Understanding: The Value of Reflection

by

Professor Gene Kamena,
with assistance from Colonel Eric Smith, USA

“One of the greatest moments in anybody's developing experience is when he (or she) no longer tries to hide from himself but determines to get acquainted with himself as he really is.” ~Norman Vincent Peale

The manner in which senior leaders invest their time speaks volumes as to what they deem to be important. Senior leaders tend to expend most, if not all, of their time and energy giving back to other people and to the organizations they lead. Sounds like the right thing to do, correct? Well maybe. Even successful leaders, however, get tired and become stagnant. People who are always doing for others will eventually run out of energy or motivation, unless they also make time and expend effort to personally recharge and renew.

The process of reflection is a powerful tool affording leaders the opportunity to recharge and renew their mental and physical batteries. Reflection can take many forms; thinking, writing, asking questions, keeping a journal or diary, running, or going for a walk. If reflection is so easy, then why do so many leaders find it difficult to accomplish? One answer to this question is a perceived or self-induced lack of time. The fast paced and pressure-filled world in which senior leaders live and work demands constant attention, leaving little or no time for reflection or anything else. Rare is the opportunity to just sit and think; to reflect on past events or future decisions. Other possible reasons senior leaders avoid reflection include, not making self-investment a priority and possibly a sense of guilt for taking time for one's self. Leaders are doers; they make things happen. Making time to reflect may not provide a heightened sense of physical accomplishment, but time spent reflecting is never wasted.

If a leader wanted to take time to reflect; how does one actually do it? What is the process and how does one know if they got it right? This article offers a framework to think about the reflection process. If done well, reflection requires energy and forethought. As in most other activities, preparatory effort sets the stage for success; please consider (reflect) upon the following points:

- **Set the conditions for success:** Carve out and protect time in your busy schedule for reflection. Block time on your calendar or electronic organizer, otherwise routine activities will overcome any plan for self-investment. It is also important to let other people know this is your time and ask that they respect your desire to do so
undisturbed. Many people find the morning best suited for reflection, but regardless of details, what is important is to establish a routine that works for you and your life style.

Location matters. Pick a place that is quiet and without distractions. A change in scenery helps set the stage; get out of the office and away from the daily grind. The idea here is to change settings in order to gain a spark of energy or creativity, opening your mental and reflective apertures.

- **Set the terms for the session:** Topic areas for reflection are without bounds; because, specific subjects are an individual’s choice. One topic area, however, that is ripe for reflection is personal or professional failure. History is replete with leaders who had failed, but were able to learn from their mistakes; they overcame and ultimately succeed (Churchill and Grant come to mind.) Although the list of topics is infinite, please resist taking on too much in a particular session. The idea of reflection is to gain deeper understanding, not cover as many topics as possible in one session. Some topics may require more than one period of reflection to fully come to terms with.

Be careful not to turn this activity into work. Relax and reflect at your own pace and do not feel pressured to immediately produce results. Reflection works best when one tries to think inclusively and in broad terms rather than focusing exclusively on the facts of a specific event. Attempt to establish linkages, look for patterns, tendencies and principles. ¹ Ask yourself questions such as; why did this occur, who were the players and what motivated their actions, how might I do better next time, what must I do to improve my leadership, or what should I do next?

- **Capture the information:** Capturing one’s thoughts is a key part of the reflection process. A journal, diary, or notebook all work. Many great leaders from the past kept diaries; Patton, Rommel, and Washington are a few who come to mind. The act of capturing your ideas and thoughts prevents time spent reflecting from becoming time spent day-dreaming. The process of writing things down will help solidify your ideas. This point is worth repeating-- capture your thoughts!

- **Act to improve:** The last step is to act based on the deeper understanding you gained through meaningful reflection. Reflection is only useful if one can benefit from it. Not all periods of reflection generate immediate action, sometimes it is enough just to gain more understanding, and then file your thoughts away, once they are written down, for future reference.

The diagram below attempts to visually depict the process of reflection, which in simplest terms, is nothing more than having a critical conversation with one’s self. Reflection is based on the premise of critical thinking; asking probing questions until a higher level of understanding is obtained. The circular pattern in the middle of the diagram illustrates the linkage between the topic (what you are reflecting on), reflection (the act of thinking critically
and deeply for a reason by asking probing questions,) and perspective (the byproduct of reflection which facilitates asking questions at increasing levels of insight.) It is through this cyclical process of reflection that one gains understanding; removing obstacles to clarity of thought. Understanding permits leaders to become increasingly self-aware. When a leader is self-aware, they are value-added to other people and to their own organization.

Data points or specific information is introduced into the reflection process through, what I term, “injects.” An “inject” is often more than mere information fed into the reflection process; in fact, an “inject” may be the actual topic of reflection. “Injects” may be generated from many sources but for the purpose of this short paper, I will keep the list narrowed to three sources; self, inner-circle and institutional injects. Examples of possible “injects” are listed below:

- **Self:** insights into one’s physical, emotional, mental or spiritual condition
- **Inner-circle:** discussions or comments from personal staff, confidants, mentors, friends, and family members
- **Institutional:** promotions, fitness reports, formal counseling sessions
Taking a critical approach toward reflection ensures one gains an increased understanding in a specific topic. Injects provide both balance and context to issues. If left exclusively to one’s own thoughts and interpretations, reflection can easily become narcissistic. Before an “Inject” is allowed into the reflection process, it should be evaluated in terms of the spirit in which it was offered, and the trust and confidence you have in the person or system providing the “inject.”

Reflection requires more than merely piecing together events in order to decipher lessons learned. Reflection provides perspective, which in turn facilitates a better understanding of “what” happened, and “why” things occurred as they did. Ultimately, reflection informs leaders as to what they should do in current or future situations. Additionally, if done well, reflection offers patterns and linkages that allow increased, wider and deeper, understanding on any given topic. Reflection fosters personal and professional growth. It is also a powerful tool allowing renewal and recharging of one's batteries.

Reflection is not the proprietary domain of senior leaders; leaders at all levels of responsibility should adopt the practice of reflection. Imagine the benefit to an organization if leaders throughout the organization took time to reflect? The process of reflection unfortunately does have one flaw; one must do it for it to work.

Gene C. Kamena is a professor of Leadership & Strategy at Air University’s Air War College. While an active duty US Army colonel, he was a Border Team Leader & special advisor to the Iraqi Minister of Interior in 2005-2006.

2 There may be other sources of “injects,” but these three sources are the most common for leaders.

Bibliography:


