

Reflect Yourself

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Take time out of your busy day to reflect on yourself and where your team is headed.

Reflecting a few minutes a day will keep you and your team on the right course.

The following suggestions were made by a group of vice presidents of large North American companies:

“Stop all this ‘do, do, do’ and put in time to reflect.”

“Good conversations always have space for reflection. It’s part of listening and taking seriously what someone else says.”

“A team can call a ‘time-out’ with a manager to halt a process that might be lacking reflection.”

“Take a moment at the end of meetings to reflect.”

The executives were partway through the first week on the “Reflective Mindset” portion of our three-week advanced leadership program. These managers had become aware of the need for reflection. But how many managers these days are aware of this need? Why is reflection necessary? And how do they build reflection into everyday business life?

Why Reflect?

Managerial work has become unrelenting boot camp. Keep marching, keep driving and don’t slow down. Some management development programs even promise more boot camp—you won’t get a chance to be lazy here, they claim.

No company needs lazy managers. But neither does any company need unrelenting boot camp. Boot camps train soldiers to march and obey, not to stop and think. Managers today desperately need to stop and think. They need to step back from the action and reflect thoughtfully on the experience.

T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets* wrote, “We had the experience but missed the meaning.” Reflection is about getting the meaning from everyday experiences. In fact, social activist Saul Alinsky wrote in his book *Rules for Radicals* (Dimensions, 1989) that something *becomes* an experience only *after* its meaning has been understood.

Experts espouse a great deal these days about the importance of action in managerial work—managers must be doers. Absolutely. But they also must be thinkers. All effective managing has to be sandwiched between acting on the ground and reflecting in the abstract. Acting alone is thoughtless—we have seen enough of the consequences of that—just as reflecting alone is passive. Both are critical. But today, one—reflection—gets lost.

On the Nature of Reflection

The Latin origin of the word reflection lends a nice image; *flect* is a “fold,” so to reflect is to re-fold. When you fold something, the surface comes face-to-face with itself. A reflective mind turns its attention to its own activity. Then when an item is re-folded, the outside turns inwards, and the inner part becomes outward-facing. Reflection is a conversation between yourself as the actor and as an observer of the actions you take. By considering your actions, you get an outsider’s view of yourself. So a person who is reflecting is both the subject and the object of reflection, and both the giver and the receiver of attention.

Reflecting does not mean musing, and it is not casual. It means wondering, probing, analyzing, synthesizing and connecting. And not just about *what* happened, but *why* it happened and *how* it differs from other happenings. In fact there are two kinds of reflection here: *reflexivity*, which is awareness of your own state of mind and emotions, and of your prejudices and preferences; and *remembering*, which is drawing together strands of thoughts and experience.

Every manager today is forced to carry around a great deal of conceptual baggage. There are many theories and models about managing that are heavily promoted. In addition, every industry has its own practices—accepted beliefs and procedures about how things are supposed to work. Put all this and a great deal more together, and you can appreciate why thoughtful reflection is so important in management development.

Reflecting Alone and Together

For some, reflection is a private, meditative practice. Many people value the drive to and from work because the time alone in a car offers them the opportunity to mull over the events of the day. Others walk the dog, listen to music or exercise while reflecting. None of these activities are distractions from work—they *are* work. Mulling things over is an important way of distancing oneself from immediate emotional reactions, seeing a situation in a wider perspective, considering various interpretations about what was going on, and wondering about underlying motives and long-term objectives.

Personal reflection also recharges the batteries. This is an easy exercise. Sit quietly for three minutes and ponder the events of the past couple of hours.

If you’ve done that, we bet that these few moments have made you feel calmer, more focused and energized. That is the power of personal reflection.

But reflection has to be collective, too. Anyone who has worked on an effective team knows just how important it is for a team to be able to reflect on and modify its own processes. It has to be aware of how it has responded to awkward facts and unwelcome opinions, and how it gives and takes feedback. All are aspects of reflection.

Lessons from the Reflective Classroom

Over the nine years that we have been running degree and development programs for practicing managers, we have experimented with all kinds of ideas for personal and collective reflecting. Much that we have learned can be applied by managers on the job.

Managers often come back from development programs energized, not from what they learned in the classes—all those lectures and case studies—but from what they learned from their colleagues at coffee breaks and after hours. What an awful waste of opportunity. Why can't the class time be as energizing as the time out of class, we asked ourselves, and we found the answer—significantly—in reflection.

