

2006

# Using Reflective Journeys to Engage and Empower Leadership Teams

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Originally published in the Proceedings of the EDU-COM 2006 International Conference. Engagement and Empowerment: New Opportunities for Growth in Higher Education, Edith Cowan University, Perth Western Australia, 22-24 November 2006.

This Conference Proceeding is posted at Research Online.

<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ceducom/107>

## **Sullivan, T. Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Using Reflective Journeys to Engage and Empower Leadership Teams**

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**KEY TERMS:** Rite of Passage, Ritual, Communitas, Liminal, Laminar, Reflective Practice, Leader Communities, Learner Communities

### **ABSTRACT**

The Reflective Leader Development Workshop was designed to professionally and personally develop individual leaders in the health care and education industries into working teams. It was used to meld the individual nursing administrators and school heads in the Master of Education (Educational Management) programme at Universiti Brunei Darussalam into small cooperative leadership learning teams that would function after the programme, as workplace support networks. However, the need for renewal of leadership is always present. It readily became obvious that a workshop using reflective journeys could engage and empower leadership teams in the workplace at individual and group levels. So the workshop is now available locally and regionally as a four day consultancy promoting powerful distributed leadership in the workplace. The key to this personalised yet group learning process is of the type that anthropologists have documented as being in use in tribes and communities since pre-history. It is a four-day live-in retreat workshop that uses powerful 'rite of passage' processes to engage and renew team spirit. This workshop process entails; (1) separating from one's usual workday; (2) immersing into a personal journey of interaction, discussion, reflection; and (3) finally emerging from this 'liminal world' to an invigorated sense of 'integration and oneness' with personal and professional insight. The workshop content includes the reflective and relationship aspects of a typical leader adventure course without being too physical, thus allowing leaders of all physical abilities to fully participate. Pent-up isolation and uncertainty from being exposed to isolating workplace structures and day to day stress suddenly evaporate during the workshop. Leader behaviour change is dramatic. After the workshop, a sense of energised synergy radiates from the participants. This readily converts into motivated and inspired leadership renewal.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most of my educational and nursing administrator workshop participants have never ventured as far up a rainforest river as the university's field studies centre. The thought of leaving behind, even for four days, their luxuries of life - their families, communication with their usual world, their air-conditioned comfort of their homes and their cars - is dreaded before embarking on the workshop journey. However, at some point during the workshop, those joys and comforts are forgotten when as a team, they become one with themselves, each other and their environment.

Although over their generations, they have chosen to remove themselves from this environment to an urban domain, they remain subtly rooted in the rainforest and rural life. Their traditionally strong and nurturing culture has taken on symbolic form, dating back generation upon generation from times when they were a large kingdom ruling much of the South China Sea.

When they return to the city, they tell their families and friends of their new and heart-warming experiences. Yet these experiences have been deep inside their very being all this while (Lu 1992). They have simply had an awakening of their traditional symbolic culture (Antonacopoulou and Bento 2004). They reconnected. Some stay connected – (a) across workplaces amongst each

other in leader support networks; and/or (b) others connect in their own workplace amongst their staff in distributed leadership teams.

For the past three years, this four day workshop has been inspiring school leaders and nursing administrators amidst a tropical rainforest at the University Brunei Darussalam Kuala Belalong Field Studies Centre. Every year at the workshop closing ceremony, the group asks me if I could arrange another workshop for them at the same venue next year. Yet it is not simply the beauty nor is it the geographical isolation of the venue that initiates such a cherished leadership renewal. A simple guesthouse in quiet surroundings with limited external influence equally accommodates the workshop process.

The reflective leader development experience is more a process of the type that anthropologists have documented as being in use since pre-history. For the developing leader, it involves immersion into a personal journey of interaction, discussion, reflection and finally emergence from this 'rite of passage' to an invigorated sense of being a leader.

Observable behaviour change occurs as the participants become more aware and begin emulating exemplary leadership. From this new way of acting and seeing their world, also comes a refinement of their team skills and strategies. Group cohesion is strengthened giving real hope to establishing lasting leader support networks within education and health care workplaces (Gronn 2003).

