

REFLECTIVE EDGE

SERIES

For Senior Executives



223

**HARD-HITTING
QUESTIONS THAT
WILL TRANSFORM
THE WAY YOU LEAD**

DEVIKA DAS

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Written by Devika Das

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For my daughters, Saachi and Saisha.
The most courageous thing you can do is
tell yourself the truth. May you always have
the courage to look inward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Reflective Edge series was crafted while I was in the midst of writing a separate book on executive presence. Provisionally titled *Core Executive Presence for Women*, this required me to research how the deep space within a person changes their outward presence.

After two years of working on the book, I came to the conclusion that self-help as a genre can only be used as guidance because the true meaning of self-help is to look within ourselves for answers. There is so much collective, untapped wisdom within all of us, yet we don't take the time to discover it. We should.

Writing *Reflective Edge: For Senior Executives* has been both an academic and a spiritual endeavour. The questions put me in an uncomfortable position. They challenged me to look at the world as it is and not tinted by the lens I wear to protect myself. No matter who we are in front of the world, once we reflect within to be authentic in our own truth, we become more inclusive in our outlook.

There is no such thing as singular leadership skill; it involves the whole person. You cannot detach yourself in leadership roles. The courage to reflect on yourself translates into accepting not only who you are but also who others are. A conscious leader can impact not only their organization but the wider world as well, and let's face it: the planet is certainly in dire need of some mindful leadership right now.

Of course, I couldn't have written this book alone. To start with, I would

like to thank ‘the force’ that shepherded me through this process. I was in a state of flow that can only be described as some form of ‘guidedness,’ showing me that there is a lot we can achieve when we are centered. As Anne Lamott would have said: this higher source is a bit of a show off – I’m blessed for it.

Standing on the shoulders of giants: I thank my professors at INSEAD – Manfred Kets de Vries, Erik van de Loo, and especially Roger Lehman, from whom I learnt that if you want to be the force of good, you need to start with yourself. Thank you for giving me the psychological perspective to look within myself and the ability to look deeply into what is ‘unseen’ in others.

It was at INSEAD that I learned the transformational power of deep, reflective writing. Manfred, who has written several books and is a true leadership guru, once told me that writing helps keeps him sane. I’ve found that that couldn’t be more true. It’s wonderful to be able to share the joy of writing with others and help them find sanity themselves.

To my classmates and friends at INSEAD: you have been a constant source of support and encouragement, and for that, I truly thank you.

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To all of the people who have stuck around through my failures, vulnerabilities, and challenges without judgment and who have become family in the process: you stayed without any sense of duty or need for gratitude, and your selflessness has inspired me to do the same for others – to show up with kindness.

Last but not least, my heartfelt thanks go out to my family. I love you more than I can say. Thank you Saurabh for your patience in listening to all 223 questions at all sorts of odd hours and for your honest feedback. And finally, to my children: you can be anything you want to be – I'm glad you have chosen to be kind.

FOREWORD

I dropped out of college to start my first company when I was 22 years old. Nobody appointed me or promoted me to become the company leader; it just happened organically, as I made our first hire, then the second, then the subsequent ones. Almost without noticing, our company grew to over a hundred members, but unfortunately my leadership and management abilities didn't grow in parallel. I made so many mistakes in that first experience as CEO that I could write a series of books about all the things I messed up.

It's been 16 years now since that first leadership experience, and in that time, I have embarked on a personal journey to become a better leader. This journey has taken me to some of the best business schools in the world, including Kellogg, Harvard, and Stanford. I learned a lot through these programs, but I can honestly share that no leadership class or exercise can compare to the amazing power of self-reflection. It's through self-reflection that I have come to recognize my core values, develop self-compassion, straighten my emotional intelligence, and become more empathetic. All of these have helped me become a better leader and, more importantly, a better person.

What excites me the most about this book is that Devika has combined the best of academic research with years of her own experience as a coach to create a true self-help manual, which provides the roadmap to a profound personal exploration journey that will ultimately make you a more self-aware leader. This is the book I have been looking for throughout the last 16 years of my leadership development journey.

For me, the impact has gone well beyond my own personal exploration. I'm now running my fourth company, and one of the key learnings I have taken away is the importance of every hire for the success of the company. For this reason, even though we are now a team of more than 200 members, I still conduct the final interview of all candidates. Since reading *Reflective Edge: For Senior Executives*, I always include at least one of its question in every interview. It has an almost magical effect. Cultural-fit interviews automatically become candid conversations. Furthermore, besides the interviews, the questions presented in the book have proven to be extremely effective in helping me activate some of the most meaningful conversations I have had with colleagues and friends.

