



## THE WHAT, HOW AND WHY OF EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT REFLECTION

By LEUT Robert Wallace



# Tac Talks

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## Introduction

As a 'Thinking Navy' there is an increasing need to depend on the quality of our decision-making to gain an advantage. The development of leadership soft skills has the potential to build resilience and improve decision making. This paper is a reflection on my experience of emotional intelligence during Maritime Warfare Officer Continuum (MWOC) and as a School of Navigation Warfare (SNW) instructor, proposing strategies on how to develop reflective practices in order to build emotional intelligence. I will state the what, describe the why and discuss three methods on how to build emotional intelligence through reflective practices.

## What is emotional intelligence and why is it important?

Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to monitor one's own and others feelings and emotions, discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions.<sup>1</sup> Emotional intelligence is not about being a mate or empathic, but is a soft management skill that enhances interaction between team members to achieve results.

The benefits of improved emotional intelligence are that leaders with higher emotional intelligence often have higher stress resilience and are more likely to engage in transformational leadership. Transformation leadership is leadership aimed at challenging and transforming followers' expectations and inspiring them to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the organisation.<sup>2</sup>



Deputy Chief of Navy, Rear Admiral Chris Smith, CSM talks about the challenges of leadership during the Navy Emerging Leaders Forum held in Canberra. Photographer: POIS Bradley Darvil

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## Emotional intelligence and continuous improvement

A literature review was conducted on emotional intelligence and it was concluded that there is an expanding need to develop emotional intelligence within organisations. Limited research was identified involving emotional intelligence within the military. Predominately, research being undertaken on emotional intelligence is in the medical and teaching professions. However, militaries often indirectly develop emotional intelligence through the conduct of leadership exercises and mandatory training.<sup>3</sup> The SNW has identified the development of emotional intelligence as beneficial within the MWOC; resulting in the employment of performance coaches for phases 3 and 4.



Commander Andrew Mierisch (left) speaks with Lieutenant Connor Mooney-Collett (right) during a Leadership Coaching Program held at Defence Plaza in Sydney. Photographer: ABIS Leon Dafonte Fernandez

The MWOC performance coaching works where both trainees and staff have their Trait Emotional Intelligence (TEIQue) tested and members are then debriefed on their leadership styles, learning styles and their leadership traits under pressure. This is conducted through a series of online tests in order to obtain a baseline TEIQue profile. The profile highlights potential leadership strengths and culminates in a face-to-face debriefing which is detailed and comprehensive.

However, it did not provide a quick and continuous method to reflect on and develop emotional intelligence. A mechanism for continuous reflection of emotional intelligence was identified as a training gap. The literature review identified two methods that could be used to continuously review emotional intelligence. They were the Yale RULER meter and the Red Head and Blue Head thinking and grounding model used by the All Blacks Rugby Team.

The premise of the RULER program is that appraising emotions can lead to the utilization of emotional information for making decisions and forming judgements. The RULER program has five pillars which involve reflecting on five key emotional skills they are:

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- recognizing emotions in oneself and others,
- understanding the causes and consequences of emotions,
- labelling emotions with an accurate and diverse vocabulary,
- expressing emotions and
- regulating emotions in socially appropriate ways.

However, RULER is targeted at the pre-adolescent age range and is deemed unsuitable to our target population. Therefore the question of how we can continuously improve emotional intelligence led me to investigate how the red head vs blue head thinking model is used by the All Blacks.

This form of thinking is used to ground players in high pressure environments. It is used to identify when embedded auditory, visual and/or kinaesthetic triggers cause negative effects. Red head behaviours are typically dominated by the conscious mind exerting control and is manifested as: tight, inhibited, results-orientated, anxious, aggressive, over-compensating and desperate behaviours. Whereas, blue head behaviours are more often associated with sub-conscious processes and presents as: loose, expressive, in the moment, calm, clear, accurate and on task behaviours.<sup>4</sup> The red head vs blue head thinking model works through the identification of red head negative emotions and prompts the member to 'reboot' or 'reset' in order to occupy blue head thinking. Synthesising the RULER program and the red head vs blue head model; two reflective tools were created to scaffold the reflective process.

