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## Reflective Practice For Leadership (RPL)

Item Type	capstone;article
Authors	Bedingfield, Sarah
Download date	2025-02-07 10:35:43
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/4553">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/4553</a>

Reflective Practice for Leadership (RPL)

Final Report

June 9, 2011

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## Preface

Great Bay Community College (GBCC) is one of seven campuses within the Community College System of New Hampshire. The campus is located in Portsmouth, in an area referred to as the *Pease International Tradeport*. This location was once home to the Pease Air Force Base which closed in 1991. Over the next two decades, the base slowly converted to office, commercial, educational, and industrial space. What was once a military hospital is now Great Bay Community College, a vibrant educational institution that enrolls over 2000 students from southeastern New Hampshire as well as Southern Maine and Northern Massachusetts.

The President of Great Bay Community College is Will Arvelo. Upon his arrival in 2007, President Arvelo dedicated himself to transforming the college, beginning with its location, name and physical appearance. Since that time, the President has shifted his attention internally, cultivating a supportive environment for professional growth. It is important to President Arvelo that GBCC create opportunities for individuals to explore and nurture their leadership potential. After several discussions regarding the *Community College Leadership Academy* (CCLA) project, the President gave his support for creating a forum for individuals to engage in systematic contemplation of their thoughts and actions, as well as invite the insights and opinions of others. The project was named, *Reflective Practice for Leadership*. Why reflective practice? Individuals who reflect upon their beliefs and assumptions, their work environments, relationships with colleagues, and professional goals are better equipped to make critical decisions. It is through listening, questioning, reflecting, and strategizing that individuals explore their leadership capacities.

“I define reflective practice as about helping people to reflect on their experience of themselves and each other in the work place in a way that builds self-insight and awareness so that people have increased choices about action” (Miller, 2007, p. 367).

### **Introduction**

An examination of the literature reveals that *Reflective Practice* (RP) is a term with many different meanings. Depending upon the context and purpose, RP could mean simply thinking about something to engaging in a well-defined and carefully crafted exercise (Loughran, 2002). The Reflective Practice project described in this document leans towards a well-crafted exercise, a structured and collaborative approach to solving professional dilemmas. Dewey (2010) suggests that the exercise is actually one of suspending judgment or action until such time more information is gathered and examined. The idea is to engage in a process of active inquiry in an effort to generate new information to support or dispute existing thoughts or practices (Dewey, 2010). In this way, professionals become more intentional in their actions and mindful of the outcomes (Pellicier,2008).

Reflective Practice can occur individually, with a partner, or within a group. For the purpose of this project, reflective practice is a collective inquiry and exploration of the knowledge, skills and behaviors that support leadership development. Within the context of a group, individuals critically examine why certain situations result in stress, confusion, or concern and what strategies exist to bring resolution or clarity to the presenting issue. Essential to the success of RP is the creation of a confidential space where group members can ask for help in dealing with problems that arise in their daily lives. Reflective Practice allows individuals to examine their thoughts and actions with the encouragement and support of colleagues who often struggle with similar questions and dilemmas. According to Miller (2005), the value in reflective practice is in gaining insight into personal strengths and challenges. It is a journey of individual

growth through self-awareness and self-discovery. Group members are encouraged to use the skills and wisdom of the group to critically think their way towards a solution or decision. This alone can be anxiety producing, but tough decisions are often disquieting and learning to reflect on and about them is a valuable leadership skill.

Keeping in mind that the goal of this Reflective Practice project is to allow individuals to explore their leadership capacities, RP becomes a vehicle for solving existing problems as well as cultivating the skills of cognitive flexibility, critical thinking, active listening, and strategic decision-making. In this spirit, the project is referred to as *Reflective Practice for Leadership* (RPL). There two major goals for RPL are: (1) to create a forum for exploring leadership capacity; and (2) to identify topics for a leadership development program. The forum, or reflective practice group, represents a grass roots effort to flush out those issues with which GBCC employees struggle. These issues will subsequently provide substance for a leadership program on a more global scale.

## Literature Review

Experience alone is not enough to generate learning, there must be present an element of reflection that accompanies the experience. Through reflection, individuals make meaning from their experiences and use that information to guide subsequent action (Daudelin, 1996). Without reflection to stimulate learning from experience, actions and thought patterns might not inherently link to affect change (Osterman, 1990). In the words of Daudelin (1996), "Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self...learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behavior" (p. 39). Looman (2003) suggests that reflection is actually a form of metacognition in which individuals think about their thinking relative to a particular idea or action. This metacognitive process is a first step in formulating solutions to particular problems or challenges. In an age of increasing demands for accountability among school leaders, the need to generate innovative solutions to complex issues has never been more important (Barnett and Mahony, 2006; Dimova & Loughran, 2009). Reflection allows professionals to remain receptive and flexible in their responses to external challenges and pressures. A review of the literature, however, reveals that reflection or reflective practice is often misunderstood or misinterpreted as merely a thinking exercise (Domova & Loughran, 2009). The reality is that reflection, as a construct, is much more complex. Kottkmap (1990) refers to reflection as a "cycle of paying deliberate, analytical attention to one's own actions in relation to intentions...for the purpose of expanding one's option and making decision about improved ways of acting" (p. 183). The key is in the connection between thought and action; between knowledge and application.

