

RELATIONAL REFLEXIVITY IN TEAM LEADERSHIP: THEORY, MECHANISMS, AND PRACTICAL CASES

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of relational reflexivity as a fundamental component of effective team leadership, concentrating on four interrelated dimensions: self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, and conflict resolution. Drawing on empirical research and conceptual frameworks, this study argues that reflexive leadership fosters psychological safety, ethical decision-making, and adaptive team performance. These theoretical insights are illustrated through four case studies of elite coaches who exemplify reflexive leadership. Phil Jackson, former NBA coach of the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers, fostered mindfulness and collective identity through spiritual self-awareness and ego reduction. Gareth Southgate, manager of the England national football team, demonstrated perspective-taking and emotional literacy, transforming his team's culture through empathy and humility. Steve Kerr, head coach of the Golden State Warriors, modeled dialogic communication and player-led leadership by decentralizing authority and fostering trust. Patrick Mouratoglou, Serena Williams' long-time coach, demonstrated how emotional attunement and adaptive feedback can sustain individual excellence in high-pressure, dyadic settings. Together, these cases demonstrate that relational reflexivity is not merely a conceptual ideal, but a practical and measurable contributor to leadership effectiveness across diverse performance domains. The paper concludes by calling for broader integration of reflexive practices in leadership development programs and cross-sectoral studies.

Keywords: relational reflexivity, team leadership, self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, conflict resolution

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective team leadership in today's complex environments requires far more strategic intelligence or technical expertise. Increasingly, leaders are expected to demonstrate relational competence—skills that enable them to manage themselves effectively while engaging others with authenticity, empathy, and ethical clarity. The heart of this evolving leadership paradigm lies in the concept of relational reflexivity. Defined as the continuous process of reflecting on one's actions, emotions, and assumptions in the context of interpersonal relationships, relational reflexivity enables alignment between the individual and team, fostering trust, psychological safety, and adaptive learning (Damon et al., 2022).

Unlike solitary introspection, relational reflexivity is inherently a dialogic process. Leaders who practice it intentionally consider the emotional and cognitive experiences of others, adjust their behavior accordingly, and take responsibility for the impact of their presence on team dynamics. As Corsby and Mata (2024) argue, reflexive leadership “enables coaches to co-construct meaning with athletes,” creating more inclusive and context-sensitive practices. Empirical studies confirm that reflexive teams—those that pause in evaluating their goals, communication patterns, and decision-making processes—achieve higher levels of alignment, innovation, and sustained engagement. Reflexivity, when enacted authentically, not only mitigates conflict but also transforms it into a source of collective learning (Widmer et al., 2009).

This study examines how relational reflexivity fosters team leadership through four key dimensions: self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, and conflict resolution. These dimensions are supported by a synthesis of academic literature and real-world leadership case studies from elite sports

contexts, demonstrating how reflexive practices contribute to both team effectiveness and ethical leadership.

2. SELF-AWARENESS AS THE FOUNDATION OF REFLEXIVE LEADERSHIP

Self-awareness is widely recognized as the foundational capacity of reflexive leadership. This enables leaders to consciously assess their thoughts, emotional reactions, motivations, and behavioral patterns, thereby regulating their influence on others and aligning their actions with ethical and strategic intentions. Yang et al. (2020) found that leaders who demonstrate high self-awareness are more responsive to team feedback, which supports adaptive behaviors and fosters cohesion. Beyond interpersonal effectiveness, self-awareness is deeply linked to moral clarity. As Malekar (2007) explains, “the reflective capacity to align one’s actions with internalized values leads to more consistent and morally grounded decision-making.” In high-pressure environments, such as competitive sports, this clarity becomes essential. Leaders who understand their motivations and can recognize moments when their behavior deviates from those values are more capable of course-correcting and upholding transparency and integrity.

Self-awareness is not only important for leaders but also crucial for athletic development. Tenenbaum and Filho (2016) demonstrated that athletes with strong self-efficacy and self-awareness perceive performance pressure as a challenge rather than a threat, which enhances decision making and emotional regulation during competition. Similarly, Hepler and Feltz (2012) demonstrated that such athletes are more likely to employ intuitive heuristics, such as the “Take the First” rule, which enables quicker and more confident decisions in dynamic situations.

At the neurological level, self-awareness is linked to activation of prefrontal brain regions associated with planning, inhibition, and metacognitive monitoring. According to Balconi et al. (2023), this activation supports goal-directed behavior and self-regulation, both of which are critical for leaders navigating ethically charged or emotionally intense scenarios. Ultimately, self-awareness underpins a leader’s ability to lead not reactively but reflexively: guided by values, informed by relational context, and open to feedback. As Showry and Manasa (2014) note, self-aware leaders create environments of psychological safety by modeling openness and accountability and inviting others to do the same.

