

1 Reflection

1.1 What is reflection?

Reflection is a form of conscious thinking. When we reflect, we are consciously considering something, paying special attention to it. We consider an experience or an action, and ask ourselves why we act as we do. Reflection is a process of becoming conscious. Often, we need to take plenty of time for this, and reflection takes place after the experience.

When we think consciously about our actions, we take a step back from our own role. We try to examine our actions as objectively as possible. Input from others is extremely important in this process. From their perspective, they will often have a very different interpretation of the event. If we reflect together with others, we can make the best possible use of these varying perspectives.

When we reflect on our own experience, we make use of our knowledge to evaluate our actions and search for alternative actions. For this reason, reflection is defined as *the reinterpretation of experience and knowledge*. We use our knowledge to think about our experiences. In turn, our experiences give us new insight into the knowledge we have. By reflecting, we become aware of various aspects of our own actions. When we do something consciously, we know *what* we do, *why* we do it, and what the *consequences* of our actions are.

1.2 Why do we reflect?

When we reflect, we can learn from experience. If we experience things without pausing to think about them, much of the experience will be lost to us. In an educational context, students can think about what they have experienced during the learning process, describe why they have approached a specific project as they have, and what their ideal result was when they began. By reflecting, they can become aware of other ways to approach their internship or working environment, how to recognise their experiences in the books they read and how to apply the techniques from those same books in their assignments. Teachers can make good use of reflection exercises to discuss their practical experience during supervision or peer supervision.

The ability to reflect on our own actions cannot be taken for granted. It means taking a certain amount of distance from ourselves. It requires the capacity to call things what they are and to delve deeper into ourselves. Without this, reflection is nothing more than a superficial description. In reporting their reflection, students describe enthusiastically how they have set up a project, what everyone has done, and how busy they were at the end trying to get everything done in time. Accounts of this kind often take the form of ‘and then...and then...’ stories. Under the heading of, ‘Reflecting on what you have learned’ students will write things like, ‘Make better agreements in the group’, ‘Find more material from the very start’, and ‘Don’t wait until the end to set up the presentation’. When asked further about their feelings, they will say they found it extremely difficult when they started, though, now that it’s finished, it wasn’t too bad after all. Very quickly, writing this kind of account becomes a futile routine. The questions are treated as little more than lists to be filled in. Slowly but surely, students come to hate this form of ‘reflection’. With the help of reflection exercises, we learn to rise above this level of description and go deeper into the experience, the thought process, and alternate ways of acting.

Some students are more reflectively inclined by nature and have little trouble thinking about their actions. Others need to be started off and require encouragement. The purpose of reflection exercises is to stimulate working in pairs or groups, possibly using a theme determined in advance. The exercise helps to get the reflection process going. Reflection exercises teach the ‘reflector’ (the person performing the reflection exercise) to make use of

the space opened up by his reflection. The reflector does the thinking, and is assisted in this by the other participants. Reflectors have to do their own thinking, attain their own insights, and become aware of the process they are going through. The facilitator of the reflection exercise initiates, steers and supports this process.

Reflection is different to evaluation. Evaluation refers to looking back at a process and applying a value to it. Based on that evaluation, decisions can be made to approach a situation differently. Evaluation can thus serve as a meaningful starting point in the reflection process. Reflection, however, goes much farther than evaluation.

1.3 What happens during reflection?

Every day, Nasreddin crosses the border on a bicycle. A suspicious customs officer has it on good authority that Nasreddin is smuggling something, only he does not know what. So, he asks him what he is carrying in his saddle bags. 'Sand', says Nasreddin. The officer searches the bags and, sure enough, he finds only sand. This same process goes on every day for a week and, though the customs officer finds more and more sophisticated ways of testing the sand, he still finds only sand. Finally, at the end of his wits, he promises Nasreddin that he will not prosecute him if he will only tell the officer what he is smuggling. Nasreddin answers calmly, 'Bicycles'.

What happens during reflection? Reflection is a form of thought which stretches the frameworks of the thought process. Assumptions, preconceived notions and perceptions are disturbed in such a way that these frameworks of thought are forced to shift. If this occurs suddenly, it is referred to as an '*aha*' moment. It is that moment when 'the penny drops', when someone has a sudden realisation, when they create a link between an existing perspective and a new way of thinking. When this happens, the sudden realisation leads to a rearrangement of the thought framework.

So, the purpose of reflection is to stretch frameworks of thought — to rearrange the way we think. Our frames of thought can be stretched or shifted and, therefore, changed. This is referred to as *reframing*. Humour provides a good example of reframing. In the punch line to a good joke, we are forced to change our assumptions. This causes a smile or even a fit of laughter.

How does this reframing take place? In the case of a joke, it often involves withholding a certain amount of information causing the listener to create an insufficient context based on a set of assumptions. When the punch line provides the missing link, the frameworks are restructured and the penny drops. In eastern cultures, jokes — such as that of Nasreddin — are told not only to make people laugh; they are used to expose preconceived notions.

Reflection exercises also have this capacity to restructure thought frameworks. Using tools for reflection in which participants offer their insights, this occurs when participants expose the reflector's blind spots. Participants add their own perspective — not to force the reflector, but to tempt him to consider different options. It is up to the reflector to stretch his framework by integrating the new information into his mindset.

1.4 Reflecting on the past, present and future

One of the most common definitions of reflection refers to thinking about something that has happened. We go back over an experience, for instance, something that did not go well at work. We think quietly about what happened exactly, what we did, what others did, and we think about what we could do differently next time. Thinking back to an experience is a common first step in reflection.

