

Report from An Action Research Inquiry to Explore the Relevance and Value of 1:1 Executive Reflection to Leaders in a Global, Virtual and Diverse World

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Abstract

Leaders, particularly in global organisations, are facing increasing pressure to perform and deliver results, with little time or incentive to pause and think or reflect on what they are doing or how to better resource themselves (Scharmer 2018)

There are a variety of ways that these needs can be met – for example through leadership development programmes, coaching or action learning sets. 1:1 Executive Reflection has been identified as a useful additional mode of development. However to date there is only a limited amount of evidence as to its efficacy. The research therefore set out to explore the experience of ten senior global leaders undertaking this development.

The findings from the research indicated that this 1:1 practice of reflection was found to be a vital, invaluable and imperative oasis for leaders. A distinct practice of 1:1 Executive Reflection was defined and the resultant skills, training and CPD requirements of the practitioners working in this way were identified as areas for further discussion, development and research for the profession. This might also encourage Coaching Supervisors to see the value and relevance of their training to leaders as well as to coaches.

Key Words

Executive Reflection; Action Research; GVD (Global, Virtual and Diverse); Leadership Development; Coaching Supervision.

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Glossary

For the purpose of clarity, definitions of several of the key words and acronyms used in this report are provided here:

‘Executive Reflection’ (or Leadership Supervision) is a 1:1 distinct practice. It provides a creative, reflective space and generative oasis for Leaders to gain deeper insights and awareness (“Helicopter-Vision”) that includes themselves, their work, their relationships and with their wider environment at work

‘Executive Reflection Practitioner’ (also sometimes known as the Supervisor) works as a confidential witness, companion and observer providing a creative and non-judgmental container for the leader to reflect. The Practitioner creates the personal and environmental conditions for the Leader to gain profound insight, resourcing and learning to ignite personal, team and organizational change through wise action.

VUCA: An acronym meaning volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous

GVD: An acronym meaning “Global”, “Virtual” and “Diverse” to capture the essence of business and organizational life today for leaders as they shape vision, goals, deliverables as well as inspiring performance.

- **Global** - the worldwide nature, stretch and web of work that can cross continents, time zones, cultures and language
- **Virtual** - computers, the web and digital technology have enabled leaders to reach, communicate, co-ordinate and deliver work to customers and clients globally
- **Diverse** - the cultural mix and blending of many different countries, languages, identities, cultures, races and languages which can exist in just one person, in a team and in an organisation.

Leadership Development: The purposeful development of leaders for their leadership tasks and roles

Coaching Supervision: A co-created learning relationship that supports the supervisee in their personal and professional development. It offers a forum to attend to professional and emotional wellbeing and growth.

‘Action Research’ (AR): It is a participatory democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues... and more generally the flourishing of individual people and their communities (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 1-2)



Section 1

Introduction

Context – What is going on in organisations globally?

A brief literature review (Duncan, R. Dean 2018, Scharmer 2018) highlighted a number of significant demands on leaders in today. Although not comprehensive, a sample from the review highlights the experience of leaders leading today. This prompted the research inquiry into what was needed and what could be done to better support and resource these leaders.

- The demands on executives are constantly changing with increasing competition from technological advances and 24/7 global connectivity (Johansen & Ryan 2012)
- Executives are expected to be creative and do more with fewer resources in less time (?WHATIF! Innovation Partners 2015)
- Executives are both needing and wanting themselves and their employees to be more resourceful and resilient (Hall 2015, Pemberton 2015)
- Executives are seeking safe confidential spaces to think clearly to enable them to make effective decisions (Kline 2009)
- Executives are both needing and wanting to inspire and motivate their people (Arnold 2016)
- Executives are keen to understand how best to lead people who are working in global, virtual and diverse environments (Einzig 2017)
- No generation before now has had so many of its people living simultaneously in, between and among so many different cultural worlds (Bushong 2013)



Section 2

Literature Review

Over the last 40 years the demands of the changing business contexts have been reflected in the literature on leadership and leadership development. Handy (1978, 1989 and 1994), and Schon (1984) noted how both technical and linear thinking and processes needed to be adapted particularly in the post-industrialised world principally in Europe and the Americas. This was further augmented with the literature on executive coaching, emerging from the sporting world with the focus primarily on driving individual and team performance. (e.g. Gallwey 1982, Whitmore 1992, Hawkins 2017, Leary-Joyce & Lines 2018, Hawkins & Turner 2019)