## Decision making under pressure

The reflective tools were created in order to meet the aim of equipping warfighters to better manage emotions and operate in pressure situations. This is done through reflection on emotionally expressive behaviours and the ability to recognise and regulate these emotions in future evolutions. The reflective tools work by plotting emotional keywords after undertaking challenging and stressful evolutions. Figure 2 shows the Self-Control Reflective Tool which is used to measure resilience. It is conducted by plotting emotional regulation on a vertical feeling word continuum versus the plotting of the ability to manage stress on the second vertical feeling word, the two terms are then connected by a horizontal line. A vertical line is drawn based on the timeliness of decision making during the evolution. This will result in a fix indicating a reflective position of clarity of mind and control during pressured situations.

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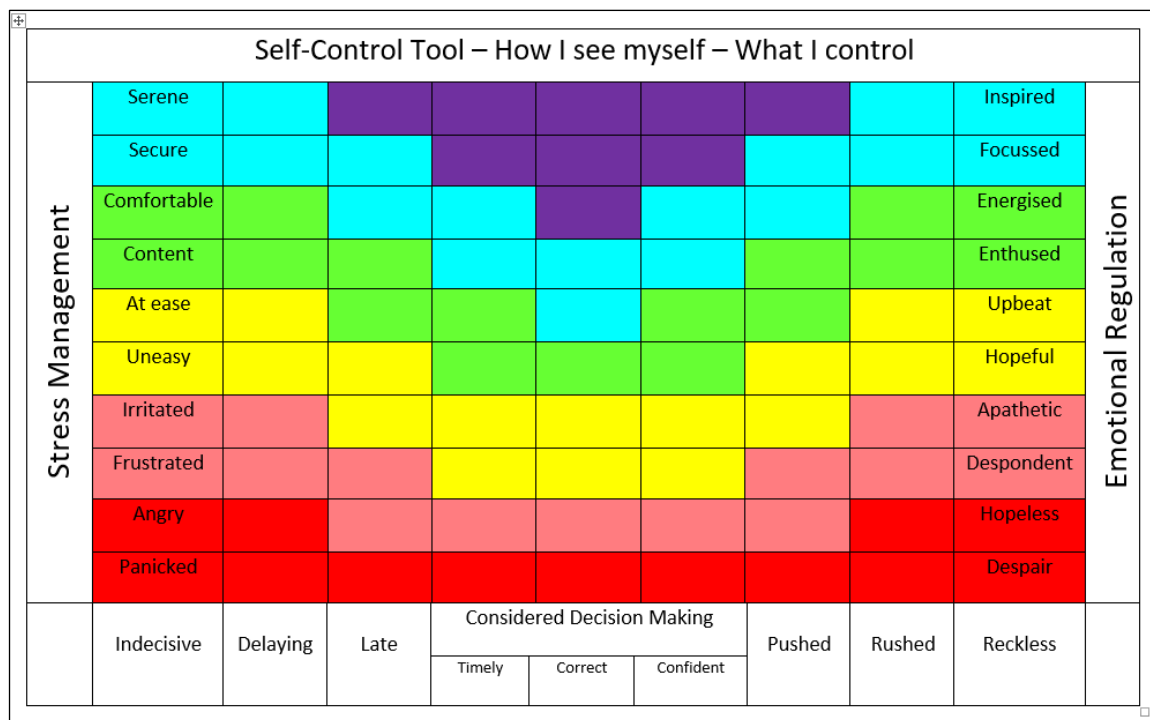


Figure 1: Self Control Reflective Tool

The charted position provides a reference point from where a process of improvement through scaffolded reflection can commence. Reflective coaching questions are included which are targeted to question what emotions were experienced and the resulting behaviours. Scaffolded reflection after high pressure situations may provide potential solutions to understand and regulate emotions more effectively in future experiences. Emotionally intelligent reflection is predicted to increase resilience and improve decision making under pressure.

Why is reflecting on emotional recognition and regulation useful? Because:

*"Bad decisions are not made through a lack of skill or innate judgement: they are made because of an inability to handle pressure at the pivotal moment"*<sup>5</sup>

## Get the best of them, by giving the best me

Decision making under pressure is only part of effective decision making. The ability to promote these decisions in a manner that inspires confidence, is empowering and resonates is the second part. How often do we actually reflect on the soft skills we use to inspire those around us? How can I assess if I am giving the best me?

