



CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS REFLECTION AND REFLECTIVE CAPACITY?

When considering the terms ‘reflection’ and ‘reflective capacity’, you might easily think of a mirror. And that makes sense, because the metaphor of a mirror has been used ever since primitive man discovered his reflection in still water. Of course the best-known example of this in mythology is Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection. When that love couldn’t be satisfied, his life force and his beauty eventually faded away, and he died. All that was left of him was a yellow flower encircled by white petals, the narcissus, or daffodil.

The first mirror that we look into during our own lives is our

mother's face. And from that moment on, we create an image of reality as our mirror constantly adjusts the reflection we see.

DID YOU KNOW

Ever since I finished my research on reflection and reflective capacity, I haven't dared to give anyone daffodils because I'm afraid they'll think that has a hidden meaning.

Asking questions

For the origin of reflection, we have to go all the way back to the epoch of the man who was possibly the most famous philosopher of all times: Socrates (470-399 BCE). He became one of the first philosophers to make use of reflection when he tried to determine the nature of goodness by asking other people questions. He was constantly challenging the statements and convictions of other people. This process was adopted by his disciple Plato (427-347 BCE) and Plato's disciple Aristotle (384-322BCE).

There's an enormous number of definitions of 'reflection' and 'reflective capacity'. I've tried to collect the most commonly used ones. I've also explicitly added the following observation: a person can also choose to follow the same behavior for their actions in the future. This is because the goal of reflection is not always to change a certain behavior the next time. It's only meant to call the behavior into question, so that from then on, a person can decide to act in the same way or differently. This

brings us to the following definition. Get ready, because it's a long one.

The capacity and the courage to take a step back, either consciously or unconsciously, while you're performing an action, or after you've performed it. You then embark on a deeply personal cognitive process of exploration and discovery in which you examine and analyze current situations and experiences you've had, as well as your actions and assumptions about yourself or other situations. Where necessary, you question these assumptions and subject them to criticism. Your goal is to expand your awareness, to learn from the process, and to collect better insights that allow you to choose whether to do the same thing in the future or act differently.

Well, that's the definition, even though it took 106 words! And it does give an excellent idea of the complexity of reflection (or the misconceptions about it). It can't be put into a single word, you can't do it in the blink of an eye. It has many aspects, and this definition helps you grasp that.

Reflecting on reflection

Of course, many people before have reflected on reflection. It's tempting to go into more detail on the models that these thinkers and researchers have developed to map out the steps that have to be taken during reflection. I've also devoted a great deal of attention in my master's thesis to the models that recur in theories of reflection.

For the die-hards: the four best-known models of reflection are

those by Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988), Korthagen (1993), and Aggris & Schön (1978). For those of you who want more information on this subject, I refer you to the reference list at the end of the book, and of course my thesis. You can send me an email at juri@drshofnar.nl if you'd like to receive a copy of my thesis. But because this is a book and not a dissertation, I'll limit myself to a brief summary of the so-called reflective cycle (1988) by the American sociologist and psychologist Graham Gibbs, who says reflection has to take place in six steps.

1. Description: the description of what happened.
2. Feelings: exploration of the thoughts and feelings that arose.
3. Evaluation: an analysis of what was good and bad about the experience.
4. Analysis: an attempt to understand the situation and examine its impact.
5. Conclusion: the investigation of alternatives. What could the person have done differently? In this phase, it's crucial to consult other people and ask them about their views and opinions.
6. Action plan: what would the person do if the situation repeated itself?

What I especially like about Gibbs's model is that he takes into account the thoughts and feelings that you had during the event or action you're reflecting on, and what went well or badly there. He also advises you to involve a third party in the reflection.

And apart from the various models, as valuable as they are for studying reflection, the most important question for you will always be, “What can reflective capacity mean for you as an executive or manager?” Or to put it even more directly, “Why can’t you do without it?”

We live in a time where executives are almost worshipped for being good at multi-tasking. People say that this is because it’s the only way for you to keep up with all the rapid changes and make good use of the abundance of information. But multi-tasking is not an effective strategy at all. On the contrary, various studies have shown that multi-tasking actually reduces your effectiveness as a manager by affecting your thought patterns, your planning and your decision-making in leadership capacities. Rather than multi-tasking, it’s much better to have the skill to keep learning from whatever happens in the ever-changing work situations that come along. To keep improving your performance, you have to have new tools, techniques and management practices.

