

Commentary by Phil McArthur on “I don’t Have Time To Think!’ versus the Art of Reflective Practice”, Joseph A. Raelin. In *Reflections, the Sol Journal on Knowledge, Learning and Change*. Vol 4, no 1, 2002

As the title of Joe Raelin’s paper 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 use 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” (Schon, 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 notes, 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 Schon, 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 judgements may be accurate and necessary for change. The solution to this dilemma is not to be non-judgmental, but to be aware of our judgments and communicate them in ways that promote mutual learning.

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 paper. Below, 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.”

Reactive Observer (from supervisor’s journal)	Reflective Observer (my examples of 2nd order reflection)
"Sam [is challenging] our very purpose. He [is questioning] not only why we need to meet so often... he [seems] to be even questioning why we [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.”
“This 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.”

Turning to Raelin’s model of reflective practice, I would like to emphasize that a strength of his paper for our ability to model build collectively is his use of examples to illustrate the skills of reflective practice at the level of what you would actually say or do. I have done the same above. 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 comprised of 5 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 level. I apply them to both. Let me use Raelin's example of Probing to illustrate. Below 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 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 that you can share that would help us, and perhaps you too, understand what seems to be making Lisa such an obstacle. May be there is a way that would make it possible for perhaps 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 oneself." 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 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.

"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.” (p 56)

In Schön’s example the jazz musicians are hearing the collective voice as well as 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.

References:

- Argyris, C. (1982). *Reasoning, Learning, and Action: Individual and Organizational*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Argyris, C. & D.A. Schön (1974). *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Schön, D.A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books