John Dewey, a philosopher, psychologist and educator in the late twentieth century, moved reflection beyond the value of thinking for thinking's sake, to the value of thinking to

inform action (Dimova & Loughran, 2009). Dewey felt that the application of reflection was critical; each new reflection informing a new action which in turn contributed to a more knowledgeable and skillful practitioner (Dimova & Loughran, 2009). Building on Dewey's ideas of reflection as being purposeful, Donald Schön crafted the concepts of "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" to infer a continuous cycle of mindful activity (Dimova & Loughran, 2009). It is not difficult to see that the intersection of reflection and action is well suited for educational environments as witnessed in a substantial amount of educational research dedicated to the improvement of pedagogical practice through reflection (Husu et al., 2008; Loughran, 2002). Additionally, reflective practice has been "harnessed" as a leadership tool to examine challenging work-based problems and situations (Boucher, 2007; Daudelin, 1996; Hill, R. 2005). The frequent use of reflective practice overtime however, in both educational and corporate settings, has resulted in multiple terms being generated for what appears to be similar intentions.

### **Reflective Practice and Leadership**

A review of the extent literature provides a representative sample of the various terms being used to represent the construct of reflective practice: inquiry orientation (Brookfield, 1998; Corcoran, 2003); collaborative inquiry (Weinbaum et al., 2004); metacognitive process (Looman, 2003); synergy between cognitive and emotional mental processes (Looman, 2003); reflective dialogue (Nehring et al., 2010); mindful consideration of one's actions (Osterman, 1990); communities of practice (Miller, 2005), guided reflection (Husu et al., 2008); and systematic reflection (Rodgers, 2002). While it is difficult to know if John Dewey's original intent for reflection has been preserved in these various iterations, the terms suggest common themes of mindfulness and inquiry. These two themes are present in a study by Stoeckel and Davies (2007), in which eight community college presidents were interviewed regarding their

personal experiences with self-reflection. To these presidents, mindfulness meant being thoughtful and deliberately attentive to the needs of the self, others, and the environment. Inquiry meant taking personal inventory of the values and life-experiences that served to shape their "vocational calling". A third and important theme was authenticity, doing things that are congruent with personal values. Consistency and congruency between internal beliefs and external actions are important to the quality and integrity of the output (Corcoran, 2003). According to Pellicier (2008) authenticity is the hallmark of a good leader. Being willing to struggle and agonize over decisions demonstrates a genuine caring for the consequences and a willingness to explore alternative options. Pellicier goes on to say that individuals who fail to give thoughtful consideration to their actions are at risk for limited, if not stunted, growth as leaders. His testimony is rather profound, "I know many so-called experienced leaders who, rather than having twenty-five years of experience, have one year of experience twenty-five times. That is what happens to leaders who act and react without reflecting" (p. 153).

In the absence of reflection, leaders rarely challenge their own assumptions and practices, and are unable to recognize distorted, if not dangerous ways of being (Densten & Gray, 2001; Brookfield, 1998). Brookfield (1998) suggests that the individual who fails to reflect is actually "crippled" in his or her attempt to resolve a problem. Reflection is dynamic, allowing leaders to shift positions and navigate different contexts and challenges, armed with multiple insights and ideas. For developing leaders, trial and error needs to be followed up with a reflective process that allows for an analysis of the transpired events (Daudelin, 1996). Leaders who understand that their development is ongoing will engage in active reflection as an adaptive function to contextual problems and challenges. In this way, leaders continue to grow and become cognizant of their personal strengths and challenges. Moreover, they model a leadership style



that supports inquiry, authenticity, and reality-based decision making. Good leaders continually reframe what they know and need to know to address current challenges (Densten and Gray, 2001). It's about being open to ongoing learning through continual review of personal assumptions and current practices. Leaders who adopt a learning perspective are open to transformative experiences (Amey, 2004). Transformation is about change and through reflective practice, the individual can confront and respond to change in healthy and inspiring ways. In truth, reflective practice is a system for change, helping individuals to expand their thinking (Rogers, 2001) and consequently, consider alternative perspectives and actions (Osterman, 1990).

### **Reflective Practice and Constructivism**

At the heart of reflective practice is a constructivist approach which is critical for learning and growing as an instructional or institutional leader (Densten and Gray, 2001; Kinsella, 2006; Nehring et al., 2010; Osterman, 1990; and Schön, 1983). A constructivist approach starts with the self in examining personal values and beliefs, but gains momentum towards new knowledge and skills through collegial and collaborative inquiry and dialogue that expands the individual's world view (Osterman, 1990). The problem with reflecting alone, however, is that the individual is limited by the boundaries of his or her own thinking (Jindal-Snape & Holmes, 2009).

Reflective discourse opens up new possibilities. Schön (1983) credits the reflective conversation in helping the practitioner to reframe the problem. By reconstructing a different lens through which to examine the issue, he or she makes available additional options for resolution.

Constructivism, as a learning theory, emphasizes facilitated learning; it is about accessing the sources and resources that allow for the creation of new knowledge (Kaminiski, 2011).

Reflective practice that engages peers in constructive dialogue around specific topics are

purposefully and meaningfully assisting individuals to connect new insights to existing or prior knowledge, thereby improving their ability to respond to challenging situations effectively and appropriately.