In reviewing the literature since 2000 there has been a shift in the focus of organisational change to wider, relational and systemic themes. (Scharmer 2007 & 2018, Scharmer & Kaufer 2013)

At this time new thinking started to emerge and permeate, paying attention to the wider, relational and systemic themes that arise with organisational change (e.g. Wheatley 2001, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers 2005, Shaw & Linnecar 2007, Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Luar & Schley 2008). Leaders and also their Human Resources Teams started to recognise the need to develop beyond a “command and control” approach, to a more “servant leadership” or “authentic leadership” culture (Greenleaf 1977, Bennis 1994) with greater emotional intelligence, not just technical “know how” (Hughes, Patterson & Terrell 2005, Goleman 2005 and 2013).

This has necessitated leaders to attend to their own self-development from the inside out as maturing adults (Torbert, Rooke & Fisher 2000, Kegan & Lahey 2016) enabling them to engage with the demands of their roles in the current global environment. What is now emerging is the need for greater psychological awareness (Bluckert 2006, Peltier 2009) and work on self, recognising the correlation between who you are and how you lead or work (Murdoch & Arnold 2012)

This shift towards the development of the person who is the leader as well as the development of their technical skills inevitably involves a degree of self-reflection. Here we turned to the literature around reflection, at the forefront of which was Schon (1983) who argued for the need to move beyond pure rationality and technical competence, to work with the actual “messiness” of practice in the real world (ibid:42). As Schon argued:

“On the whole professional knowledge is mismatched to the changing character of the situations of practice – the complexity, the uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to professional practice” (ibid: 14)

Reflection and reflective practice has been more typically confined to the world of academia or psychotherapy (Patterson 2015 & 2019). Often goal and action oriented leaders regarded the notion of reflection as “woolly and a waste of time” (ibid 2015:641). Leaders sometimes found the notion and practice off-putting, difficult and even alien, and in fact sometimes it was regarded as a self-indulgent luxury in busy environments (ibid 2015: 644). However, recent research that explored leaders’ experience of reflection and reflective practice showed that reflection is an act of creation giving them valuable thinking time, creating space to develop the resources to lead well (ibid 2015: 636).

However, whilst for example West & Milan (2001) talk usefully of the reflecting glass but do not mention the “how” of reflective practice, Goffey and Jones (2006) join a list of authors like George & Sims (2007), Collins (2001), Cashman (2008) and Perks (2011) who provide a helpful definition and list of qualities for “authentic leadership” - defined as “being true to yourself and what you believe (George et al 2007: 205) but no process for how to actually learn and embody these qualities. Smith & Shaw (2011) provide a list of attributes for the reflective leader with questions for inquiry but no overall process for reflection. Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee (2002) provide a model of self directed learning but is goal rather than process orientated. Johns (2004) insightfully describes reflective learning as an experience and then focuses on repetitive lists of reflective questions applied to nursing rather than leadership.

Scharmer (2007) describes a powerful map for transformational learning that offers a methodology for reflective conversations but not for deep reflective practice. Goleman et al (2002) offers lists of emotional intelligence but no process for helping the reader embody these qualities. Wheatley (2001) and O’Neill (2000) highlight the importance of developing systemic mindedness but no process for the journey. Jaworski (2011) inspiringly describes his own transformational journey but does not offer the reader a model for reflective practice. Densten & Gray (2001), Brown (2008) and Smith & Shaw (2011) had empirically observed how critical reflection might support leadership development but did not evidence base this or describe how this could be made mainstream.

Meanwhile, in support of these changing needs of leaders in our VUCA world, executive coaching has developed, largely since 2000. This process often provides leaders with the aforementioned opportunity for reflection (Hawkins & Smith 2006, Stober & Grant 2006, Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck 2018). It involves one-to-one, person-centred facilitation of individual reflection and subsequent change that requires an extensive range of knowledge and skills in the areas of adult learning and development including: adult development theory (e.g. Kegan 1982, Wilber 2000), adult learning theory (e.g. Kolb 1984, Mezirow 1991, Cox 2006) reflective practice (e.g. Argyris & Schon 1974, Schon 1983), emotional intelligence (e.g. Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee 2001), organisational change and systems theory (e.g. Von Bertalanffy 1968, Hawkins & Smith 2006, Brunning 2006).