Yes-people

By learning from what happens around you, you also become aware of your own fallibility. The people you meet as a manager are often dependent on you or have an interest in securing your approval. In a leadership position, you run the risk of surrounding yourself with a lot of so-called “yes-people”. This is a dangerous phenomenon, because it can make it easier for the manager (you!) to start believing in your own infallibility.

If you don’t think about your actions and the people in your circle

also don't dare to comment on your behavior, actions and decisions, you could convince yourself of your own invincibility. Then you'll stop paying attention to the viewpoints of others. And to take this even further, you could even shut yourself off from other viewpoints so that you don't have to think about someone else's way of doing things. Or you might think that accepting someone else's viewpoint might cause other people to question their favorable impression of you. Or you might be afraid that you'll become involved in matters that you'd prefer not to be thinking about. Dear readers and executives, it's much better for you not to hide. If you're so good at what you do, then show it, and give a good example. Show that you have the capacity for reflection. Then you'll be an inspiration to the people you work with.

Better decisions

Reflective capacity will not only help you to be a manager who has better insights into yourself and your own thoughts and actions. It also helps you to better understand organizational situations and to make better decisions and judgements in the future.

DID YOU KNOW

After every major military exercise, the American army does an evaluation to reconsider their assumptions and re-examine their motivations so that they can make the next exercise run more smoothly.

To put it simply, whoever avoids reflection runs the risk that he

or she will make bad decisions and form mistaken opinions. In that sense, you can say the reflection is the core of leadership development. And there are many advantages of making a habit of reflection. Reflection expands your professional skills. You become better at meeting the needs of your workers and your target group, at weighing ethical and moral issues, and using yourself as an instrument to help other people. To top everything off, it helps you make use of your core virtues and gives you even more self-confidence than you had before. Sounds great, doesn't it? Well, it really is.

Political dramas

For the sake of completeness, let me say something about the other side of the coin. Many business scandals, governmental controversies and political dramas could have been avoided if the parties involved had isolated themselves less and put more effort into reflecting on their everyday behavior. In the year that I completed my degree, I read the book *A Very Stable Genius* by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig, a shocking reconstruction of Donald Trump's term as president of the USA. By the time I'd finished the first chapter, I already knew that this book was related to my thesis research. I was nearly breathless as I raced through the book's chapters, and was astonished at the imperious behavior of the former president. One passage connected perfectly with the core message of my book.

It is summer 2017 and U.S. President Donald Trump is sitting with his top military officers and diplomats in a blinded conference room.

The president is lecturing everyone, while handling the facts in a very casual manner. Almost everyone bows their heads at this tirade, except for Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Tillerson takes a critical stance and decides to hold a mirror up to Mr. President. The criticism ends up costing him dearly. Tillerson becomes the first cabinet member ever to be fired by tweet.

The authors claim that, after this incident, Trump began to distance himself from advisers who tried to get him to change his mind and from then on based all his policies on his own preferences and ideas. This can easily create a situation where a president tolerates no opposition and is surrounded exclusively by people who do nothing more than listen and nod.

That can happen to you in your capacity as a supervisor. But who will expand your reflective capacity then? And how will this happen? We'll answer this question in the next chapter.

COLUMN BEN TIGGELAAR

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'If you want to become a better leader, you need to get better at self-reflection. But systematically and critically examining yourself—your decisions and your behavior—isn't easy.

I read the master's thesis by Juri Hoedemakers: The reflective capacity of leaders. Last week, as a part-time business student, he won an award for it from Erasmus University. Here are a few highlights.

There are many frameworks and models for reflection. But the most frequently cited approach is that of American sociologist and psychologist Graham Gibbs from 1988. According to Gibbs, reflection involves six steps:

Description: What do you want to reflect on? Describe the situation, event, or activity in concrete terms. Stick to the facts. Feelings and thoughts come later.

Feelings: Explore the thoughts and emotions that came up before, during, and after the event. How do you view what happened now? Are you satisfied or not?

Evaluation: List what went well and what didn't. What was your contribution, and what was the contribution of others?

Analysis: Try to understand the situation. This is where you shift from describing to understanding. Why did things go well? Why did they go wrong? What led to a particular decision? Why did I act the way I did?

Conclusion: This step is about the question: What can I learn from this? What could I have done differently? What do I need to work on to do better next time?

Action plan: What specific agreements do you make with yourself or others? How will you ensure you approach things differently or better next time?