Talking to colleagues about what we do unravels the shroud of silence in which our practice is wrapped. Participating in critical conversation with peers opens us up to their versions of events we have experienced. Our colleagues serve as critical mirrors reflecting back to us images of our actions that often take us by surprise. As they describe their own experiences dealing with the same crises and dilemmas that we face, we are able to check, reframe, and broaden our own theories of practice. (Brookfield, 1998, p. 200)

Reflective practice is particularly helpful in addressing situations that demand attention and action; the insight gained from the reflective dialogue allows for alternative solutions to emerge, thus increasing the individual's options for action (Miller, 2005).

Rogers (2001) indicates that those experiences that demand a person's attention are often those that cause him or her some level of uncertainty or anxiety, and that perhaps challenge existing values, beliefs and assumptions. The discomfort is enough to initiate reflective thought in an attempt to make sense of what has transpired and what needs to happen next. Osterman (1990) recognizes the problem approach as a pathway to new knowledge, as opposed to "dirty linen" that must be hidden from public view. This is particularly important because many problems are "often rooted in the system, rather than in personal inadequacies" (p. 138).

The experience of problem-solving challenges the individual to exercise critical thinking in developing a solution. The learning as a result of this reflection manifests as action or application of new strategies. Hart (1990) believes thinking improves action and that "developing the habit

of reflecting on what one knows before and while acting, improves the quality and creativity of choices and eventually contributes to the knowledge available in subsequent choices" (p. 153).

### **Reflective Practice and Professional Development**

The field of education, in particular, has seen growth in the area of reflective practice as a professional development strategy for students and educators (Osterman, 1990). This is particularly true in teacher preparation programs where students are in the process of developing their "craft"(Osterman, 1990). Among school and college faculty, reflective practice in the form of "collaborative inquiry" has also received attention. Collaborative inquiry is characterized by groups of colleagues focused on issues of teaching and learning (Weinbaum, et al., 2004). Through these forums, teachers draw upon the experience of others in order to enhance their own practice or art. In a study by Short and Rinehart (2005), ten graduate students in a doctoral program engaged in reflective practice over the course of one year. In this case study, they used a *critical incident* protocol and reflective journaling. Over time, "students demonstrated a difference in the complexity of their thinking about specific problems and resolutions" (p. 519). They had begun to develop the expertise required of their positions within their respective institutional settings. Daudelin (1996) discovered the benefits of reflection in helping managers within a business setting to cope with rapidly changing environments. She found reflective practice to be a responsive and flexible system for dealing with, and learning from, day-to-day issues. Amey (2004) supports the use of reflection among community college leaders as a means of extending personal knowledge and skills. Transformation truly occurs when leaders admit to their own limitations and actively seek new ideas, insights and strategies.

While people engage in reflection individually and one-on-one, the advantage of small groups is in the access to new perspectives; to learn from the creativity and expertise of others

(Stoeckel& Davies, 2007). Smyth and Cherry (2005) would agree that reflecting in the company of others is indeed a powerful practice. They suggest that people are most helpful to each other when they allow themselves to be vulnerable; "to lean into the experience and learn together" (p. 274). Being a fan of Dewey, Rogers (2002) felt strongly that Dewey knew that a function of the group was to poke holes in an individual's logic or thinking about a particular event or dilemma. Considering that reflection takes its direction from ancient Greeks, such as Socrates, it is not surprising that reflective practice is characterized by a "Socratic" method of dialogue which involves careful listening and active questioning (Barnett & Mahony, 2006; Daudelin, 1996; Stoeckel& Davies, 2007). It is this act of persistent questioning that forces individuals to closely examine their way of thinking or responding to a specific situation. Reflective practice in the company of others is often referred to as reflective dialogue (Nehring et al., 2010). The key to success is the exchange, where colleagues or friends examine thoughts and behaviors together. The collective perspectives and experiences can cause profound shifts in thinking or action. Although reflection might start as a solitary experience, its transition to a collegial conversation opens up possibilities for options that fit the dilemma (Brookfield, 1998). When the dialogue is structured, as is in the use of "dialogic protocols", patterns of conversation promote even deeper understanding and learning (Nehring et al., 2010).

Dialogic protocols provide structure for the reflective process. The protocol is designed to influence patterns of conversation as well as conversational dynamics (Nehring et al., 2010). Dewey might even say that systematic reflection is rooted in scientific methods that require precise steps (Rodgers, 2002). In a text-based protocol for example, three groups of educators, made significant transformations in their thinking as a result of their interactions with each other and a particular text (Nehring et al., 2010). This study emphasized the success of moving

beyond "normal" discussions to those that fostered active listening and probing questions. These structured experiences are useful in guiding people towards a deeper analysis of the problem and expanded view of solutions (Rogers, 2001). In controlling discussion patterns, the collective wisdom of the group can propel the individual towards new insights (Nehring et al., 2010).

"When sharing takes place in a public forum, with other like-minded colleagues, the process of communication leads not only to new knowledge but to greater understanding of others as well as understanding of self" (Osterman, 1990, p. 139). Rogers (2001) warns, however, that the individuals must be open to the experience and willing to shift their thinking about what brought them to the group. Reflective practice groups can challenge conventional ways of thinking and doing, and being open to new perspectives is paramount to personal growth (Hart, 1990).