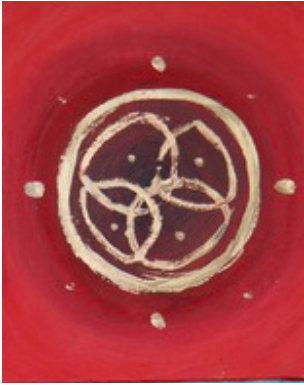
Whilst extremely rewarding and effective, the process of executive coaching, particularly in an organisational context can be challenging and demanding for the coach (Hodge 2014). This has resulted in what might be described as an inevitable need to support executive coaches to help them remain “fit for purpose”. To this end, we have seen the emergence and development of the practice known as coaching supervision, hitherto associated with and adapted from the psychologically-based fields of social work, psychotherapy and similar helping professions (Hawkins & Smith 2006, Hay 2007, Hodge 2014). With this in mind, we sought to explore the literature around the relatively young profession of coaching supervision (e.g. Hawkins & Smith 2006, De Haan 2008, Murdoch & Arnold (Eds) 2013, Hodge 2016, Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck 2018) in either 1:1 peer or group settings.

Based on their own professional experience in the field and this albeit brief exploration of the literature around leadership, executive coaching and coaching supervision, what became clear to the Researchers was:

- (a)** an increasing need and wish to explore and identify new ways to support executive development
- (b)** that this may be different in some ways in remit, focus or emphasis from the existing methods and approaches.

What is persistently emerging is the significance and value of reflective practice, in this case, particularly for executive coaches. The Researchers were curious to explore if this approach of Executive Reflection could be of relevance and value to leaders. The working definition of Executive Reflection which we wanted to test through the research was:

‘Executive Reflection’ (or Leadership Supervision) is a 1:1 distinct practice. It provides a creative and reflective space and generative oasis for Leaders to gain deeper insights and awareness (“Helicopter-Vision”) that includes themselves, their work, their relationships and with their wider environment at work



Section 3

Research Question

The central research question therefore sought to explore the relevance and value of the process of 1:1 Executive Reflection to resource and support leaders leading in a VUCA GVD world.

What follows is an account of the practice-based, inductive inquiry that explored the lived experience of ten global executive leaders who engaged in a series of 1:1 Executive Reflection sessions with qualified Executive Reflection Practitioners.

The outcome of the research is expected to be of value not only to executive leaders, who might benefit from the support, but also to practitioners who are trained in the practice and skills of coaching supervision. This might encourage coaching supervisors to see the value and relevance of their training to leaders as well as to coaches. Likewise, the findings were potentially relevant to purchasers and corporate sponsors seeking to identify and source effective personal and professional development interventions for their senior executives.



Section 4

Methodology

The Researchers selected the practice-based methodology of Action Research (Lewin 1946). At the heart of this approach (Reason & Bradbury 2001, McNiff & Whitehead 2009, McNiff 2017 & 2018) includes not only change in practice for the practitioner themselves, but also changes to the wider system in which the work takes place.

Action Research (AR) is a qualitative, relational methodology that involves the participants so they are engaging with the purpose and their own learning while contributing data to the inquiry. It was also evident that this approach was congruent with the process of supervision (e.g. Carroll & Gilbert 2005 & 2011, Hawkins & Smith 2006) and the practice of 1:1 Executive Reflection. The key element in the research method used was co-created relationships. This enquiry methodology takes an inductive approach, informed by inquiry and curiosity, rather than seeking to test or prove a hypothesis. It also allows for the findings to emerge iteratively from the data as it was collected and analysed.



Section 5

Research Design

Two groups of participants, located globally, were invited to participate in the project: 10 Volunteer Leaders (VL) and 10 Volunteer Practitioners (VP). They were organized into 10 randomly matched pairs (dyads). Each dyad engaged in three 1:1 Executive Reflection sessions of 1.5 hours' duration.