## BACKGROUND

Leader development workshops and conferences generally share similar philosophical and personal viewpoints to 'rope' (rite of passage experience) and 'cope' (challenging outdoor physical encounters) courses. They see leading, like life, as an adventurous and challenging journey of learning and growth. Most generally focus on personal achievement and require participants to confront their personal fears and anxieties. They are designed to explore the physical behaviour of group interaction, problem-solving, and leadership as well. Their challenges are physical and emotional, as well as cognitive, as they explore the fundamentals of various skills and trust.

Most leader development experiences, be they workshops, conferences or practical activities, have an essence of time and place which is held together by a certain process dynamic where one gains insight into key values and connects with memorable people at a memorable venue. If deep insight learning has taken place during that time, participants often feel as if their experience has organised their professional and personal thoughts as if in a lucid dream (Brookfield 1986). This process creates a certain sense of encapsulation inside the workshop's 'rite of passage' environment where even journeying to the venue and back again entails a physical and emotional learning experience.

However, the Reflective Leader Development Workshop departs company over the more physical aspects of these approaches to leader development and opts for the psychological approach. The Reflective Leader Development Workshop is not so physical and may take place in a retreat centre or quiet guesthouse away from external interruptions as well as in the rainforest setting and tends to focus on the more cognitive aspects of reflection and learning. The participant's do not have to venture outdoors at all for the duration of their four day workshop.

### **Venue**

In Brunei Darussalam, the four-day Reflective Leader Development Workshop is an adventurous journey taking its participants away from their normal work activities as does attending a conference. The venue is in the middle of the Temburong Rainforest and is an appropriate retreat environment isolated and free from distractions. The road and river journey there and back again is always demanding and unexpected.

However, the venue does not have to be so geographically isolated. It is essential though, that the location is a retreat venue away from the usual urban noise, conducive to reflection and free from

outside contact. This can easily be arranged by negotiating with the participants the elimination of mobile phones, music, radio and video devices for the duration of the workshop.

A catered semi-urban guesthouse or retreat house would suffice. This type of venue is often a very important option. Many participants' personal situations require that they can not be absent from their families for the four days. Therefore, often the catered semi-urban guesthouse or retreat house is most appropriate because participants, who have the need, then have the choice of travelling to and from their homes each day.

Once settled into the centre, the participants focus on introspection and reflection to stimulate personal growth and leadership development. In so doing, each participant uncovers their hidden talents, values and goals and how they enact them in their workplace.

### **Participants**

The participant's should include the full leadership team because the nature of the workshop dynamics requires that the whole team participates. In this way cohesiveness of vision is shared and maintained. In fact, if we are thinking of distributed leadership, which O'Connor (2006) believes is the sensible leadership format for today's organisations, then I would recommend this workshop process, not just for executive leadership teams but also for different levels of leadership teams such as; (a) the executive and departmental heads; (b) departmental sections; or even (c) year level teacher or clinic groups, depending on the size in each case.

### **Planning and Conducting**

The intended workshop would be workplace authority supported and therefore whole organisational groups would have negotiated participation in order to achieve specific goals. These goals might be to function more as a cohesive team, to agree on certain team objectives, to manifest a team vision, to improve effectiveness and efficiency through smarter, more cooperative team effort or simply to renew team spirit after a particularly exhausting year.

The university facilitators negotiate these specific goals and any particular participant nuances with the workplace organisers, but the finer content details are planned by the facilitators alone in order to maintain a workshop element of mystery and surprise. This important feature ensures that the participants will experience the physical, mental and emotional 'rite of passage' journey into unknown reaches of leadership and back again. Yet it also ensures that the participants capture their organisation's unique culture and nuances and apply leverage to important organisational imperatives. Long lasting effects from four days of workshop can thus be assured.

There are three choices of workshop presentation. The workshop can be presented; (a) externally by the university consultant as facilitator; (b) co-presented 'in-house' by the university consultant as co-facilitator with a well-liked workplace leader; or (c) solely 'in-house' by the workplace leader with the university consultant acting as advisor and 'behind-the-scenes' external partner.