In support of life-long learning and continued professional growth, Osterman (1990) encourages institutions to create reflective practice forums to construct new and better ways of doing business. Amey (2004) takes this directive to a deeper level, suggesting that college leaders and developing leaders establish a culture of inquiry that fosters individual and collective responsibility for organizational decisions. Through inquiry, interpersonal dialogue and intrapersonal reflection, leaders amass a repertoire of knowledge, skills and alternative perspectives that are useful in generating forward thinking strategies, particularly useful during tough times. Professional development through reflective practice has no limits as long as the individual actively engages in the learning experience, is willing to shed old assumptions and remains open to new viewpoints. Brookfield (1998) suggests that within the context of the group or forum, leaders examine the "interpretive filters" that influence how they interact with others and how they make decisions. In many ways, reflective practice acts as a vehicle for transformation, providing opportunities to "try on" different lenses and make decisions about

which to keep and which to discard. Reflective practice is about enrichment, it is about becoming a stronger and more skillful practitioner. It is about using the collective wisdom of the group to formulate strategies and ideas. Ultimately, it is about exploring the self and the self's capacity to tap into the human capital present within the group, and to use that experience to move forward as a more capable and competent individual.

Reflective practice affirms individual potential. Good leaders recognize and support human potential; empowering individuals is empowering the institution. This in turn engenders a culture of trust and respect (Day, 2000; Looman, 2003). In this 21st century, successful and flexible organizations are those with strong human potential (Looman, 2003). In academia, the strength of the institution is highly connected to the faculty and staff, the work that they do and the habits they cultivate, particularly in times of stress and uncertainty. Through reflective practice, members of the community experience a sense of empowerment and confidence to weather difficult times and capitalize on more profitable times. College presidents, in particular, benefit most from a mindset that allows them to move beyond a "one best way" approach to a collective wisdom that fosters contextual, critical, and alternative thinking (Haruna, 2000). According to Schön (1983), unique problems require alternative strategies to solve them. In this way, professionals learn to be flexible, creative, and innovative (Schön, 1983). Reflective practice in higher education promotes resiliency and resourcefulness; qualities needed to address the multitude of challenges and issues related to the academy (Rogers, 2001).

## **Project Description**

### **Preparation**

The project began with an information session, on November 19, 2010. The purpose of the information session was to give all faculty and staff at Great Bay Community College (GBCC) an opportunity to learn more about Reflective Practice for Leadership (RPL) prior to making a decision to join (or not join) this activity. All faculty and staff that work at GBCC were invited to join; reflective leadership was not defined by position or title. The assumption in doing so was that people engage in leadership activities at any point in the organizational chart (Mirsalimi & Hunter, 2006). The information session was initially promoted four weeks prior to the event in a department newsletter. As a follow-up reminder, an electronic flyer was sent via email two weeks later. For the information session, a PowerPoint presentation was prepared in anticipation of the types of questions that might emerge: (1) what is Reflective Practice (RP); (2) why is leadership the focus of RP; (3) why is RP important; and (4) how does RP work.

Twelve people showed up for the presentation and four additional college members indicated an interest, but were unable to attend. In total, 16 faculty, staff, and administrators expressed a desire to participate in Reflective Practice for Leadership (RPL). Among the group was advisors, admissions representatives, faculty, registrar, librarian, two Vice Presidents and the Chief Financial Officer. The college President attended the introductory session, but did not participate in the monthly sessions. His presence demonstrated support for the project and an implicit acceptance of employee participation. At the end of the introductory meeting, the participants agreed that the next steps were to: (1) establish the ground rules or “group norms” that would guide the RPL sessions; (2) divide the group into two smaller groups; (3) determine

who would be the “coach” for each group; and (4) review the “consultancy” protocol. We agreed to meet again on December 17, 2010.

The first task at the December meeting was to brainstorm group norms (see Appendix A). Everyone participated in drafting norms in three areas: interpersonal, procedural, and product oriented (Behling et al., 2006). Interpersonal refers to the ways in which members of the group interact with each other. Procedural refers to the logistics of the group process and product oriented refers to quality assurance, or how participants demonstrate their investment in the outcome. Once the group norms were established, it was time to divide the participants into two smaller groups. The recommended number of persons for an effective reflective practice group is eight to ten (Behling et al., 2006), so the 16 interested persons, were split into two equal groups. For this type of activity, smaller numbers allow for greater cohesion, safety, trust and individual participation. An additional, and equally important reason for dividing the larger group in half, was to allow employees with direct supervisors to separate, thereby “freeing” them to be more open and honest. The third activity was to select a "coach" for each group that would be responsible for enforcing the group norms and facilitating the reflective process using the approved protocol. The fourth and final activity that occurred on December 17, 2010 was a review of the protocol or structure that would guide the RPL process (see Appendix B).

The "consultancy" protocol (Behling et al., 2006) was chosen as the most appropriate protocol for RPL as it encourages individuals to think more expansively about the topics they bring to the group. The consultancy protocol provides structure for the dedicated time (one hour), allowing the group to work through a problem or issue with focus and intensity. The groups agreed that they would use the discussion forum on Blackboard (Bb) to later process each RPL meeting, thus contributing to the third norm, the "product". An important feature of RPL is



to evaluate the efficacy of RPL in helping participants to meet their goals. It was believed that the diversity of participants and perspectives would generate substantive feedback for the development of a leadership program at GBCC. This was one of the desired outcomes of this project.

Initial feedback was collected in the form of a "participant questionnaire" (Behling et al., 2006). The responses about participant expectations for RPL fell into several themes: (1) improve leadership skills; (2) improve communication skills; (3) develop stronger relationships with colleagues; (4) engage in personal reflection; (5) establish a "tool box" for approaching problems; and (6) remain open to diverse perspectives and solutions. .

