

Reflection—A method for organisational and individual development

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Abstract: This paper presents how organisational development can be the results when politicians, managers, social workers and teaching staff take part in reflection. The results are based on a government-funded initiative in Sweden for lowering sick absenteeism. Three local governments introduced reflection as a strategy to combat work related stress and a method for employee development. The aim was to develop empowered workers who could learn a new approach in their work situation. Professional workers sometimes feel shame when management directives make them supply a lower standard in service than they perceive as a good enough standard. The results show that reflection as part of work can help individuals to cope with work related stress and stabilise staff retention figures and result in organisational changes in municipal services such as public elementary schools, homecare and social work. This paper is the result of a longitudinal qualitative study with an interactive approach. Basis for data collection are group and individual interviews, study visits and participation in seminars and conferences and joint paper productions.

Key words: reflection; preparation; health; shame; individual development; organisational development; learning process

1. Introduction and background

Ill health in public sector jobs has increased in the last eight years. The Swedish government is responding to the increasing cost of sick-absenteeism by reviewing the regulation around sick-benefits and by investing in research to develop better workplaces to stop production work related illness. Between 1997 and 2003 there was a substantial increase in sick absenteeism in the public sector and the character of illness was slowly shifting. A growing proportion of long term illness was caused by psychiatric diagnoses and diagnosed depression due to exhaustion was becoming more common. There were other changes in the character of illness—men had a lower rate of sick absenteeism than women did. Women working in low paid jobs in the public health care sector had the highest proportion of sick absenteeism. From 2004 the trend was broken and the sick numbers were decreasing for both men and women. Regardless of that the difference in sick rates between the male and female workers is still significant, the high proportion of psychiatric diagnoses remains among people who are on long-term sick leave.

This paper presents how individuals and organisations can develop as a result when politicians, managers, social workers and teaching staff take part in reflection during working hours, and how it leads to healthier employees and better workplaces.

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The context of the paper is based on a government-funded initiative in Sweden (2001–2006) where 18 projects were granted funding for developmental work that aimed to decrease the numbers of people being absent from work due to illness. VINNOVA (The Swedish Agency for Innovation Systems) and the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications wanted to learn more about the success rate and the long-term effects of the 18 projects and therefore they required a research-based evaluation of the initiative. We used an interactive approach in the research design for the evaluation (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006). During the two years research process (2004–2006), we conducted 87 interviews, carried out nine case studies and held six different analysis seminars where altogether 130 people took part (Svensson, et al., 2007).

This paper describes one of the 18 projects—“reflecting workplaces”—organised by Karlstad Municipality which also included Grums and Forshaga Municipality. These three municipalities introduced reflection as part of work as a strategy to deal with work related stress and as a method for employee development. The aim in the developmental work was to create conditions where employees could develop new personal strategies and become more empowered by learning a new approach to their work situation through reflection. This paper is based on twelve individual interviews with the project leaders and participants, and results from discussions in seminars and additional data from interviews with participants and a survey conducted by the municipality of Karlstad (Tilander, et al., 2005).

2. Shame and health

Many employees in the Swedish public sector are finding it more difficult to carry out their work duties according to their work ethics and standards of performance. After years of cutting national budgets for public schools and social services the work situation for the public sector employees is strained. Public schools have to cut down on the teaching staff, especially on the group of support staff. Many teachers experience that they lack sufficient support in the classrooms to be able to support all students especially as the government directives indicates that it is the individual teacher’s responsibility to ensure that all students have sufficient support in their learning. Many public schools have cut down on psychologists and counsellors with the consequence that many students cannot get adequate support. National and local school authorities continuously issue new and additional regulations that the teaching staff must follow in their work. This situation with fewer resources to control work and more regulations to follow puts additional pressure on the teaching staff. Many teachers choose to leave their occupation as they are overworked or because they find it hard to cope.

People who work in the public social (welfare) service also experience they have less opportunities to carry out a good enough service for their clients, as a consequence of a downsized organisation. Many employees experience they have to compromise on their work tasks as they have less time to meet clients and they are forced to keep up with administrative tasks. The staff is often asked to speed up the time they set aside for client meetings and to swap client between themselves to avoid developing social bonds with their clients. Social workers and clients have fewer opportunities to develop a trusting relationship. Many social workers have left the work force as they cannot adjust to these much harsher working conditions—as it requires them to change their approach towards their clients. They therefore have to compromise with their work ethics and standards.

So what is making the employees feel uneasy in their occupations? There is some support in literature about professional workers’ feeling shame when management directives forces employees to supply a lower standard in their service for their clients/students than they perceive as a good enough standard (Scheff & Starrin, 2002). This

is often the results of a restructuring process or reorganisation of work. Shame is a response to how you feel and experience yourself as a person. Not being able to commit to your work or carry out your work duties according to your personal “standards” makes people feel shame when they meet their clients or students. Shame is not about what you do, but about how it makes you feel as a person. Employee’s work ethics is constantly compromised in some public service sector jobs such as teaching staff and social workers. Having to compromise your working standards in relations to your work ethics makes people ill at work especially if people are working in a social surrounding which gives few opportunities for talking about the working conditions and how it affects how you perceive your self. The lack of social support adds to stress and puts strain on working relations which can lead to people developing ill health (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

3. Reflection—How does it work?

The issue we shall explore in this paper is that reflection can lead to better health and weather it is connected to organisational development. We shall start this document by describing the context of the research and then continue to describe how reflection is carried out as a method during working hours. Later we shall describe individual and organisational benefits and finish the paper with some final reflections of using the method.

