

Mastering Leadership Reflexes: A Case Study of Captain Aubrey in *Master and Commander*, Utilizing Russell West's Reflex Leadership Theory

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by David M. Durst, Mark L. Russell, J. Michael Cuckler

The assumption of the present writers and of all leadership theory is that the future is neither predetermined, nor fully determinable. People can influence, but not control their environment and their future. Those who would lead must learn to dance to or act in response to environmental stimuli and the movement of fellow dancers. Using a popular film and a contemporary leadership development paradigm, we seek to illustrate that though events provoke responses from us, it is possible to develop the inner being so that a leader acts reflexively and wisely in the real world.

Russell West's reflex leadership theory sees four elements at work in every leader-needy situation (West, 2004). The first two, context and episode, are externals which provoke a response. The second set, the person's reflexes and habitus are the internal processes by which a person feels, thinks and acts, making the situation either better or worse. Drawing on his experience as an entrepreneurial leader, teacher and United States Marine drill instructor, West argues that both habitus and reflexes can be intentionally formed, empowering a leader to respond with wisdom and strength to presenting exigencies. He writes, "When encountered with a leader-needy situation, most people reach deep within and sometimes beyond themselves for adequate solutionary resources and forces. *Habitus* is that place to which they reach" (2004, pp. 190-191). West identifies eight traits and eight techniques that can raise leader effectiveness.

In *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (Weir, 2003), audiences behold an English frigate being tossed by storms and fired upon by a superior French warship. The year is 1805, the age of Napoleon's rise. The English vessel, the HMS Surprise, is an aging 28-gun warship, led by

Captain Jack Aubrey (played by Russell Crowe). His orders are to sink, burn or take as prize the superior French privateer, *Acheron*, which is en route to the Pacific “intent on carrying the war into those waters.” The roles of prey and predator sometimes reverse, as Aubrey demonstrates well-honed leadership reflexes and mentors people in his context, and ours.

Traits that Increase Leadership Effectiveness

Let's first consider the eight traits or interior qualities West says are key to leadership.

The Core-Keeping Reflex

A leader's strength begins with fidelity to values. Through the film, it becomes increasingly clear that Aubrey's men may not always like the decisions their chief announces, but they respect the source from which they spring. These include the traditions of the sea, the intrinsic worth of people, fidelity to command and protecting the homeland. The doctor's call to rid the ship of alcohol is rejected based on hundreds of years of “privilege and tradition.” Aubrey demonstrates respect for human souls through the death rituals, which announce with pride the names and roles of officers and conscripts alike.

Without a doubt, however, the ultimate value lived out by the sea captain is his devotion to England. Aubrey repeatedly shocks his crew with his persistence in pursuing the enemy ship, beyond orders, beyond expectations and beyond reason. Yet, he repeatedly reminds them that they are a warship at war and must act accordingly regardless of risks. “Duty” is not ultimately to the chain of command, but to the grand purpose, which has propelled the leader into service.

Leaders such as Captain Aubrey often push their subordinates to their limits. But, while the moment by moment decisions and actions of such leaders are not always predictable, those who act and react from a firm core of values are followed because their motivations are trusted.

The Ethical Consideration Reflex

Choices can be made on the basis of fear, peer-pressure, immediate gratification, pragmatics or principle.

Two episodes within *Master and Commander* vividly portray the importance of ethical reflexes. In one, a storm has cast a man and a platform into the icy Atlantic. While the man is calling for help and

attempting to draw himself closer to the ship, the sea threatens to engulf the ship, now tilted by the drag of the fallen rigging. Ultimately, the captain orders the ropes to be cut. The friend is lost; the ship is saved. Later, the Surprise has its prize in view and the positional advantage, but the doctor who is the captain's confidant, has been shot and needs surgery. Aubrey calls off the chase and turns to land where surgery is safely and successfully performed.