### **Reflective Practice Groups**

The Reflective Practice for Leadership (RPL) groups agreed to meet the third Friday of every month, starting January 21, 2011 and ending May 20, 2011. The two RPL groups met in separate locations in the building and were facilitated by a member from each group. The facilitators were referred to as "coaches" throughout the five months. From this point on, the groups will be referred to as Group A and Group B. Group A was coached by the Project Director and Community College Leadership Academy (CCLA) participant. Group B was coached by the Coordinator of the Advising Center at GBCC. The coaches were responsible for recruiting individuals from their respective groups to *present* each month. It was expected that each member of the group would in turn, bring a problem, issue, dilemma or question to the group for help in processing, resolving, or strategizing solutions. At the end of each RPL session, the coaches summarized the presentations and discussions on Blackboard (Bb). The person who presented was asked to follow-up on Bb with any reflection or action that he or she took towards further resolving the problem. Other group members were asked to contribute to

the thread of discussion, providing additional insights, ideas or comments. The use of Bb was especially helpful for the Project Director who could not be in two places at one time.

Blackboard provided a means to review topics that had been explored in Group B. Table 1 represents an overview of the topics, by titles, which were presented over the course of five months. The fifth month, May, proved to be a difficult month due to graduation activities.

Many participants were unable to meet so for those who could gather, the time was devoted to a review of the program.

<b>Group A</b>	<b>Group B</b>
Failing Grades	Team Meetings
Handling Disappointment	Lack of College Support
Novice Instructor	Feeling Blindsided
Electronic Communication	Leadership Insecurity

Table 1: Topics brought to reflective practice sessions by individual group members

**Failing Grades.** An adjunct instructor talked about the anguish she feels when administering an AF grade. An AF is given when a student has violated the course attendance policy. While she remains comfortable with the policy itself, she asked for help in dealing with the subsequent guilt that she did not do enough to “save” the student. The group helped this instructor to see that administering an AF grade is not necessarily a negative action. Although it might feel bad, for the student it might be the right thing to do. Students need to learn to take responsibility for their learning and this includes coming to class. A full-time faculty member and Department Chair shared his wisdom with this instructor, indicating that he shares her anguish but knows in certain circumstances, giving an AF is absolutely the right thing to do. He provided some insight regarding the student perspective, indicating that students are more judicious than we give them credit for and often understand the fairness of the grade. Additionally, failures often make us stronger, for both the teacher and student. The group

encouraged the adjunct instructor not to allow the emotional stress over a few students divert her attention away from all those who have benefited from her good instruction. When asked about the Department in which she teaches, and what was its philosophy or policy regarding AF grades, the adjunct instructor indicated that this topic had never come up at any of Department meeting. It was suggested that she bring the AF issue forward as an agenda item for the next meeting in the context of exploring best practices for retaining students in this particular major. What started off as a dilemma over a specific grade turned into a conversation about this adjunct taking a leadership role in requesting a collective conversation about how to better engage students in the curriculum so they do not end up on the AF list.

**Handling Disappointment.** A part-time employee was turned down for a position at the college and suffered a very defensive and emotional reaction to the outcome. The employee asked for help in handling emotional reactions and for remediating strained working relationships as a result of her outburst. Additionally, the staff member requested strategies for increasing her eligibility for future positions at the college. At the heart of the conversation was a feeling of inequity in the hiring process and the manner in which she was informed of the decision. She was angry with herself for allowing her emotions, in the heat of the moment, to hijack the clarity of her thinking. At this point in time she was looking for help on how to bring closure to this event in a productive way. The group was very helpful in assisting the employee to see the experience as a learning opportunity and to articulate what were the "take-away" lessons that would guide her in the future in similar situations. Additionally, the employee was given strategies for dealing with runaway emotions. Equally important to the individual, however, was being able to find her voice and express her opinions regarding the recent job outcome in a calm and rational manner. In the end, she was able to do this and came

away from that meeting feeling as though she had achieved a new level of professionalism. Part of the journey for this emerging leader, is to consciously raise the bar to a new standard of behavior.

**Novice Instructor.** A Department Chair asked for advice on how to handle a grading fiasco that occurred within the class of a new adjunct instructor. The adjunct instructor and the Department Chair disagreed on how to handle the issue. The Department Chair was torn between allowing the adjunct to learn by experience or to overrule in an effort to save the adjunct and students from what he perceived was a messy situation. The Department Chair has great admiration for this particular adjunct; he knows how hard it is to transition from a business to an instructional setting. The group discussed the situation, looking at such issues as critical thinking, learning opportunities, rigid vs. flexible mind-sets, course integrity, and student relationships. The Department Chair took this information back for a follow-up conversation, but still gave the adjunct room to make his final decision. In the end, the adjunct chose to follow the Department Chair's advice. What is important to acknowledge is that the Department Chair initially took a risk; he gave the new instructor an opportunity to discuss the situation and the room to make his own decisions. He showed both support and trust.