Those who want to reflect well usually need help from others

Hoedemakers, who won the thesis prize, delved into the literature and interviewed leaders. His conclusion: if you want to reflect well, you usually need help from others. That's because we all have blind spots—those things you don't even know you don't know. So ask a colleague, an advisor, a coach, or a good friend for help.

Hoedemakers also suggested we take a look at how court jesters once held a mirror up to leaders. We need someone who's independent, who speaks plainly, and who guides us through the reflection process with positive intent and a bit of humor.

Another powerful lesson in self-reflection I saw this week came from an interview by Tommy Wieringa with former President Barack Obama. Obama spoke about his surprise when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009—just a few months after becoming president—which he felt was premature.

Before the ceremony, he saw a large crowd with lit candles gathering to honor the winner. Obama said, "I thought to myself: okay, maybe I don't deserve this. There's still so much cruelty and conflict in the world. But what those candles are telling me is: you have to try. You have to do your best to be worthy of that hope.

You'll almost certainly fall short. But just by trying, you'll probably make the world a better place."



CHAPTER 2

WHO CAN INCREASE REFLECTIVE CAPACITY?

FROM PRACTICE

WHEN SELF-REFLECTION IS ABSENT

In the United Kingdom, the Partygate scandal of 2021-2022 shook public trust in political leadership. While the country was under strict COVID-19 lockdown measures, several gatherings took place at 10 Downing Street — the Prime Minister's official residence — in clear breach of the very rules the government had imposed on its citizens.

The public reaction was one of outrage. The final report by senior civil servant Sue Gray described a culture of excessive drinking and rule-breaking at the heart of government. Despite the uproar and eventual resignation of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, what stood out was the lack of genuine self-reflection among the political elite. Apologies were made, but few politicians publicly examined the deeper causes of the misconduct or the enabling political culture.

Parliament, too, largely avoided introspection. The focus remained on damage control and public relations, not on a serious reckoning with how such a disconnect between leadership and public responsibility had developed. A true 'fool' at court — someone who could safely question and ridicule power — might have helped the system confront itself more honestly.

Yourself

Some people are very good at increasing their reflective capacity. They value self-knowledge highly, constantly solicit feedback in order to learn, and keep becoming a better version of themselves. The health care board members I interviewed from my research did this actively. I asked them for some tips.

PROFESSIONALS SPEAK UP

WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO REMEMBER AS YOU SELF-

REFLECT? PRACTICAL TIPS FROM TOP HEALTH CARE EXECUTIVES

- * “Stay critical and go over things again. Ask yourself the question, ‘How have I dealt with this situation, and was that the right approach?’ And ask people, ‘Could I have done this differently?’ And always ask yourself what goal this is leading to.”
- * “Try to keep your emotions out of it and concentrate on the facts. I notice that I’m sometimes stressed by what’s going on around me, and that this influences my objectivity. So I always have to stay aware of this, and I point it out to others too. Then they can pull me back when I get too caught up in my emotions.”
- * “Explore why you acted as you did and whether you did it well, or should have done something differently. Share your views with someone else, because they have another opinion and that can be a great help to you.”
- * “Provide reflection in an organized way, and believe me, you have to sit down to do it. Look back to see if you’re satisfied, or if you wish you had done things differently. And give others freedom to look at you critically too.”
- * “If you think someone else’s reaction is crazy, ask them this question: What am I doing wrong that is making this other person act so strangely?”
- * “Follow your gut.”
- * “Make sure to be critical enough of yourself, really listen to other people, but stay yourself.”
- * “Look in the mirror, listen to your children and read a

popular newspaper. They tell you what society really thinks.”

- * “Know your weak points and give them names.”
- * “Try to separate fact from fiction and evaluate your own role. Look back, draw a conclusion and think about what you could have done better. Try to get the facts straight.”
- * “Ask these questions: ‘Can I always bear to face myself in the mirror?’ ‘Did I just do what I always do?’ I always check whether I’ve stayed faithful to my views and my goals.”
- * “Talk with your partner and make sure there’s a good balance between your professional and personal lives.”
- * “Pay attention to your own feelings and intuition, because you know a great deal.”
- * “Reflect on the positive things too; if something goes well, you can communicate that to others.”
- * “Check to see that the people working for you sense that they have space, a combination of verbal and non-verbal freedom.”
- * “Observe, and especially ask, how you come across to others. They’re a better mirror of what you are than you are yourself.”
- * “Be sure that you really listen and ask questions, and that you’re not too quick to start persuading people of your own opinions.”
- * “Make sure that you have a large and diverse group to discuss issues with. Hear everyone out and be analytical.”

