REFLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Successfully Leading Your Team in a Complex World

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OBJECTIVE

We first explain why people react with reduced confidence in managing challenges caused by the increased complexity and uncertainty of today's world. We then invite you to discover how, as a leader, you can support your people in re-building confidence by using *reflective leadership*, specifically *reflection by thinking and feeling*, and ultimately reaching your and their goals.

INTRODUCTION

The world we live and conduct business in is often described as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA).

People in the West are seeing that job security and guaranteed wealth are beginning to fade, and the system of right and wrong being replaced by *a dynamic and ever-changing system*.

Life in the 20th century was mostly predictable and consisted of applying ("best") practices to new situations, leading to emotional stability. Today, the fast-changing environment makes business transformation processes necessary, and strategic goals have to be challenging so as to guarantee a company's survival. This sometimes leads to unexpected and non-sustainable results, which harm the company in the long run. The Volkswagen scandal about manipulated emission results is one example of this.

All of this can lead to negative emotional arousal and anxiety, which translates into stress and the fight-or-flight reaction humans acquired in the Stone Age when seeing a saber-tooth tiger. And, while then people could relax somewhat once such as threat no longer prevailed, people today have difficulties stepping out of stress mode. This stress may paralyze an entire organization when decisions are no longer made or are delegated upwards. People then neither fight nor flee; they just sit there as if waiting to be eaten.

Two signs of this increasing stress are the growing rates of burnout and depression: a recent German study showed that between 2004 and 2011, the number of sickness days due to burnout grew by 800%, creating substantial economic damage.

This stress and potential paralysis are caused by a decreasing confidence in being capable of tackling the challenges of today. This presents a major challenge for leadership and the survival and development of organizations. Leaders can contribute to resolving this situation by supporting the people they lead. Reflective leadership is one highly effective answer. It helps finding solutions beyond thinking because it is based on reflection that combines both thinking and feeling. This leads to an increase in confidence, which allows for the achieving of individual and organizational goals. Using our full potential brings out unexpected, creative, and sustainable solutions, which supports people and organizations to do business in healthy ways in these challenging times.

THE THEORY BEHIND IT

Exploring The Drop In Confidence

A popular dictionary defines *confidence* as "a feeling or belief that you can do something well or succeed at something" (Merriam-Webster, 2016). The word is closely linked to *self-efficacy*, defined as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (Bandura, 1994). In a simple example in football, a person might be asked to share her confidence that she can (capability) score a goal (designated level) when hitting the ball toward the goal from 20 meters away (performance).

Usually, people perform tasks where their confidence is high, that is, they are moderately to highly certain they can do them. These tasks are often referred to as *routine* tasks (note: this also applies to highly demanding professions, such as surgeons for whom open-heart surgery is often routine). The routine tasks are complemented by new tasks that are beyond the ordinary patterns. These tasks are called *challenges*. People facing challenges are less certain that they can do them (as opposed to routine tasks).

When confronted by a challenge, one's body reacts with stress. The challenges puts the body into the fight-or-flight state useful thousand of years ago when a hunter suddenly faced a saber-tooth tiger: to avoid being eaten, the hunter could either fight it or run away. Evolution helped the body to establish patterns that support both options: the focus is on making the hunter strong (to fight) or quick (flee), which means that blood and oxygen are taken out of the brain and put into the muscle areas, which means that the body is partially shutting down the brain.

The likelihood in the 21st century of someone encountering a saber-tooth tiger or similarly dangerous predator in the wild is very low. And the fight nor flight reaction is not useful in the business environment. Yet our body still responds in this way. These reactions can't be overrun: they have served us very well, securing our survival for thousands of years, and are managed through our limbic nervous system. While people sometimes try to do away with these reactions, they always return. Thus, accepting the fact that challenges create stress is a first step in dealing with it.

Confidence as an Indicator of Self-Efficacy

Scientifically, confidence is a measure of self-efficacy: by asking people how confident they are in mastering a challenge on a scale between 0 (*I cannot do at all*) and 10 (*I am very certain I can do it*), they provide an indication of how self-efficacious they are (Bandura, 2006).