**Electronic Communication.** The Registrar for the college asked for perspective on a decision she made about dropping students from an off-campus course and how that decision was communicated to, and received by, the faculty member involved with the course. Confusion around process for registration and payment clouded the issue. All communications had taken place electronically, including the email to the faculty member that produced some negative exchanges regarding the tone of the email as well as the Registrar's role in making "executive decisions" without faculty input. After much questioning and processing of the situation, the

group agreed that the Registrar made the correct decision given the time constraints she was operating under. How her decision was communicated became the focal point as this person tends to be short and directive, not giving much attention to how the message is packaged. The Registrar sends volumes of emails daily; it is the most expedient way to send and receive information vital to her work. As she reflects back on the email in question, she felt her communication was curt and didn't consider the situation from another point of view. The registrar came to the conclusion that her emails are such a strong business function that they were void of any human element. The sterile nature of her messages left her particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation by others who look for cues in the emails that alert them to the "tone" or "spirit" of the communication.

**Team Meetings.** The Director of the Academic Support Center discussed her struggles with team (staff) meetings. The meetings run for almost two hours and during that time some participants go off topic, some monopolize the conversation, some become offended if others disagree with their ideas, and some remain voiceless as a result of the afore mentioned problems. The Director explained strategies to date that she had tried, but without much success. The group shared with the Director different ways to structure agendas, strategies for planning and preparing in advance of a meeting, and phrases to use to get team members back on task. The book, *The five Dysfunctions of a Team* was recommended as a valuable resource. The Director posted the following comment in Bb, "I have truly reflected on my role and responsibility in addressing these issues for and with the team". It is often assumed that as persons move into leadership positions that are competent in facilitating teams. *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni (2002) demonstrates that this is not always the case; it takes wisdom,

strategy and dedicated practice. And if we accept Lencioni's premise that there is power in teamwork, then professional development devoted to this function is certainly worthwhile.

**Lack of College Support.** The Transfer Coordinator had been given a directive by the college to increase student access to transfer information but felt completely unsupported in this charge. When attempting to host a transfer fair, she came up against numerous brick walls. She was denied the space she wanted, designated parking for the transfer agents, food for the transfer agents, and advertising on the web site. This individual asked the group for help in two directions: (1) sorting out what she could reasonably expect the college to support, and (2) learning to advocate for what she needs. This feeling of being unsupported had been going on for several years; the reflective practice group gave her the "green light" she had been waiting for to express her frustration. The group helped the Transfer Coordinator to wade through the brick walls and gain insight into why certain decisions might have been made, that at the time seemed counterproductive to her efforts. Additionally, the participants focused in on the skills sets of advocacy and assertiveness as well as negotiation. They helped the Coordinator to see which decisions were within her sphere of influence and which were not.

**Feeling Blindsided.** A Senior Administrator shared her experience of going to a meeting where she thought it would be just her and the President and found she was in the company of other administrators. The topic of discussion related specifically to an issue in her area and she resented being subjected to the judgment and scrutiny of others, particularly those who had nothing to do with her area of responsibility. In hindsight, it was determined that an email invitation to this meeting was confused with a different meeting, but the attending members were not dismissed at any point and no-one questioned whether or not he or she should be there. She endured the questioning with grace, but left angry and hurt. It was too late to do anything about

the event, but the administrator asked for perspective; were her feelings legitimate? Should she have addressed the situation as it was happening? Now that the meeting is over, should she say something to the President? The group recognized that this way of doing business does not happen on a regular basis and to accept it as a "freak" occurrence. Nevertheless, the group acknowledged her feelings and gave her language to use should she ever find herself in a similar situation. As for a meeting with the President, the group asked her to reflect on what she hoped for an outcome and to make her decision based on reasonable goals for that dialogue. Additionally, did she trust her relationship with the President enough to know she could enter into a sensitive conversation and be heard.

**Leadership Insecurity.** The Coordinator of the Advising Center (AC) expressed concern about her leadership capacity for the Center. She talked about her relationship with her staff members, her work output, her relationship with faculty, and her ability to deal with the stress of limited resources. She also mentioned some difficulty in working with a staff member who had been at the college a longer time and used her seniority to undermine the operations of the Center. The AC Coordinator struggled with defining her role, oscillating between friend and supervisor and feeling they could not co-exist. She expressed a need to be more directive and assertive, but was afraid she would be perceived as not caring. The AC Coordinator asked the group to help give shape and form to her leadership style and identify her strengths and weaknesses. What the group did was enter into a conversation about the Advising Center, and asked her to describe a successful operation. The members then asked her how she would work to achieve that vision, what were the potential barriers, and how would she deal with those barriers. The group helped the AC Coordinator to focus less on leadership styles and more on working with her team to get the job done. They advised her to give herself the time and space

to experiment, to try different strategies and approaches that serve to influence others. The members also encouraged her to ask for help from her staff and allow them to be part of the developmental process. In time, a leadership style will form that fits and feels right, but she must first let go of her preconceived ideas about what she "should" be and remain open to the learning experience.

The goal of this project was to capture the “stories” of participating members and extract from them the ideas and themes that could be used to design a college leadership program. Upon reviewing the various problems and situations that employees wrestled with, it became clear that many of the root causes feeding the distress would make legitimate topics for discussion and/or training. It's important to note that the majority of leadership dilemmas that emerged through RPL targeted people and processes. According to Bess and Dee (2007) these are leadership problems aimed at the managerial level as opposed to the institutional level. Considering that the composition of the groups was comprised largely of middle managers, this is not a surprising outcome. This does not negate the need for leadership development for as these individuals become better skilled in sound leadership practices, they will be better prepared to move into positions of great complexity and responsibility. Table 2 represents a list of topics that might comprise a partial list for leadership development.

