certain level of maturity (defined as both skills and personal development,

reflective capacity and life experience) was needed from both the VL's and VP's to benefit from this level, quality and type of intervention

e. Chemistry Sessions

We found that chemistry sessions might not be always necessary or relevant if robust contracting was put in place.

f. Action Research Methodology

The Researchers found that the Action Research Methodology was congruent and compatible with the practice of Executive Reflection. The methodology generated robust, rigorous evidence.

11. Research Recommendations

The recommendations are as follows:

1. Acronyms of VUCA and GVD

VUCA and GVD together describe the realities of leadership today. The use of one or other on its own does not reflect the complexity of today's realities.

2. Recognition of Executive Reflection as a Distinct Practice

Executive Reflection is recognized as a specific developmental intervention to grow leaders and resource them to lead in today's VUCA GVD world. Executive Reflection is a form of "super-vision" for leaders in the context of their leadership.

3. Development of Executive Reflection Practitioners

Further work is carried out by Coaching Supervision Academy | International Centre of Reflective Practice to define the skills, training, resourcing and support of Executive Reflection practitioners super-ising leaders in a VUCA GVD world.

4. Promoting Executive Reflection to Leaders

Communicating the value and relevance of Executive Reflection to leaders leading in a VUCA GVD world is now vital. New ways of reaching new audiences who would benefit from this intervention need to be found.

5. Further Research

Further research with a larger cohort is recommended to further test the findings.

12. Acknowledgements and Thanks

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