

"I Don't Have Time to Think!" versus the Art of Reflective Practice

Joseph A. Raelin

"Susan, you're next. As you know, we figure the Cadlink merger is going ahead. They expect their Wentworth localization unit to be merged with your marketing group. What do you think?"

"No problem, Charlie," Susan replied. "We can integrate them, no sweat."

"Wait a second," Charlie said, looking a little uneasy. "I heard they use an entirely different CRM model. Don't you want to think about this a little?"

"Charlie," Susan insisted. "I'm working on a news release on the merger. I don't have time to think!"



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Managers like Susan and Charlie live in a world of frenetic activity. Reflective practice is hardly possible or practical in this age of the busy corporate executive who is socialized to be a person of action, not of reflection. Action is required. Delaying decisions is seen as a sign of weakness, even if the delay may subsequently produce a better decision. CEOs want an answer rather than a question; they are looking for solutions rather than problems. Yet, is it possible that the frenetic activity of the executive is a drug for the emptiness of our organizational souls, that constant action may merely serve as a substitute for thought?

So society gives reflection and its counterpart—listening—short shrift. We don't seem to be interested in the whole story. We even perfect the art of interruption so that we can show our "proactivity" and gain the boss's attention. There was a time before instant replay when humans had to get the whole message or it would be lost forever. We seem to be unwilling to perfect the art of public reflection, in which we show a willingness to inquire about our own and our colleague's assumptions and meanings.

What Is Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice, as I define it in this article, is the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment. It illuminates what the self and others have experienced, providing a basis for future action. In particular, it privileges the process of inquiry, leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice. In its public form, it is associated with learning dialogues. These types of discussions, rather than constituting an exchange of statements of viewpoints, bring to the surface—in the safe presence of trusting peers—the social, political, and emotional data that arise from direct experience with one another. Often these data are precisely those that might be blocking operating effectiveness. Learning dialogues also are concerned with creating mutual caring relationships.

Reflective practice tends to probe to a deeper level than trial-and-error experience. It typically is concerned with forms of learning that seek to inquire about the most fundamental assumptions and premises behind our practices. It is thinking about our thinking. Consider that the brain, as a sophisticated information-processing organ, can handle some

50,000 to 60,000 thoughts per day. Unfortunately, as we encounter problems in our work, we tend to go no further than consulting our “solution database” (depicted in figure 1) to find an answer.¹ Our solution database contains all the standard answers and assumptions we have used in our past to solve our problems.

In thinking about thinking, we are actually able to reflect together about our solution databases and add to them or alter them entirely. In this way, we reflect together with trusted others in the midst of practice. Plato had relationships in mind when, in *Apology*, he quoted Socrates’s now famous phrase: “The unexamined life isn’t worth living.” This phrase has often been misinterpreted as a call for additional introspection. Although this might be useful, the actual meaning is that we need to include others in the examination of experience in our life. Plato’s idea resonated with Aristotle, who recognized that human beings are social animals whose good is bound up with the good of the *polis*. Underpinned by these Greek roots, the egalitarian tradition in Western thought has long since recognized that the dignity of human persons is achieved only in community with others.

So, reflective practice, though recognizing the value of private reflection, opens up for public scrutiny our interpretations and evaluations of our plans and actions. We subject our assumptions, be they personal or professional, to the review of others. We do this not only before or after an event, but learn to inquire even in the heat of the moment.

Rationale for Reflective Practice

Reflection must be brought out in the open for many reasons:

1. At times, we are, unfortunately, unaware of our behavior and its consequences. To complicate matters, our unawareness occasionally does not allow us to be open to new data or information that would help us learn from our actions. We may even be unaware that the questions we ask might be producing defensiveness in others, closing off the possibility of generating new information, even new questions. Often, only through the support of and feedback from others in an open dialogue can we become receptive to alternate ways of reasoning and behaving.

For example, Claire, a research director at a pharmaceutical firm, had advanced to her position after being mentored by the foremost biochemistry guru in the company. His approach was to try to poke holes in every proposal on which Claire had been working. Now in management, she saw her role as “grilling” her subordinates, not only privately but in public during and after their research briefings. She was surprised when three of her subordinates requested a transfer out of her group, claiming that she was too much of a perfectionist to work with. Why couldn’t they understand that she was just trying to be helpful and that her interrogation at the end of the day always led to a better project?

2. There is an unfortunate gap between what many of us say we will do and what we actually do. We are simply guilty of deceiving ourselves that we can practice what we preach, though what we preach may be very difficult to accomplish in particular organizational cultures. How many readers have submitted to the game called “Yes, but . . .” with a boss? “Yes, but . . .” bosses typically start out by proclaiming that they have an open-door policy. “If you ever have a problem or a question for me or about our operation, you should feel free to come to me at any time,” they proudly avow. A series of conversations with the boss ensue during the next several months and may go something like this:

[One month later] “Boss, I would like to propose that we adopt the balanced scorecard approach to measuring our outcomes.” “Yes, good idea, but we actually tried it 14 months ago and it didn’t work. But keep those great ideas coming!”

[Two months later] “Boss, rather than paying out so much overtime, what would you say to hiring Tim Evans part-time to help us out. I know he’s available.” “Yes, that might work, but Tim didn’t get along well with Sara, so I think we best continue as we have been.”

