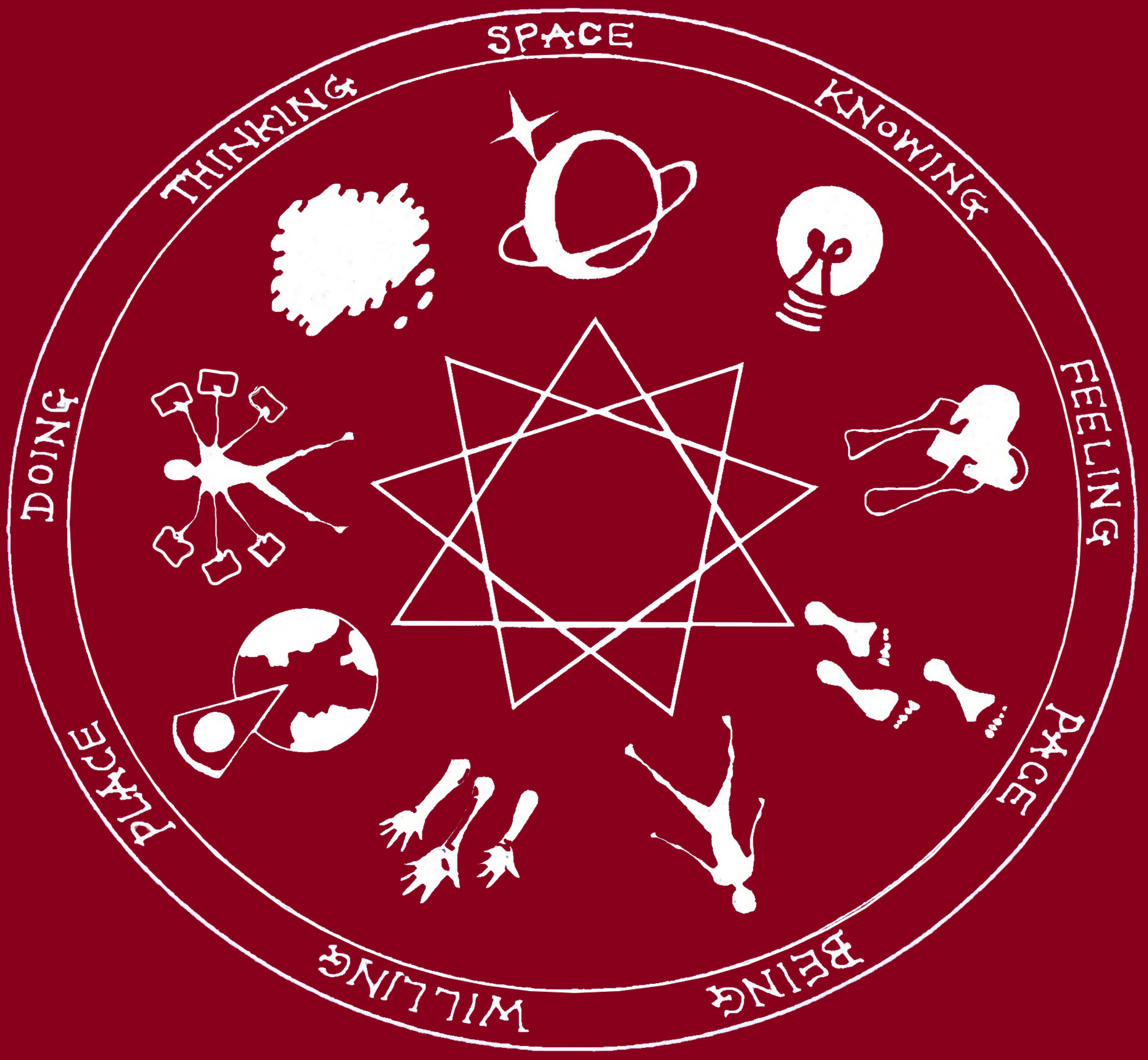
CRITICAL LEADERSHIP

How we learn to be better leaders


SPACE
KNOWING
FEELING
PACE
BEING
WILLING
PLACE
DOING
THINKING

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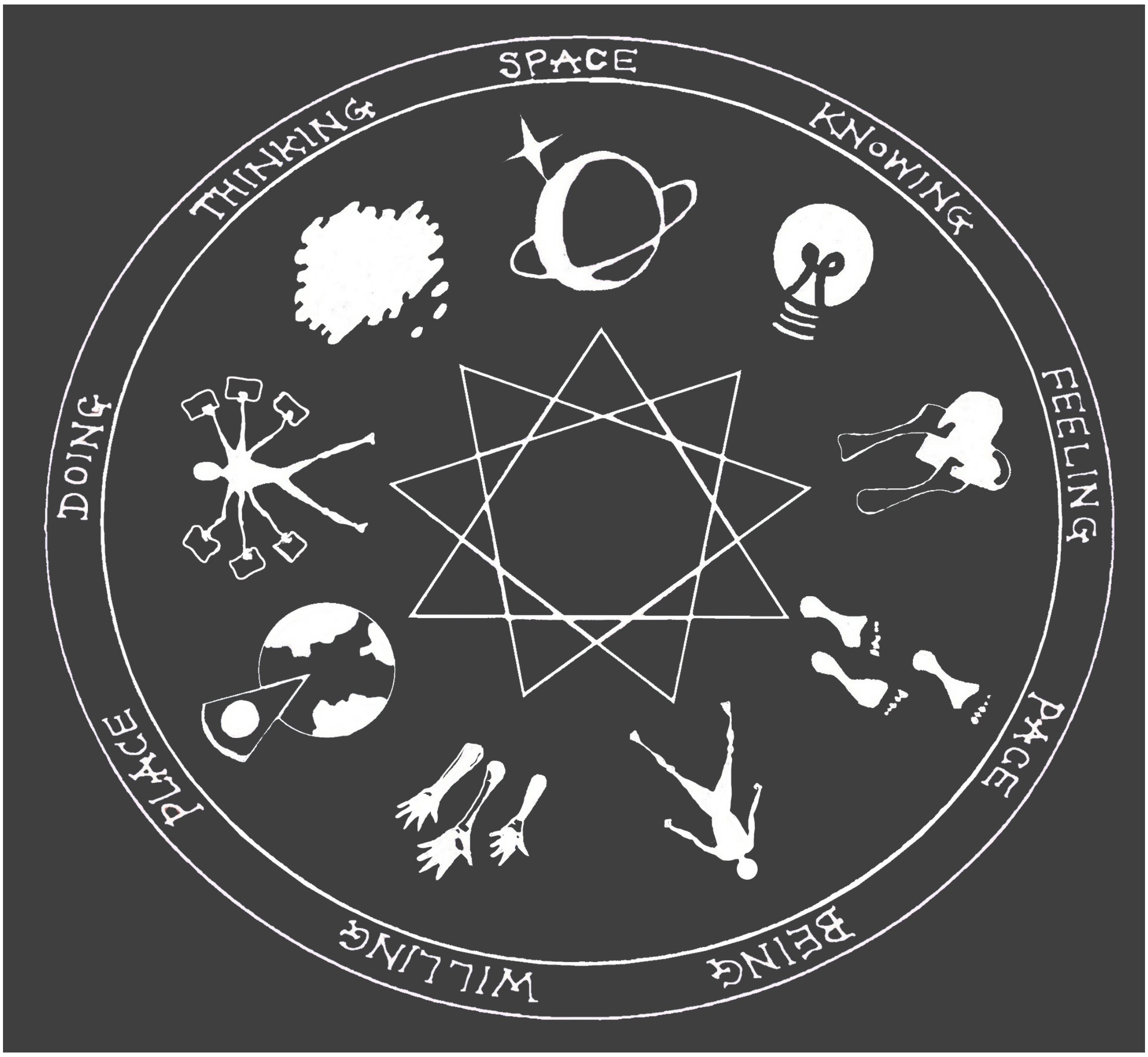
1. Why you need to be a critical leader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Having worked in the field of leadership development for over 20 years we were keen to look at what was needed for successful leadership development. Since Plato's time, over 2,400 years ago, leadership has been seen as something that is special, reserved for only a few who possess the requisite qualities. But once you start looking closely at the kind of qualities being advocated by Plato and others, that leaders need to be brave, caring, kind, assertive and understanding, at all times, you start to ask where are we going to find these paragons of virtue?