- * “Ask questions and be open to surprises. Take your gut feelings seriously. Learn to listen well to less serious concerns, but do it more from the gut. It takes practice, but it will definitely help.”
- * “Accept uncertainty and learn to deal with it. Learn to assess the worth of advice you receive. Be a good example and communicate clearly.”
- * “Do you understand all concerns of the people involved? Have you obtained all the information? Exchange questions and make use of your analytical abilities.”
- * “Make sure that people feel safe enough.”

Others

There are not many people who are able to increase their reflective capacity. If we want to reflect one hundred percent, we always need other people to help us do it. Let me introduce you to the people who can increase our reflective capacity. And as you'll see, these can be very different people in very different places.

In the first place, you'll find them where you work. There, you'll find all sorts of people who can increase your reflective capacity as a leader, either consciously or unconsciously. For example, there might be an in-house coach whose job it is to increase reflective capacity in you or in the whole company. There might also be an internal adviser or a guidance counselor. Also, some companies organize special reflection groups where the members discuss one another's behavior, thought patterns, and actions. These are

sometimes referred to as peer groups. It doesn't even have to be a person who holds the mirror up to you; it can also be a thing.

FROM PRACTICE

MIRRORS FOR A SAFER WORKPLACE

During one of my meetings I heard about a company that uses 'smart' mirrors to increase safety on building sites. While people wash their hands and look in the mirror, they find themselves looking at a list of all the safety regulations. The reason for this was that many injuries were taking place as a result of accidents on the building sites. This way, a mirror was held up to the employees in which they not only saw themselves, but were also warned of possible dangers. You could call it a 'mindful mirror'.

Unconsciously

There are also people at your workplace who are not specifically there to increase your reflective capacity, but can still do this. Think of people like personal assistants or secretaries. Both these jobs are directly connected to an authority figure or manager. This close relationship creates more freedom and trust for remarks that can increase reflective capacity. This is pretty much the same for HR employees, who concentrate more on the human side of the organization and get people to think about themselves and their actions.

Another position that might work would be that of a financial controller. They can use their position to compliment the boss for a good idea, while also pointing out that there isn't enough money to fund it.

People with more experience can also increase the reflective capacity of their superiors. A person like this will have had more experience either on the job, or with a specific topic. Sometimes this person can be a mentor for the leader in question.

A confidant can increase reflective capacity simply by lending an ear. And in an extreme form, even a whistleblower might serve this purpose.

FROM PRACTICE

LOYALTY OVER TRUTH

In France, the Benalla affair became a political scandal in 2018 that exposed serious flaws in accountability at the highest levels of government. Benalla was filmed manhandling a protester while wearing police gear during May Day demonstrations, despite not being a police officer. Benalla was suspended for two weeks but remained employed at the Élysée until the scandal became public.

It was only after the media published the footage and pressed for answers that the full story came out. Internal warnings had reportedly been made, but were downplayed or ignored. The delayed response from the presidency and lack of transparency caused widespread

public anger and raised questions about a culture of impunity and loyalty over integrity within the French executive.

Although the French Senate conducted an investigation and criticized the administration's handling of the case, no serious structural reforms followed. And while President Macron eventually admitted the affair was a failure of the system, genuine reflection on internal power dynamics and whistleblower protection was largely absent.

Private life

Outside the workplace, there are also people who can increase your reflective capacity. Think of partners, parents, or other family members and friends. The bond of trust that you have with these people gives them the freedom to hold the mirror up to you, and sometimes to give an opinion, solicited or not. The best example of this might be children. They don't watch their words and just say what occurs to them. They speak with their heart and are often unaware of the impact of their words and actions on the listener.

The other social circles where you operate outside of your family, like society and acquaintances, are all useful for increasing your reflective capacity. The same is true of other professions and individuals, like clergy or members of your faith community, therapists, or astrologists.

“MAMA, YOU NEVER DO ANYTHING BUT WORK”

A friend of mine leads a team at an obstetrics department. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all she did was work. Hard work and intense emotions, day after day. High points alternated with low ones, and when she looks back on it, it seemed like everything passed in a flash. But what really stuck with her was the reaction of her children. They were home most of the time and she was at the hospital. Children are honest and don't self-censor, as she herself found out. At one point she started getting comments like, “Mama, you never do anything but work.”, They would also call her at the hospital in the evening, saying “Mama, you're done working now, aren't you? You're coming home, aren't you?” They also asked if they could please all have breakfast together for once.

