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Through team reflection, employees gain better understanding of how their individual contributions affect organisational outcomes.

STOP, REFLECT, GO!

LEADERS WHO PAUSE TO REFLECT REAP BENEFITS IN A HEALTHIER WORK ENVIRONMENT

By **KAMINI SINGGAM**
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As you step into a brand new year and prepare to embrace the development it brings, have you also put aside some time to reflect on the past year? The idea of reflection is not intended to slow us down but to give ourselves a better perspective on what we have accomplished as an individual and as an organisation. It is an especially essential practice for a leader.

While reflective leadership is not new in the field of leadership development, it is yet to be the most widely practised approach. This is mainly because, when work starts, it's all about moving forward and keeping ourselves busy with the next project, hitting the latest performance target or catching up with unfinished business. Not many leaders would actually take the time off and get herself – or better still, the entire organisation – to pause and look back on the execution of the last game plan and analyse the challenges, goals and results that have unfolded so far. Some might ask why this is even necessary.

According to leadership coach Carl Robinson, professionals who practise reflective leadership can more easily avoid misinterpretation, missing out on details and key aspects of learning curves, or repeating mistakes. Contrary to notions that this is an unnecessary act of reminiscing, executives who set aside the time for some personal and organisational reflection in fact may well return to work with insights that enable themselves to perform more efficiently.

Reflective thinking is a contemplative state. For it to work, one typically retreats into a quiet thinking space and minimises potential distractions. This means no e-mails, messages or meetings. But while it is ideal to take a day off and do this someplace away from home and work – with practice – one can enter into reflective

exercises almost immediately; provided, no one is encroaching on your personal space or disrupting your flow of thought.

REFLECTING AS A TEAM

While personal reflection has its benefits, team reflections have even greater power. Corporate culture guru Joseph Tan feels that a reflective leader can more easily lead his or her team to spot issues and make the right moves, at the right time, to discuss and contemplate problems affecting specific employees or the organisation as a whole.

This is because a reflective leader is usually more observant and empathetic, with good problem-solving skills. He or she is more likely to notice the symptoms of a disengaged employee, for example. Tan recommends reflective leadership because it not only helps increase productivity but also improves performance for the organisation.

Tan recalls a case in which the management of a sales company he was coaching faced a 24% turnover in their sales force. The management was unsure as to what was causing this problem.

Upon reflection, the management team realised that while the organisation had reasonable performance expectations, the manner in which these expectations were communicated caused their sales representatives to be disengaged.

Once that root cause was identified, it was only a matter of taking the right action to set things straight.

"Through reflection, leaders realise there is such a thing as the human spirit and that our profession involves emotions, motivations and morale that can either push or drag down the working spirit," says Tan.

He adds that while there is nothing wrong in wanting employees to work hard to achieve certain goals, leaders should always ask themselves whether their employees are looking forward to the next race or just happy to have

crossed the finishing line.

"Always ask if what you are doing is sustainable," says Tan, adding that it is extremely important for leaders to start the process of reflection as soon as they see signs of burnout or low morale among employees.

AVOID NAVAL-GAZING

Let's face it. Sometimes, in the process of reflection, we often tend to get very stuck in the past. This could be a reason why some leaders might perceive the process of reflection as unnecessarily time-consuming or distracting.

To avoid an over-indulgence of reflective thinking, Tan suggests doing joint reflections with people you are comfortable with so they can act as your sounding board.