It all sounds great in theory, but we soon recognised that lists of characteristics that ‘good’ leaders require are not that meaningful or helpful. They just set up would-be leaders to fail, by demanding something quite idealistic. Professor Chris Mowles of the University of Hertfordshire, speaking at an ILM conference in 2009, described many of these expectations as burdensome, an idealisation that creates unreasonable expectations and sets up leaders (and leadership in a wider context) to fail.

Our own research, and studies by others that we have read, lead us to believe that leadership, rather than being something possessed by a select group of people possessing special qualities, is better understood as a social construct. What does this mean? It means that there is no physical entity out there called ‘leadership’ which exists independently of us that is available to be discovered and studied. Rather, leadership is something that we create through our willingness to follow. It can be the followers who determine who is a leader and it is their perception of leadership and what they want from leaders that enables certain people to perform the role. As long as people will follow them, people can be leaders but when the followership stops, so does the leadership. Given this, we can’t study leadership without considering the relationship between leadership and followership (and the fact that people, at different times, will be both leader and follower).

It is because of this that we began to formulate our own underpinning beliefs and understanding of leadership. This starts with four simple propositions that define what we call *critical leadership*:

- *Leadership is about social relationships.*

  This is the connection between leadership and followership. Professor Donna Ladkin[1] suggests in her book **Rethinking Leadership** that the relationship between followership and leadership is not as clear-cut as we may like to think and that sometimes we may be a follower and sometimes a leader, as the situation demands.

- *Leadership abilities are needed at all levels of an organisation and not just at the very top.*

  Leadership can be distributed throughout organisations and is not necessarily linked to job titles or descriptions. Managers are appointed but followers determine who is a leader. The great strength of distributed leadership is that it increases the total amount of leadership available, making it easier to deal with complex problems in a complex world. Kate Cooper, head of research, policy and standards at the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) has argued that *"leading an organisation today cannot be*

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[1] Donna Ladkin is Professor of Leadership and Ethics, Plymouth Graduate School of Management. *Rethinking Leadership: A New Look at Old Leadership Questions* (2011) is published by Edward Elgar Publishing

a solitary pursuit" and we must move away from the idea of the solitary heroic leader at the helm, to a view of leadership as something that permeates the organisation.

- *Leadership is about context.*

  What is needed at a given time in a given place may be appropriate there and then but a different set of behaviours may be needed at another time and place – one leadership style does not fit all. Leaders must be agile in their approach and flexible in their manner.

- *Good leaders are able to reflect, adapt and change as the situation and circumstance demands.*

  Reflect not ruminate: reflection means asking ourselves the difficult questions which may challenge our thinking and beliefs, the things that we take for granted.

These four ideas about leadership, that:

- *it is distributed;*
- *context-dependent;*
- *about social relationships and*
- *requires intellectual agility;*

provide the focus for our thinking and are the basis for our ideas about critical leadership.

For us, critical leadership is the ability to be self-aware, to ask questions in order to gain further knowledge and insights. Critical leaders are able to check and challenge themselves in order to find new ways of 'doing', as well as helping others by being a true critical friend. Critical leadership is about striving to improve and doing this by reflecting on behaviour and questioning current practice.