The Self-Awareness Reflective Tool, see figure 2, is used as a measure of how emotion is regulated and expressed. It is separated into positive or negative terms and reflects the emotional expression and regulation of the leader. This tool is used by plotting points between two expressive polar opposite terms on each diagonal axis. The central point shows neither (0) of the two extremes grades to Like (+/-1) the term and Very Like (+/-2) the term. Two lines of best fit are then drawn and where they intersect is a reference point of emotional regulation and expression of that leader during that activity.

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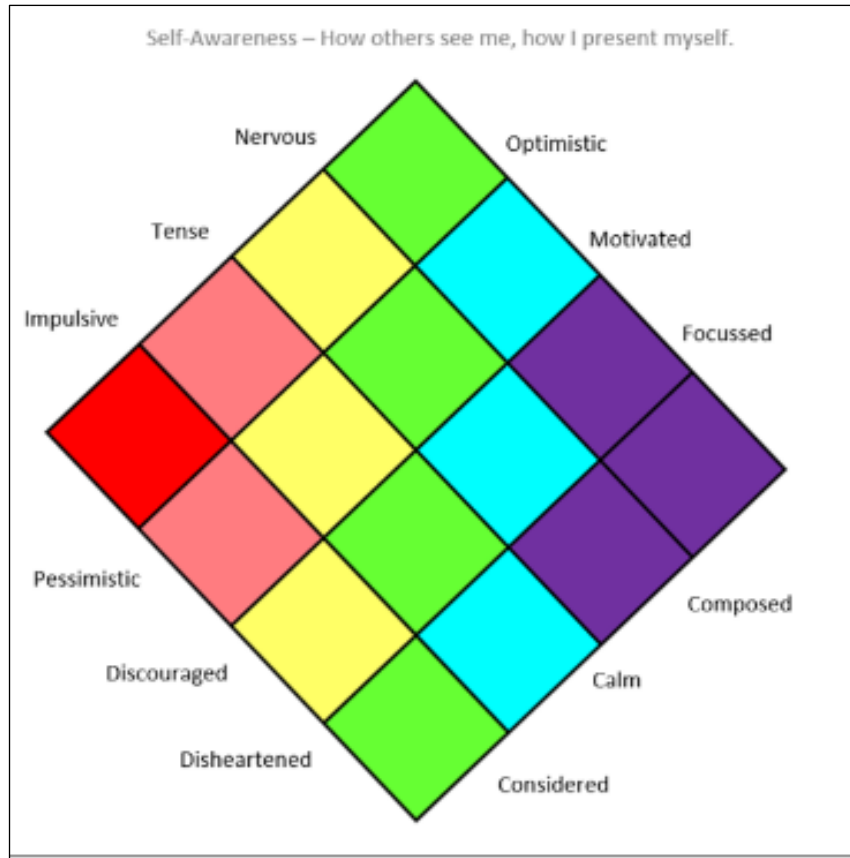


Figure 2: Self-Awareness Reflective Tool

Key to the process is the recognition and labelling of emotions after stressful situations and if these emotions caused resonant or dissonant behaviours. It is simply identifying the internal feeling, recognizing the external reaction and whether these emotions were harnessed in helpful or unhelpful manner. This tool is predicted to accelerate the development of emotional intelligence in leaders building resonance and engagement.

Why is reflecting on emotional expression important? Because:

*"Good leaders...do not lose their cool, preferring to remain calm and engaged with the team"* <sup>6</sup>

## Reflect – Intervene – Evaluate

Reflection of emotional intelligence has been described as a mechanism in order to improve resilience and resonance. Action research is a practice which aims to solve both personal and organisational problems and issues through intervention, see figure 3.<sup>7</sup> Action research uses a triple loop cycle of reflection, intervention and evaluation to promote continuous improvement. The loop is conducted in three phases, whereby dissonance is identified, intervention occurs and the intervention results are then evaluated. The potential benefit of embedding action research as a reflective practice is to develop an attitude and culture of personal and organisational inquiry in order to affect positive change.