Recruitment of the VL's and VPs was based on the following definitions and criteria:

Volunteer Leaders (VL)	Volunteer Practitioners (VP)
<p>Leaders who met the Association of Professional Executive Coaches and Supervisors (APECS) definition of an Executive. Executives are defined as people who “have a level of Leadership responsibility (financial, operational, or people) and / or for the responsibility of policy formulation and / or who makes a senior level contribution in the organization” (2018)</p> <p>Had been in the role of Leader as defined in (1) above for at least 2 years</p> <p>Who saw themselves as a Leader working in a GVD environment(s)</p> <p>Represented cross cultural organizations, public, private and voluntary sector (NGO), operating globally</p>	<p>Held a Coaching Supervision Academy (CSA) Diploma in Coaching Supervision and who had maintained their accreditation</p> <p>Had been working internationally in the field of 1:1 supervision with senior coaches and Leaders for 2 years or more</p> <p>Were in regular supervision themselves, and had their own professional indemnity insurance</p> <p>Subscribed to a professional body's Code of Ethics and Conduct (e.g. EMCC Global Code of Ethics 2018)</p>

Table 1: Volunteer Leaders & Volunteer Practitioners: Definitions and Recruitment Criteria

Recruitment of the participants for each group involved several elements. Firstly, the researchers used the method of “snowballing” that involved “finding a small number of subjects, who, in turn, identify others in the population (Gray 2009). Secondly, they also invited a number of VL’s from their own professional networks, representing a range of ages, organisational contexts and geographical locations. Finally, the researchers offered an invitation to a “random” number of potential VPS, likewise known to them through their professional networks.



Section 6

Stages of the Research Project

Over a series of four cycles, the following steps were taken to generate and analyse the data.

CYCLES 1-3: 1:1 Executive Reflection Sessions

Each dyad conducted three 1:1 Executive Reflection sessions and subsequently completed individual, separate reflective logs.

1. Each VP facilitated their VL in three, 90 minute 1:1 Executive Reflection sessions
2. Both the VLs and VPs completed their own reflections on each session within 48 hours in Reflective Logs. The VL's were asked to comment on the value, relevance and impact or not on their relationships, thinking and behaviours. The VP's were asked to comment how on they worked and what they observed and experienced working in this way.
3. The Project's PA collated and anonymized the Reflective Logs from all the participants from each cycle
4. The Researchers each completed a thematic analysis of each Reflective Log at the end of each cycle and then met to collate and record individual and shared observations.

Their findings from each phase of analysis were not shared with the participants until all stages of the research had been completed. In taking this approach, the Researchers wished to avoid influencing the dyad process or relationship with data from the other dyads.

CYCLE 4: SEMI- STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS BY THE RESEARCHERS

At the end of Cycle 3 the Researchers conducted a recorded 30-minute semi-structured telephone interview where each participant was invited to share their final reflections. This focused on the relevance and value of the process and outcomes in which they had participated in their dyads.

The Project's PA transcribed, anonymized and collated the interviews for analysis by the

Researchers. The Researchers read the transcriptions independently looking for patterns and emerging themes. They then collated and recorded individual and shared observations building on the collected observations from the 1st, 2nd & 3rd Cycles. The Researchers then provided overall interpretations and offered conclusions for writing up.



Section 7

Results and Findings

This section summarises the results from the project.

(1) The relevance and value of 1:1 Executive Reflection for VL's

The VL's valued their reflective space with a non-judgmental and non-competitive reflective partner. Their willingness to engage led to greater disclosure. This often enabled rapid and transformative exploration of self, purpose and different ways of thinking, relating and behaving in their organisations.

The VL's also worked on live current issues which was a fractal of their systems and was the portal into broader explorations of self and self in work. The complete freedom to bring to each session whatever they needed to work on was liberating and empowering. The ability to choose their own agenda, and co-create the relationship in an emergent space without pressure to perform had multiple spin-offs. One VP described this as "providing water in a dry place".

All the VLs participated voluntarily and their engagement was driven by their curiosity about the process and what they might learn about themselves and their leadership challenges in order to lead more effectively.