The questions we posed for ourselves were – How do we construct learning situations that will help individuals become critical leaders? How do we turn the theory into practical application? We began to build our professional programmes around a framework of three key concepts that we believed would help to develop critical leaders:

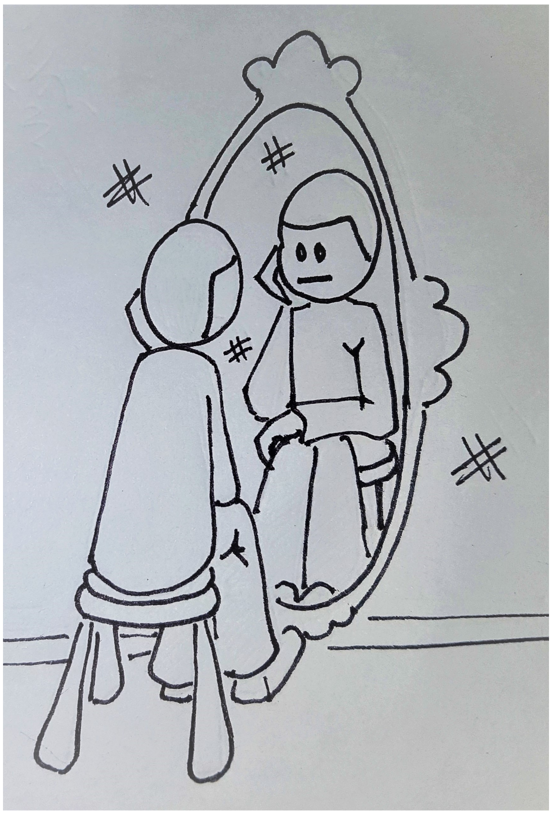
- Knowing – Being – Doing
- Thinking – Feeling – Willing
- Space – Pace – Place.

Some of these concepts can be found in other writings and are used in other contexts: indeed, ILM draws on the Knowing - Being - Doing concept to inform its thinking about leadership.

However, we believe that in drawing these three concepts together – to support and complement each other – we have created a new and deeper understanding of the key components needed for the criticality required in leadership development.

Reflection – the essential skill

We've already mentioned the importance of reflection and you will find that it crops up time and again throughout **Critical Leadership***,* so it's important to start off by explaining exactly what we mean by it and to guide you in developing this essential skill.



Let's start by saying what it isn't. Reflection isn't rumination, going over and over events in your mind, until you've either made yourself ill from worrying or managed to convince yourself that things were completely different from what they seemed to be at first.

Donald Schön[2] challenged the notion that professionals' behaviour was driven purely by technical-rationality: that they applied some form of cold, clinical reasoning to the problems they face. Instead, he argued, professionals use their experiences, connect with their feelings, and employ various practical theories, which he labelled collectively as *reflection-in-action*. This is because each case is unique in some way, and we can't follow textbook models of action. Instead, we look for patterns in the current experience which enable us to link it to our existing repertoire of actions. Subsequent reflection - *reflection-on-action* - enables us to make sense of what we did and to develop a coherent picture of what we did and why we did it, to inform our future action.

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[2] Schön was a Professor of Urban Studies and Education at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and gave the 1970 Reith lectures for the BBC on learning in organisations and society.

Subsequently, Schön (working with Harvard Professor Chris Argyris) developed this theory to explain the observed behaviour of professionals, when they engage in evaluation of their actions (reflection). Most have a set of what they called *espoused theories*, or mental maps, that they use to explain their actions, theories which are often related to the technical-rational principles of their discipline. However, their actual behaviour is governed by their *theories-in-use*, which are derived from their experiences and the context in which they found themselves at the time.

Schön and Argyris argue that, when we engage in reflection on our behaviour, we employ *single loop learning* - we strive to rationalise our behaviour by reference to our espoused theories. However, effective learning (what they called *double loop learning*) requires us to question those espoused theories, to ask how well they truly explain our experience and our actions, and challenge us to be truly reflective. It is this ability to question and challenge our own behaviour that critical leadership depends on for effectiveness, and is what we mean when we talk about reflection.

Reflection, as a practice, has been advocated for many years in a wide range of disciplines, not just in leadership development but in teaching, social work and engineering, amongst others. Although purists may differ on the precise definition and description, there are several common elements that are core to effective reflection: these are:

- *It is an active, conscious process.*

  Reflection occurs when you set aside time and space to engage in the process of examining events that you were involved in, looking at both your own, and others' behaviour, and at the consequences of your actions.