[Three months later] “Boss, I know the group can increase its efficiency if we purchase and then receive some training in the software program, PROJ-ACT. I know a great supplier;

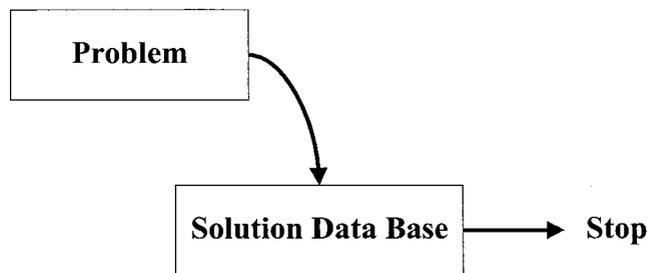


Figure 1 Our normal problem-solving pattern

they do a great job and can convert us in under two weeks." "Yes, but Marcia proposed that we try out the exact same program, and it was voted down just before you joined us."

[Four months later] "Boss, what would you say to all of us going out to see the latest Spielberg flick?" "Yes, he's great, and his current movie has an important message for our group, but you can't force these social outings on people. We each have our own lives."

[Five months later] No more ideas are forthcoming. Case closed.

3. Most of us are biased in how we obtain information that, in turn, produces cognitive "errors" in our perceptions of reality. Errors constitute such practices as collecting data superficially, ignoring certain pieces of information, making assumptions about data rather than investigating them, or using self-confirming reasoning. However, if we are interested in improving our managerial practices, we have to become aware of these so-called errors. Such an awareness is extremely difficult to awaken without the involvement of peers who can detect the use of untested assumptions and raw biases.

In the game of professional baseball, some managers employ a so-called "platoon" system in which they use certain left-handed players against right-handed pitchers, but replace them for a right-handed batter when the pitcher happens to be left-handed. The reason for platooning is that it is merely easier for batters to face opposite-handed pitchers. However, this general statistical rule breaks down at the level of the specific case, where more reflective practice may be called for. Some batters, for example, do just as well against same-sided as opposite-sided pitchers. Others seem to bat well against particular pitchers, regardless of their throwing arm. Some situations, such as a bunt, may call for a play that may not depend on the hand dominance of the batter.

4. Although intuition and past practices can give us very cogent clues in deciphering future situations, often the new situation presents itself in a different context. Prior solutions may not fit, even if the situations appear alike. We tend to look, however, for the

similarities between the situations rather than differences. This type of normal cognitive processing can play tricks on us. Even when we consult a repertoire of available responses, we may not find one that fits the new situation. Consider the business strategy of mergers and acquisitions (M&As). From most accounts, it appears that more often than not M&As fail to generate the synergistic value expected from the combined entities.

Take the case of Quaker Oats, which has recently merged with Pepsi Co. In 1994, nearly 10 years after the incredibly successful acquisition of Gatorade, Quaker Oats completed a \$1.7 billion merger with Snapple. Three years later, it had to unload Snapple for \$300 million. Given their previous success with Gatorade and their preconceived sense of the cultural norms within the industry, it appears that Quaker's principals may have critically overestimated the more particular cultural differences between the prospective partners. On one hand, Quaker was known for its highly focused, mass-marketing operating style, whereas Snapple was considered to be quirky, entrepreneurial, and distribution oriented. Was it possible that the principals may not have sufficiently reflected on what Robert Thomas (2000) likes to refer to as "cultural due diligence"?

We need managers who can inspire reflection to the extent of generating new ways of coping with change.

The Practicality of Reflective Practice

Is reflective practice possible or practical in this age of the busy corporate executive who is socialized to be the person of action, not of reflection? In our turbulent global environment, it appears almost definitional that we need managers who can inspire reflection to the extent of generating new ways of coping with change. A reflective culture makes it possible for people to constantly challenge without fear of retaliation. Yet, a culture that permits questioning of assumptions is difficult to tolerate because it requires that people in control lose their grip on the status quo.

In actuality, inspiring reflective practice in an organization does not have to be an onerous task, even for top managers. Although they are, by definition, people of action, they are also people who, when given a hospitable environment, like to compare expe-

riences and, moreover, to help one another. They may also crave the opportunity to share their insights, questions, and even failures with others, if given a climate receptive to open discourse. Indeed, they might appreciate an opportunity to replay their plans and actions in front of like-minded colleagues who are not assembled to take advantage politically of their faults, but who want to help. They realize that they, too, need the understanding of others.

Accordingly, there are some strategies that organizations might endorse to encourage more widespread use of reflective practice even in the face of unrelenting pressure for action (Haggerty, 2001; Raelin, 2000).