All the VLs valued being given a unique space and time to stop, think and reflect on themselves as a person and as a leader. They valued the free space to come without necessarily having a fixed agenda that enabled them to explore WHO they were being and becoming and HOW they showed up at work and HOW this affected their impact, relationships and results. They all valued the rare opportunity of being heard, seen, supported and resourced by a trusted partner who had no other agenda except to be in service of their own insights, learning and development.

All the VLS felt validated through the acknowledgement, support and challenge that they received that built their self-awareness, self-reliance and self-confidence.

(2) The experience of the VP's working with the VL's

What was common across the reported experience of the VP's was the significance and value of

the relationship that enabled their VLs to reflect. The VP's recognized the value of offering the time and space for leaders to reflect on themselves and their own unique leadership style. Both the VP's and VL's sought clarity on the purpose of 1:1 Executive Reflection but then co-created their working partnership in and through their mutual relationship.

An interesting theme the VP's identified was how they played a vital role in establishing clear working agreements (contracting) to individualize the conditions for learning. This went beyond the practical to include the culture and time zones as well as the psychological, emotional and spiritual phenomena. At the same time, the VP's also noted how sessions were used to address live current issues providing a gateway to wider explorations of role, purpose, awareness and perspective.

The VP's drew on their personal extensive and cumulative theoretical and experiential skills, knowledge and wisdom that they evidenced through the notes in their Reflective Logs. This enabled them to co-create genuine reflective thinking partnerships which moved beyond the day to day surface considerations to a deeper exploration of WHO the leader was and WHO they are becoming (their mission, purpose and identity (Dilts 1996) and how this showed up in HOW they worked; to explore further choices open to them moving forward (beyond capability, behaviour or context).

Storytelling (Owen 2001) use of language and reframing (Lahad 2000, Shohet 2008) emerged as important skills. The VP's clearly blended more classical models and theories with whole body practices like meditation, mindfulness, visualisation, metaphor cards, Clean Language and drawing to foster new insights and new learning.

The VP's exhibited both a personal and professional robustness to challenge and support their VL's appropriately. This was greatly valued by the VLs.

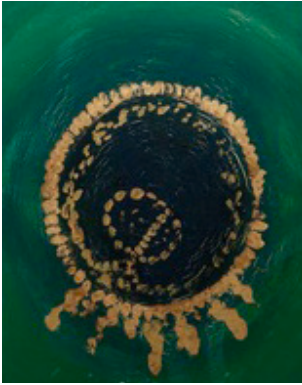
The VP's shared a lived and living experience of reflection and reflective practice that enabled them to role model and embody reflection for their VL's as they were engaged in their own supervision (reflection on practice before, during and after the project). They each had a strongly developed heart-based relational presence (Benefiel & Holton, 2010) as well as an "internal supervisor" with a very strong capacity to work with the unexpected and the emergent with multiple intelligences in the moment. As one VP said "there was less propositional knowing and more wondrous receiving". The VP's also evidenced that they relied on a systemic and field awareness as well as an appreciation of global complexity in their work.

(3) Further issues that were identified

The Researchers noticed that initially there was some confusion amongst the VLs about the term and purpose of 1:1 Executive Reflection (and the difference between Executive Coaching and Executive Reflection) that may have caused some initial hesitancy and may have impacted on their enjoyment and confidence in the process. Technology, whilst key, did prove troublesome sometimes and interfered with the sessions running smoothly or without interruption.

There was also a real challenge for the VL's to shift from a clear action-results focus to a more reflective focus from which clearer or better decisions would evolve. The maturity and wisdom coupled with the skill of the VP's built safety and trust in most cases. This in turn enabled rapid disclosure for deeper work on identity and meaning, which informed the VL's decisions, behaviours and actions.

Despite the random pairings of the dyads, without formal matching chemistry sessions to establish compatibility, safety and trust was created through a clear process and psychological contracting (Carroll 2005) and through the shared commitment of both parties to each other.



Section 8

Discussion and Overall Conclusions

The overall conclusions and recommendations are:

(a) Relevance and Value of 1:1 Executive Reflection was confirmed

From the data, 1:1 Executive Reflection was found to be relevant and valuable to the VL's leading in a GVD world. The process was found to be a vital, invaluable and imperative 'oasis' for leaders. It supported them to adapt, evolve and transform themselves, in order to lead their teams or organisations more effectively in the face of fast-moving external business environments.