Over the years of bringing this idea to life, we have made one great discovery, which should be obvious to anyone who has ever stepped foot in a management development classroom: Managers can learn from each other in ways that can be startlingly effective, if given the chance to reflect personally and collectively on their own experience.

Consider team discussion, one of whose pitfalls is a tendency to pursue one line of discussion to the exclusion of all others. It's a form of groupthink. Usually this is driven by one or two members, who are actively engaged, while the others just go with the flow. These disengaged employees are put in the uncomfortable and somewhat redundant position of having to stay “tuned in.”

So we asked people who were not directly contributing to a discussion to tune *out* of the discussion. Quite literally, we asked them to turn around and face outwards, their backs to the group. That gave them an important job: to listen but not to contribute. It was like switching from passively watching TV to actively listening to the radio, which, as we all know, are quite different processes.

Hearing their colleagues debate, the listeners became aware of the messages behind the words: the hints, the clues, the sly seductions and subversions that are part of any group activity, yet that so often are not picked up. Forbidden from responding, the listeners were able to make links to other ideas, images and feelings. For they, after all, were the reflective ones, while everyone else was busy pretending to act.

After a while—about half an hour—we asked these reflective listeners to turn around and join the conversation, bringing their “outside-in” perspective. In other words, we asked them to re-fold. The result was remarkable! Partly they commented on the process, but more important, they offered clear insights on what was discussed and how it could be seen and acted on differently. Such a simple management tool and so easily done in practice. Try it next time you have a meeting.

Morning Reflections

For years, we have been doing something else that is no less simple and no less powerful—“morning reflections.”

Many thoughtful ideas come out early in the morning, before the pressures of the day pick up. This is especially true when managers are in a development program where they are receiving a lot of feedback. So we have formalized a procedure to capture these insights.

We start with a few minutes of personal time for everyone to write thoughts in the empty “insight books” they are given. (One graduate of our master's program for practicing managers held the book up at a meeting in her company to welcome new participants to the program and said, “This is the best management book I ever read!”) It is rather remarkable to see a classroom full of normally noisy managers sitting in absorbed silence.

The managers in our program sit at round tables in a single-level classroom, so they can go in and out of small group discussions easily. No need for the disruption of “breaking out.” So after some minutes of this personal reflection, discussion

follows naturally, around each table, as the managers share their personal thoughts with each other. Ten to 15 minutes of this table discussion serves both to surface and to screen individual ideas.

Open-ended plenary discussion then follows, primed by the table discussions. This can run long—well over schedule. But we are all there to learn, not to “cover ground,” and much of the best learning happens during these morning reflections.

Frank McCauley, when he headed up executive development at the Royal Bank of Canada, visited our class in the module we run in India. In November 2002, he told a *Fast Company* journalist about the morning reflection session he saw: “That was the most fascinating conversation in an academic setting that I have ever seen. We zoomed around the room discussing everything from political to economic issues and then got into ethics and business.”

As this suggests, anything can come up in these morning reflections—thoughts about issues discussed the previous day, happenings in each person’s companies, items in the news and concerns from earlier days. So this morning reflection becomes a running commentary—a main thread—across our entire program, to blend all the learning.

Try it in your team, and maybe it can become the thread that blends all the activities of your company.

Reflecting in a New and Confusing Job

“What happened the day you became a manager?” We have asked that question of many groups of managers, and the answers are usually the same—puzzled looks, a few shrugs and the response, “Nothing.” Here we have a job that is so different from everything else—and so different from what the incumbent did the day before—and rarely is anything done to ease the transition. “Did they at least give you an article to read on managing?” we ask, and get the same response: “No.” Managing is treated like your first kiss—you are supposed to figure it out, usually with about the same consequences.

So when the manager of a high technology group in Montreal came to one of us recently, concerned about what to do with all his young, confused new managers, we had a ready answer. Why not just get them together to share and reflect on their experiences? He loved the idea—so much better than the usual suggestion, he said, of coaching them one by one. Reflection: so simple, so obvious, so powerful and so rarely done.

During the goodbyes at the end of the first module of our master’s program, in response to classmates who said, “It was great meeting you,” a sales manager with British Telecom in England retorted: “It was great meeting myself!”

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