3. PERSPECTIVE-TAKING IN REFLEXIVE TEAM LEADERSHIP

While self-awareness turns the leader inward, perspective-taking turns them outward toward others’ thoughts, feelings, and mental models. This capacity is essential for fostering mutual understanding, de-escalating conflict, and facilitating inclusive decision-making. Gustavson and Liff (2014) argue that “successful leaders are not only attuned to their own values but are also able to consider how those values are interpreted by others,” making their leadership more adaptive and widely accepted.

In team leadership, perspective-taking enables leaders to understand not only what their team members do but also *why* they do so. Calvard (2010) frames it as a meta-cognitive process that “enables leaders to navigate uncertainty, integrate diverse feedback, and empathize without losing objectivity.” This function becomes critical in diverse and multicultural teams. Plaister-Ten (2016) emphasizes that cross-cultural leadership requires “a systems approach in which leaders interpret behaviors through the cultural lenses of others rather than assuming shared assumptions. In coaching contexts, perspective-taking sharpens real-time decision-making. Light, Harvey, and Mouchet (2014) describe how coaches who adopt an “at-action” perspective-taking approach adapt their training strategies to align with the athlete’s experience and engagement. Similarly, Richards, Templin, and Graber (2017) show that perspective-taking supports the development of athlete-centered coaching, ensuring alignment between leadership intention and athlete reception.

However, the effects of perspective taking are not uniformly positive. Vorauer (2013) warned that in evaluative settings, heightened awareness of others’ thoughts can lead to overcorrection, anxiety, and self-consciousness. As she puts it, “Perspective-taking can sometimes make individuals more concerned

with how they are perceived than with genuine engagement.” Pierce et al. (2013) show that under conditions of intense competition, perspective-takers may become more manipulative. “Competition,” they write, “can turn perspective-taking from social glue into gasoline.” For this reason, Gilin et al. (2013) distinguished between empathy and perspective-taking: the former is affective and grounded in emotional attunement, while the latter is cognitive and analytically driven. In team leadership, the most effective reflexive leaders understand when to lead with the heart and mind, balancing both processes to promote understanding without manipulation.

4. COMMUNICATION AS A RELATIONAL PRACTICE

In reflexive leadership, communication is not simply a vehicle for transmitting instructions; it is a medium through which relationships, meaning, and team identity are constructed. Reflexive leaders recognize that every conversation presents an opportunity to clarify values, share responsibility, and promote cohesion. Hedman (2015) notes that “communication competence in leadership teams depends not just on clarity or persuasion, but on relational reflexivity—the willingness to ask how our words shape others’ responses.” This view of communication as *meaning-making* is central to dialogue leadership approaches. Reflexive leaders utilize communication for surface assumptions, explore multiple interpretations, and co-create shared narratives by drawing on frameworks such as Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) and dialogic organizational development (Hedman, 2016). Consequently, communication is no longer unilateral; it becomes a site of collaborative interpretation.

Evidence from healthcare and education has confirmed this relational function. McHugh et al. (2020), studying interprofessional medical teams, found that video-reflexive ethnography improved performance by “creating spaces for shared reflection and adaptation to contextual realities.” Similarly, Weger et al. (2022) emphasized that communication during the *transition and action phases* of engineering project teams benefits from reflexivity: teams that openly revisit communication norms are more agile and coordinated.

However, communication in reflexive leadership is not limited to feedback sessions or postmortems. This is embedded in everyday interactions, particularly in how leaders strike a balance between directness and emotional tone. As Harvey and Green (2022) point out, “leaders with an overly agreeable feedback style may stifle reflexivity by avoiding the discomfort necessary for growth.” If managed ethically, constructive tension enables teams to address breakdowns before escalating into disengagement.

The importance of indirect communication has also attracted considerable attention. A study of ambiguous leadership signals found that subtle, non-prescriptive communication can increase creativity and initiative, particularly in high-trust teams. As the authors conclude, “Leader ambiguity, when embedded in a culture of reflection and mutual respect, can create space for team autonomy and innovation” (“The Beauty of Ambiguity”, 2022). In short, reflexive communication is not defined by how much leaders say but by how thoughtfully they speak and listen. It is about creating conditions where team members feel heard, respected, and willing to reflect on their actions and intentions collectively.