All three presentation modes have their merits. The external university facilitator is most effective in most cases. However, 'in-house' co-presentations also develop effective results because the 'in-house' facilitator is seen as an influential champion in the eyes of the participants. The workshop dynamics are enhanced due to; (a) already existing leadership bonds and (b) first-hand knowledge of the participants and workplace coupled with the legitimate expertise of the external facilitator.

If completely 'in-house' workshops are chosen then there must be prior and thorough consultation with the external university consultant and this consultant must act as a 'behind the scenes' but 'on the spot' co-facilitator during the workshop. This is because it is the quality of the 'rite of passage' process that is important.

The workshop content develops leadership skills and attitudes. It also socialises the participants into key organisational values and builds a strong coherent culture. Their reflective diaries begin when they wake and leave their families on the first day until they go to sleep the night before the morning closing ceremony on the fourth day. This frame of mind is essential for activating the workshop 'rite of passage'.

To reinforce this 'rite of passage' notion that they are a team on a journey, the participants and the facilitators meet at a designated pick-up location and travel together by bus and boat to the workshop venue. They are finally dropped off at the same location. Participants have their own transport only if they are non-live-in participants.

Being cut off from their usual livelihood is further completed by the active discouragement of communicating with family, workplace or the outside world unless an emergency arises. The appropriate choice of workshop venue and prior agreement amongst the participants ensures this scenario.

However, the workshop must be planned and conducted so as to cater for all intending participant's personal situations. Many participants' personal situations require that they can not be absent from their families for the four days. Therefore, often the catered semi-urban guesthouse or retreat house is most appropriate and participants, who have the need, have the choice of travelling to and from their homes each day. Flexible programming of the main workshop activities must always be an available option in order to cater for all circumstance.

Such flexible programming would ensure that the evening sessions would be devoted to the more individual reflective type activities. These would include the writing of the reflective diary. Also there would be time for socialising and discussing. There would also be a few bonus activities. It may be more worthwhile for participants to complete the live-in workshop but it would not be absolutely necessary.

Finally, the workshop must be understood as part of an ongoing developmental process. To instill this idea in all participants there are pre- and post- workshop briefings. Although striking results are usually observed immediately after the workshop, this workshop is an investment in the future.

## PROCESS

The overarching workshop dynamic is adapted from the work of Van Gennep (1960) and later Turner (1969) on the use of 'rites of passage' to shape significant physical, social and temporal life experiences of developing individuals and groups. Both have noted the use of ritual as a learning and developmental process that has been in use since the dawn of civilisation. Anthropologists continue to document such transitions using Van Gennep's (1960) and Turner's (1969) terms of reference in all primitive and all modern societies. These transitions are phases of deep experiential learning affecting the very heart of a participant's psyche which is his or her creative source – the heart of creation.

In Turner's (1969) terms, the 'rite of passage' which characterises the participant's growth in leadership awareness occurs in spurts as the participant transits from his or her normal everyday life, to a liminal phase of intense development, and finally returns to a restructured post-normal phase of more effective leadership. Such phases stimulate creativity and can lead to visionary breakthroughs for the leader as he or she finds his or her way to a more developed and integrated state of being.

The first phase is a rite of separation from the participants' usual everyday livelihood. They embark on a physical, social, reflective and temporal journey into unknown territory which can only succeed through group trust, cooperation, challenge and commitment.

The second phase is a liminal period throughout which the participants' leader characters, behaviours and personalities are ambiguous. This is because they are in a state that has little of their normal everyday structure. They are passively in the realm of the workshop facilitators with the expectancy of emerging from an unknown teaching and learning process with new insight into what it means to be a leader.

The third phase is an integration period of strength, confidence and hope that comes with reincorporation and their return to familiar ground. There is also the satisfaction of accomplishment

that is a sign of new learning and effectiveness. A certain sense of authenticity is renewed in their leader characters, behaviours and personalities. The participants experience a sense of comradeship, insightfulness, spirituality, creativity, achievement and vision. Throughout, there is a sense of what Turner (1969) called, 'communitas'. Usually in a 'rite of passage' this community-building element gives support to the group members. It creates a sense of belonging as a result of shared experience and eventually of group and individual achievement. Professional and personal status is usually levelled, allowing various individual differences amongst the group to be recognised and more easily accepted, thus enabling collaborative learning.

