

Reflectional Learning

A short Introduction

In many earlier generations, one was able to learn all the important things from parents and from the more experienced. Later, abilities and skills came around which no longer could naturally be passed on in the circle of the family: reading, writing, calculating ... education had to be organised in society, schools and other professional institutes were successively established. The least which had to be guaranteed here was the learning of the "culture techniques". Apart from that, life was to the large extent clearly regulated, most people knew what to do and which possibilities were open to them. Over time our actions in life became „self-evident“. In most situations, this was sufficient.

Today the world is differentiated, the possibilities of orientation and the way of living is so far well-advanced and diverse, that the life of an individual is no longer predictable and plannable. Therefore, elders can no longer give all the orientational guidance and "each life is a project itself" (comp. Scala/Reichel 1999, S. 133).

Ingeborg Schüßler explains how today's relevant knowledge is

- (1) continuously revised,
- (2) permanently seen as improvable,
- (3) in principle not seen as the truth, but as a resource and
- (4) inseparable to the state of not knowing.

Therefore, especially in a management and leadership context, we continuously encounter situations in which the things that we do are no longer seen as self-evident. The reasons for this are complex:

- Superiors, colleagues, employee, partners ... even ourselves ... question our actions.
- We discover that others may act differently in the same situation.
- We encounter situations in which our previous actions obviously no longer work.
- More and more we are challenged by having to choose between diverse possibilities of action.
- We get into situation in which our previously successful behavioural responses no longer create the desired positive outcome.

This is valid for the manner in which we behave with our colleagues, how we lead our employees, how we communicate with our customers, how we handle agreements, how we are seen in our self-conception, etc.

In such situations, most managers just want to know what they have to do: they search for someone who can tell them what to do now or they look for a new recipe on their own. This stance is reflected in the great amount of offered guidebooks – Management and Leadership literature, management trainings, coaching etc.

Another supplementary approach is to look at one's previous actions and to think about them – **to reflect**. This is another way to actively "engage" in knowledge management.

The question then is not only: What should I do differently? Instead: How can we and how do we want to behave as leaders at all? As a leader do I want to behave in the same way as my leader which I have experienced until now? In what way differently? What is so important to me that I might even give up other things for it (career, more money ...)? Do I always want to be accessible everywhere and at all times?

With other words: **„What am I even doing, when I'm doing what I'm doing?"**

This sounds logical ... and easy. And it is obvious that this question is neither logical nor easy. As this extended reflection is a whole new ability, a cultural technique, which irritates our usual communicative security in the pattern of „one must know what to do; otherwise one must ask someone who knows". Reflection is familiar to us right from the beginning but only in certain borders.

Next to the traditions in occidental thinking, in our culture, there are traditional forms which in deed have an approach in the direction of reflection:

- the confession or similar forms
- speeches at anniversaries, for retirements or at funerals
- thoughts and resolutions at New Years
- etc.

But these examples also show that they are simply not enough as rituals and that they are just not expressions of an everyday reflection culture. The invitation to reflect is therefore often seen by many as "unnecessary quibble", as „something that we do anyways" or as „Psychoanalysis". However, reflection is neither unnecessary nor does it have to do with Psychology, and not at all is it something that has always been done. It is rather very unusual as an everyday competence.

When we look at our everyday work we realize that we often encounter situations in which we cannot simply ask someone for help. The complexity and dynamics are just too major to just return to easy recipes from the past in order to find a quick solution.

More and more we have to face new challenges and have to question our behavioural patterns to see whether they are appropriate for the situation and their consequences.

Managers and leaders of the "new generation" cannot ignore this ability any more – they have to be revealed to this potential in which one reflects upon situations, actions and their consequences. And this over and over again.

Therefore, we are convinced that reflection is essential for long-term success. And it is difficult for many. The fear to show one's colour or fear to be hurt lie behind it. Also, the

switch from experiencing to reflecting is hard. Maybe this list can help to understand reflection as an enrichment.

→ **Reflection means processing**

One's who spend time with groups will experience a lot. When we give ourselves time to look back we can well process the experienced, transform it into memories which can grow and impact something in us.

→ **Reflection means ordering**

In the middle of group processes we often do not have the necessary distance to the happening. The topic gets out of focus and that can lead to disputes and other disruptions. It is then when we have to stop and sort out our thoughts on what just happened. Only then we can successfully continue to work.

→ **Reflection mean appraisal**

What was good? What was helpful? In our evaluation, we look at the good things and appreciate it because it is this which can develop us further. It simply feels good to hear what we did well.

→ **Reflection means changing**

Disruptions lead to dissatisfaction, anger and disappointment. Also, negative experiences need to be managed in reflections. Only then groups can change something in collaboration, for example by adapting the program to the needs of the participants. Stay realistic!

→ **Reflection means questioning one's ability**

Was this really reasonable? Could I have tackled this problem differently? Why did I behave the way I did in that situation? What are my conditions and behavioural patterns? Who do I really look up to?

→ **Reflection mean participating**

Kids, teenagers and grown-ups all have different interests and needs. When we respect these and when everyone gets to voice their wishes and questions, everyone is more motivated and more engaged.

→ **Reflection means learning**

The leaders who regularly reflect with their teams can learn an enormous amount, also about oneself. But they must also be willing to receive critical feedback. They can learn where their strengths and also their weaknesses are, they learn to appreciate feedback and how to successfully give feedback.

Reflection does not only have to happen at the end of a work period. Also during a working period, a reflection can be helpful to adapt the course of action. Reflection does not have to mean: „We all have to sit in a circle and discuss the question: how are we feeling today?“. Reflection can also happen in a more playful way.

Nevertheless, there should ideally be „room for reflection“, especially in the beginning it can support the introduction.

Sources:

Scala, E.; Reichel, R. (1999): „Abschied von der Gewissheit. Von der Unmöglichkeit, pädagogisch richtig zu handeln“; Linz 1999; Verlag Veritas Schöbeler, I. (2008):

„Reflexives Lernen in der Erwachsenenbildung – zwischen Irritation und Kohärenz“; in: „Reflexives Lernen“; Hrsg. Häcker T.; Hilzensauer, W.; Reinmann G.; Jahrgang 5 2008; Ausgabe 2