Several factors describe the nature and extent of self-efficacy:

- *Subjectivity—self-efficacy is highly subjective and personal.* In the football example, person A's confidence may be at 9, while person B's could be at 2.
- *Case-dependency—self-efficacy levels may vary depending on the area one looks at.* While person A has a high confidence in his foot-

ball skills, he may assess his confidence in frying an egg to restaurant standards as 0. Each person has an infinite collection of self-efficacies that make up their self-esteem; and even a person with low general self-esteem may have pockets of excellence in which their self-efficacy is high.

- *Perceived capability-focused—not willingness-focused.* The above-mentioned measures inquire into an individual's *capability* of mastering a challenge (*I can do this*) and not their *willingness* (*I will do this*). Thus, confidence clearly refers to someone's *perception* of being able to do something, and not to their *willingness* to do it nor to their *objective capability.*

- *Dynamic—self-efficacy can change.* Confidence is always assessed in the moment based on the full information available to one. As the information changes, so does self-efficacy.

USING *REFLECTION WITH THINKING AND FEELING* TO BUILD SELF-EFFICACY AND CONFIDENCE

As noted, self-efficacy is a subjective phenomenon. Thus, it can only be developed by the person and not by another person on their behalf. However, a leader can support the people he or she leads by accompanying them through a process of building self-efficacy and confidence. We summarize the foundation of this process as *reflection by thinking and feeling,* which brings out an individual's full potential by leveraging their full resources through reflection that uses both intellectual and emotional aspects.

The process is illustrated in Figure 7.1: through a challenge, self-efficacy, which is normally at the *personal routine level* (A) drops to (B) and can then be rebuilt to reach (C), where the person again starts working with confidence using *reflection by thinking and feeling.*

When at (B), if nothing is changed, this level is often described by paralysis, that is, people just sit and wait—in the case of the saber-tooth tiger, this would have meant certain death; in today's businesses, it means losing time and energy and being unable to reach set goals.

The previous discussions showed that all three aspects—confidence, self-efficacy, and challenge—are subjective constructs. Thus, a leader may often only become fully aware of a challenge and the lower confidence once a person already has reached position (B) in Figure 7.1. Since this move cannot be prevented, the leader's job starts at point (B) and is about supporting the other person in starting and doing the journey from (B) to (C).
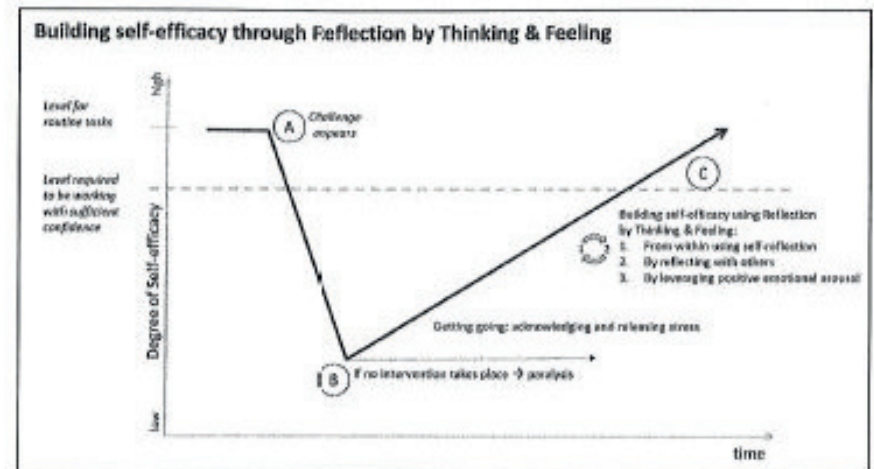

Figure 7.1.   Confidence lost through a stressful challenge is rebuilt using reflection with thinking and feeling.

Getting Going: Acknowledging and Releasing Stress

This journey starts with overcoming the paralysis or fight-or-flight state one is in when experiencing negative emotional arousal in (B). Research shows that this can be done simply by acknowledging and releasing the stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Another person may simply ask *How do you feel?* and stress is often immediately released. Importantly, the objective is to build for the future and not look back. Here, this means tit suffices to release the stress; no further analysis of what and why it happened is required. This would put the person unnecessarily on the spot and would deviate from the objective to build self-efficacy. Thus, the stressed person receives time and space to let off steam and then moves to the next stage.