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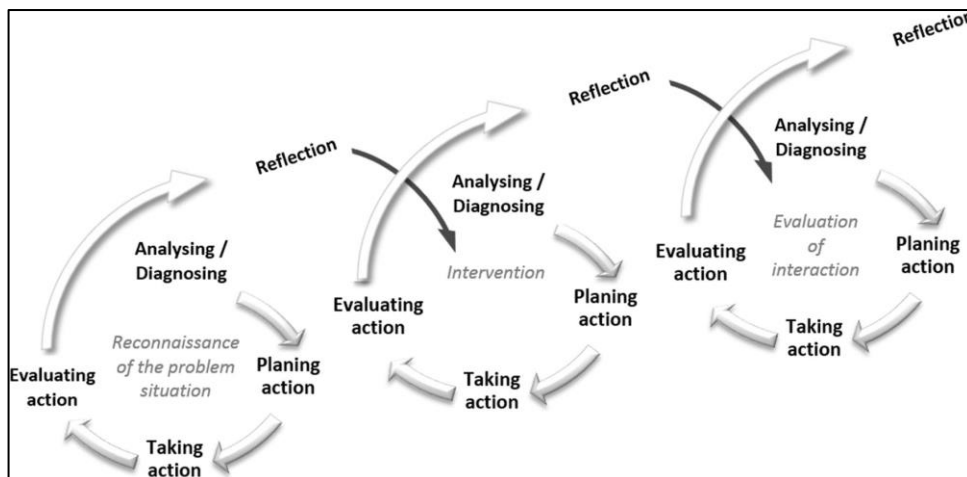


Figure 3: Action research cycles <sup>8</sup>

The first loop of action research is the discovery and acceptance of dissonance. This highlights the need for attention on a target area. The second loop in the cycle is an invitation to question our understanding of the situation and intervene in the dissonance. The third loop focuses not only on changes to our behaviour or our thinking, to our purposes, to our ability to identify and to evaluate the understanding of the situation as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Not all interventions may work, however, the cycle of reflection – intervention – evaluation continuously repeats allowing the team to learn through failing forward.

Action research is a process that leads us to ask the why of what we do. Emphasising the why focusses on the purpose, cause or belief of the organisation. By addressing the why, culture is more likely to be transformed. Continuous inquiry through reflection, intervention and evaluation highlights critical areas for targeted intervention. Resulting in solutions that have more acceptance on both a personal and an organisational level.

Why is it important to reflect? Because:

*"A culture of asking and re-asking fundamental questions cuts away unhelpful beliefs in order to achieve clarity of execution"* <sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

This article started by stating what is and why emotional intelligence should be developed personally and within an organisation. I doubt that many would argue against the benefits of improving organisation emotional intelligence. However, the how we build emotional intelligence in an organisationally specific and continuous manner was more difficult to answer. The reflective tools created are proposed as a mechanism to enable this. The journey I embarked on started through the professional coaching testing conducted during MWOC; initially to identify strategies to cope better under pressure, which it has. However, along this journey it became evident that developing emotionally intelligent reflective practices is a continuous process, which has the potential to create a culture in which positive organisational changes can flourish.

## Biography

LEUT Robert Wallace joined the RAN in 2015 and was an OOW on HMAS Success in 2018 and instructed at the SNW before transferring PQ to TSO in 2019. Prior to joining the RAN he was a high-school teacher and an officer in the Army Reserve. The scaffolded self-reflection tool is part of his Master's thesis and is being trialled on a voluntary basis with the MWOC Phase 3 simulator candidates. A full copy of the Self-Reflective Tool can be obtained by contacting LEUT Wallace.

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## End notes:

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- <sup>2</sup> Marshall, S (Occasional Paper) Issues in the Development of Leadership for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, Carrick Institute.
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- <sup>4</sup> Kerr, J (2013), Legacy, what the All Blacks can teach us about the business of life, Constable, UK.
- <sup>5</sup> Kerr, J (2013), Legacy, what the All Blacks can teach us about the business of life, Constable, UK.
- <sup>6</sup> DCN, (2018) Contemporary Australian Naval Leadership, letter, dated 12 Dec 18.
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- <sup>8</sup> Tejedor, G & Segalas, J (2018) Action research workshop for transdisciplinary sustainability science, Sustain Sci, 13.
- <sup>9</sup> Marshall, J (2011) Leadership for sustainability: An Action Research approach, ProQuest EBook, Routledge
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