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Dear Reader,

We thank you for the great feedback we received after our last issue, containing small “reflective gifts”. Many seemed to enjoy it specially, and that’s the best outcome of a gift. This month we are presenting a review of an article written by author and professor Joseph Raelin, which we hope will inspire you to try out some of his recommendations.

Isabel Rimanóczy
Editor

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

A Review of a Recent Article by Joseph Raelin

By Mauricio Cardenas

Joseph Raelin is a “friend of LIM” who has done research, consulted and published extensively about workplace learning. He is the Asa Knowles Chair of Practice-Oriented Education at Northeastern University in Boston. On the Fall 2002 issue of *Reflections – The SoL Journal on Knowledge, Learning and Change* (SoL is the Society for Organizational Learning), professor Raelin published an article titled “I don’t have time to think!’ versus the Art of Reflective Practice”. We are pleased to share with you the following review of his article.

Raelin defines reflective practice as “the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment.” (p.66).

According to Raelin, “reflective practice opens up for public scrutiny our interpretations and evaluations of our plans and actions. We subject our assumptions, be they personal or professional, to the review of others. We do this not only before or after an event, but learn to inquire even in the heat of the moment.” (p.67) This is a key element in the process of transferring learnings from the individual to the team level.

There are a variety of reasons for the implementation of reflective practices in organizations. Some of them are related to the need for effective communication and feedback; others have to do with the limitations of individual perception and old solutions. As Raelin puts it, “reflection must be brought out in the open for many reasons:

1. At times, we are, unfortunately, unaware of our behavior and its consequences...
2. There is an unfortunate gap between what many of us say we will do and what we actually do...
3. Most of us are biased in how we obtain information that, in turn, produces cognitive ‘errors’ in our perception of reality...
4. Although intuition and past practices can give us very cogent clues in deciphering future situations, often the new situation presents itself in a different context. Prior solutions may not fit, even if the situations appear alike...” (pp.67-8)

There is a direct connection between a reflective practice and the ability to change and experiment. according to Raelin, “we need managers who can inspire reflection to the extent of generating new ways of coping with change. A reflective culture makes it possible for people to constantly challenge without fear of retaliation.” (p.68)

Amongst the strategies that people can use to adopt a reflective practice on their day-to-day environment, Raelin lists the following:

- **Reflective actions** (including journals, post meeting e-mail minutes, reflective note taking, learning histories, and ‘stop and reflect’ or debriefing episodes held during or at the end of meetings);
- **Building communities** (groups formed for mentoring or support purposes, for sharing and testing ideas, or for feedback and exchange on initiatives and performance);
- **Process improvement** (quality improvement approaches reinforce the value of learning from experience);
- **Learning teams** (vehicle to merge theory and practice: participants in a learning team discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings but also the application or misapplication of concepts and theories to those actions); and
- **Culture of learning** (senior managers have a key role in modeling a learning orientation, in particular, a culture that values continuous discovery and experimentation). (p.69)

Regarding specific skills that can contribute to reflective discourse, in addition to active listening and feedback, Raelin refers to those of being, speaking, disclosing, testing, and probing. (p.69) As an example of the power of ‘being’, the following excerpt from a supervisor’s journal is shared:

‘Sam began to challenge our very purpose. He questioned not only why we needed to meet so often, but once he got going, he seemed to be questioning why we even needed to meet at all! I had formed our team and felt a spontaneous urge to counter his negativity. But I caught myself and decided to pause and continue to listen instead. Perhaps it was good that Sam was getting his feelings out on the table. Any knee-jerk reaction by me would likely shut him down. Maybe he had a few good points? At that moment, Linda and then Paul began to share their vision for our task force, yet they did it displaying profound respect for Sam’s challenge. I found myself appreciating that Sam brought his objections to the team and said so. We began to work on some of our deficiencies as a group. I think it was our best meeting.’ (p.72)

In response to commentaries about his article made by colleagues from SoL, Raelin says: “[One

emerging] theme is the sheer need to expose one's fragile self if reflection is going to occur publicly at all. It is hard enough just to ask others to slow down, let alone question self and others in front of the assembled. We need to ask each other how we can establish a climate for *being* in a world of acting." (p.78)

This is indeed the most crucial challenge for those promoting reflective practice in their organizations (as we assume some of our readers do): having the courage to express themselves and leading the way for others to question how things are currently done by tapping into their own thoughts and feelings. Joseph Raelin does show us on his article the usefulness of cultivating the skills that will allow this process to run smoothly in today's organizations.

Joseph A. Raelin, I don't have time to think! versus the Art of Reflective Practice, *Reflections – The SoL Journal on Knowledge, Learning and Change* (Volume 4, Number 1) Fall 2002, pp.66-79.



REFLECTION IN THE ARMY

The US Army has for years been using a similar process: after each training event, called **After Action Review** (2).

They have a team exercise when they have to respond these questions:

- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- What should we do about it?

"The AAR is not a critique. A critique is merely an assessment of success or failure. In the AAR process, the establishment of success or failure, sometimes in a very precise (and painful) way, is only a tool with which to learn. (...) It is a process designed to improve performance. It will not work if the leader lets it become a scorecard or a basis for public executions."

Gordon R.Sullivan & Michael V.Harper, "Hope is not a Method", Broadway Books, NY 1996

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