Getting People Back Into Confidence

The sociopsychologist Alberto Bandura (1977) was the first to develop a model of self-efficacy and has become the most eminent researcher in the field of self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996). We have further developed his model based on our research, following the key belief that all a person needs to solve a problem or manage a challenge already lies within them—it only has to be found. Our research shows that giving oneself time and space,

and spending 15 minutes with thinking and feeling about a challenge yields major changes in confidence without any further intervention by anybody else (Müller, 2016).

This means that, as a leader, you have a powerful and simple tool at hand for both yourself and those you lead: allocate dedicated time and space to reflect on what you and they have within them to manage a challenge.

BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY FROM WITHIN USING SELF-REFLECTION

In challenging situations, people often look to the outside world for support: more information, different viewpoints, and so forth, are sought. However, this disregards the vast repository one has in dealing with life and its challenges. Reflective leadership values our experiences we had and our experiences when observing others dealing with such challenges. Thus, it may be that a person has no experience in a certain area but has observed other people performing a similar task and can access this experience without asking them. A typical example is that a person may not know how to operate the SPSS statistical software package but, by observing others using it, he is confident of being able to do it.

The biggest challenge in using each person's vast resources is in accessing them. Our brain has two ways to manage and store information: the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. The conscious mind is doing what Nobel Prize laureate Daniel Kahneman (2011) refers to as *slow thinking*: It processes information at a speed of 40 Mbps—it is slow, deliberate, and logical-intellectual. The unconscious mind processes information at 11 million Mbps—it is fast, intuitive, and emotional. While Kahneman uses these criteria to describe the processes in *using* the resources, this distinction also applies to the *storage* of information. One can easily understand this difference when one remembers the last time one drove a car: the conscious mind remembers the actions (e.g., going onto the highway or honking. The unconscious mind stores everything around this (i.e., all the surrounding activity, the sounds, smells, and eventually tastes and touches). Thus, all this information is stored and "only" has to be accessed. When dealing with challenges, people often start with analysis: they gather all the available information and then think about it. A typical example of this approach is the question *What do you think about this?* in meetings, pointing to an intellectual answer. This approach is in the tradition of scientific management of the 1910s that looked at people as cogs in an industrial process and also strongly contributed to reflection in the business context being equated with thinking (Dewey, 1910).

Harvard study showed that 15 minutes of reflection a day support an increase in outcome by 20% (Stefano, 2014). Interestingly enough, this was only done using *thinking* and not tapping into the potential of *feeling*.

However, thinking only allows us to access what the working brain can do and only accesses the unconscious mind to a very limited extent. One sees the unconscious mind at work in sudden and most unexpected moments of enlightenment, such as in the shower when one finds a solution to an issue that has been deliberated for weeks: the unconscious mind made the connections (the *sense*) without any further ado by the individual.

While these moments of enlightenment are uncontrolled, we discovered that their logic can be used in a controlled way by simply asking *How do you feel about this? in a meeting*. This approach is also found in the tradition of reflection in the nursing context (Johns, 2009), the approach of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996), and the traditions of Buddhist philosophy found in mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

While the individual value of both *thinking* and *feeling* have been recognized for decades by psychologists and sociologists, they have recently been further supported by advances in neurosciences, namely the research by Antonio Damasio (1994, 2000).

Our most recent research shows that combining thinking and feeling leverages the already significant benefits from "just" thinking or feeling in isolation and brings confidence to new statistically significant levels. (Mueller, 2016)

BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY BY REFLECTING WITH OTHERS

Many people may ask: Is this not this what we are doing already in our meetings? However, in the context of reflective leadership, reflection with others is expanded and delivers substantially broader results:

While the traditional reflection process starts with *What do you think about...?*, reflective leadership always also asks *How do you feel about...?* and includes the full spectrum of experiences. Because joint reflection is step 2 in the process, people don't answer these two questions on the spot but prepare: they spent time before joint reflection reflecting individually on the questions. This leads to everyone being prepared, since everyone did the preparation work. This leads to a level starting point for the reflection process and the sharing of experiences.