And then she got called to report for work and the children ended up sitting at the table alone. As she related, that made them extremely unhappy. That was the hardest thing for her during this whole period.

Outside

Away from home and the office, there are many different people who can increase our reflective capacity. Comedians and satirists are very useful for forcing politicians to look at themselves in the mirror and expressing their opinions in salty terms. Politicians can

fulfill this role themselves. British politician Boris Johnson often played the role of political jester — using wit, provocation, and self-mockery to challenge norms, reframe debates, and bring uncomfortable topics to the surface. His unorthodox communication style, mixing humour with sharp political instinct, sometimes forced both allies and opponents to reconsider their own positions. Joseph Goebbels, the minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in Nazi Germany, was even able to increase the reflective capacity of Adolf Hitler.

Besides, there are also TV programs and other media that can stimulate your reflective capacity. Think of *El Intermedio*, a Spanish satirical news show co-hosted by El Gran Wyoming, who relentlessly exposes political hypocrisy with biting humour and irony — much like a modern-day court jester. Or consider Italian journalist and comedian Beppe Grillo, who long before co-founding the Five Star Movement, used sharp comedy and public performances to criticise corruption and provoke public debate.

Then there are cartoonists, whose satirical drawings in newspapers and online media regularly skewer the powerful. And let's not forget cultural events like Italy's *Carnevale di Viareggio*, known for its enormous, grotesque papier-mâché figures mocking politicians and societal trends. These parades don't just entertain — they hold up a mirror to society that is as festive as it is unforgiving.

Special mention

There is one profession that far surpasses all others in increasing reflective capacity: the external adviser or consultant. These peo-

ple are often brought in to give advice on management and business practice, with the goal of helping the company to achieve improved performance.

FROM PRACTICE

WHEN THE REFEREE PLAYS THE GAME

A widely discussed case from the European Union illustrates how self-evaluation can easily become self-justification. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, came under fire after the Commission signed a major vaccine deal with Pfizer in 2021 — a process marked by a lack of transparency. The controversy grew when it emerged that von der Leyen had personally exchanged text messages with Pfizer's CEO, which were never disclosed despite repeated journalistic and parliamentary requests.

Later, the EU's own watchdog — the European Ombudsman — criticised the Commission for failing to ensure accountability and transparency. Yet when it came to reviewing the process, the task remained within the Commission itself. No independent investigation, no released messages, no real consequences.

It's a classic example of a system auditing itself — where those in charge are also the ones passing judgment. And when the referee is also the player, the game loses credibility.



CHAPTER 3

HOW CAN YOU INCREASE YOUR REFLECTIVE CAPACITY?

Individual reflection

Reflection is a highly personal cognitive process. We all say now and then that we need time to review the situation, process things or understand events that have just happened. Just like many other cognitive processes and activities, reflection is often spontaneous and usually takes place unconsciously. The probing character of the reflective process is normally most efficient while we're asleep, because sleep reduces the amount of sensory data we receive and enables reorganization and efficient storage of information in the brain. This process helps us to better prepare

**'A GENUINELY SURPRISING BOOK THAT WILL
MAKE YOU VIEW THE WORLD AROUND YOU
WITH FRESH EYES!'**

It's dangerous to surround yourself with yes-men. Who will point out your mistakes? Who will tell you the unvarnished truth? Who will hold up a mirror to you? You need critical people around you to enable true reflection. What you need is a court jester.

For centuries, the court jester helped the king reflect. But who was the court jester, really? And what can we learn from him in today's workplace? This book shows how others can enhance your ability to reflect — and how you can do the same for those around you. You'll get practical tools to bring reflection into your daily work.

**EVERY PERSON HAS BLIND SPOTS.
WHERE ARE YOURS?**



Juri Hoedemakers (1987) is a professional court jester, PhD candidate, and international keynote speaker on reflection, social safety, and organizational culture. He helps major organizations – like Dutch Customs – bridge the gap between mission and reality. As founder of Het NarrenGilde (Jesters Guild), officially inaugurated by Princess Margarita de Bourbon de Parme, he trains professional jesters. His award-winning thesis led to three books, including this one, nominated for Business Book of the Year 2022. He blogs for a leading Dutch media platform and lectures globally. Currently, he researches the jester's comeback in modern organisations. His mission: to reintroduce fearless truth-telling where it's needed most.