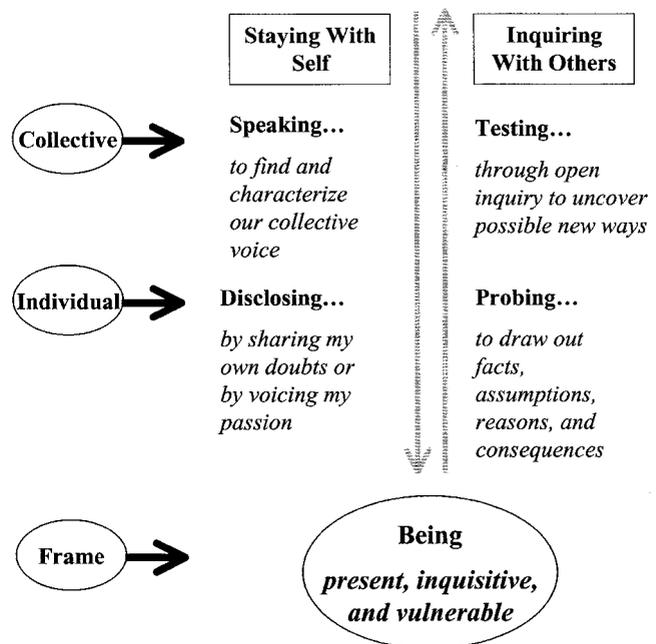
- ⊙ *Reflective actions*—Just one person demonstrating the value of inquiry generates interest in reflection among members of a team or work unit. A team may be introduced to reflective activities and processes such as journals, postmeeting e-mail minutes, reflective note taking, learning histories, and “stop and reflect” or debriefing episodes held during or at the end of meetings (Castleberg, 2001; Kleiner and Roth, 1997).
- ⊙ *Building communities*—Individuals may be encouraged to network with fellow employees who, though not necessarily in the same work unit, may have a shared interest in a craft or job. Other small groups, even dyads, could form for mentoring or support purposes, for sharing and testing ideas, or merely for feedback and exchange on initiatives and performance.
- ⊙ *Process improvement*—Although quality improvement approaches, such as total quality management, may not critically probe to the deeper levels of reflection alluded to earlier, they reinforce the value of learning from experience, whether before, during, or after the practice in question.
- ⊙ *Learning teams*—Whether constituted to support individuals working on their own projects, in the form of work or of self-discovery, or to support task teams working on meaningful action-learning projects, learning teams represent a vehicle to merge theory and practice. Participants, with assistance from their peers and qualified facilitators, use the learning team to help them make sense of their experiences in light of relevant theory. They discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings but also the application or misapplication of concepts and theories to these actions.
- ⊙ *Culture of learning*—Reflective practice tends to flourish in learning and collaborative environments. Senior managers have a particularly important role in modeling a learning orientation, in particular, a culture that values continuous discovery and experimentation. Reflective practice can become a way of life when organizational members feel free to challenge the governing values of their practice and where structures and standards can change to accommodate new requirements.

The Skills of Reflective Practice

Having considered some organizational strategies to orient firms in the direction of reflective practice, we now drill down to the level of skill to identify specific practices, notwithstanding the basic skills of communication. In particular, beyond the contribution of active listening competencies and the value of feedback, there are five advanced skills that, used together, can contribute to reflective discourse.

Although trained facilitators often introduce these skills, other facilitating members of any work or learning team can also initiate them. The model in figure 2 shows the five principal skills: being, speaking, disclosing, testing, and probing. They are also displayed in the sidebar, including their definitions, some prompting questions along with associated behaviors, and an example. I examine them here in more detail.

Figure 2 The five skills of reflective practice



Descriptions of the Reflective Skills

Being

Definition

Creates a climate for reflection in the group; asks that we experience or describe situations, even our own involvement in them, without imputing meaning.

Ask

What can I learn here?

How am I acting to constrain what is possible?

Behavior

View with empathy and with open-hearted acceptance.

View as strange, display deep interest and curiosity.

Invite questions and comments.

Acknowledge our own and others' vulnerability.

Consider positions as hypotheses to be tested.

Pause, reflect, contemplate.

Example

"It looks like we have pretty much endorsed the direct marketing approach for this advertising campaign. As you know, I have pushed for it as well, but we all remember what happened on the Do-op project. I have to admit that it still feels right to me, but to be honest with you, I still have some reservations. Do you think we should take one more look at this? I'm afraid I might have over-looked something."

Speaking

Definition

Calls for speaking with a collective voice to find collective meaning in the group. It attempts to characterize the state of the group at a given time.

Ask

What can I say to help the group understand itself?

What social practices is the group engaging in right now?

What is emerging in our collective consciousness that I can articulate?

Behavior

Suggest group norms.

Articulate meaning, such as by summoning an image.

Be willing to bring out uncertainties and unfounded assumptions.

Example

"James, your concern left me with an image that seems to characterize our effort right now. It is like we're a cargo plane having to make our destination in Istanbul, but with one engine knocked out."

Disclosing

Definition

Asks that members find and speak with their own voice in order to disclose their own doubts and assumptions and to voice their impatience and passion.

The skill of *being* is central and pervasive, cutting across the other skills, because it represents our presence and vulnerability in creating a reflective climate. Recalling that reflection represents a stepping back to ponder meaning, the first reflective skill is to experience or, even more simply, to be. In accomplishing *being*, we try to experience and describe situations, even our own involvement in them, without imputing meaning to them or without evaluating them. We learn to explain with others.

As the most unusual yet potentially powerful of the skills, the skill of being can place us in a vulnerable state because we do not rely on defending ourselves against experience. The object is rather on opening up to experience and to our interpersonal environment. We engage in such practices as suspending certainty, externalizing our thoughts, and exploring the tension of the opposites. This produces a reflective response that can be characterized by a number of attributes (from Bell, 1998) that directly contrast to the defensive posture:

- ⊗ Instead of maintaining unrealistic standards, we set realistic expectations.
- ⊗ Instead of expressing trepidation, we display tolerance.
- ⊗ Instead of concentrating on self-expression, we listen.

Ask

What am I holding back that needs to be aired?
 What might I say to help the group know me better?

Behavior

Disclose feelings at a given moment, based on what has transpired.
 Present a story to reveal the depth of experience.

Example

"I wasn't planning on telling you about this. I know I have seemed distracted lately, and the way I just dealt with Linda is a case in point. Well, frankly, I am having some marital problems. I've moved into an apartment and can't get my mind off my kids."