This process is further strengthened by using pairs as the default mode of reflection: contrary to normal meetings where participants jockey for air-time, political games are played, and quieter or more intuitive partici-

pants go unnoticed, reflective leadership uses the one-on-one situation known from coaching to build trustworthy relationships of trust: the two people in a pair commit to sharing their thoughts and feelings about a topic in an appreciative manner. They ask clarifying questions, draw conclusions, and build a relationship as part of a human–human interaction. Each person is in full control of their contribution and only share the parts of their reflection they want. Allowing each other time to speak uninterruptedly and listen attentively creates an atmosphere that is conducive to learning and the building of confidence. At the end, the pairs decide what they want to report to the group.

From a traditional perspective, this may seem time-consuming. Experience shows that a sequence of introduction to a topic, self-reflection, reflection in pairs, and reporting back and discussion in a larger group can easily be accomplished in 30 minutes.

While meetings are the most visible use of this approach, it can be used in any situation where sharing experiences is considered a valuable activity—one can imagine using this approach over lunch.

BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY BY LEVERAGING POSITIVE EMOTIONAL AROUSAL

In his research about self-efficacy, Bandura (1977, 1994, 2006) sees emotional arousal primarily as a negative that lowers self-efficacy through stress when being moved from (A) to (B). However, arousal can be positive or negative. This, people can use positive experiences to increase self-efficacy (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985) or can even turn negative emotions into positives ones. This is achieved by looking at states, that is, what a person feels in a particular situation, including neurological activity, mental activity, physical energy, and emotions (Bossons, 2015). People often give these states names like *happy* or *relaxed*, and these names can be used to trigger complex unconscious processes within an individual. A leader can leverage this by inviting another person to first experience a state of positive arousal and then explore ways of getting to this state. The chemical reactions in remembering and reliving the state immediately change the other person's confidence.

LEADERS SUPPORTING AN ITERATIVE PROCESS

As a leader, you can support the confidence-building process by encouraging and guiding your followers: give them the time and space to do self-reflection and practice it yourself. Building confidence always starts with the individual. Then, invite others to join the reflection. Then, go back to self-reflection; this cycle is continuous. Over time, you and your

people will have practiced *reflection with thinking and feeling* and will have developed your own approach to it, both as self-reflection and with peers.

This also supports a learning organization (Senge, 2006): every time it is practiced, the individual and the team are learning, tempering the effects of challenges and establishing a mutual support environment to get back to higher confidence levels.

APPLICATION IDEAS

Reflection by thinking and feeling must be experienced! In this section, you are invited to practice reflection so that you can then use it in your daily leadership work.

Application 1a:

Get Started: Experiencing *Reflection by Thinking and Feeling*

Many people come to know *reflection by thinking and feeling* by a short, 15-minute directed sequence. Take a piece of paper and a pen and look for a comfortable place where you can reflect for 15 minutes without being interrupted. Please respect this timeline, following them supports the power of reflection (Mueller, 2016).

1. *Please think about a current business-related challenge of yours. Write it down.* (Take 2 minutes.)
2. *Allow yourself a moment to feel if it already contains the core challenge – if not, rewrite it.* (Take 2 minutes.)
3. *Please **think** about the challenge and what you can do to solve it. Write down your thoughts.* (Take 3 minutes.)
4. *Now, please look at the **feelings** your challenge creates in your body.* (Take 2 minutes to feel and write down these feelings.)
5. *Now, imagine how it feels after the challenge has been solved.* (Allow yourself a minute to feel.)
6. *Please write down, in <u>one</u> word, how you would describe this state.* (Allow yourself a minute.)
7. *Please think about what you could do to reach this state.* (Take 2 minutes.)
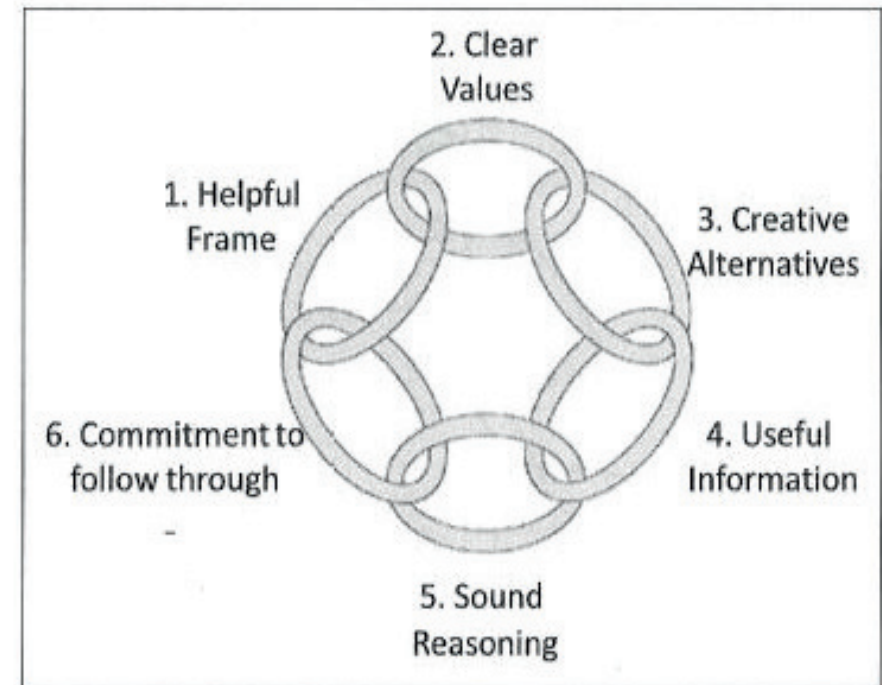8. *Write down what you have gained from this exercise.* (Take 2 minutes.)