5. CASE STUDIES IN REFLEXIVE LEADERSHIP

To illustrate how relational reflexivity is practiced in real-world leadership, this section presents four case studies of elite coaches who model self-awareness, perspective-taking, dialogic communication, and ethical conflict engagement: Phil Jackson, Gareth Southgate, Steve Kerr, and Patrick Mouratoglou. These leaders differ in context and style, yet each demonstrates a distinct application of reflexive principles that support team performance and psychological safety.

Phil Jackson: Mindfulness, Ego Dissolution, and Collective Identity

Phil Jackson, renowned for leading the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers to a combined eleven NBA championships, pioneered a leadership style grounded in mindfulness, spirituality, and relational awareness. His method integrated Zen Buddhist philosophy, Native American rituals, and stoic discipline to cultivate what he described as a “selfless, team-first culture” (CRM.org, 2025). As Jackson explains, “I wanted my players to understand the importance of mindfulness and the value of leading from a calm center” (Jackson & Delehanty, 2013).

Rather than enforcing rigid systems, Jackson trusted the players to become co-leaders. He often practiced silent observation during games and deliberately stepped back to unfold team dynamics, allowing emotional intelligence and group reflexivity to emerge organically (Furtado, 2020). According to one summary of his methods, “Jackson dismantled ego-driven performance by emphasizing collective awareness, spiritual discipline, and deep listening” (Catalyst Insider, 2022). His leadership remains a prime example of how self-awareness and relational intentionality drive sustained excellence.

Gareth Southgate: Humility, Empathy, and Emotional Literacy

As the head coach of England’s national football team, Gareth Southgate redefined leadership in a context often marked by media pressure and historical disappointment. His approach centers on emotional intelligence, humility, and perspective-taking. Southgate emphasizes that “being a leader is not about control; it’s about empathy, listening, and enabling others to thrive” (England Football, 2022).

Southgate fosters psychological safety by openly acknowledging mistakes and encouraging vulnerability. As he explained in an interview with *The Boot Room*, “We have to be able to talk about our fears, admit when we don’t know the answers, and allow players to express themselves freely” (The FA, 2022). His inclusive leadership has not only improved team cohesion but has also transformed the public perception of the English football identity (Llewellyn, 2022). Rather than suppressing conflict, Southgate navigates through relational dialogue and shared responsibility. His leadership exemplifies how a reflexive stance, rooted in emotional awareness and mutual respect, can humanize elite sports and enhance performance outcomes.

Steve Kerr: Player-Led Dialogue and Strategic Humility

Steve Kerr, head coach of the Golden State Warriors, exemplifies reflexive leadership through empowerment, distributed authority, and strategic adaptability. Rather than centering on himself as the sole decision-maker, Kerr cultivates what he calls “a team of leaders,” where players like Stephen Curry and Draymond Green are expected to participate in tactical discussions and cultural stewardship (Stiepleman, 2022).

Kerr’s core principles include vulnerability, collaboration, and listening. As *The Daily Coach* observes, “Kerr views communication not as transmission, but as co-creation—he listens deeply, seeks feedback constantly, and speaks with emotional precision” (The Daily Coach, 2022). He often uses timeouts not to give commands, but to ask reflective questions—modeling dialogic leadership in real time.

His openness to ambiguity and player input has been credited with fostering creativity, resilience, and cohesion across multiple championship seasons (NBC Sports Bay Area, 2023). As summarized by the Player Development Project, “Kerr builds trust by giving it away first” (Player Development Project, 2022). His reflexive approach shows how humility and dialogue can generate adaptive, high-performance teams.

Patrick Mouratoglou: Trust, Feedback, and Emotional Adaptation

Patrick Mouratoglou, Serena Williams’ long-time coach, has built his coaching philosophy on trust, transparency, and emotional recalibration. Working in the intensely individual world of professional

tennis, Mouratoglou blended strategic instruction with deep relational attunement. “The coach-player relationship is like a marriage,” he once stated. “Without mutual respect and understanding, nothing lasts” (GQ, 2018).

He emphasized that coaching Serena required constant reflection, not only on tactics but also on tone of communication, emotional support, and the timing of feedback. “I learned to adapt, to listen more, and to find the right words for the right moment,” Mouratoglou explained in a coaching interview (CoachTube, 2023). His leadership relies on emotional literacy and mutual trust, enabling elite performance to emerge from a culture of psychological safety. Even during high-stakes moments, such as coaching from the stands during major finals, he reflected on the balance between influence and autonomy: “You have to feel the energy of the player, not impose your own” (Tennis Now, 2018). His reflexive leadership shows that, even in one-on-one coaching, deep listening and emotional presence are strategic assets.

