

COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY

AUDITOR



RETALIATION AT THE UNIVERSITY:

THE CONSEQUENCES OF REPORTING \$2.3 MILLION IN FRAUD

INSIDE:

Auditor Turned Faculty Member

Demonstrating Value to Our Stakeholders

**Increasing Leadership Effectiveness Through
Reflective Practice**

**Everything You Wanted to Know about Fraud
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Being a Team Player



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Increasing Leadership Effectiveness Through Reflective Practice

By James Sartain, MBA, PhD and Kathryn Davanzo, M.Ed.

What was I thinking? For many of us, this one simple question prompts anxiety and lays the groundwork for regret. It is a question that we typically ask ourselves after we have made the wrong decision, chosen the wrong option, or acted without thinking at all. This question is often the first step of a prolonged process of self-flagellation that follows. In the emerging field of cognitive leadership, however, researchers and leadership development practitioners are trying to rehabilitate this question by using it as part of a strategy for rigorous self-reflection. When done as part of a structured and systematic process, questions about our thinking can help unlock new and powerful insights required for enhanced performance.

Reflective practices help us to rigorously examine our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions with consideration on what could have been done differently to obtain better results. In many ways, a reflective practice is like a cognitive audit. Similar to a financial audit, a cognitive audit verifies that what is believed to be factual is, indeed, factual. Through a systematic review, both audits help us to find errors and identify misrepresentations of fact. Through the use of reflective practices, we are concerned with identifying our blind spots or faulty thinking. For example, what are some possible thinking errors or cognitive distortions that may have led to a faulty conclusion? What are some possible factors that may be getting in the way of seeing the situation as it really is? Just as a financial audit often leads to a management letter with recommendations for future actions, reflective practice can lead to a customized course of action designed to address deficiencies in thinking and acting.

Reflective practices involve, at the core, the identification of a set of questions that an individual would consider at the deepest level of self-awareness, targeting a particular area of deficiency or challenge. Two of the most common reflective practices include After-Event Reviews (AERs) and targeted journaling. Each of these activities provides a structured and deliberate way to prompt deep-level thinking to identify what impacted, or should have impacted, our actions and decisions. AERs, for example, require individuals and teams to scrutinize, after the fact, a project or event to determine what went right, what went wrong, and what could be done differently in the future. Similarly, targeted journaling involves a leader completing a set of customized questions that relate to a specific issue or challenge and to help facilitate insights into perceptual blocks and incomplete or biased thinking. Although typically conducted as part of a coaching intervention, research has shown that independent journaling can also lead to better decision-making and improved performance. The following is an example of how targeted journaling, conducted as part of an executive coaching engagement, led to improved leader performance.

“John” was referred for executive coaching as a result of complaints that he was not a team player and that he acted in ways that diminished or discounted the ideas and input of his peers. In the initial session, John shared that he was confused by the negative reactions he routinely experienced from co-workers and support staff in his department. He described the reactions of others as sarcastic and periodically hostile. After a bit of discussion, it appeared

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that John experienced these reactions when he tried to step in for his supervisor by offering supplemental supervision to people who did not view him as their supervisor. Although he could agree that the trigger point for the reactions all appeared to occur when he tried to provide direction or feedback, he didn't understand why they were not receptive to his attempts to help. After all, he had seniority in the department and was well versed in the various functions represented by the team. Given that the team supervisor was engaged in a big project that had him increasingly disconnected from the team, John believed he was filling the gap in leadership and acting in a professional and responsible manner. He believed his knowledge and experience should have been welcomed, respected, and appreciated.

The cognitive audit began with the identification of priming questions from the coach to isolate the potential reasons why he was not experiencing the intended reactions. Initial priming questions included:

- What do you believe are the reasons team members are not receptive to your feedback and instruction?
- Putting aside the fact that you are not their formal supervisor, what else could be getting in the way of their willingness or ability to receive your feedback and direction?

These priming questions helped John to identify, with coaching assistance, additional questions that he wanted to take the time and fully consider including:

- How do I think I come off to my co-workers and what evidence do I have that this is actually the case?
- What are some of the factors that may be contributing to their perceptions of me and which ones can I influence?
- What do I really want for myself in these interactions with my co-workers?
- What do I really want for my coworkers and how would I act if I really wanted these things to happen?

Over the course of several weeks, John thought about these questions and captured his responses in a journal. He shared his journal entries as part of the coaching sessions. To help clarify and expand thinking, the coach would push back on some of John's answers or prompt him to more deeply think about his responses to gain additional or more complete levels of insight. John responded well to the journaling activity and even admitted that it was the first time in his career that he had actually taken the time to consider how he thought and behaved in a structured way.

Our research has shown, time and again, that employing a reflective practice prompts deep thinking about the self, the context, and the challenge.

Over time, John was able to come to an understanding that it was his approach to his peers that was the true barrier to influence. Through the coaching experience, he acknowledged that he typically offered his direction and feedback whether solicited by others or not. He discovered that his timing wasn't optimal, often providing feedback and direction after a missed deadline or a mistake rather than as guidance before action was taken. Eventually, he even developed awareness that his style of communication, characterized by a fast and urgent tone and an over-reliance on declarations rather than questions, was off-putting to virtually everyone. At the end of the coaching intervention, John completely adjusted his approach and repositioned himself from a person who imposed his approach on everyone to one who was a valuable resource if assistance was needed. He worked actively to change the tone and pace of his speech and he began to be more cognizant of the statements he made and the questions he asked; making sure he did the latter with greater frequency than the former. He is well on his way to being viewed as a trusted and valuable colleague.

Our research has shown, time and again, that employing a reflective practice prompts deep thinking about the self, the context, and the challenge. This thinking then invariably leads to better analysis, decision-making, improved influence, and more effective outcomes. Consider employing a reflective practice the next time you feel stuck, have a persistent problem, need to prepare for a tough conversation, or when you want to identify why you aren't getting the reaction you expect from others. The answer may very well lie deep within. ■