Testing

Definition

Makes an open-ended query to the group to attempt to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving. It asks the group to consider its own process, including its norms, roles, and past actions.

Ask

Are we helping each other right now?
 What can I ask to help us all focus on our process?

Behavior

Attempt to make a "meta-inquiry," to focus on where the group is right now.
 Ask if the group would be willing to test some taken-for-granted assumptions.

Example

"I guess we're at an impasse. In fact, it looks like we're split right down the middle on this one. Can we come up with some way to resolve this to everyone's reasonable satisfaction? What do you all think?"

Probing

Definition

Inquires directly with a group member in order to understand the facts, reasons, assumptions, inferences, and possible consequences of a given suggestion or action. Commits to a nonjudgmental consideration of another's views.

Ask

What is the basis for another's point of view and feelings?
 Can I explore with others even though their position may be different from my own?

Behavior

Ask about impressions and perceptions.
 Inquire about attributions of others' behavior.
 Explore the consequences of an alternative.

Example

"Frank, you've said several times that you believe that the workers in your unit should take the ball and run with it. Yet, you say they are dependent and continue to check with you on every new initiative. Is there anything you might be doing or saying that might be blocking their sense of independence? Might you be unwittingly giving them the sense that you'll be critical if they screw up?"

- ⊗ Instead of being self-absorbed, we convey humility.
- ⊗ Instead of feeling out of depth, we feel open to learn.
- ⊗ Instead of feeling out of context, we become open to experience.

Bell's reflective response suggests that, at times, we may engage our empathy with others by viewing them and listening to them as we wish to be treated. At other times, we may wish to view others as "strange" (Isaacs, 1999), people so unlike ourselves that they require even deeper respect and attention so that we may learn to know them. Using language from Buddhist insight meditation, *being* can also be referred to as mindfulness, which represents knowing what is arising in the moment without losing track of the knower. Gregory Kramer (1998), through the practice of "insight dialogue," has explored the potential of maintaining a meditative state of being while engaged in relationship with others. Developing the discipline of folding action and reflection into one requires a good deal of skill and patience but can be learned, according to Kramer, using these guidelines:

- ⊗ *Commit to the process*— We bring full presence to the group and commit not out of obligation but out of wisdom and compassion, allowing us to connect with one another.



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☉ *Trust emergence; have no goals*—The universe of possibilities is not limited by a preconfigured agenda. There is no goal but to rest in the moment from which might ensue an emotional and spiritual release or an intellectual breakthrough. These are natural results, not goals.

☉ *Balance affirmation and investigation*—We practice deep listening and maintain an attitude of inquiry. We affirm, not from a separate, limited self, but from the circle emerging within the group. We feel at ease with ourselves, confident of the group's "lovingkindness."

☉ *Pause, reflect, contemplate*—We pause after hearing a statement, reflect on what has been said, and contemplate our feelings, the motivation for speaking, and the richness of the moment. By providing space in interactions, we can begin to understand their nature.

☉ *Free up roles*—In the group, there is no hierarchy. We attempt to avoid the tendency to put people into pigeon holes. An open-hearted acceptance of ourselves and of others yields freedom and spontaneity to all.

☉ *Seek out assumptions*—We actively explore the moment, searching for assumptions in our own thinking and in what others have said.

☉ *Observe judgments*—We allow judgments to rise to consciousness in order to gain a window into our reactive nature and to open the possibility of a more even-handed way of being.

☉ *Share parallel thinking*—Parallel thoughts are those that arise in the background as other things are expressed. In the safety of the group, we bring these forth, be they judgments, feelings of inadequacy, or observations about the processes arising in the group.

Referring to the dimensions of the model, *being* itself occupies the dimension called the *frame* mode. Framing refers to how we think about a situation, more specifically, how we select, name, and organize facts to tell a story to ourselves about what is going on and what to do in a particular situation. In the collective mode, we extend our contributions and inquiry to all members of the community, whereas in the individual mode, we hear our own voice or address one individual at a time. The cross-dimensions are "staying with self" and "taking action toward others." At times, we make personal contributions to the group or focus attention on ourselves. At other times, we extend and dedicate attention to others.

Being, as a central skill, may entail staying with oneself or taking action toward others. It is most concerned with exploring differences and diverse experiences apart from members' preconceived notions. The being skill models an inquisitive, nonjudgmental attitude toward group phenomena. Some of its components are: inviting questions and comments, considering one's own positions as hypotheses to be tested, acknowledging expressions of vulnerability by others. Consider this excerpt from a supervisor's journal as an example of being:

Sam began to challenge our very purpose. He questioned not only why we needed to meet so often, but once he got going, he seemed to be questioning why we even needed to meet at all! I had formed our team and felt a spontaneous urge to counter his negativity. But I caught myself and decided to pause and continue to listen instead. Perhaps it was good that Sam was getting his feelings out on the table. Any knee-jerk reaction by me would likely shut him down. Maybe he had a few good points? At that moment, Linda and then Paul began to share their vision for our task force, yet they did it displaying profound respect for Sam's challenge. I found myself appreciating that Sam brought his objections to the team and said so. We began to work on some of our deficiencies as a group. I think it was our best meeting.

