



Reflection is a deliberate, rather than passive, activity. It breaks through unconscious bias and allows us to review strategies and plans that may no longer be appropriate.

## Chapter 11: The Reflective Organisation

# 11

## THE REFLECTIVE ORGANISATION

*“Reflection without action is passive; action without reflection is thoughtless.”*

Henry Mintzberg

Reflection is probably one of the most critical, but least understood, and most underdeveloped management capabilities in today’s world, and in particular today’s modern world, where speed and fast action are revered above much else. In this chapter we explore what we mean here by reflection, why we see it as an essential leadership capability, how it relates to learning and sustainability, and most importantly how you can develop a reflective organisation.

Henry Mintzberg, one of the most noteworthy and inspired management writers, has long been arguing for reflection to be embedded in all management syllabuses. His seminal article, *The Five Minds of the Manager* (2003), and his book *Managers Not MBAs* (2005) both place reflection at the start of the management learning process, and throughout.

Reflection is often associated with inaction or slowness, but in reality, reflection is a highly proactive and conscious process that must be practised to become proficient. In his more recent writing, (e.g. *Managing*, 2009 and *Simply Managing*, 2013) Mintzberg has shown that reflection is a critical and integrative thread for skilled managers and organisations. Self-awareness, awareness of others, organisational awareness, the ability to constantly make sense of and interpret events and acting according to these new perspectives is an essential art that leaders often overlook.

Gosling and Mintzberg cite T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets* who wrote: *“We had the experience but missed the meaning.”*

*“Reflection is about getting the meaning from everyday experiences... Experts espouse a great deal these days about the importance of action in managerial*

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*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”.* (Gosling and Mintzberg, 2004)

Leaders who are used to the increasing pace of organisational life find it hard to reflect. And indeed they often complain that they are too busy to stop, think, and question. But when they do learn to do so, our experience shows that many become strong advocates for the reflective process, and indeed take many of the techniques they learn back into their workplaces and actively engage in the education of their people in an endeavour to build reflective organisations.

At Caplor Horizons we continuously aspire to become a reflective organisation, and we frequently hold community days to question and challenge our assumptions. In this chapter we offer tips and guidance for doing this in your own context and becoming reflective practitioners yourselves whilst building a reflective organisation.

### The External Environment

*“Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful.”* Margaret Wheatley

As the preceding chapters in the book have all indicated we are undoubtedly operating in unprecedented times of turbulence and change, consequently we are experiencing an inability to predict the future of our planet, our economy, our sector and our organisation. This feeling of uncertainty and being out of control often leads us to focus on action even if we do not know whether our action will help. At least we are “doing something”. As one leader told us when discussing his learning about reflection, “My manager will think I am not busy if I take time out to think!”. This is a common response to the idea of reflecting. Our organisations expect us to be busy all the time, irrespective of whether being busy is leading to the outcomes we need.

Action without reflection has become a side product of Western style capitalism, whether this is practised in the US or UK or in Korea, China or India. However, Asian cultures have not

always behaved in this way. If we look back at the ancient leadership wisdoms found in Eastern cultures, we find their origins rooted in spiritual beliefs and evidence that reflection has long been a core strength of most Asian cultures. Confucian leadership wisdom, for example, places reflection as the highest priority for acquiring wisdom:

*“By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.”*

Echoes of reflection are also found in the ancient Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita, which focuses on the value of self-discovery. And in Buddhist teaching too through meditation as a channel to enlightenment.

Against the stresses and challenges of today’s backdrop we now see the growth of mindfulness as a popular form of reflection loosely emerging from meditation – but marketed as a secular process with little reference to its spiritual roots. Mindfulness is recommended for mental health wellbeing on the NHS (UK National Health Service) website. Mark Williams of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre is quoted as saying:

*“It’s easy to stop noticing the world around us. It’s also easy to lose touch with the way our bodies are feeling and to end up living ‘in our heads’ – caught up in our thoughts without stopping to notice how those thoughts are driving our emotions and behaviour.”*

Mindfulness can be a very valuable process, and self-reflection is the first step toward becoming a reflective practitioner. For some leaders this is still felt to be a spiritual experience (see Chapter 8 on the Soulful Organisation for a deeper discussion), for others this is a health driven process that enables mental and physical wellbeing. Either way, a mindful organisation has some of the components of a reflective organisation, deploying active processes that require regular and sustained practice. We will discuss these processes later in the chapter.