- *It involves questioning what happened.*

  Questions around what you and others did, felt and thought (insofar as we can tell what others are thinking and feeling); why events happened as they did; whether alternative actions might have had different results and if they would have been preferable. Most importantly it requires you to focus particularly on your own thinking, feelings and behaviours and consider whether you could have done it better – and why you didn't.

- *It matters where and when it happens.*

  As we discuss in the section on Space – Pace – Place, by changing the context in which you do something, you change the way that you think and act. Sometimes just walking out of the office and strolling round outside, slowly, can help you to have a different perspective on something.

- *It can be done alone or in discussion with others.*

  Both have strengths and weaknesses. Alone you can ask yourself questions and consider more extreme scenarios that you might struggle to do with others, but you may also overlook questions that may be important to consider. In discussion with another, a critical friend, someone you trust and who trusts you, it can be easier to see things that you may not have otherwise noticed, because of the different perspective that the other brings.

- *It leads to conscious action.*

  This may simply be a decision to do things differently in future, or it could involve reconvening and meeting to consider alternative actions to those previously agreed. The most significant outcome is that you learn something from the event. Critical leadership is all about continual personal development and reflection as a necessary part of this process.

This may sound relatively straightforward but it is the second stage that catches people out. Our natural tendency is to see weaknesses in our words and actions being due to externalities – things that other people have said or done. This is what is meant by single loop learning – we go round the circle of reflection once and don't question why we did what we did, just ask what we did and what happened. We prefer to justify our own behaviour because it helps to reinforce our self-esteem, rather than recognise that we could have done it differently and had a better outcome. The reality is that, by being open and honest we become better at what we do and so our self-esteem is enhanced for the long-term.

Asking the questions outlined in point 2, above, can help you adopt a methodical and constructive approach to reflection, to make the second turn around the reflective cycle and enable double loop learning. By structuring those reflective processes you are better able to reduce the emotional reactions that naturally shape your cognition and create a defensive mode of thinking.

Ask yourself:

1. What did I and others say and do?
2. Why did we say and do what we did?
3. Why do I think that?
4. What were the outcomes of my, and others', words and actions?
5. Were these the best outcomes?
6. What else could I have said or done?
7. What might the outcomes have been if I did?
8. Would these have been preferable?
9. In future, what will I say and how will I act?

Asking 'Why?', especially about others' behaviour is always going to be subjective and biased – we are often unable to identify the real reasons for our own reasoning, let alone that of others. In asking the question 'Why?', it is important to ask the follow-up question 'Why do I think that?' to help you uncover the factors that shape your own reasoning – that is *meta-cognition* – thinking about your own thinking.

Our brains struggle to cope with the vast quantity of data that they constantly receive from our senses, so they use some simple techniques to help them. One is to decide how much effort to put into thinking: if the process is a repetitive one that we are used to doing, then we deal with it with minimal cognitive effort. This has been called System 1 thinking. If it requires more active thought and greater cognitive effort then we deal with it consciously – System 2 thinking. These ideas, although discussed and debated for some considerable time, have been illustrated in the bestselling book **Thinking Fast and Slow** by Daniel Kahneman.

Reflection is a System 2 process, but our brains try to undertake as much System 1 thinking as they can, so they rely on System 1 thinking - simple rules of thumb – as much as they can. Heuristics (‘rule of thumb’ thinking) are based on experience and are short cuts to analysing data. We tend to be optimistic and risk-averse, rely on the most recent data rather than review historic data, see things in context rather than being able to view them objectively, and use simpler rather than more complex explanations. Consequently, we rely on stereotypes and other biases in making decisions.

This is normal and is a vital way of conserving the amount of effort our brains have to put in – although only 2% of our bodyweight, our brains account for 20% of our energy consumption, on average. The challenge of reflection is to be aware of these potential biases in our thinking and avoid allowing them to come to easy conclusions about the effectiveness of our actions. Throughout **Critical Leadership** you will be encouraged to practice reflection and develop your critical faculties to enable you to learn and improve your leadership capability.