The second reflective skill of *speaking*, at the upper left in figure 2, seeks to articulate a collective voice from within ourselves. In speaking, we attempt to characterize the state

of the group or its meaning at a given time. It may entail summoning an image to articulate meaning, suggesting group norms, or bringing out uncertainties or unfounded assumptions. In speaking, it is not necessary to prepare words in advance. We craft our message in the moment as the meaning unfolds. Consider an example from the world of symphonic music:

Michael Tilson Thomas, the famous and still relatively young American conductor, was observed, perhaps unwittingly, using the collective speaking skill when he served as guest conductor with the Chicago Symphony. Although the role of symphonic conductor is often interpreted as a directive practice in which members of the orchestra are asked to follow carefully the direction of the conductor, Thomas used a more collective approach in his rehearsal with the orchestra of Tchaikovsky's Sixth. "Of course, they had played the *Pathétique* hundreds of times," recounted Thomas. "[But] when we got to the second theme, instead of beating it note by note in the typical schoolmaster way, I raised my hands into the air and gently indicated a breathing space that would precede this phrase. At first they were baffled," but I urged, "Let's breathe together, hold the first note slightly longer, and then let the melody gracefully fall away from it." In explaining what happened next, Thomas recalled, "I couldn't make the music happen alone. We needed to share the feeling, we had to find that shape together, and we did. It was miraculous."²

In the third skill of *disclosing*, we stay within ourselves and, at the same time, share our doubts or voice our passion. By disclosing, we may unveil feelings at a given moment based on what has transpired, or we may present a story to reveal the depth of our experience. As people disclose more about themselves, the group learns more about its membership. Another cue to promote disclosing is to ask myself what I might say to help the group know me better. A story about George Washington reveals the power of disclosing.

Unknown to all but the most astute historians, there was a substantial movement during the waning years of the American Revolutionary War for the military to take over the civilian government and install Washington as king. At one historic point, Washington appeared before some of these military officers to condemn this affront to democracy, the cornerstone of the entire revolutionary movement. However, his speech was falling on deaf ears. Then, at one point, as he helplessly attempted to read a missive from a member of Congress, he paused to reach for a pair of glasses, something only his closest aides had known that he needed. Then he quietly confessed to his officers: "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." The men wept. It was thought that his statement of vulnerability nipped this movement in the bud: How could the men ignore this selfless commander who reminded them that he was one of them?³

As people disclose more about themselves, the group learns more about its membership.

Testing, the fourth reflective skill, is an open-ended query directed toward the group as a whole that attempts to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving. When testing, we may ask the group to consider its own process or may attempt to explore underlying assumptions previously taken for granted. In testing, we are trying to promote a process of collective inquiry. As a tester, we may occasionally ask for a process check or ask if someone might act out a scenario to explore an option. Perhaps readers are familiar with the "Abilene Paradox," an interpersonal dynamic described by Jerry Harvey (1988). Harvey coined the terms when pondering why he and some family members took an exhausting trip in a dust storm to Abilene, 53 miles away, when not one person in their party actually wanted to go there. Because we have an unfortunate tendency in everyday life to communicate the very opposite of our wishes based on our assumptions of the desires of others, the testing skill can become indispensable. We need to develop the courage to inquire about our mutual desires and actions if we are to successfully manage agreement.

Finally, in *probing*, we make a direct inquiry, typically to one member at a time, to find out the facts, reasons, assumptions, inferences, and possible consequences of a given suggestion or action. For example, probing might attempt to point out inconsistencies in members' reasoning patterns, perhaps helping them to uncover the assumptions and

beliefs behind particular actions. When probing, however, we need to be careful not to interrogate or make any member feel he or she has been put on the spot or on the defensive. On the other hand, probing may initially make some members uncomfortable if they are asked to consider assumptions that had been hidden even from their own consciousness. As an example, consider a frank inquiry posed to a group member, Mark: "Mark, every time that I can recall when we've thought about broaching our plans with Lisa, you chime in saying that she is someone whom no one can work with and a person to be avoided at all costs. I wonder if you've had some experiences with her you can share that would help us, and perhaps you too, understand what seems to be making Lisa such an obstacle. Maybe there *is* a way that would make it possible for one of us to approach her."

So, how would Susan and Charlie from the initial vignette interact under reflective practice conditions? Let's see how the conversation might have changed. See if you can detect Susan's interest in building a reflective community and more specifically in her use of the *being* skill, followed by Charlie's use of the *disclosing* and *probing* skills:

"Susan, you're next. As you know, we figure the Cadlink merger is going ahead. They expect their Wentworth localization unit to be merged with your marketing group. What do you think?"

"Charlie, thanks for giving me your confidence. Frankly, I'm concerned. Even though I had earlier been pretty vocal about my support of the merger and had told Jeff that I believed we could assimilate Wentworth, I have new data suggesting that their work methods might not converge with ours. We need to get them in the room, but I'm not sure how to broach the matter. You've had conversations with them before. What do you suggest?"

"Susan, I'm somewhat fearful that they might think we're back-pedaling here, and my word is on the line. But I appreciate your frankness. By being up-front, I think I can show Jeff why this matter is too important to rush. I also know their marketing VP. But before we approach her and her group, let's hear about the new data that you have. What operating methods of theirs do you anticipate to be problematic?"

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. I am grateful to David Hardy, of the Bank of Montreal, for demonstrating the concept of the "solution database."
2. The Thomas account is from D. Schiff, "An Older, Wiser, Humbler Wunderkind." *New York Times Magazine* (August 20, 1995): 31.
3. This story of Washington was described in O. Guinness, ed. *Character Counts: Leadership Qualities in Washington, Wilberforce, Lincoln, and Solzhenitsyn* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999): 37.