If you are reading this, it means the book has found its way into your hands. Now it is your turn, as Devika says in the book, to find the power to look into yourself – it's where most of your power lies.

Carlos Moncayo

Co-founder and Chief Executive Officer at Inspectorio

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INTRODUCTION

If you were to write a list of steps you could take to become a more effective and influential leader, which areas would you choose to focus on? Communication? Motivation? What about self-awareness? Would introspection be somewhere on your list?

Research shows that leaders who are self-aware can significantly increase their teams' chances of success. How? By having an awareness of who you are, what has shaped you, and how you respond to the vicissitudes of business and people issues, you can tailor your interactions for maximum effect and influence.

The competitive advantage that comes from understanding your own thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns is enormous. Not only does it increase self-acceptance, it also increases your acceptance of those around you. The more you know and accept yourself, the more open minded and inclusive you can become. You gain awareness of how you are perceived by others, and you can use this to evolve as you grow in your role.

I have coached many C-suite executives over the years, and when it comes to personal development, I find journaling (asking self-analytical questions) to be one of the most effective tools in my kit.

Common feedback I receive is that self-reflective journaling helps with stress management, mental clarity, and decision making, and the one thing every single client has said is that it has helped them manage

people with greater empathy, which in turn has led to an improvement in overall team performance.

It makes perfect sense: once you've acknowledged yourself and had the time to reflect on your own inner stories, you can apply the same considerations to others.

The technique has other applications too. For example, many people find the questions a useful tool for assessing candidates in interview situations, particularly when recruiting senior management – when the stakes are high, attitude becomes one of the most vital criteria for selection. I've also known clients use stories that surfaced from their own journaling as material for inspirational speeches, blogs, and books on leadership. By writing your own stories down, you create the raw material needed to inspire and motivate others.

The CORE components

I approach coaching from a psychoanalytical perspective. As a coach, my primary goal is to help leaders look inward and identify ways to use their learnings to positively influence external interactions.

It's not always easy. Self-reflection can be uncomfortable. Human nature is to seek validation, and our instinct is to try and pass blame and responsibility on to others. But if we can take ownership of our actions, the resilience we gain is unmatched. Journaling is a reflective process in which you give yourself the privilege of non-judgment. No, it's not easy, but I assure you, it's well worth it.

When working with my clients, I focus on four key pillars: Competence, Ourselves, Reflection and Energy (CORE). ‘Competence’ is the ability to contribute and serve the world using acquired skills and innate talent. ‘Ourselves’ is knowing and accepting who we are, including our values, purpose, and even our dark side. ‘Reflection’ is the act of stepping back in order to observe the situation and the needs of our stakeholders, and ‘Energy’ relates to how we influence the world with our integrated persona and how we project ourselves through both verbal and non-verbal communication.

By focusing on these pillars and embarking on the journaling process, you will take ownership of your own transformation and bring the ‘whole person’ into your leadership role. Other benefits include improved confidence and the ability to redefine and rebrand yourself.

Journaling will also help you come to terms with the stories you tend to hold back. As it has done for me, it will help you understand just how far you’ve come and how you can use your experiences to keep moving forward.

I have journaled for many years, but it wasn’t until I wrote a paper about my own life, as part of my training in clinical and organizational psychology at INSEAD, that I understood its true power. To write the paper took a great deal of courage and required me to be honest with myself about who I was and what had shaped me. It is the single most transformational thing I have ever done.

By writing that paper, by looking deep into myself, I realized that I had inner resilience and could break patterns of behavior that didn't serve me anymore. In the years since, I have used journaling to help countless corporate clients with life and career goals, stress, health, influence, confidence, critical thinking, and much more.

There is a cacophony of voices around you telling you who you are. You know amidst all the noise which one is yours. Journaling will enable you to turn the volume of your own voice up while at the same time fading the external noise out.

Questions are key

Each book in the Reflective Edge series contains 223 questions based on the psychoanalytical research of organizations. They draw on several academic studies on the topics of emotional intelligence, influence, self-aware leadership, reflection, and self-worth.

The open-ended questions have all been carefully crafted to offer a counselling-led, motivational, nondirective approach. The idea is for them to provide you with an accessible platform for self-exploration in a noncritical, affirmative way.

This is a true self-help book. Its aim is to provoke and challenge you so that you can discover the answers for your own unique situation. To motivate yourself and evolve as a leader, you need to be evocative. These questions are deeply evocative.

By writing this book and the other books in the series, I hope to share with you some of my coaching practices and expertise so that you can benefit from my professional experience and give yourself the best chance of growing as a leader.