Each leader embodies a different pathway to reflexivity: Jackson through spiritual self-awareness, Southgate through empathetic humility, Kerr through dialogic empowerment, and Mouratoglou through emotional attunement. Together, they affirm that relational reflexivity is not a soft skill; it is a core driver of trust, adaptation, and sustained team success.

The following table presents a comparative overview of four elite coaches—Phil Jackson, Gareth Southgate, Steve Kerr, and Patrick Mouratoglou—who exemplify the core dimensions of relational reflexivity in their leadership. Each coach demonstrated a unique but overlapping application of self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, and conflict resolution. This comparison highlights how reflexive leadership manifests in various contexts while consistently fostering trust, adaptability, and team effectiveness.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Reflexive Leadership Practices Across Four Elite Coaches

Coach	Self-Awareness	Perspective-Taking	Communication	Conflict Resolution
Phil Jackson	Practices mindfulness and ego dissolution; uses Zen philosophy to foster inner balance and team harmony (Jackson & Delehanty, 2013)	Understands team psychology; integrates cultural rituals and spiritual metaphors to reflect shared (Furtado, 2020).	Employs silence, symbolic language, and non-directive coaching to enable reflective dialogue (CRM.org, 2025).	Reduces ego-driven tensions through self-regulation and shared responsibility and fosters unity via collective rituals (Catalyst Insider, 2022).
Gareth Southgate	Embraces vulnerability; openly reflects on his own limitations and past failures (The FA, 2022).	Encourages player voice and emotional honesty and adapts coaching to the psychological needs of the team (England Football 2022).	Prioritizes empathy and listening; uses inclusive language to build psychological safety (Llewellyn, 2022).	Navigates tension through openness and humility; reframes criticism as collaborative feedback (BrandPointZero, 2023)
Steve Kerr	Models humility and vulnerability; openly acknowledges uncertainty and credits others in moments of success (The Daily Coach, 2022)	Seeks input from players and staff; adjusts game strategies based on player perspectives (Stiepleman, 2022)	Uses dialogic timeouts; frames questions instead of issuing directives (Player Development Project 2022).	Allows open debate: empowers leaders within the team to mediate internal disagreements (NBC Sports Bay Area 2023).
Patrick Mouratoglou	Reflects on emotional tone and feedback timing; adapts to Serena Williams’ evolving needs (CoachTube, 2023)	Builds deep personal understanding of the athlete; “reads energy” to know when to intervene (Tennis Now, 2018).	Emphasizes trust and precision in coaching language; blends strategy with emotional presence (GQ, 2018).	Recalibrates communication under pressure; uses trust as foundation for honest, reflective conflict navigation (CoachTube, 2023)

6. CONCLUSION

Relational reflexivity is not a peripheral competency; it is a central mechanism through which leaders align values, manage emotions, navigate complexity, and sustain high-functioning teams. This study explores four interdependent dimensions of reflexive leadership: self-awareness, perspective-taking, communication, and conflict resolution. Leaders develop the capacity to act with ethical clarity, emotional presence, and dialogic responsiveness.

Theoretical models suggest that reflexivity enables teams to become more than the sum of their components. It enables leaders to transition from controlling behavior to relational stewardship, creating space for diverse voices, addressing tension with transparency, and evolving in tandem with their teams. As Damon et al. (2022) emphasize, “Relational reflexivity promotes psychological safety and trust by grounding leadership in dialogue and shared accountability.” This model contrasts with traditional hierarchical leadership by valuing presence over position and awareness of authority.

Case studies have illustrated this in practice. Phil Jackson’s mindful detachment helped foster a collective identity in NBA dynasties. Gareth Southgate’s humility and empathy created a new culture of openness in English football. Steve Kerr’s dialogic style empowered players to take ownership of both decisions and mistakes. Patrick Mouratoglou’s emotional reflexivity sustained one of the most successful coaching relationships in modern tennis. Each show how reflexive leadership is not abstract; it is practiced in real moments of silence, dialogue, adjustment, and trust.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should investigate how relational reflexivity can be intentionally nurtured across sectors, particularly in leadership development programmes. There is also a need for a deeper inquiry into cultural and contextual differences in how reflexivity manifests and is received. While the leaders profiled here come from sports, their methods apply across organizational life in education, business, healthcare, and beyond.

As the demands on leaders grow more complex and human-centered, the capacity to reflect *in relation*, not just alone, may be the most enduring marker of effective leadership. Reflexivity is not only a leadership tool; it is also a way of being present with others, accountable for one’s influence, and committed to collective growth.

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