During the 'rite of passage', the participants are held together with this sense of communitas yet isolated by the liminal aspect of self-reflection and awareness, thus enabling group and individual growth. It is a learning experience that is completed with others but also in solitary reflection. This intensive process forms an evolving collaborative leader support network that enables collaborative and reflective learning to impact on character, behaviour and personality.

Self-knowledge is important for leaders. Leaders need to understand the image that they present to their followers. Leaders need to reflect on and understand their personal and public experience of leadership if they are to develop more fully (Kolb 1983 and Mole 2004). When educational leaders think reflectively about their own practice and the practice of others, their professional knowledge becomes embedded in their personal life. They start using their life experiences as evidence to justify and confirm their personal theories (Schon 1987). Evers (2000a, 2000b) points out that the more often this expanding spiralling process takes place, the more the person grows in personal theory and in thoughtful practice, to eventually become one with the wisdom of their profession.

## CONTENT

### **Aims**

The first aim is to observe and discuss various leadership practices. This involves observing theory in action. The aim is to heighten the participants' powers of reflective observation and to provide models for instilling desirable aspects of leader characters, behaviours and personalities. The participants also need this skill to observe and reflect on themselves and others throughout the workshop.

The second aim is to participate in specific leader development exercises to improve group dynamics. These exercises make the participants aware of their characters, behaviours and personalities and thus provide the foundation for improving their strategies for leading people.

The third aim is to give the participants peaceful reflective time away from their normal lives, in which they can consider their professional vocation as a leader.

The fourth aim is to develop a professional group bond amongst the participants so they can form enduring and productive leader support networks.

These aims form the basic reflective leader development workshop content. To individualise each workshop experience so that it most benefits the requesting workplace authority, workplace leaders and workshop facilitators negotiate additional aims.

Once planned, the participants embark together on a journey of learning in pursuit of their individual and communal goals. Along the way, they will encounter learning obstacles or resistances that must be overcome. However, the deep experience which drives the workshop to its climax is the 'rite of passage' process, with its primordial symbolism and metaphors (Turner 1974) permeating all action and all thought of the participants. The workshop becomes a passage through a social drama from which the participants emerge energised, inspired and renewed in spirit, knowledge and skill.

### **Activities for Achieving the First Aim**

The facilitators and participants visit an exemplar workplace en-route to the workshop venue. This exemplar workplace is nominated by the workplace authority and organised by the workshop facilitators.

The participants interview the workplace leader and leadership team and observe their behaviour in their usual workplace environment. Later, at the venue, the interviewees' characters, behaviours and personalities are critically discussed. Appropriate aspects are considered for personal modelling and emulating. The participants heighten their powers of reflective observation and imitate the desirable leader aspects that they observed.

The participants also watch their colleagues and learn how to understand and pre-empt their behaviours so as to accommodate more cohesive teamwork. It is critical that a team knows itself and each member knows his or her function in any team situation that may arise.

### **Activities for Achieving the Second Aim**

Each participant is given an opportunity to take the leader position in the group, to solve management problems, to role play management scenarios, to analyse case studies and to chair critical discussions. It is clearly impressed upon the participants that there is no substitute in a distributed leadership team setting for each member to have highly refined leadership skills that can be deployed in synchronised precision (Gronn 2003).

These role plays and simulations take place in an activity room at the field studies centre. This team skill-building simulates real situations that the participants would encounter in their day to day work. The specific skills are isolated and incorporated into the workshop during the planning stage and run as negotiated mentoring and coaching activities run by the facilitators.

### **Activities for Achieving the Third Aim**

Reflection times are spread at regular intervals throughout the four days. From a practical point of view, they serve as opportunities for the participants to catch up and complete their reflective diary which must be handed to the facilitators at the closing ceremony.