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Commentary

by Phillip DiChiara

In the mid and late 1990s, abundant venture capital catalyzed the rapid growth of fledgling organizations, many of which placed great emphasis on market share, virtuality, personal fulfillment, and overall staff satisfaction. Technology firms in particular proudly provided space for recreation with the hope of encouraging dialogue and teamwork. Many new ventures assumed that highly motivated employees would view work as play, play as work, and professional fulfillment as essential to their continued commitment to the often-entrepreneurial task at hand. The spoken intent was to recruit the best talent at any cost, to provide a nurturing environment for innovation, and to create teams that would succeed.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that "safe space," physical or otherwise, for individual or group reflection was often less a reality than an optimistic promise. Joseph Raelin's article reminds me that, for many practitioners, the concept of reflective practice is essentially unknown.

As Raelin notes, there are many reasons why reflection should be brought out in the open, and there are strategies to encourage its use. Within the efforts of The Boston Consortium for Higher Education, a young collaborative focused on addressing the shared problems faced in the administration of member colleges, we believe reflective practice has been an essential part of our success thus far.

As our groups evolve from informal meetings within a discipline, but across several different school organizations, community building is not left to chance. A clear sense of shared interest and vision is essential, and creates the fertile ground on which reflective practice can be nurtured. Encouragement from senior staff may catalyze initial involvement, but few managers can afford, or want, to spend time in meetings that do not provide a return on their investment of time. Additionally, they value sessions that allow them to engage their peers in settings that are relaxed but clearly focused on how their collective knowledge can reduce workload or enhance the quality and sophistication of their respective operations.

Facilitating the correct balance between "getting down to business" and nurturing an environment that permits reflection is not easily accomplished. It is however, necessary, as too little of either will discourage further involvement in a newly formed group. It is modulated differently from group to group, within a group, and often within a topic. The skills of reflective practice, detailed in the article, can be readily observed in sessions involving our more matured communities of practice.

The consortium initially employs a coordinator, who, with solid facilitation skills, assists a group in discovering and sharing their common concerns. As dialogue leads to relationships, time for reflection is created by simple but effective tools such as collective review of previous meeting notes or informal updates on the seemingly unrelated problems they have had to tackle in order to move the effort ahead.

In some cases, casual dialogue before and after meetings involves sharing of often-humorous episodes encountered in merely finding the time to attend a group meeting. We suspect that this is evidence that value is placed on attending the meeting. It would also appear to resonate with the value we discover in stepping back and observing our activities, as conditioned as we may be to doing otherwise. Public reflection in a trustful environment brings attention to the flurry of activity that often acts as a substitute for thoughtful analysis. An individual's ability to observe his or her approach apart from and outside of the traditional organizational setting is an important benefit of reflective practice within consortia, and we believe, very much a part of the attraction of participating in a community of practice.

Unfortunately, not all communities evolve at the same pace, and some, despite able assistance, do not achieve their full potential. What would appear to distinguish them is the degree to which the group becomes comfortable with observing itself and others. Groups that are hell-bent on achievement often meet their objective, but seem to cycle out of productive existence. Other groups, frequently populated with two or more personalities that are biased toward inquiry, typi-



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cally find the ability to re-engage continuously. Is it that the relationships created have become so trusting that the vulnerability often associated with reflection is no longer a concern? We believe that is the case, but are not sure.

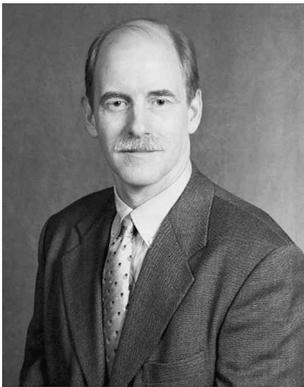
If communities of practice in collaborative environments tend to encourage reflection, then interorganizational communities of practice would appear to require it. There is rarely a clear line of authority on joint projects. A compelling argument for project completion must be adopted and internalized by all participants in order to achieve success. Absent facilitated reflection, failure to appreciate the whole story and understand the unique perspective of several organizations will increase the likelihood of a failed effort. The creation of "safe space" becomes the critical element in successful consortia and the communities of practice they seek to produce. Without that space, reflection is less likely to occur. Shared reflection, even in modest quantities, is part of every successful effort within our consortium and often absent in those that do not meet our hopes and expectations.

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Commentary

by Philip W. McArthur



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As the title of Joseph Raelin's article captures, reflection in organizations, while so necessary for the reasons he articulates, is often resisted because people think they don't have time. What leads us to think this? What are the implications for people who wish to foster more reflection? As Raelin points out, we can think of reflection as occurring in three distinct moments: (1) before we act, (2) after we act, and (3) in the heat of the moment. I would venture a guess that when people think they don't have time to reflect, they are referring to the *before-* and *after-action* types of reflection. This puts a premium on understanding how to optimize reflection in the heat of the moment, or what Donald Schön (1983) in his seminal book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, called *reflection-in-action*.

Schön used the term reflecting-in-action to describe the process professionals implement to develop practical knowledge in unique, surprising, and puzzling situations. As Schön explained, much of professional knowledge is tacit. Expertise leads to a dilemma. The better you get at what you do, the less able you are to say what you know. You "just do it." The process of reflecting-in-action involves "turning thought back on action and the implicit knowing in the action" (Schön, 1983), making your tacit knowledge explicit, reflecting on your assumptions, so that you can entertain fundamentally new options.