Ethical considerations often strain the soul. Leaders who are able to make right choices in ethically muddied situations demonstrate an inner being worthy of respect.

Style Versatility Reflex

Some people are predictable to a fault. Those who find within themselves a freedom and ability to adjust their personal style are able to lead more people in more contexts.

Aubrey demonstrates situational leadership. We see him in full authoritarian mode when his position is communicated, by the positioning of his hat, a firm countenance and his dismissal of all objections. He halts his friend's complaint of a broken promise: "We have no time for your hobbies, Sir!" End of discussion. At other times, the captain is the cheerleader of comrades who are repairing the ship. He is a compassionate visitor of the injured and the counselor of emerging leaders. Whatever Aubrey's preferred role, he stretches to meet people where they are.

Negotiating Reflex

Leaders can be sure that they will be called upon to facilitate agreement between conflicting parties. When faced with conflict within the group or between competing organizations, something from within will either push a leader to fight, flight or fix. Each has its appropriate moment, but a healthy leader often strives for the third alternative.

In one instance, a crew member fails to salute an officer and, in fact, makes insubordinate contact. Aubrey knew why the crewman did not salute the officer and may have agreed that the officer was not worthy of respect. Aubrey's fix is to have the crewman flogged and to forcefully, but separately, correct the young officer as well.

Although the ability to see things clearly is a leadership strength, it is a great advantage to attempt to view each side of a dispute and to bring a new reality into being through negotiation.

Orchestrative Judgment Reflex

Every concert attendant knows there is a difference between the warm-up and the performance. The first displays individuality, as each instrument is a world unto itself. The chaos ceases, however, when the conductor enters the context and goes to work.

During one of the opening scenes, the HMS Surprise suffers considerable damage. The crew and officers try to persuade Capt. Aubrey to return to England or even to a nearby jungle, to make repairs. However, Aubrey finds a way to make repairs to the ship without falling too far behind the pursuit of the enemy. Repairs are made "on the fly." By garnishing available resources and motivating his crew, the Surprise is soon back on the trail of the French vessel. The reflex of sequencing diverse resources for a single use is an important leadership strength.

Solutionary Reflex

The solutionary reflex is the leader's ability to generate innovations to address problems. On two occasions, the HMS Surprise is a victim of surprise, and is threatened with destruction. In the first event, the rudder is destroyed by the Archon's cannons. Aubrey's solution was to have the lifeboats tug the ship into the fog where they could do repairs unseen. In a second escape, the captain gained significant capital in the eyes of his men, by returning to their previous course, but this time in the advantageous position. A weathered officer boasts to the men around him, "All my years I've never seen anything like it ... that's seamanship!" Near the end of the film, Aubrey leads his crew to morph their warship into a whaling ship, at least outwardly, and suddenly the predator becomes the prey.

People at every level of organizational leadership can boost their status by identifying a pressing problem and solving it. Somewhere deep inside, the leader believes that a solution exists and sets out to find it.

Political Awareness Reflex

Another leader capacity is that of perceiving competing agendas. It is naïve to believe that no one in an organization carries any personal or competing agendas.

Although a 19th century ship's captain was largely shielded by coercive power, we do see Aubrey consulting with the doctor and asking what the men are thinking and saying. Clearly, it would take a

great deal of opposing pressure to convince him to end the pursuit, but he demonstrates wisdom in tending to the pulse of various interests.

A true leader is unimpressed with robotic obedience, preferring that subordinates generate ideas, develop their strengths and operate from their core values and passions. It is not the elimination of political agendas, but the coordinating of them, that advances a cause.

Action Biased Reflex

This trait involves responding proactively to situations with energy for changes. The other traits are of little value if not accompanied by a tendency to translate thought into action.

The opening scene of *Master and Commander* provides an instructive contrast of the degree of action bias among leaders. An officer on watch glimpses threatening shadows through the fog, but is hesitant to act. A peer comes alongside and the two converse as follows:

What is it?