However, from a more developmental perspective, these reflection times allow for the participants to fully digest each workshop activity before moving on to the next. In this way there is a sense of progression through the workshop. In a 'rite of passage' this sense of progression through each phase is essential. It is these moments of unguided and sometimes mentor guided reflection that effectively locate the four days as a 'rite of passage' journey.

The actual content of these reflection times depends on the nature of the workshop venue. Personal individual time is timetabled to allow the participants to be at peace with their environment by taking a walk or sitting quietly where they can consider their personal and professional life.

### **Activities for Achieving the Fourth Aim**

The workshop is designed as a journey of fellowship 'there and back again'. There is the outer journey of jungle roads and rivers, past waterfalls and up rapids, deep into pristine rainforest. Along the way they may encounter new experiences but none as pervasive and reaching as their own inner journey experienced as a 'rite of passage'.

The facilitators point out universal cultural symbols at every opportunity and engage and empower the participants to discuss their team's emotional strengths and to gain new insights into themselves and their colleagues. In this way, strong personal and professional bonds are established which will eventually support enduring professional networks and team effectiveness.

### **Measuring Development**

The character of a leader is measured by his or her; (a) application of emotional intelligence in areas such as self and social awareness; (b) ability to manage human relationships in diverse

situations; and (c) commitment to vision (Tyler 2004). This is a mixture of attitude, responsibility and commitment as well as some very complex management skills and wisdom.

Leader development on the individual level is measured by evidence of improvements in; (a) personality; (b) knowledge and skills; and (c) behaviour. Team development is measured by evidence of improvements in group; (a) culture; (b) effectiveness; and (c) productivity.

Progressive evaluation is achieved by requiring the participants to submit a pre-workshop self-reflection report on; (a) their leadership characteristics; (b) how they acquired such characteristics; and (c) the direction in which they think that they are heading. During the workshop, the facilitator observes the developing leader's applied knowledge and skills as well as engaging him or her in informal unstructured interviews. Summative evaluation is achieved through the facilitator evaluating the participants' confidential reflective diaries concerning their ideas and theories on leadership in terms of their personal and group experience throughout their 'rite of passage'.

## DESTINATIONS

There are moments, defined as 'rites of passage', which demarcate a transition in a person's life from one clearly defined phase to another new and still unfamiliar phase. These phases are usually thought of in terms of transitions in one's social, occupational or qualification status. However, such moments also relate to transitions in a person's psychological insight such as a learning experience which initiates taking on a new world view.

Van Gennep (1960) describes a rite of passage as being comprised of three stages; (1) the 'death' of a person's old global perspective; (2) the 'margin' or 'transition'; and (3) 'rebirth' into a new global perspective. The margin or transition period takes up the main body of the workshop. It is when the participant is in this state of flux that social rules are suspended because the person has left his or her usual daily routine and way of thinking. Eventually the participant will return to that daily routine with a different way of interpreting that world.

This is why during the workshop, the participants are more open and more at ease with the notion of distributed leadership where one time they may be leading a group discussion and in the next instant they may be following another person's suggestions. On the group level, the participants are very team oriented.

However, on the personal level, the transition period in the 'rite of passage' with its liminality or 'laminar personae' (Turner, 1969) are conditions where doubt about one's capacity to cope with the workshop situation, and anxiety are highlighted. Most of the participants report such feelings at some stage during the workshop. The participants grapple with expressing the dynamics of their workshop journeys in the context of leadership and their own heartfelt values. Such a process of continuous self-examination in order to develop a professional and personal life-map is very demanding on participants who do not normally self-disclose to themselves or others. Their reflective diaries are always moving and inspiring.

This important challenge is overcome through the participants discussing personal and group issues with their facilitator or other participants during the course of the workshop and especially in the participants' free-time with their accommodation partners. Some participants progress to a very open and trusting level which is evidenced in their discussions. In this way a bonding is established which strengthens throughout the workshop and later back in the university or workplace to initiate the intended leader network.