Reflection, in this sense, is not divorced from action. It is about applying learning to one's performance in the current situation. As Schön noted, we can think about what we are doing, even as we are doing it, but this requires that we embrace uncertainty rather than see it as threatening or a sign of weakness. The barrier to reflecting-in-action is not necessarily time, but our willingness and ability to engage each other effectively in reflecting on our thoughts, feelings, and actions. When Charlie says to Susan in the opening vignette, "Don't you want to think more about it?" Susan may understandably see this as a delaying tactic. When she responds, "I don't have time," what she may really mean is, "I don't find this conversation helpful."

I agree with Raelin that reflective practice is powerful because it is public. But, to leverage this power, there is a dilemma with which we must contend. As we engage in reflection with others, there are usually two conversations going on simultaneously: a public one and a private one (Argyris and Schön, 1974). The private conversation is a function of our ability to observe both others and ourselves. Unfortunately, in difficult conversations, our internal observer can become quite reactive. We think to ourselves, "What an idiot!" "How can he possibly believe that!" "I better not rock the boat." Our reactive observer is judgmental in ways that are not useful and leads us to protect others and ourselves rather than promote learning. Yet, our judgments may be accurate and necessary for change. The solution to this dilemma is not to be nonjudgmental, but to be aware of our judgments and communicate them in ways that promote mutual learning.

Table 1 Developing a reflective observer

<i>Reactive observer</i> (from supervisor's journal)	<i>Reflective observer</i> (my examples of second-order reflection)
"Sam [is challenging] our very purpose. He [is questioning] not only why we need to meet so often. . . . He [seems] to be questioning why we even [need] to meet at all!"	"What is it about Sam questioning this group that I find difficult?" "These are my interpretations. I need to test them publicly."
"Perhaps it [is] good that Sam [is] getting his feelings out on the table. Any knee-jerk reaction by me would likely shut him down."	"I understand Sam thinks we shouldn't meet. I'm glad he's raised this, but I don't yet understand his thinking. I need to ask." "I am assuming I would shut him down if I respond. If I just say he is wrong that won't help. If he doesn't find my inquiry helpful I need to learn why not."
"I think it was our best meeting ever."	"That is my assessment. Feeling good can be a trap. Did we miss any opportunities for learning? I need to check with others."

Given that our reactive observer does not disappear overnight (if ever), as we learn to reflect-in-action in tough situations, we have to develop a *reflective observer* that can help us make sense of and manage our reactive observer. What might this look like in action? Let me use as an example the supervisor's journal entry from Raelin's article (see table 1). In the left column, I have placed those comments of the supervisor that contain untested hypotheses and assumptions, which are characteristic of our "reactive observer." We need to become aware of these reactions, and further reflect on them, as we are acting. Examples of second-order reflection are in the right column under the heading "reflective observer."

In Raelin's model of reflective practice, his use of examples to illustrate the skills of reflective practice at the level of what you would actually say or do is one of the article's particular strengths. I have done the same in the table. Having examples at this level allows us to reflect on our causal reasoning and identify any gaps or inconsistencies in how our ideas might be put into practice (Argyris, 1982).

Raelin's model for reflective practice is composed of five core skills: being, disclosing, speaking, testing, and probing. I agree that the framing skill he identifies (*being*) underlies the effective use of the other four skills. What I find novel, but not yet convincing, is the idea that these skills apply distinctly to either the collective or the individual level.

Regarding the skills of testing and probing, in my practice, I don't make a distinction between using these skills at the individual or group levels. I apply them to both. Let me use Raelin's example of probing to illustrate. Here is a statement made by one group member to another.

Mark, every time that I can recall when we've thought about broaching our plans with Lisa, you chime in saying that she is someone that no one can work with and a person to be avoided at all costs. I wonder if you've had some experiences with her you can share that would help us, and perhaps you too, understand what seems to be making Lisa such an obstacle. Maybe there *is* a way that would make it possible for one of us to approach her.

First, the use of words such as "chime in" could lead Mark to feel his concerns are being dismissed (and suggest that the speaker has work to do on his frame of Mark). That aside, from my perspective, this comment would be more effective if it included more explicit testing. The first place I would test with Mark is after I state my recall of his response to working with Lisa. I would ask, "Do you see that differently?" or "What's your recollection?" Second, when the speaker says, "Maybe there *is* a way . . . for one of us to approach her," this is, implicitly, suggesting a test. It would be a more explicit test if the speaker were to say, "I'd like to figure out a way to test if it is possible."

Regarding the skill of speaking, I do not understand what it means "to articulate a collective voice from within ourselves." I understand in the example that the orchestra found the shape of the music together, and that Thomas, the conductor, could not make the music happen on his

own. But, how did the orchestra do this without hearing their own "voices" in the process? Schön also distinguished between reflecting-in-action at the individual level, as when a baseball pitcher makes adjustments to his delivery, and at the collective level, as when jazz musicians improvise. But in Schön's description of the collective music-making process, the individual continues to be very present (1983: 56).

As the musicians feel the direction of the music that is developing out of their interwoven contributions, they make new sense of it and adjust their performance to the new sense they have made. They are reflecting-in-action on the music they are collectively making and on their individual contributions to it, thinking what they are doing, and in the process, evolving their way of doing it.

In Schön's example, the jazz musicians are hearing the collective voice and their own voices. There is no blurring of the boundary between the individual and the collective. A key challenge in reflecting-in-action is being able to shift one's focus fluidly between the action you observe "out there" and your own internal experience and sense making. This is why it is important to combine productive advocacy and inquiry (speaking, disclosing, probing, and testing) whether at the individual or group level.