<b>Leadership Topics</b>	
Engaging Students	Facilitating Team Meetings
Runaway Emotions	Advocacy, Assertiveness and Negotiation
Supervising the Novice	Tough Conversations
Communication and Conflict	Leadership as a Developmental Process

Table 2: Leadership Development Topics



## Evaluation

On the last meeting date, group members were asked to provide feedback regarding their experience with RPL. When asked what they enjoyed about the group experience, the top five responses were: (1) the camaraderie and collegiality; (2) listening and learning from the different perspectives; (3) the safe and supportive environment; (4) getting feedback and concrete suggestions; and (5) the opportunity to be “reflective”. One participant said, “The one hour I spend here gives me an opportunity to breathe and think about my goals”. Another participant said, “I like that the sessions brought different spins to a situation”. When asked what they found challenging about the group experience with RPL, the top four responses were: (1) poor attendance among a few people; (2) determining if a problem was appropriate for public examination; (3) getting a member to “present” each session; and (4) following up on Blackboard (Bb). Collectively, everyone agreed that they learned something they could take back into their working environment. One participant said, “I learned the difference between clarifying and probing questions and have started using these with students”. Another member said, “It is nice as a participant to hear what others are wrestling with; this helps me see the college through a broader lens”. All participating members agreed they would participate in a future reflective practice group should the opportunity arise, but without the Bb component. Group members did not have the time or interest in following up on Bb and felt that any reflection regarding the sessions could be handled in subsequent sessions.

Relevant to the "participant questionnaire" administered at the start of the program, group members were asked to acknowledge whether or not the program had met their expectations. A review of the top six expectations reveals that participants hoped to: (1) improve leadership skills; (2) improve communication skills; (3) develop stronger relationships with colleagues; (4)

engage in personal reflection; (5) establish a "tool box" for approaching problems; and (6) remain open to diverse perspectives and solutions. It was very clear from the comments that the small groups generated a sense of collegiality and camaraderie. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics and the vulnerability present within the room, a sense of connection developed quickly. One person said it succinctly, "there was a wall of confidentiality that I knew could not be breached and this gave me the confidence to share my situation". The spirit of "we are in this together" quickly emerged; people were eager and willing to help each other resolve the presenting issues.

Regarding leadership, it was less apparent to the participants if they had made progress in this area. Certainly, the reflective practice groups allowed the participants to evaluate their strengths and limitations in addressing various issues. And yet, as they waded around in the day-to-day problems, individuals were less inclined to believe they were developing leadership capacities. And yet, leadership development is implicit in the exercise of reflective practice, evolves over time as the individual continues to engage in situations that challenge him or her to grow in new ways. As the months ensued, it became apparent to the Project Director that in future groups, more explicit statements need to be made about the role of RP in nurturing leadership potential: (1) leadership is a learning activity, it is never finished; (2) leadership can be found in the smallest of tasks, e.g., each time an individual group member assists another to reframe a problem or strategize a new solution, he or she is taking a leadership role; and (3) leadership often requires stepping back from the problem and grasping the bigger picture. Leadership is about transforming one's reality (Amey, 2004).

### **Limitations of the Project**

Each group started with eight members but this number quickly dwindled to six and sometimes four. The groups were able to function with four; the real issue was whether or not to allow sporadic attendance. Group B felt that random attendance among a few members disrupted the flow and cohesion of the group. This group was also concerned that “no-show” members had access to Bb which meant access to information that they did not hear or participate in first-hand. This suggests that access to the topics brought to the group, in the spirit of confidentiality and collegiality, is privileged to those who attend. The intent of Bb for this particular project was to allow the Project Director access to Group B’s discussions as well as provide a forum for ongoing conversation about the topics. This idea did not produce the desired results. The coach from Group B forgot to post summaries and members in both groups did not participate in any ongoing conversation. The project Director ended up interviewing the coach from Group B to get a handle on the topics and discussions.

A second limitation was the composition of the two groups. Every attempt was made to separate supervisors from their direct reports. To a large extent this was accomplished. But in each group, there was a participating Vice-President and while the VP was not a direct supervisor, they did represent senior administration and positions of power that a few members experienced as intimidating. This resulted in some reservation in not only bringing forward problems for presentation, but in responding to other people’s problems. Members who felt a sense of unease were much quieter and more conservative in their contributions to group discussions. Group A asked their participating Vice-President how he felt about the issue. He concurred that having a senior administrator among the participants could be awkward, but felt it depended upon the person. The feelings of intimidation or fear of retribution might change with

the participating administrator, but theoretically these worries should be controlled for by the group norms. The VP said it was a good experience for him to practice listening and responding without prejudice. Nevertheless, he felt conflicted about presenting due to the sensitive and confidential nature of the problems with which he is involved. The group helped him see he could bring in past “cases” and reflect back on them in light of decisions made and perhaps gain new insight and perspective as a result of the group’s help. While cross representation between faculty and staff did not present as any problem, and in fact was welcomed, it may be that lateral integration is easier to handle than vertical integration. This is something to consider when forming future RP groups.

A third limitation was recruiting group members to present. There was an expectation that everyone would take a turn in the “hot seat”, but many members were reluctant to share their problems. Others were uncertain if their issues were “appropriate” for RPL. One member suggested handing out a worksheet in the beginning that might help members to flush out issues or concerns and/or stimulate thinking about specific topics.