## The Observatory

*“If you don’t understand, ask questions. If you’re uncomfortable about asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions, and then ask anyway.”*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The challenge of leading from the Observatory is often preoccupation with how to anticipate “what might be” and “what could be” in a world where predicting is increasingly problematic and sometimes high risk. We tend to think of the Observatory as a room for thinking about the future, a huge challenge in this unpredictable world.

We have, however, found that aspiring reflective organisations nevertheless set out to imagine, create, and enable multiple futures in order to respond to these unforeseen futures. They build flexibility into their thinking and create alternative paths to success and sustainability. They are responsive and resilient, and ready to re-calibrate their direction, strategy and plans as the context shifts. Indeed, reflective organisations and the people within them are both reflecting on and reflecting in action all of the time.

Unreflective organisations, or organisations that have few reflective processes embedded in their cultures, are often top down hierarchical organisations, slow to change and pursuing a single direction, single mode of operation, and fixed end point. Such organisations can quickly be derailed if other players in their sector unexpectedly do something to disrupt the status quo, for example, by bringing disruptive “blue ocean thinking” to their sector (Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, 2004). Top down leaders often lack an early warning system. They are not known for their antennae or listening skills. They often have poorly developed reflective ability.

By contrast the active reflective leader tends to reflect continuously, both when alone and also with others, valuing the diverse ideas of other team members and appreciating and seeking out ideas and challenges from other functions, backgrounds and even different generations. For the reflective leader, the Observatory can be a lively place for collective reflection. This is true whether a leader is leading at the top of the organisation or influencing from the middle or from lower down in the organisation.

The Japanese have a concept called *Ba*, which means a place or platform (whether physical, mental or virtual) for advancing collective knowledge and innovation (Nonaka Ikujiro and Takeuchi Hirotaka, 1995). This idea maps well onto our outward thinking Observatory as a collective place for reflecting on alternative and possible future(s) ahead, and for reflecting on the actions we need to take to handle the inevitable challenges and crises ahead, and for pursuing the wellbeing of our planet, society, community and organisations, and the people within them.

Organisations are busy places and we are always racing (sometimes literally) to complete projects, so how can we create a real or metaphorical space for collective reflection? And what kind of space would stimulate a different way of thinking?

The approach taken can vary. Some organisations take time to be outside with nature, for example a walk in the park or eating lunch outside. The wellbeing felt when at one with nature can create a new way of seeing. Others create adult “play” spaces for creativity, such as taking people out for team-building activities or pottery painting. Many organisations set up permanent reflective hubs or coffee spaces for cross-functional talk. Others choose remote or wild places for retreats. There is significant evidence that a change of setting can create a change of mindset. We recognise that carving out spaces like this is a privilege, it can often require resources, time and even money. However, carving out space for reflection does not have to be resource-heavy, for example making use of public parks and free, local attractions. Leading by example is often the most effective way to make change happen in an organisation, and a reflective mindset can often influence others around us even if we are not in a position to direct change.

Mintzberg’s International Masters Programme for Managers (IMPM) is an excellent example of creating temporary reflective knowledge-creating spaces. Each module is held in a different location (usually a different continent) creating a sense of strangeness and difference. Within each contrasting module, culturally specific places are visited to stimulate surprise, disorientation, and consequent personal and collaborative reflection. In England, for example, a well-preserved cotton mill from the industrial revolution provokes reflection on the past, as we see now see it from the present, and on the future from the perspective of the present. Similarly, a walk in the Lake District where Wordsworth wrote his poems stimulates people to reflect on their own lives and purpose. In India, a Bangalore city walk

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that includes ancient Hindu temples and cows, set alongside multi-million dollar software offices employing youthful highfliers and deploying state of the art technology solutions enable conversations in the classroom about social change, responsibility, justice, and the partnership between business, government and the third sector in society.

Learning by reflecting together in an unfamiliar place or space can produce powerful changes in assumptions, beliefs and values that do not happen often enough in our workplaces or our classrooms. Later in this chapter we will explore practical ways to capture this reflection.

### The Library

*“We do not learn from experience... We learn from reflecting on experience.”* John Dewey

There has been much research into reflection as a core management skill, yet our organisations seem to be less reflective than ever.

Education Reformer John Dewey, for example, was one of the first to highlight the value and importance of reflection. He noted that reflection is not a passive but a deliberate activity, an “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads” (Dewey 1933: 118).