Um... Two points off the starboard bow, in the fog bank.

What was it? A sail?

I don't know what it was.

Should we beat to quarters?

I can't be certain.

You're officer of the watch. Bonden, you must make a decision ... We shall beat to quarters!

The resulting summons is both late and timid, contributing to disaster. Bonden's reflexes are biased for information, not action. Only with certainty would he dare to initiate action.

Certainty is a luxury in the real world. The action bias is not a call to business. It rather reflects a tendency to move into appropriate action as soon as possible.

Reflex Techniques to Increase Leadership Effectiveness

West's eight valued leadership reflex techniques are also well demonstrated in *Master and Commander*. While there is some overlap with the previous list, these are measurable skills that should be continually nurtured in growing leaders.

Continuous Learning Reflex

Leaders learn continually and intentionally.

Aubrey, despite being “master” of a warship, finds creative ways to learn. He creates space for feedback and vulnerability. The ship's surgeon, Dr. Stephen Maturin, regularly visits Aubrey in his quarters and, at times, vociferously debates his leadership decisions. Aubrey is also seen reading *The Victories of Lord Nelson*, the memoirs of the famous British admiral.

Late in the story, Aubrey listens to a thirteen-year-old describe a unique animal that disguises itself as a stick to hide from predators. His genuine interest in learning from the young man creates an opportunity to apply a chameleon approach in battle. He develops a strategy to take the Acheron by camouflaging his warship as a whaling vessel.

Engaged leaders do not listen simply to please or appease followers, but to gain valuable insights and information that advance the organization's mission.

Mentoring Reflex

Aubrey mentors as he was mentored. He frequently mentions his former commander, Lord Nelson, and once muses, “With Nelson, you felt your heart glow.” He deliberately encourages the ship officers not to only revere Nelson, but also to emulate him as a human being.

The Surprise's captain takes advantage of difficult work situations to mentor others in overcoming challenges. Following the insubordination scene, he explains that an officer's job is to lead, not to be a friend. He mentors people informally in critical learning situations, rather than in formal classroom settings.

Leaders who did not have a mentor will not be as prepared as they could be for calls on their leadership ability. Similarly, leaders who are not mentoring others are not complete leaders. While

for many being a leader means having followers, true leaders produce other leaders, largely through mentoring.

Collaborative Reflex

This represents a leader's skill of collaborating with others to develop group-oriented success rather than simply individual accomplishment. Collaboration is not present if success is dependent only on the leader and if the rewards go to the leader alone.

Aubrey develops camaraderie with his executive team, frequently dining and conversing with them. He participates in song and exchanging jokes. These good times enable him to develop a personal connection with his key leaders and produce leadership capital, increasing his credibility during the more desperate portions of their journey.

The scenes in which the ship must be repaired are excellent displays of collaboration. Aubrey personally visits injured men on the ship. He inspects damage. He empowers the crew to handle their own repairs, recognizing that they were more knowledgeable than him regarding these details. In sum, he creates an environment in which they all work together using their individual strengths and abilities to accomplish a common goal.

Contemporary leaders succeed by creating environments in which people are able to give the best they can at the time it is most needed. This is not a trick, it is genuine empowerment.

Sense-Making Reflex

Sense-making is the leadership task of framing messages in such a way that people are able to understand past episodes, present reality and future plans.

Following a junior officer's suicide, Aubrey creates space for people to move on. He recognizes some may feel responsible for this death and communicates that the slate is clean and no residue from this tragedy will tarnish the mission. He shows grace and provides redemption. Without attempting to give unknowable answers, Aubrey deflects a potentially divisive incident and creates unity and forward mobility for the organization.

In the midst of confusion, people need clarity and they look to leaders to provide it.

Diagnostic Reflex

This technique is based on the leader's ability to read situations and unlock explanations. In changing contexts, leaders must see reality clearly to diagnose both causes and solutions.

