

## **The Nature of Knowledge, Reflective Practitioners, and the Value of Experience**

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I agree with McCall's passionate essay advocating experience as the centerpiece of leadership development. There is something deeper, however, in McCall's essay about the nature of knowledge and why experiential knowledge is more valued than explicit, technical knowledge (and the vehicles used to present such knowledge such as training and competency models that McCall decries). One reason is the tighter linkage between thought and action than typically presumed by academics and HR professionals. In other words, knowledge is revealed through intelligent action, such as a superb musical rendition or a brilliantly delivered lecture. Knowing is doing. Our knowledge is embedded in action and in most cases action is spontaneous and owes little to conscious deliberation (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Our intelligence is revealed through competent performance and is difficult to describe discursively (Wilson, 2002).

This knowing-in-action is developed through more experience (or practice). We begin to see situations the same way as mature professionals and develop intuitions about the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in a professional context. The practice of leadership does not involve knowing formalized knowledge but rather is the skilled "in-situ coping and making do" (Chia & Holt, 2006, 2008). Through experience we begin to behave more intelligently in the world without having a formalized theory of it (Dreyfus, 1997). In other words, our knowledge is tacit and is not achieved through cognitive effort or articulation and codification. This is contrary to the academic and competency models of leadership that McCall finds lacking, and is

frustrating to those seeking reflective answers about practices from executives. Just as McCall says, “You don’t have to spend too much time around managers and executives to notice that reflection is not their strength” (20). Their knowledge is largely tacit and they are unable to articulate what it is they are doing—their knowledge is in action.

Second, much of McCall’s plea of learning from experience mirrors the work completed by Donald Schön and others on developing the “reflective practitioner” (1983). The suggestion McCall makes on being more intentional in developing reflective moments is an integral part of the pedagogy of practicums and capstone experiential learning courses (Schön, 1987). Schön’s work has been influential in pedagogical reforms in schools of education, medicine, social work, urban planning, and design by placing experiential learning at the center of professional education. This is higher education’s equivalent to McCall’s argument for more developmental experience in a professional context. Schön’s seminal book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, challenged educators to reconsider the role of technical knowledge versus “artistry” in developing professional excellence. Schön describes how professionals make sense out of situations that are complex, uncertain, unstable, unique, and value-conflicted. In these situations, professionals cannot apply their technical knowledge of how to deal with unambiguous situations (e.g. a dentist completing another root canal.) Instead, complexity and uniqueness spark reflection-in-action and much of professional mastery is knowing-in-action—our tacit ability to perform with skilled intuition.

The idea of reflective practitioners is particularly relevant to senior executives (the implicit job description in McCall’s essay) who mostly deal with situations that are complex, uncertain, unstable, unique and value-conflicted. No standard professional knowledge exists to apply standard solutions. The simpler problems are handled lower in the hierarchy while the

unique and value-conflicted problems rise to executive positions. Reflection-in-action involves the ability to change course during some complex performance in response to changing and unanticipated circumstances. Jazz improvisation is one example, reshaping a lecture in response to a student's question would be another. When actions fail to achieve the desired result the hallmark of professional artistry is on-the-spot experimentation. The capacity to reflect-in-action is a pathway to mastery, whether it is developing executive competence or musical ability.

If we take the artistry of managing and leading more seriously, then just as you cannot learn to paint by reading about painting, *experience* is the process through which the art of managing is learned. And while academic knowledge can be useful in developing a novice into a competent manager—defined as one who can decide what to do in a limited set of circumstances—it cannot help us achieve practical proficiency or mastery (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005). For this level of expertise, coaching and apprenticeship are needed to develop a style of acting which is passed from person to person without recourse to formalized models. Practical wisdom is developed that begins to affect our perception and manner in which we respond to situations. This form of tacit learning-by-doing comes through apprenticeship and experience. This background experience develops a repository from which we can unconsciously draw from to deal with novel situations.

However, while “most expert performance is ongoing and non-reflective, the best of experts, when time permits, think before they act” (Dreyfus, 1997, 28). Just as Schön describes reflection-in-action there are some situations that are so unfamiliar that experts act deliberately rather than responding intuitively. This is not resorting to abstract, rational deliberation and rule following, but a skilled form of coping. As Schön describes, reflection-in-action is the process of being consciously aware of one's knowing-in-action. Reflection-*in*-action differs from

reflection-*on*-action which happens off-line when we think back on something we have done to construct how our knowing-in-action may have resulted in an unexpected outcome. Improving our ability to reflect-in-action and respond with alternative repertoires is a hallmark of skilled expertise. If executives become better at reflection-in-action, this skilled awareness can occur in-situ and alter the flow of events.

Finally, while I agree with McCall's argument, there is one point of contention: What is and is not experience? McCall seems to equate experience as facing hardship or having a great manager in an organization. By his definition, experience is not training or educational programs of any sort. He also states that "360 feedback, performance management, training interventions, and HR processes," and "training, mentoring, rotational programs, coaching, and development programs" are *not* experience. But can not training or educational programs be counted as "experience?" Facing the challenges of understanding and responding to case studies, having to learn financial models and how to use them, getting feedback in a 360, having an in-depth discussion with a coach, having to learn how to handle working in teams on a class project, all offer valuable lessons for developing leadership capabilities.

Instead, is McCall arguing against context-free knowledge? Is abstract, technical, codified knowledge less valuable to leadership development than the self-awareness and mastery that comes through experience? If so, do we not create such experiences in the classroom through simulations and exercises, and drive reflection to improve analytic and leadership capabilities? These developmental activities are seemingly dismissed by McCall, as are other HR interventions, as *not* experience. I would argue for a broader view of experience than McCall allows.

In sum, the argument that McCall makes is persuasive; however, we need to better understand why technical competency models have not gotten us as far as we'd like and what is and is not valuable developmental experience. McCall has helped fire such a debate.

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