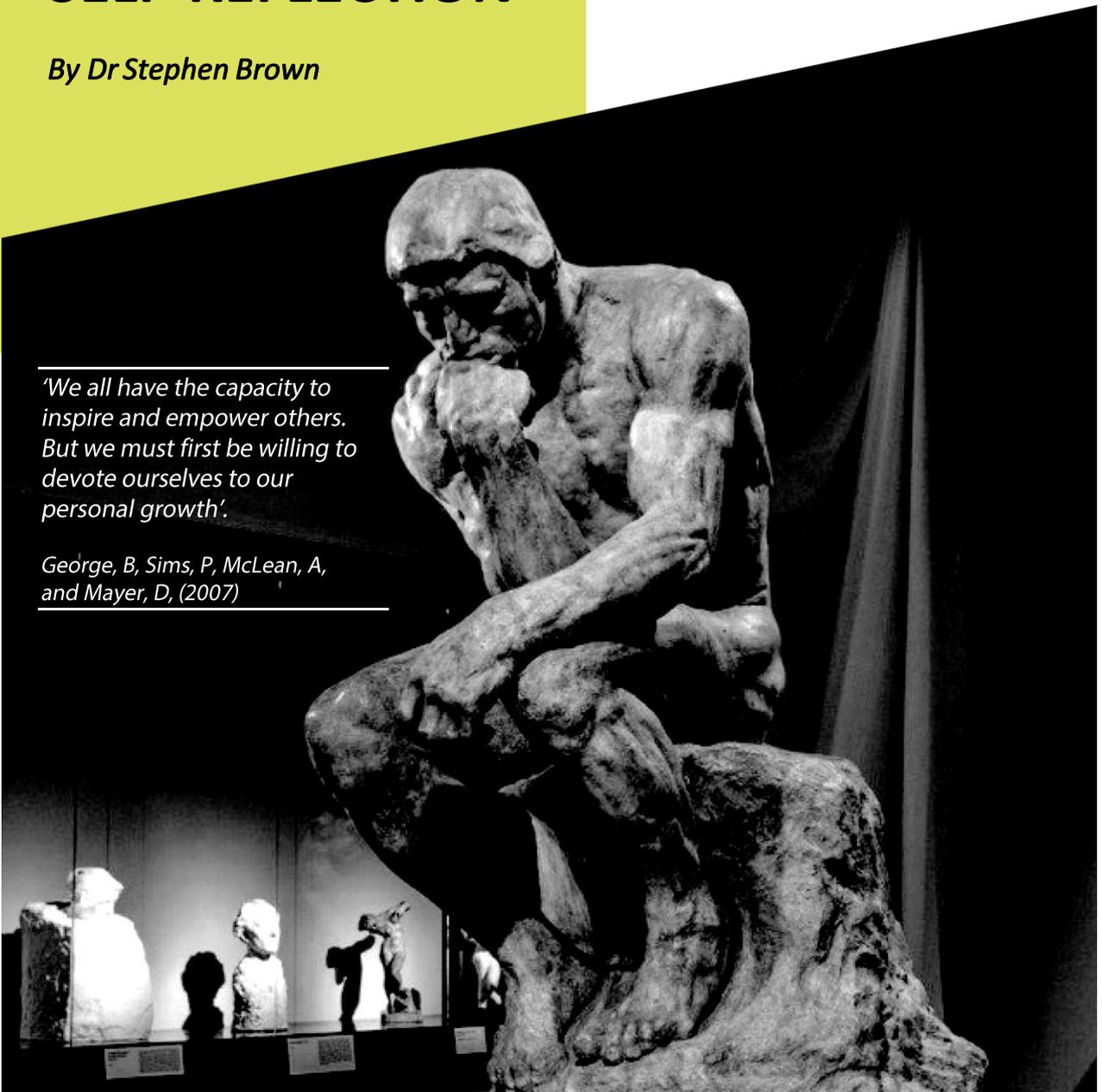

QUESTIONS TO LEAD BY: THE POWER OF SELF-REFLECTION

By Dr Stephen Brown

*'We all have the capacity to
inspire and empower others.
But we must first be willing to
devote ourselves to our
personal growth.'*

*George, B, Sims, P, McLean, A,
and Mayer, D, (2007)*



INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a lifetime learning activity. Given that the act of leadership is carried-out by a diverse range of individuals, each being fallible, imperfect and profoundly human, then this must be the case. We learn in context and we learn in relationship with others. Therefore, every new situation and every new relationship gives us an opportunity to shape our leadership further.