(b) Use of the GVD Acronym

Based on our sample the GVD acronym descriptor did not appear to impact on relationships or outcomes due to the experience and maturity of those involved. The Researchers have therefore concluded that GVD should be used with the acronym VUCA as shorthand to describe the experience of living and working today.

(c) Definition of 1:1 Executive Reflection

The Researchers' original definition of Executive Reflection was broadly validated but also needed to be refined in the light of the project's conclusions.

In essence 1:1 Executive Reflection could be described as "super-vision" for leaders in the context of leadership. 1:1 Executive Reflection is typically geared to the higher levels of change and works at the levels of mission, purpose and identity (Dilts 2012). 1:1 Executive Reflection for leaders attends to the formative, normative and restorative functions of supervision (Inskipp & Proctor 1993). Thus the Researchers adapted the definition as follows:

"1:1 Executive Reflection is an independently co-created learning partnership and distinct developmental practice built on trust, safety and service. Executive Reflection provides a uniquely creative, compassionate, resourceful and generative reflective oasis for Leaders to gain a robust and deep awareness of WHO they are, WHY they lead and HOW they lead. The process attends to both their personal and professional development that in turn resources leaders to lead wisely in turbulent times".

A certain level of maturity that was defined as both skills and personal adult development, reflective capacity and life experience was needed from both the VL's and VP's to benefit from this level, quality and type of intervention (Mezirow 1991, Kegan 1982, Laske 2005). This might also encourage coaching supervisors to see the value and relevance of their training to leaders as well as to coaches, as well as for the professions to develop and define a new hybrid practice for practitioners working in this way which combines and augments the capacities and competences of Master Coach Practitioner and Coaching Supervisor

(d) Practice Development for Executive Reflection Practitioners

The Researchers' description of the work of the VP was validated and reads as follows:

“The Practitioner works as an independent and confidential witness, companion, mirror and observer providing a creative space and non-judgmental container for the leader. The Practitioner creates the personal and environmental conditions for the leader to gain profound insight, resourcing and learning to ignite personal, team and organizational change and wise action.”

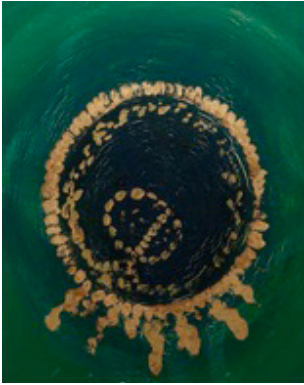
The research also revealed that the VPs required particular qualities and training for this practice. Capabilities and competencies that were highlighted included: relational presence (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers 2005), finely attuned systemic and field awareness, cultural sensitivity and global awareness, deep understanding of adult learning, relational and group dynamics, psychological mindedness and development of the internal supervisor (Casement 1985).

(e) Chemistry Sessions

The research found that chemistry sessions might not be always necessary or relevant if robust contracting was put in place, given the professional maturity of the VP's in this sample.

(f) Action Research Methodology

The research found that the Action Research Methodology was congruent and compatible with the practice of 1:1 Executive Reflection. The methodology was robust, rigorous and evidence based.



Section 9

Recommendations

The recommendations are as follows:

(1) Acronyms of VUCA and GVD

VUCA and GVD together describe the realities of leadership today. The use of one or other on its own does not reflect the complexity of today's realities.

(2) Recognition of 1:1 Executive Reflection as a Distinct Practice

1:1 Executive Reflection is recognized as a specific developmental intervention to grow leaders and resource them to lead in today's VUCA GVD world. 1:1 Executive Reflection is a form of deep "supervision" for leaders in the context of their leadership.

(3) Development of 1:1 Executive Reflection Practitioners

It would be useful to carry out further research to define the skills, training, resourcing and support of Executive Reflection Practitioners "super-ising" leaders in a VUCA GVD world.

(4) Promoting Executive Reflection to Leaders

Communicating the value and relevance of Executive Reflection to leaders leading in a VUCA GVD world is now vital. New ways of reaching new audiences who would benefit from this intervention need to be found.

(5) Further Research

Further research with a larger cohort is recommended to test the findings more widely.

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