

## A Key Barrier to Making Our Leadership Transformational

### REFLECTION

is a process of thinking and inquiry about a situation to expand understanding of it, clarify our intentions, expand options, choose an action, and learn from results.

#### Basketball 101: Half-court play



**Think of basketball.** Reflection may happen intuitively in the midst of a play as players make fast adjustments. More systematic and sustained reflection is the rule before and after games as teams review game videos, chart out plays, and practice.

An executive in a recent workshop I led pulled me aside to privately say:

*"I know I need to reflect on the way I am thinking, feeling, and acting to be a better leader but I don't know how."*

I was taken aback by his honesty. This was clearly hard for him to reveal. He chose not to ask in front of the group.

Reflection seems so straightforward. But is it?

### What 420 leaders say about reflection...

It turns out the executive who pulled me aside is not alone. Of 420 healthcare leaders I surveyed at talks on leadership, almost all indicated they face one or more barriers to reflection. Two of the most common, each checked by nearly half of the leaders, were "uncertainty about how to do it well" and "lack of time."

The majority of written comments were about struggles with prioritizing and taking the time for reflection. Some of this was attributed to being "caught up" in issues such as "lack of trust in the organization" or "lack of political capital to get anything done." One leader attributed his difficulty reflecting to "weakness." Another wrote that it is "hard to change habits."

### What brain science says about reflection...

At the heart of things, creating a reflective practice is creating a new habit. We all know changing habits like diet and exercise is hard. But I think reflection is much harder. In reflecting, we work to shift from being "caught up" in our thoughts and feelings to *looking at* them to expand our understanding of situations and open to more creative and effective options.

Brain science has indicated that experiential information we take in is coupled to automatic, habitual ways of explaining events. Our brains are hard-wired for us to leap to conclusions from limited data in nanoseconds. It takes work to "decouple" ourselves from such automatic processes. But, even brief reflection such as taking 15 minutes to write down lessons learned from experience can yield more objective understanding of events and better options. (1 – 2)

### Hard-wired to avoid transformation

Transformation involves getting to new perspectives. Because our brain hard-wiring can easily trap us into biased conclusions, we benefit from developing a regular practice of questioning our own thoughts. This is not easy for the ego. It is humbling. The tendency is to jump quickly to

feeling “right” rather than leaving ourselves open to uncertainty. Think about how easy, common, and seductive it is to be sure other people are “the problem” rather than looking at our own contribution to problems.

### Missing the true level of our accomplishments

Another challenge is that our automatic responses can make it surprisingly easy to miss the true level of success we have had. Seeing our successes accurately is crucial to changing habits.

For example, in the middle of a longer conversation, almost as an aside, a leader mentioned she had resolved a conflict with a team. I said “Wait! At the start of this conflict, what would you have estimated for the chances of achieving this level of success?” She replied “No more than a 20% chance.” Suddenly, this event became *one worth reflecting on*. How did she pull this off?

### Three steps forward you can take right now

I guarantee you have already had multiple experiences of “decoupling” yourself from automatic thinking. The challenge is to turn such experience into an intentional and systematic practice. There is no way around carving out time. But, you can start small. For example, carve out one half-hour a week to reflect on a past or current situation.

Next, start trying out a consistent set of questions for guidance. Be willing to change them over time to find out what works for you. Here is a quick set to work from: What happened?; What were my thoughts, feelings, and actions?; What did I do that was helpful and unhelpful?; Where did I leap to conclusions?; How did I contribute to the problems?; What options might I consider?; What will I try next?; What do I hope to accomplish?

Finally, be sure to keep the goals for actions small to build confidence. For that leader who resolved the team conflict, her first step was to simply listen to the team and explore their concerns. That was transformational for her instead of needing a solution in one meeting.

### Consider engaging an extra set of neurons

The journey of developing a reflective practice also benefits from episodes of coaching and consultation. In my own work with clients, I think of myself as offering “an extra set of neurons” to increase power in countering hard-wired responses and generating creativity. In the wild complexity of organizational life, two brains can sometimes be better than one.

### Additional resource

- Obtain tools for **Situational Reflection and Action Planning** by subscribing for free monthly articles at [Subscribe](#). It contains a list of questions and references specifically designed to aid reflection about situational challenges in organizational life.

### References

1. Di Stefano, Giada et al *Learning by Thinking: How Reflection Aids Performance*, Harvard Business School Working Paper 14-093, March 25, 2014

2. Siegel, Daniel J. *Mindfulness training and neural integration: differentiation of distinct streams of awareness and the cultivation of well-being*, **SCAN** 2, 2007

---

## About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. helps strengthen and enhance the impact of individual leaders, leadership teams, and consultants (e.g. quality consultants and improvement advisors) in the midst of work in order to create work environments which foster learning, motivation, well-being, and performance.

He is adept at assisting leaders in using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results. This approach can be applied to any current work but is especially effective in the midst of quality or innovation initiatives.

He has developed these approaches through more than 30 years as an organizational leader, speaker, consultant, and coach. His clients have included the Peterson Center on Healthcare, Health Quality Partners, and the Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care. He has served as faculty and improvement advisor over 15 years for multiple initiatives for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Boston, Massachusetts and was previously Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative (now part of the Kaiser system) in Seattle, Washington.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com).