While collaborative teamwork is at the heart of the workshop, the emphasis is on the growth of individual leaders struggling to understand themselves, their vision, and their values, and to discover their voices in the service of others. Covey (1992) describes this as developing from the inside out. Simultaneously, this process manifests ideals of altruism and service.



Self-knowledge is critical for leaders. It is through self-knowledge that leaders can maintain an accurate image of themselves in the eyes of their followers. The workshop helps the participants see themselves as others see them. Once the delusions of self and others are removed, the participants can begin to develop their individuality and their personal and professional vision with integrity (Manasse 1985).

Time away from the rush of the outside world creates a sense of wholeness. This is highlighted in the celebration of the closing ceremony which allows each participant's unique abilities and gifts to be recognised. This re-integration stimulates self-confidence and wellbeing.

## AFTERTHOUGHTS

The workshop has been conducted as part of the Educational Leadership course within the Master programme for the last three years. Course evaluation surveys were completed each time after the workshop was conducted. Participant feedback showed that this 'rite of passage' method of teaching and learning invoked deep understanding of being a leader when integrated with the more commonly used lecturing, research and internship methods. In each of the last three cohorts, participants highlighted the workshop as inspiring them to indulge in more thoughtful cooperation focused on enhanced collaborative learning throughout the second half of their course. Lasting observable behaviour change occurred as the participants became more aware and began initiating collaborative planning and decision making characterised by genuine empathy for those affected by their plans. Turner (2004) called this bonding amongst the group 'communitas'.

Follow-up discussions of selected participants from each of the cohorts supported the idea that this community building aspect of the workshop had longer term effects which enabled them to maintain social and professional leader support networks in their day to day social and professional lives. Many developed and maintained lasting interpersonal and professional relationships which are still currently intact two to three years later. They reported use of each other as 'sounding boards' for problem solving and for emotional support.

It is also very probable that these lasting effects were due to unmentioned pre-existing factors. Most of the participants already knew each other socially and professionally before the workshop, even though most reported a strengthening of their camaraderie. At the very least it can be said that based on participants' comments, the workshop certainly supported the development of these social and professional networks.

This networking aspect fulfils one of the aims of the Master of Education (Educational Management) at Universiti Brunei Darussalam; that is to help develop a community of leaders that might improve professional communication and thus form a community of leadership practice. Its practical focus provides experiences in which the participants form small networks which they are openly encouraged to continue and expand with previous graduates of the programme, once they return to the workforce.

The programme designers hope that the participants might discover that this connected network of power, authority and creativity truly does embody what is required for sustained success, individually and systemically. Surely a well founded community of leaders (McGregor 2003) might be inspired to consider the possibilities of establishing professional learning communities for teachers and cooperative learning groups for their students. Blase and Blase (2004) believe that it is through such structures that instructional leadership becomes a distributed communal responsibility.

An adaptation of the workshop will also be a component of a new Executive Training Programme in Educational Leadership being designed for neophyte leaders and administrators. The reason for its inclusion for neophytes is that an important and lasting outcome of the workshop for the participants was a growing sense of career direction and vocation. The workshop would also introduce them to the idea of initiating a support network from the very beginning of their career so

that they will think more like a community of leaders and be sustained in the early stages of their new positions when the unknowns are the greatest.

Further and more focused research is necessary to differentiate the effects of the workshop from effects caused by accompanying influences existing in the same context. As time since participating in the workshop lengthens for many past participants and their numbers increase, a new review of the workshop and accompanying leadership programme is planned whereby a current master participant will work with past participants to uncover any long-term reflections on the effects of this 'rite of passage' way of developing leaders.

Life-changing journeys involve unfamiliar paths and risk. The choices we make throughout our lives, and how we choose to lead our personal and professional lives, does make a difference to all with whom we interact in our families, our communities and our organisations. Our life has only the meaning that we are able to give it through the understanding of ourselves, our relationships with others, our beliefs and our actions. It is by placing our selves and our world under the microscope that we uncover that meaning and begin to map the future direction of our personal and professional journey with vision and renewed passion.

Roads go on ever on  
Under cloud and under star,  
Yet feet that wandering have gone  
Turn at last to home afar. (Tolkien 1975)

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