If you want to take things to the next level, I urge you to reach out to a qualified coach with whom you can discuss your answers and who can walk you through the process of transforming your leadership capabilities.

If you would like to reach out to me, please feel free to get in touch via my website – www.COREexecutivepresence.com. I'd be very happy to discuss ways in which we could work together.

How to use this book

When setting out to answer the questions, it's important to come at each one with a clear mindset. If you've spent time mulling them over beforehand, the ideas won't flow naturally. Let each question surprise you. Go in unprepared so that you can tap into your genuine self.

Work through the questions in an order that makes sense for your own personal situation. You may want to start at the front and work from cover to cover (a great option if you want to challenge yourself, as you never know what's coming next), or you may want to flick through to find a question that is pertinent to the 'place' you are in in your career/ life right now.

Grab a journal and a pen, and get writing. When you physically write something out by hand instead of typing, it resonates more deeply. I usually use a fountain pen because I like the flow and also for environmental reasons. Pick good-quality stationary so that it will last for years to come.

It may sound simplistic, but make sure you write down each question and question number for future reference. If you want to add to it later or look back to understand what you were going through at a certain time in your career, it's important to be organized up front.

In terms of how long you should spend on each question, I recommend at least eight minutes of continuous writing. After that, if you feel you would benefit from further unpacking and have the capacity to carry on, keep going.

The silent 'why'

You will notice that most of the questions don't contain the word 'why.' This is because it applies to each and every one, so always keep that one small but hugely important word at the back of your mind when considering your answers.

I recommend following the '5 Whys' technique, which was originally developed by Sakichi Toyoda for the Toyota Motor Corporation. The idea is that you keep asking why, with each answer forming the basis of the next question.

It's a fantastic tool for delving deeper into cause and effect. Keep on asking until you feel you have reached the root cause of the feeling, behavior, or outcome in the context of the original question.

Tips and guidelines to keep in mind

As you work through the book, try to remember the following:

- 1. Engage:** This journal should be engaging for you. Allow your outer self (the leader you project) to collaborate with your inner self (the truth of who you are) to create a trusted space in which you can reflect deeply. As you write, allow yourself to let go of any inner resistance towards your goals. Make a 'to-do' list of things that surface. Remember that it is not mandatory to take concrete actions for everything you write. If you use the book purely to gain a better understanding of yourself, it is still time well spent.
- 2. Focus:** Stay focused on the process, and remember it will at times be a journey you may not want to go on. It will take discipline and commitment. To make things easier, try to follow your heart, and let it dictate what comes out – grammar, spelling, and handwriting should be the least of your concerns.
- 3. Evoke:** Look at your life, and have hope and confidence in your potential. Be honest with yourself – to be an authentic leader, you first need to be genuine in your own company. This journey within will be evocative. It will bring up forgotten memories – some pleasant and some less so. If something crops up that is

distressing or too painful to explore, I would suggest waiting before writing about it. Writing will help you heal, but so will time – give yourself a break, and revisit it when you are ready.

- 4. Plan:** When you find your authentic voice and want to develop it further, make a commitment to change just one or two things that you feel will make a difference (your engagement style, a limiting belief, etc.). Engage a trusted advisor or thought partner to help you. This could be a coach, counselor, mentor, or transformative leadership program.

Finally, remember that at the core of leadership is our inner world. It's complex, unique, and paradoxical. By journaling, we peek into the myriad of motivators that play out in the vicissitudes of the life of the leader in you.

Looking inward will help, although it will take courage, but then you couldn't have made it this far and achieved so much without having the ability to put yourself forward. Find the courage to look within yourself – it's where most of your power lies. Be true, be present, and take time to know yourself – you deserve it.

Keep this book on your desk. Take it with you when you go away on business or when you think you may have eight minutes to spare before a meeting. It will center your thoughts. Share the book with the other leaders in your organization. As they embark on their own journey of self-reflection, you will notice the power of each person's transformation on the culture and success of your business.

“The most fundamental thing about leadership is to have the humility to continue to get feedback and to try to get better – because your job is to help everybody else get better.”

— Jim Yong Kim

THE QUESTIONS

- 1 -

Under extreme pressure, diamonds can be made from anything – even cheese. Crisis can turn us into better people. Which events in your life have taught you about resilience and courage? How are you better off because of them?



I DID IT!

- 2 -

What is your next adventure? What level of self-awareness will you need in order to get the most out of the experience?



I DID IT!

- 3 -

How genuine are you with others? What is your truth, and how do you own it? Which aspects of yourself are you afraid to share with the world?



I DID IT!