In his book *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), Donald Schön built on Dewey’s work by identifying two types of reflection: reflection-on-action, an important and little executed retrospective process of reflection, and reflection-in-action, which happens concurrently with action, in other words, improvising as you act. Chris Argyris, a co-researcher with Schön, labelled the reflective process “double loop learning” (Argyris and Schön, 1974). By this he meant not simply questioning the execution of a project but challenging or deeply considering the underlying assumptions, norms, objectives and policies of the organisation. Doing this is much more difficult, of course, but nevertheless a critical skill for managers. Later Argyris and Schön added “triple loop learning”, which, in summary means learning how to learn and asking not “are we doing things right?” (single loop), or “are we doing the right things?” (double loop), but “how do we decide on what to do?” (triple loop).

Russ Vince and Michael Reynolds (2010), in their paper, *Organizing Reflective Practice*, argue that there are four key models of reflection that are relevant for organisational life:

- Critical reflection – questioning the taken for granted discourses and power relations in society that frame our assumptions and beliefs.
- Public Reflection – which is necessarily undertaken in the company of others, and as a result, creates different interpersonal dynamics of accountability, authority and learning, and engages with “experience generated collectively, for example, in project teams, internal groups and organizational sub-systems”. (p. 8)
- Productive Reflection – which they define as “collective learning activities that change work practices to enhance productivity and to underpin improvements in personal engagement and meaning in work”. (p. 10)
- Organising reflection – which moves away from reflection as the responsibility of individuals to an emphasis on “creating collective and organizationally focused processes for reflection”. (p. 11)

In each of these interconnected modes, Vince and Reynolds argue, the role of reflection is made explicit and purposeful, with a view to uncovering hidden assumptions in our belief systems both inside the organisation and outside in wider society and engaging in collective questioning of the status quo. In all cases, this imperative is an important argument in favour of reflection as a productive and proactive activity that counters the assumption that we do not have time to reflect round here.

## The Family Room

This leads us into the Family Room where people interact and work together. It is surprising to us that reflection has for so long been seen as only an individual activity. Perhaps this idea does stem from an image of a sage meditating. Perhaps it stems from Western individualist thinkers such as Abraham Maslow and later Frederick Herzberg’s ideas that we are all individuals working towards “self-actualisation”.

Despite this image the majority of us are not recluses, and even those who do meditate spend most of our lives engaging with other people: family, community, and organisations. Building



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reflective places in which we can thrive alongside others, draw on the wealth of diversity in our organisations, and produce new thinking and ideas that will propel us sustainably and inclusively toward future success should, we believe, be a priority. And developing collaborative working processes in the Family Room for productive and organised reflection becomes a practice that no leader should overlook.

This does not mean that it is only in the Family Room that we should or can reflect. We have already indicated the value of reflecting on our sustainable futures in the Observatory. Without the foundations of learning, and the reflection theories of those early pioneers in the Library, we would lack the research foundations that give us the confidence to continue to invest time in reflective practice. Many leaders prefer to learn by doing, and abhor the idea of putting time aside to reflect in a structured way. For these leaders, the Kitchen is likely to be the ideal room for reflection. But, as the T.S. Eliot quote suggests: “We had the experience and missed the meaning”, doing is not enough. We must have practices in the Kitchen that enable us to combine Reflection with Action.

The Family Room is a critical place to share and internalise reflection as part of our everyday practice. For Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), to internalise reflection means embedding the learning to become part of the shared knowledge management system of the organisation. Do we, for example, always make time to come together at critical points in a project to review and reflect? This need not be a formal process, but it does need to happen consciously and proactively. And as leaders we do need to be guardians of this process. Without spending time in the family room where we can review our relationships, roles, responsibilities, and our collaborative processes with clients, partners and funders, how will we ever know how we are progressing?

### The Foundations

The Foundations are the enablers of learning. Reflection is the most important fuel or nourishment of learning that we know! Without reflection, emergent learning is often lost or overlooked. Without reflection, latent insights and creative thinking may never take place. Much has been written about individual, collective and organisational learning, but much less

on individual, collective and organisational reflection. This is puzzling to us as learning is so dependent on effective reflection.

The CIPD's (2018) article *What is Reflective Practice?* summarises the link between reflection and learning as follows:

*“Reflection deepens learning. The act of reflecting enables us to make sense of what we've learned, why we learned it, and how each increment of learning took place. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment to the wider perspective of learning – heading towards seeing the bigger picture. Through reflection, learning is integrated, internalised and personalised.”*

## The Roof

The Roof enables us to think about sustainable futures. In this chapter we have shown how vital the skills and capability of reflective practice is for organisations in today's turbulent world. Without a culture which values reflection, organisations are in danger of pursuing strategies and plans that may no longer be appropriate. They are in danger of overlooking dangerous signals in their environments, and they will not maximise the valuable contributions of the people in their organisation.