Congratulations! You have mastered your first instance of *reflection by thinking and feeling*!

Application 1b:

Discovering the Gains From
Reflection by Thinking and Feeling

In our research, we have done this reflection with many leaders and managers around the world. We have grouped their gains in the table below. Please look at your notes from the reflection and tick all the items that apply to your experience:

Please select all items that describe your experience:

___ I have gained new perspectives or discovered new aspects related to my challenge.

___ I found more solutions or more creative solutions.

___ I found that the process of finding a solution became simpler.

___ I have gained a better understanding of my challenge.

___ I feel more relaxed about my challenge now than before the exercise.

___ I feel that my head, heart, and gut are better aligned.

___ None of the above applies to me.

Application 2:

Reflective Decision Making

Using reflection in decision making is a powerful tool, which we recommend in combination with the six steps of the decision quality model (see Figure 7.2) developed at Stanford (Spetzler, Winter, & Meyer, 2016):

Usually, this model is used in an analytical way by thinking about each chain link. This is suitable and leads to results. Adding feelings to the six steps develops decisions that are much more likely to be sustainable, as the people involved become much more committed.

Let us look closely at what happens within us when we use both thinking and feeling (see Figure 7.3).

If our head (thinking), heart (passion), and gut (feelings) are aligned when taking a decision, this decision will likely last and will be sustainable. It is important to note that alignment refers to a comfort band.
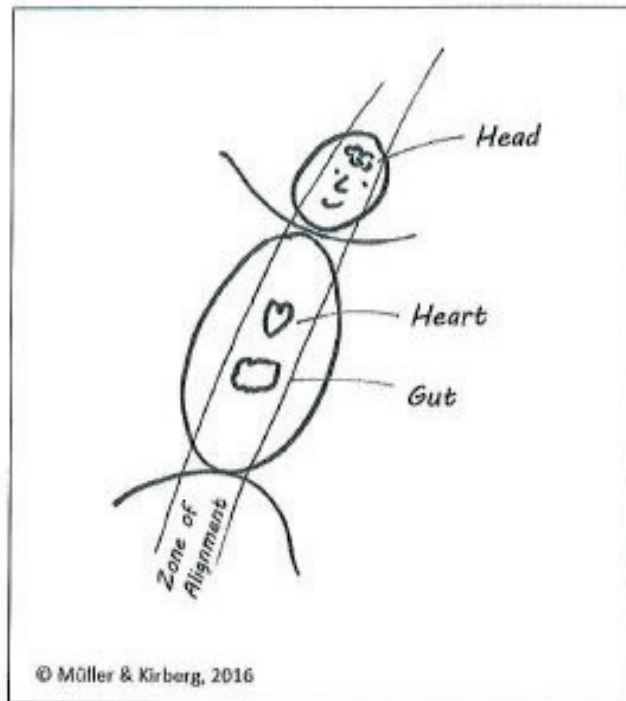

Source: Spetzler, Winter, and Meyer (2016).

Figure 7.2.   The decision quality model leads to good outcomes.

In cases were the head, heart, or gut are out of alignment, we can take decisions, but the energy level with which they will be implemented will be much lower than is possible, and their success is likely to be less sustainable.