But, reflection is not just thinking back. Reflection is a form of thought, re-thinking, thinking anew. Reflection makes us aware of the reasoning and structure underlying our actions. We can reflect about what has already taken place, or what is happening now, or what is to come. Aside from reflecting about the past, which is the most common form, we can also reflect about the present and even the future.

Reflecting on the present consists of 'presence of mind' while we take action. When a doctor treats a patient, he knows why he is carrying out a set of actions. He can explain his motives to others. He can also list alternative

actions and clarify why he has not chosen to employ them. Furthermore, he is aware of his feelings while he acts and knows what influence they have on his judgments and decisions. He is also aware of the context in which his actions take place and the effect they have on others.

Reflecting on the future — on what is to come — involves the consideration of future actions. You want to undertake *some specific action*. What does that mean to you? What does it involve and how will you approach it? Have you examined the various possibilities, including any unexpected eventualities? What do you expect of the situation? What do you hope to achieve? These are all questions you can ask before taking on something new, and which can lead to greater awareness of your actions. In our daily lives, this kind of insight into future actions is extremely useful. As part of the learning process, it is essential. What do you hope to learn from your experience? What results do you hope to achieve? What do you hope to do with what you have learned? What kind of competence will you be able to exercise?

1.5 Positive experiences as a premise for reflection

Cause for reflection can usually be found in the fact that there is something on our minds — something we don't understand. True to tradition, this is almost always considered a 'problem'. After all, the problems people encounter are real, aren't they? They are, but they can also be formulated in a variety of other ways that influence the ensuing thought process. We are accustomed to starting by analysing the problem. In that case, we'll start by focusing on the obstacles and the discrepancies.

However, the reflector can also start from a very different premise. 'I used to approach my work with great enthusiasm. How can I change the current situation so I can take pleasure in what I do? What kind of possibilities can I imagine?' This approach comprises the starting point of an *appreciative inquiry*¹.

Using this tool, we can go in search of earlier situations consisting of elements similar to the current circumstances; something that gave us pleasure. Working from these positive memories we can establish that 'the good aspect' is already happening, or has happened, somewhere. Following that, we can describe the situation in concrete terms. What makes that situation so special that we take pleasure in it?

With this in mind, we can focus on the positive potential. We discover inspiring aspects which, by way of an earlier event, come back to life. To revive this kind of experience, it is important to ask the right questions. The 'right questions' are those that motivate the thought process and invite us to examine the experience further. They constitute a powerful stimulus within this process.

By sharing the story with someone else using words and metaphors, the speakers enter a different world, as it were. Attention and involvement on the part of the person asking the questions invite the speaker to describe the positive experience. This brings about enthusiasm and self-confidence. It generates energy and frees up the thought process. In recounting a story of this kind, we find the seed for a desirable future alternative to current circumstances: 'How could it turn out?'

In this phase, it is useful for the reflector to describe clearly and in concrete terms how he imagines the new reality. In this case, the imagination is not limited by hindrances from the past. Instead, it gets all the space it needs to create a new, positive image filled with new possibilities. A whole new view of the future can stem from this.

1.6 Tools for reflection

A variety of tools for reflection comprise a toolbox containing the most desirable ways of working. These are processes with a specific aim which adapt to the setting and preconditions of the gathering — the time, number of participants, the desired depth, and other issues.

Tools for reflection are more than just sets of steps. They are a method with which to gain insight. Step-by-step descriptions are simply aids for applying this method. The tools can come across as highly structured if the steps are applied literally. Tools for reflection aim to engender awareness by reinforcing a reflective attitude.

Practising using tools for reflection will create openness to less obvious alternatives, the ability to arrive at more than one solution, and stimulate the ability to explain the choices we come to make.

The reflection exercises in this book aim to get the reflector and participants thinking. Their first purpose is not to find solutions to problems. In other words, they go a step farther than the incident method². Most reflection tools use a method of input that resembles the incident method in many ways. Their difference lies in the fact that the reflection process can be put in motion in a variety of ways and the purpose is to not offer advice. The person doing the reflecting is supposed to arrive at the insight himself, helped by the structure of the tool and input from other participants. The new insights and alternative behaviours have to occur to the person in question. For instance, whereas just one form of action was originally considered possible, three choices are now available. Or, while the reflector imagined he was the only one struggling with this problem, he now realises that others also share his predicament.

The work forms presented here always make use of at least one other reflection partner, either a coach or a facilitator. Most tools are used in groups. In this situation, all the participants — not only the reflector — take part in the reflection process. The facilitator initiates, steers, and provides support. These closely-guided reflection exercises call for active input from all participants. They make the participants aware of their thought frameworks and assumptions. In some cases, they turn their world upside-down and motivate them to take different action. Finally, these reflection exercises are exciting and fun to do.

Notes

- 1 Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider (Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio) as a way of researching which factors play an important role so that people and organisations can operate more satisfactorily. This form of research can be applied to both personal and organisational change and operates from the same premise that questions and dialogue about success, values, hopes, and dreams all hold the power to change.
- 2 The incident method is a way of reflecting on problems. In its simplest variant, it involves the reflector describing a problem, after which time the participants ask questions. Then the participants offer advice on how they would solve the problem. In the more complex variant, the reflector recounts the story but waits to give his own solution until the very end of the exercise.