The fourth and final limitation was protocol fidelity. An individual volunteered to be the “coach” for Group B but found herself getting so involved in the discussions that she lost sight of the protocol. This issue raises the question about how much the group facilitator should be engaged in the conversation. Coach involvement in the protocol is another item to consider when moving forward with another reflective practice group.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The employees at Great Bay Community College that participated in the Reflective Practice for Leadership Program enjoyed their experience and have requested that the program continue in the next academic year. It is clear from the comments that the participants appreciated the opportunity to break away from their routines for one hour each month to engage

in reflection. Highlights of the program were the connections between members of the college community that might not otherwise have happened, and the opportunities to tackle pressing issues and concerns. Based on member comments and project limitations, the following changes would be made to the program: (1) groups of eight to ten people will be initially formed to allow for attrition; (2) members must agree to take a turn presenting an issue or problem; (3) members will not be required to post on Blackboard but instead, a section of the protocol will be devoted to follow-up; and (4) group coaches will receive more training. Regarding group composition, every effort will be made to separate supervisors from their direct reports, but in some cases, it will be difficult to separate employees from more senior administrators. The group norms are designed to mitigate feelings of uneasiness, fear, or intimidation. The diverse perspectives that result from a cross representation is critical to the success of the program. The final recommendation is to consider a reflective practice group that meets every three weeks in order to promote greater continuity and sense of belonging. According to Boucher (2007), meeting every three weeks for a minimum of twelve meetings is considered an optimal number for developing the level of trust and coherence necessary for the kind of reflective work being requested of group members. This time line might also be necessary to achieve the second project outcome, developing a leadership training agenda. Five months was not enough to get a comprehensive understanding of the scope of issues within the institution; more time is needed to identify where topics begin to repeat and overlap.

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Appendix A  
Group Norms

## **Group Norms (ground rules)**

### **Interpersonal**

Confidentiality MUST be respected at ALL times.

Keep an open mind about the process and the product.

Give constructive and respectful feedback

Respect the experience that the presenter brings to the group.

View the membership in terms of diversity, not hierarchy.

Remember that this is not a “whining” session; keep discussions productive.

Feedback should be free of judgment or criticism.

Approach the task objectively; stay emotionally detached.

Be open and honest in your responses while maintaining respect for the topic and presenter.

Be aware of body language, including facial expressions and posturing.

Avoid the words “should” and “shouldn’t” when giving feedback.

### **Procedural (Coach will help with these)**

Be on time.

Stay within the time frame of one hour.

Stay on topic.

Get through the whole protocol.

Allow everyone an opportunity to speak.

Allow one voice at a time to be heard.

Start with positive feedback.

### **Product Oriented**

Be committed to attending the meetings.

Be committed to the process.

Use the Bb discussion board for follow-up reflections.

## Appendix B

### Reflective Practice for Leadership Group Meeting

#### Overview of Protocol and Role of Coach

December, 17, 2010

## Reflective Practice for Leadership (RPL)

Friday, December 17, 2010

### AGENDA

1. **Establish Group Norms (ground rules).** Why is this important?
  - a. Allows the protocol to run more efficiently and effectively.
  - b. They address problem areas before they become problems.
  - c. Create an environment that is conducive to risk taking.
  - d. 3 types of ground rules: procedural, interpersonal, and product-oriented.
    - i. Procedural: logistical. Example: the case for the next month's meeting will be sent out to everyone 3 days prior to the meeting.
    - ii. Interpersonal: interaction. Example: frame your disagreement so that it targets the issue and not the person.
    - iii. Product Oriented: quality assurance. Example: don't skip the debriefing.
  
2. **Exploring the Protocol (process guidelines).** Why do we need a protocol?
  - a. The structure allows for designated periods of speaking and listening.
  - b. The structure prevents a few people from dominating the conversation.
  - c. The structure minimizes the vulnerability of the speaker....there is safety in the process.
  - d. Encourages respectful, as well as productive, conversation.

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**Consultancy Protocol:** A process that allows for an individual to think more expansively about a particular problem or dilemma, or anything related to your work for which you would like “experience-based” perspective.

- **Presentation of issue: 5 to 10 minutes** (overview, highlighting the area of struggle or concern)
- **Clarifying questions: 5 minutes** (brief, factual answers).
- **Probing questions: 10 minutes** (to help expand thinking on topic)
- **Discussion: 15 minutes** (members of the group, not presenter)
- **Presenter Response: 5 to 10 minutes** (reflects on what he/she heard)
- **Debrief: 5 minutes:** (observation of process)

**Caveat:** The reflective practice experience works best when the presenter brings something to the group that he/she is struggling with or puzzled by; something for

which a solution has not yet been determined. Additionally, the presenter and group members should not expect or consider solutions that ask “others” to change.

### **3. Role of the Coach (facilitator)**

- a. Enforce group norms.
  - b. Keep the group on track with protocol.
  - c. Monitor time.
  - d. Encourage constructive communication.
  - e. Address destructive communication.
  - f. Support group logistics.
- 
- g. Resist taking things personally; understand that individual/group frustration is part of the process.
  - h. Recognize when the group is stuck; it is OK to “park” the issue for another time.
  - i. Avoid “knee jerk” reactions to individual/group emotions; maintain a level of objectivity.
  - j. Celebrate baby steps and milestones.

See handout for more information about “Coaching”.

Source: Behling, K., Weir, C., & Jorgensen, C. (2006). *Reflective practice implementation guide: A tool for college faculty*. A Publication of the Institute on Disability, University of New Hampshire.