Twice in the movie, the "ghost ship" surprisingly assaults the HMS Surprise. After both encounters, Aubrey is seen in deep thought, analyzing the situation. His reflex is not to rebuke those on whom blame might fall, but to diagnose and correct the process. Following each battle, an evaluation process takes place. Officers evaluate what led to the fight, how the fight went and the appropriate next steps. It is worth noting that almost all teams have their problem-focused people. They are good at diagnosing the problem, but not at developing solutions. Aubrey demonstrates the ability to give space to such people, but then move everyone into a solution-oriented process.

The leader does not need to have all the insights; however, the leader needs to be skilled in influencing the group to use its collective skills and talents to develop a clear analysis.

Capacity Development Reflex

Capacity development is the leader's ability to multiply resources from assets on hand. Limited resources and funds are ubiquitous problems. While there is a time for aggressive strategies to increase resources and funds, a leader is often required to make the most of what is already present.

In the post-battle rebuilding projects and in the eventual metamorphosis of the Surprise into a whaling vessel, Aubrey led his crew to do what they would have previously considered impossible. A perfect scenario would have offered opportunity to gather new masts and to involve the English fleet, but success was achieved by stretching and innovation, finally enabling the weaker HMS Surprise to take control of the larger, stronger Acheron.

Ideal situations of surplus resources are rare. Multiplication of resources, rather than the accumulation of them, is the mark of leaders with the skill of capacity development.

Execution Reflex

Execution is the ability to translate theoretical plans into measurable results consistently.

During the diagnosis processes following their battles with the Acheron, Aubrey and his team spent much time laying out theoretical scenarios, which could result in victory. The entire crew participated in timed tactical and cannon firing drills. They anticipated various battle scenarios and rehearsed the steps necessary to execute effectively in battle.

Breaking down complex challenges into comprehensible constructs is the task of the leader. Execution does not take place “between the ears.” It is a learned technique flowing from reflection into practice.

Intercultural Advocacy Reflex

Wise leaders are aware of the various people groups affected by their decisions and are able to interact with competing interests and integrate them synergistically.

Though Aubrey’s crew is ethnically homogeneous and all male, it contains various classes of officers and crew. This is demonstrated in distinct duties and quality of quarters, food and drink. Though ostensibly the “master and commander,” Aubrey maintains awareness of the state of his crew through informants and observation and he honors the humanity of each.

In today’s globalized society, this intercultural advocacy technique is increasingly important for leaders. Leaders need to understand unique perceptions and needs of the various groups of people with whom they work, not only to keep peace, but to incorporate the valuable contributions offered by diverse people.

Conclusion

In the final scene of *Master and Commander*, Captain Aubrey discerns that their victory may not have been complete. Although Aubrey has captured the Acheron and put its sailors in chains bound for England, he realizes that the Acheron’s captain had not been killed, but had cleverly disguised himself as a doctor. Given the ending of *Master and Commander*, a perfect sequel has been set up for the viewing public. Perhaps this is also a fitting picture to conclude our study on reflex leadership theory. Given the reality of constantly changing contexts and the barrage of new exigencies facing leaders, every action conceives and gives birth to an unpredictable sequel. Through considering

these traits and techniques, leaders can begin to discover their own reflexes in leader-needy situations and hone them for the next episode that is soon to follow. The dance between contexts and needs, leaders and followers continues.

About the Authors

David Durst is an ordained minister in the Wesleyan Church and a doctoral candidate in Intercultural Studies, majoring in leadership, evangelism and church growth.

E-mail: david_durst@asburyseminary.edu

Mark Russell is director of spiritual integration for HOPE International and a doctoral candidate, researching the use of business in missions.

E-mail: Mark@markrussell.org

J. Michael Cuckler is an instructor in sociology and youth ministry at Asbury College, and a doctoral candidate, majoring in evangelism.

E-mail: James_cuckler@asburyseminary.edu

All three authors are completing their work at the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky.

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