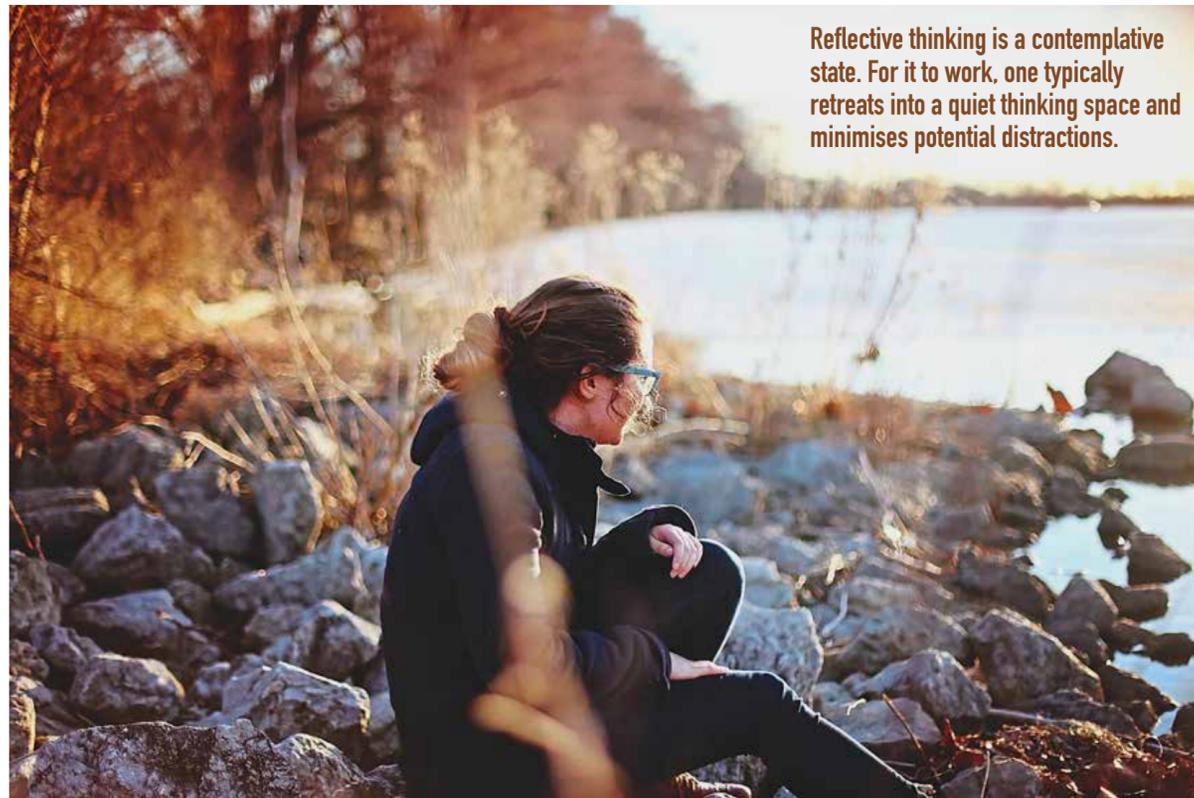
"Choose some people you trust and speak to them. This helps you gain clarity. You can also learn by just observing or listening to others speak as you contemplate," says Tan.

He suggests that when filtering things down to the team, the leader should include some contemplative techniques like storytelling to engage them. At all times, remember that the order of the day – when engaging employees to reflect – is to demonstrate and encourage humility and courage.

He believes even large, open meetings like town hall sessions can be turned into contemplative and reflective sessions through the art of storytelling.

"Imagine starting your town hall session with a personal story – perhaps your own experiences or challenges at work – instead of projecting numbers, goals or missed targets. This will engage your employees better and they will be able to see that you are also human," says Tan.

Asking the right contemplative questions also helps keep personal and team reflection processes focused. At all times, those involved should allocate enough time for the process to avoid rushing through any part of it.



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REFLECTION STARTER KIT

WORD OF CAUTION.

Be careful not to design a reflection session like an evaluation exercise. Evaluations are done with performance and results in mind. Reflections, however, are supposed to serve as a deep-analysis platform. Try not to expect results or specific answers as reflections are personal. Sharing can be encouraged in an intimate setting but not forced. Silence can be a winning indication that your session is working.

Self-reflection can be customised or carried out in whichever way that suits the individual. Google "self-reflection exercises" or "questions for leaders" and you will find many credible links offering how-to guides that you can use to spark ideas and get you started on designing your own set of questions or reflection points. Engaging your team, however, requires careful consideration and planning.

There are various ways in which leaders can engage their teams to reflect and move forward together so that the team grows together without leaving anyone behind. This includes games, activities, or just a set of questions they can answer or contemplate.

As with self-reflection, team reflection sessions give each team member the opportunity to recognise and learn from strengths, weaknesses, limitations, advantages and setbacks that he or she

has faced at both personal and professional levels.

Leaders can design the personal reflection session to include relevant questions that will meet the goals of team reflection. If you are not sure where to start – tried and tested working models used worldwide include Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, Johns' Model for Structured Reflection and Borton's Developmental Framework.

What these models have in common is the emphasis on identifying feelings and trigger points for setbacks or challenges faced, and a framework to develop an action plan for moving forward.

Depending on what you wish to address, include pertinent questions such as "What were the consequences faced?" "How do I feel at the moment?" "How did I upset the person/process?" "How could I have handled the situation differently?"

The reflection session can then close with something positive like an action plan to move forward, or summing-up activities that help boost the morale of team members.

Here's our Reflection Starter Kit to help get you started with your plans. These steps can be customised to your needs and the nature of your business.

- Engage an external facilitator or session lead – this helps to maintain neutrality.
- Get your team together – this is best done in a quiet, intimate setting where privacy is assured and team members feel safe to open up.
- Tell a story or share a personal reflection to provide insights and set the tone.
- Start with an individual reflection session followed by a team anchoring activity.
- Check on team members' morale and spirit before closing the session.