When you work with people who are aligned, you can feel this: the energy level is much higher than usual, and it is gratifying to work together.

Application 3:

Develop a Reflection Habit

We recommend regular reflection at moments when you feel like doing so. This form shown in Figure 7.4 has proven useful to support this.

Figure 7.3.   The decision quality model leads to good outcomes.

Application 4:

Inviting Others to Experience *Reflection* by *Thinking and Feeling*

Guide your team through the reflection described before. As a leader, you can read the script and time the sections. Remember that a socio-emotional environment is key to making reflection and learning happen.

Application 5:

Create a Relaxed Meeting Atmosphere

Meetings can be great moments of leadership. If you want to practice reflective leadership, the following sequence of events allows you to establish a socioemotional state in which all attendees can develop relationships of trust that contribute to the organization's goals:

Figure 7.4.   Reflection habit form.

- Arrive relaxed: When approaching the meeting room, stop 20 meters before reaching it, take three deep breaths and then stroll in.
- Be mindful: The meeting is your key focus as long as it lasts. Turn off any distractions such as smartphones; only use your laptop or tablet to take notes or share files; don't check e-mails.
- Focus on relationships: Meetings are gatherings of people with the intention that being together and interacting add value. Thus, do not lose time sharing information; focus on interaction.
- Start with a story: Start the meeting in a relaxed manner by telling a story.

- Let everyone arrive: People have only fully arrived when they have spoken. Start your meeting with a check-in, where everyone says how they feel in one sentence. This includes you.
- 100% interaction: The highest usage of the people in the meeting is achieved if they engage in one-on-one relationships: 50% are sending and 50% are listening. Working in pairs is highly efficient and effective.

IMPLEMENTATION ADVICE

Most people intuitively understand, both intellectually and emotionally, the concepts behind reflective leadership and *reflection by thinking and feeling*. Many say that it seems natural and reminds them of how people are designed to be. Nonetheless, using *reflection by thinking and feeling* in our daily work requires us to change, which represents a challenge that may lead to stress and a drop in confidence.

As a leader, you can help build the confidence of those you lead so that they can move to this mode of operating with a few behaviors:

- **Practice what you preach:** When entering the world of feelings, people use different senses to assess a situation. They will easily detect if you are using reflective leadership from a place of conviction and commitment. Act as role-model. When giving them a few minutes in a meeting to gather their thoughts and feelings, do the same. Further, ensure that both they and you explicitly distinguish between feeling and thinking: from our upbringing, many of us respond by thinking when are asked about their feelings – you may want to consult some of the literature at the end of this chapter (Kline, 1999; Rosenberg, 2003).
- **Establish an environment conducive to *reflection by thinking and feeling*:** As the fight-or-flight reaction can not be prevented in stressful situations, our brain has many operating modes that support or prevent certain activities. For learning, the brain has to move into the socioemotional operating mode. This mode is the natural default mode of brain operation, and allows us to access our own and others' feelings. The other, task-oriented mode is used for logical thinking and analysis and has become the default mode in business. Thus, ensure that you allow your people to move into the socioemotional mode. This is accomplished by creating an open atmosphere that is different from the situation in which we work on tasks—choose different locations and environments, break habits and hierarchies, and allow emotions to flow.

- **Do not replace stress with stress:** Acknowledging and talking about feelings is still an unusual activity in many societies and organizations today; this can lead to stress. Thus, while your intention may be to reduce stress caused by a challenge through reflective leadership, you do not want to replace one kind of stress with another. An effective way to deal with this is to introduce *reflection by thinking and feeling* on the go as part of everyday activities: Simply start a meeting by inviting each person to say one sentence about how they feel, and do not comment on this. By doing this and some of the other activities we have covered as you go, they become an accepted approach, and they allow your people to get acquainted with them and appreciate them.
- **Do not expect "traditional" results:** Traditionally, a leader is expected to produce results that are accomplished by the leader's actions. The success of meetings is measured by the number of items managed in a short time or the number of different topics managed by the leader. These traditional measures do not apply here: In reflective leadership, you lead by *nonaction*. Give yourself and them time and space; the process unfolds under your guidance. This is the biggest opportunity to be a leader; as Lao Tzu noted: "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."

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