Reflection enables organisations to learn from the past, understand more deeply the present, and imagine alternative futures. It creates an early warning system and enables the collective imagination to flourish and knowledge creation to thrive.

Reflective practice is easily lost when seen as too time consuming. It is not. A culture of continuous reflection is a vital indicator of a healthy culture. At Caplor Horizons we help organisations to embed reflection at every level of their professional practice and as reflective organisations to create and sustain their futures.

# The Kitchen

## Practical steps to becoming a reflective organisation

### Individual Reflective Practices

- Keep a reflective journal each day of your observations and reflections on your practice. Summarise key moments of learning such as conversations, meetings, interactions, events that have led you to think and act in new ways.
- Take time out of every day to find a reflective space. This might be during a morning swim, a midday walk, an evening jog, listening to music, or even a long bath. This space will give you insights and ideas that you might have missed in the frenetic pace of life. Capture these later in your journal.
- Enhance your active listening and active observation skills. During meetings consciously focus on what is happening in the room, the exchanges and interactions, the body language. Too often we are too preoccupied with our own thoughts and what we want to say that we forget to do this. Enhancing our awareness is a key part of the reflective practice for leaders. The ability to really see and hear needs constant and regular practice.

### Paired Reflective Practices

- The Exchange. Spend 1-3 days in the workplace of a colleague from inside or outside your organisation. Shadow and observe the colleague doing their managerial work. At the end of each day, feedback to your colleague on your observations and reflect on how this person's approach may differ from your own. What can you learn from them? Repeat this process in reverse, so that the observer becomes the host and vice versa. This process often has a profound impact reaping very deep learning from both partners.

### Collective Reflection

- As discussed in the Family Room, co-create regular collective spaces for sharing insights and ideas. These might be face to face or even virtual. This space is

different from a business meeting - with its agenda and pace. A reflective space is where new knowledge can be created. It requires clear minds and an invitation to be creative. Moving to a place that evokes calm and removes pressures can reap great dividends. Inviting a diverse group of people who will bring different ways of seeing and thinking is also a useful ground rule. This can produce results at any level of the organisation.

- One technique that can work well when seeking to create collective reflection is to move from individual to small group to bigger group. When asked to reflect on an event or a challenge we start by asking individuals to write their reflections as a stream of consciousness otherwise known as free-flow writing. When they have done this we ask them to share their personal reflections in small groups round tables of 6-8 people. As a final step for larger groups the tables share their collective insights across the tables.
- Variations on collective reflections include “Keynote listening” when one member of a table group turns their backs in order to actively listen to the conversation, journalling their insights and then sharing these afterwards with the group. Or “rolling-in rolling-out”, a reflective process where four people sit in the centre of a larger group reflecting together on a topic. The larger group on the outer circle must listen carefully and may not speak. At any time a member of the outer circle may take the place of someone in the inner circle to continue the conversation. This productive process makes it very clear to everyone when they are in observation and listening mode and when they are in the speaking circle.

## Key messages

- Reflection is a critical management capability. However, it takes time, effort and practice. Without setting aside time to engage in reflective activities it is very difficult to achieve reflective capability. Anybody can learn to reflect but it must be an active and conscious practice.
- Reflection can happen individually and also collectively. Organisations which practise collective reflection by setting aside space and time to reflect together can learn to become reflective organisations. This reflective capacity can create knowledge-creating spaces and often leads to innovation.
- Reflection and learning work together. Reflection acts as a catalyst for learning and enables learning to be deeper, more sustained and more integrated. Without reflection learning does not become embedded.

## Reflection questions

- Do you use a reflective journal? Do you write in this every day? Do you allow your reflection to flow freely? Do you act on your reflections?
- Do you make space and time in your organisation for reflective conversation with colleagues, as well as to actively listen to others' reflections on what is happening inside and outside the organisation?
- Are you making space for more junior members of your organisation to learn to reflect?

## Action and impact questions

- How will you embed reflection into everyday practice individually, in teams or organisation-wide?
- How can you be more effective in doing reflection?
- How can you make sure that being reflective makes a clear difference in your life and in your work?

## Further reading

- **Mintzberg, H. (2013)** *Simply Managing: What Managers Do - and Can Do Better*. London: Pearson Education.
- **Mintzberg, H. (2019)** *Bedtime Stories for Managers: Farewell to Lofty Leadership. . . Welcome Engaging Management*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
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