IN CONCLUSION

Begin with clearly defined parameters to maintain focus instead of starting the reflection session on general terms. These parameters can range from reflecting on aspects of communication and relationship-building to the outcomes of presentations and various achievements.

While it may be difficult to cultivate the qualities of a reflective leader in the first few sessions, it gets easier – not to forget immensely more satisfying – with practice. And this practice should start with the self. When leading reflectively it becomes a natural practice for you. You will find yourself exercising this skill at every possible opportunity (including at meetings!) and leading others in the practice. Even failure quickly becomes a stepping stone for learning and growth when a leader is reflective.

REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP

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WHAT is wisdom? A common definition is that it's something cultivated through experience over time.

It's also often said that experience is what you're left with after life throws at you what you don't want, the implication being that we learn from the setbacks: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and so on.

But if wisdom stems from accumulated experience over time, this would suggest that the older everyone becomes, the more wise-heads we see in the world. Alas, even the most furtive glance around us quickly confirms this isn't so.

"Aha!" some might exclaim, "wisdom is what's cultivated by reflecting on our experiences over time". That's certainly a step in the right direction. However, if the reflection is skewed towards the belief that "Everything I've done today was totally awesome", it rather deals a blow to the cultivation of wisdom.

In the best leaders – those resonant leaders who truly inspire and empower others through their own example – we find in their actions what true wisdom consists of: authentic reflection plus deliberate contemplation over time.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "I am a slow walker, but I never walk back." Lincoln was known for his humble stoicism, and the respect he garnered – even from his rivals – stemmed from his capacity to better understand himself, how the world works, and where he fit into the grand scheme of things.

Lincoln constantly sought to get a handle on himself, to understand what made people tick and, perhaps most importantly, persevere in discerning the appropriate course of action in relation to any given situation. Doubtless, he made mistakes – but he took those mistakes and used them as life lessons to help him change course and chart a new direction where necessary.

Whereas superficial reflection might say, "I messed up there – I'll try to do better next time, can't win them all," authentic reflection digs deeper and asks questions of ourselves that we might not wish to ask.

Let's take a closer look at the three components of wisdom and how we can tie them together to better serve ourselves and others:

- Authentic reflection is where we find the courage to ask ourselves, "Where could I have done better?" as well as "What did I do that I should carry on doing?" Just as we shouldn't shirk from facing up to where we can improve, we should also have the courage to recognise and appreciate our strengths so that we might build upon them.

- Deliberate contemplation is similar to reflection, except it goes beyond ourselves and explores the people, the environments, the dilemmas and the challenges that exist externally. We might ask, "Why does this challenge exist?" and "What are some of the possible solutions that could be put in place – and how can I work with others to help alleviate the problem?" Deliberate contemplation focuses on what's significant or important in the immediate future – it's where we derive insights as to the most beneficial next steps to take.

- Time is what affords us the room to grow. It's something we all share for a while. However, how we use the time we have determines how we grow and develop. It rolls on by regardless of whether it's wasted or utilised. If we use it sensibly, we get the most from it in terms of who we grow to be.

The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said that, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forward." In leadership, reflection and contemplation are vital tools that allow us to chart the best course moving forward by understanding what has gone wrong before.

In a *Washington Post* article the late Eric Kail, former course director of military leadership at West Point, wrote: "Reflection requires a type of introspection that goes beyond merely thinking, talking or complaining about our experiences. It is an effort to understand how the events of our life shape the way in which we see the world, ourselves and others. And it is essential for any leader."

Having said that, reflection doesn't come easily to us. We are, in general, adept at presenting a crafted image to the outside world precisely because we are inclined to construct convincing self-narratives that justify rather than investigate, conform rather than question, and sit in comfort rather than seek to be curious.

Indeed, the past year has seen a torrent of twists and turns and has undoubtedly left us all with much to ponder. As with any year, what has been is gone and in its trail, we are invited to reflect, contemplate, and ask ourselves a potentially life-changing question: "What's the best way forward from here?"

- Sandy agrees with the idea that "an unexamined life is not worth living" but, being one for balance, he also believes that life should be enjoyed – especially during the festive seasons – with family and friends. To connect with Sandy, follow him on Twitter @RealSClarke



■ Kamini Singgam is an introverted extrovert that strives to see the rainbow at the end of the road. An experienced writer, editor and social worker, she is currently an assistant managing editor with Leaderonomics. She finds joy in sharing ideas and stories that can impact lives for the better. To equip yourself with practical knowledge and understanding of key aspects of reflective leadership, e-mail us at training@leaderonomics.com