The one key trait that all good leaders share is the capability to reflect. The best leaders are the best reflectors. Dobrygowski (2016) suggests that 'self-reflection requires you to question your assumptions and habits, and ask whether they are useful in dealing with the world around you'. Daniel Goleman, in his seminal work on emotional intelligence, notes the importance of self-awareness as a necessary and distinctive character trait of successful leaders (Goleman, D, 1995).

The focus of this article is to provide a framework of questions that could assist you as a leader to reflect on your practices and personal capabilities. Such a framework is designed to encourage conversations, focus feedback discussion sessions, and guide your reflective processes. These questions have been informed by extensive work in the area of leadership development, and widely accepted across the field.



SELF-REFLECTION REQUIRES YOU TO QUESTION YOUR ASSUMPTIONS AND HABITS AND ASK WHETHER THEY ARE USEFUL IN DEALING WITH THE WORLD AROUND YOU.

DOBRYGOWSKI (2016)

KEY QUESTIONS

Here are some key questions to stimulate, assist and guide your reflective practices as leaders. The order of these provocations is informed by the maxim that leaders need to develop a good understanding of self-their values, motivations and aspirations before engaging in the act of leadership-leading others. One of the five key professional practices for school principals noted in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles (2015, 2019) for example is 'developing self and others'.

WHAT IS YOUR 'TRUE NORTH'?

A leader's 'True North' is their 'orientating point' derived from deeply held principles, beliefs and values (George, 2007). Nicholson, N (2013, p.70) poses this as the "Compass Question": what is the inner reference point or gravitational force that pulls a leader in one direction, rather than another?' For some leaders, it might be a belief in the arts as a liberating and enriching part of every child; for others, it might be a deep commitment to alleviate, through education, the effects of poverty, and or a strong desire to cultivate within young people a strong ethical disposition.

WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL 'BRAND' OR SIMPLY, WHAT WOULD OTHERS SAY ABOUT YOU?

Personal branding is essentially the ongoing process of establishing a prescribed image or impression in the minds of others about an individual, group or organisation (Peters, T, 1997).

When others speak about you, what things do they say? What is your 'Brand You'? Humans, by our very nature, have a 'first impression to classify; we are binary creatures'. We judge quickly, 'thin slicing' each other based on initial limited information or 'the first seven words that someone speaks' (Gladwell, M, 2005; O'Keeffe, A, 2011).

Being conscious of your leadership brand is a necessary part of being a reflective leader. Our 'Brand You' should be seen as an asset worth refining and enhancing. Clark, A (2019) in her text, *Future Fit*, agrees and notes that each of us need to be consciously aware of our 'brand reputation capital'. Your personal brand is something that is not a constant, but is regularly being reflected upon and refined. What should you consider when looking at 'Brand You'? Belinda Wall of *Brand Amplified*, cited by Clark, A (2019) notes that a personal brand is 'multi-dimensional – it's: the physical person, their digital footprint, their values system, their promises and actions, and the ... perceptions of others' (p.28).

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(O'KEEFFE, A, 2011)

HOW COURAGEOUS ARE YOU?

‘The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.’

Lieutenant General David Morrison, the then Chief of the Australian Army in 2013, uttered this powerful rebuke to those who condoned or perpetuated the harassment of women in the military. In our roles as leaders, we need to be courageous, to uphold values, and to deal with difficult and sometimes, unpleasant things.

Ask yourself:

- What would you do if you were 10 percent braver?
- Are there things in your (my) organisational setting that are holding you (me) and/or the organisation back?

IN YOUR FIRST DAY IN A NEW LEADERSHIP ROLE, CONSIDER THE QUESTION OF WHAT WILL YOUR LAST DAY BE LIKE?

What will your legacy be? As leaders, we are temporary custodians of an organisation; we should be, and act, as responsible stewards, leaving the organisation in a better place than when we inherited it. We, as leaders, hold an organisation temporarily in trust. Moreover, did I make, on balance, a positive difference to the lives of those who I engaged with? (Walker, A, 2017; Munby, S, 2017). Moreover, it is worth acknowledging that many of the big issues in education are generational and perhaps won't be resolved in our working life. Our role is therefore to 'pass the baton' onto the next generation of leaders to complete the job (Farrar, 2019).

WHAT IS YOUR INNER DIALOGUE?

Muhammad Ali, the iconic sportsman and social activist, noted that 'the fight is won far away from witnesses.' A key reflective practice for you, as a leader, is to listen to your inner dialogue. What is your inner voice saying? Typically, such dialogue will focus on time, motivation and relationships. Such thoughts and feelings can be positive and negative (Cheal, J, 2013).