These distinctions aside, the final vignette between Susan and Charlie is a good illustration of reflecting-in-action. They are asking for help, making their thinking and concerns more explicit, asking questions that lead to more informed action, rather than indirect questions that appear to delay action. Notice that this conversation is longer than their first. But it is more helpful. People generally invest their time where they think they will get the most return. "I don't have time" may really mean "I don't see the value," or "You aren't being helpful." The key barrier to reflection-in-action is not time but skill.

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Response

by Joseph A. Raelin

As I prepare to write my response to DiChiara's and McArthur's thoughtful commentaries, I am struck that our journalistic practice with its artifact of objectiveness may itself miss the mark on full reflective practice since the three of us and our managing editor are hardly reflecting together in action. But we are stepping back to ponder meaning and perhaps are likewise engaging our readers, who may in turn bring up some of these reflections with others in their respective communities.

Two themes and one new thought emerge for me as I read both commentaries. The first theme is the sheer need to expose one's fragile self if reflection is going to occur publicly at all. It is hard enough just to ask others to slow down, let alone question self and others in front of the assembled. We need to ask each other how we can establish a climate for *being* in a world of acting. Perhaps it ultimately boils down to an existential courage, as or Paul Tillich put it, "the courage to accept oneself, in spite of being unacceptable" (Tillich, 1952).

The second theme that I derive from the commentaries is how critical it is that reflective practice occur at all levels of experience. Phil McArthur is mostly concerned with the individual and team levels of discourse. At the individual level, we need to make a discernible effort to understand our own assumptions and feelings (our "left-hand column") and how to communicate some of these constructively to others so as not to block productive personal and professional relationships. At the team level, we need to decide how to counter centrifugal forces that lead us to protect our identities rather than commit to one another. Using the speaking skill, for example, one doesn't necessarily "speak for the group," as McArthur aptly questions, but seeks to express a collective voice that helps the team find meaning as a working and learning unit.

Phil DiChiara is more concerned with reflective practice at the organizational and interorganizational levels of experience. Organizationally, our moments of reflection can help us probe beyond

the strategic imperative of "what business are we in," to questions of "what we stand for." The value dimension suggested here applies as well to our stakeholder relationships as we seek collaborative opportunities that consider not just the economic benefits to be gained from other parties but our mutual sustainability. Indeed, in *Work-Based Learning*, I propose that critical consciousness through public reflection might begin to lead to a better world when we recognize the connection between our individual problems and the social context within which they are embedded.

Finally, is there a link between reflective practice and the attention of the Society for Organizational Learning on leadership and personal development? If we expect people with working ties in our organizations to reflect together, it may be counterproductive to send them away individually to training programs. One alternative is to send them away together to the training. Another is to bring learning into the community itself. How do we do this? I have coincidentally worked with DiChiara and McArthur on this very issue. In an ongoing executive development program with DiChiara's Boston Consortium for Higher Education, we have assembled a handful of administrative executives from area colleges and universities. Although we started using a traditional format of lecture and discussion, we have since evolved into a reflective learning team. There is now sufficient trust in this network group that at each session, members take turns disclosing to each other some pivotal problems of leadership occurring in their respective work settings. The ensuing dialogue is dedicated toward helping individuals make sense of their leadership interventions in light of relevant academic and practice theories, but most particularly, in light of our profound respect of each other's courage to be.

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Commentary

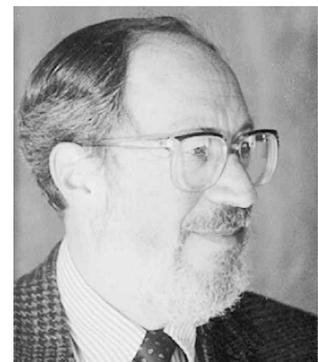
by *Edgar H. Schein*

Raelin's call for developing the skills of reflection and finding the time to reflect is very timely as we get more and more frantic in this complex world. When I say to companies that learning requires "slack" time, I get outraged responses that not only is there no slack time anymore, but even if there were, the stakeholders would never approve of time being used unproductively. So how do we "find" time in a world that claims there is no time to be found?

I would suggest that if we view time as a cultural invention rather than a physical abstraction, we might discover that there are all kinds of time for personal reflection if we choose to use it. The best example is "commuting time." If we walk or take public transportation instead of driving, we have untold hours per week to devote to reflection. A second example is "walking the dog." This is an ideal time to think, either alone or with one's significant other. It is also an ideal time for reflective conversation. A third example is "between events, meetings, and so on." If I have to walk 10 minutes from one building to another to get to the next meeting, I have 10 minutes to reflect on what has just gone on and what is about to happen.

In a very provocative study, Marcie Tyre, former MIT professor, studied what we do when external circumstances force a "time out." For example, on the football field when a player is injured and the doctor is out on the field, what do the other players do during this time out? When the power goes off for a few minutes or hours, what do we do if we cannot continue our normal work? Most of us do not smoke anymore, but maybe the "smoke break" should be brought back as an institution to provide 5 to 10 minutes of reflection time out on the balcony. Instead of bringing our coffee back to the desk, what about taking a coffee break to walk around the block or to sit alone staring at the landscape and reflecting?

The point is that slack time is a sociological definition, not an absolute category. What we need to find are adequate excuses for reflection that others will accept as legitimately fitting into our busy lives. The absurdity of how we are driven by the norms of busyness is best exemplified in Cambridge at the outdoor teashop on Brattle Street. Many people will not stop for a relaxing tea and pastry (and a bit of reflection) because they may be seen as "wasting time" sitting at a café. Let's begin by reflecting on why we don't reflect more.



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