Good leaders will develop unique practical strategies to manage and cultivate their inner voice. Sometimes, this personal discourse can inhibit and prevent our leadership growth, development and action. Am I able to be quiet and not be engaged in inner dialogue? Quelling such discourse and reaching our 'Zero Point' is the state when we are truly present, not distracted, focused on the now, and 'in flow' (Cheal, J, 2013).

**'THE STANDARD YOU WALK PAST IS
THE STANDARD YOU ACCEPT'.**

LIEUTENANT GENERAL DAVID MORRISON (2013)

WHAT IS YOUR 'SELFISH' INTENT?

Selfish intent is ensuring and assuring you are the best professional and leader you can be. Be the best professional version of yourself. Having an ongoing interest in learning, inquiry and investing in your development is essential if you are to continue to grow as a leader.

WHAT IS YOUR 'GENEROUS' INTENT?

This question challenges every leader to reflect on their motivations and desire through their work to make a positive impact on others. Leadership implies agency and power; a capacity to act and influence. Leaders in education are typically motivated by the ultimate generous intent: moral purpose — a desire and belief in making a difference in the lives of students in their care. How generous am I with my time, professional knowledge and expertise to others?

WHEN I HAVE SET MY INTENTION, WHERE DO I PLACE MY ATTENTION ON A DAILY BASIS?

Moreover, in placing or framing my intention and focus, what is my attitude? How big is the gap, and to what extent have I allowed myself to be seduced by busy work, or work that makes me feel good? If this kind of work makes us feel good but is of little or no benefit to the majority then it is self-serving and self-centred (Farrar, 2019).

WHAT ARE THE THINGS, AS A LEADER, THAT MAKE YOUR 'HEART SING'?

Each of us, as people, and indeed leaders, need to have a 'sense of purpose' or 'Ikigai'. 'Ikigai' is a Japanese word that is used to indicate the source of value in one's life or the things that make one's life worthwhile. What motivates us to undertake the work we do? Each person's 'Ikigai' is grounded in their core values and beliefs. Our reason for being, or Ikigai, is linked to:

- something that we love
- something that the world needs and work that makes a difference
- something that pays you well
- something you are good at.

(Garcia, H, and Miralles, F, 2016).



EACH OF US, AS PEOPLE, AND INDEED LEADERS, NEED TO HAVE A 'SENSE OF PURPOSE' OR 'IKIGAI'.

ARE YOU STILL CURIOUS?

Do you have the desire, the drive and interest in asking those important questions that you don't have the answers to? These are the questions that will be challenging, perhaps confronting, but necessary to explore to contribute to the growth and development of the organisation of which you are a part. Bushe, G (2013) notes that individuals, teams, organisations and society evolve in a particular direction that they collectively, passionately and persistently ask questions about. Heifetz, R, (1997, p.59) notes that 'one can lead with no more than a question in hand.'

You, as a leader, do not need to know all the answers, but be prepared to be intrigued and ask the right, or more, questions. Moreover, in asking questions, are you inviting/issuing an invitation for a real conversation? Are you, as a person and leader, prepared to be vulnerable? To reveal yourself to others? (Whyte, D, 2011).



'INDIVIDUALS, TEAMS, ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIETY EVOLVE IN A PARTICULAR DIRECTION THAT THEY COLLECTIVELY, PASSIONATELY AND PERSISTENTLY ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT.'

BUSHE, G (2013)

Nicholson, N (2013) notes that 'the self is a work in progress; it is also a hall of mirrors. Leaders can claim it as their own and take command. This is some of the hardest work a leader will ever do.' (p.242). The challenge for each of us, as leaders, is to turn reflection into practice. 'Leadership is a verb, discovered in action and demonstrated in application' (Westfall, C, 2019). Augustine Rodin's iconic bronze statue, *Le Penseur*, 'The Thinker', has been recast 28 times since the original one in 1902. Each of these reproductions of Rodin's creation are variations on the initial one. The challenge, analogously, is to evolve, refine and look at the same subject from different perspectives. The aim of this article was to provide some core questions to explore your leadership.



'THE SELF IS A WORK IN PROGRESS; IT IS ALSO A HALL OF MIRRORS. LEADERS CAN CLAIM IT AS THEIR OWN AND TAKE COMMAND. THIS IS SOME OF THE HARDEST WORK A LEADER WILL EVER DO.'

NICHOLSON, N (2013)

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ABOUT US

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