It has taken approximately ten years to develop reflection as a method for individual and organisational development. The method has been developed in three stages—where the first step was to try out reflection between social workers in Karlstad municipality 1994. At that time the rates of people on long-term sick leave and staff retention was stable. However the working conditions were changing and some people were anticipating an increase in sick absenteeism and staff turnover. Later it became more urgent to find ways to retain the employees and to decrease the sick-numbers. The model was then developed, by adjusting the length in reflection period and by mixing social workers and teaching staff as reflection partners. The last step in developing the method was to train more reflection leaders in the purpose to expand the skills in the municipal organisational structure as it would open more opportunities to provide reflection as part of work. Moreover, for the same reasons managers in the public organisations were provided opportunities to participate in reflection. There was an increasing demand for reflection in the three municipal organisations and causing a drastic shortage of reflection leaders for the service.

4. Reflection—A process model

Reflection takes place during working hours, as part of work and the reflection period is freed from “normal” work duties, which actually means that the person is taking a time-out. The workplace agrees that they cannot contact the participant at all during two weeks of reflection. This means that the employee must have their participation sanctioned by their manager or local politician in order to be able to organise a period of no contact (which includes all types of contacts, e-mail, telephone and personal visits) with the workplace. The focus during the reflection process is that the participant is to engage themselves in activities of their own choice during working hours. The activities should bring the person a feeling of joy and rest.

If needed the local authorities should provide additional counselling or other support from the health services to all participants who take part in reflection.

The reflection process involves three steps—preparation for reflection, period of reflection and follow-up meetings and networking. Reflection takes place in small groups of three people. Two people participate in

reflection and one person act as a reflection leader.

4.1 Preparation

Before the reflection period begins the participant is relieved from their work duties one day each week for four weeks on trot. The day is meant to prepare the participant for the two-week reflection period. During these four days each person will meet up with their reflection partner and reflection leader for a few hours chat, in a calm and relaxing environment with the purpose of getting to know each other. The participants learn what to expect from their two weeks reflection period—to focus on their task which is to reflect and to distance themselves from ordinary work tasks. The participants prepares for the tasks included in the reflection process, such as to meet a previous client/student/employee for an interview and keep a personal reflection diary. During the reflection process, it is emphasized to refrain from any kind of achievement or performances. The reflection process also emphasizes that all talks are carried out in an atmosphere which is freed from critique or judgments.

At the first preparation meeting the reflection partner is advised to draw a picture of themselves at the age of five. The picture of the five years old child creates a starting point for discussions where each partner can learn to understand more about their present life. The idea is to find out if they can trace a thread between their childhood dreams and hopes and their adult life. When discussing themselves as child, each participant has an opportunity to learn and understand about the choices that led to their present life.

4.2 Period of reflection

During the two weeks of being freed from ordinary work duties, the participants meet up with their reflection partners and leader on four occasions for reflection talks. These talks are based on dialogue as a technique. Each meeting starts with the same question to each partner—How are you today?

A unique situation is constructed where each person experience that somebody is prepared to listen to them until they are finished talking. This situation is quite rare in working life as people in general are accustomed to having to hurry through their talks. The idea is to create an environment where each partner feels confident to talk about anything they have on their mind as long as they wish. Each partner decides to what depth each topic is discussed and they can at any time change the subject of conversation. The reflection leader is there to guide the talks whenever necessary. Reflection takes place under a secrecy policy to assure safety for the participants. There is no ambition during the reflection period to solve work related problems. Nevertheless, it happens that some problems are solved or dissolved some time after reflection.

The participants are expected to reflect on their results from the interviews with their client/student/employee. The idea is to talk about oneself described from a third party, to the other reflecting person. The participants have been asked to consider a client/student/employee with whom they had a good professional relationship, for their interview. The idea is to create a situation where the participant will receive positive feedback in their professional role.

4.3 Follow-up

A couple of weeks after the reflection period each person reflects and writes down their experiences. The thoughts are later used for evaluating and documenting personal learning history and presented to the reflection leader. This part is developing a learning experience from the six weeks reflection process. The idea is to develop a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of reflection. Some participants learn valuable skills of how to use reflection as a method for balancing the demands of everyday life. Other people find reflection is useful as a learning experience and they appreciate the opportunity to take time-out. Some participants develop a deeper understanding of how everyday life affects the capability to carry out work duties. Some people discover the joy

of keeping a reflection diary—it becomes their new pal and confidant. Each participant is also invited to annual meetings with other people whom have participated in reflection in order to boost their skills and to network.

5. Outcomes

Reflection can lead to organisational and individual development. Management and employees can develop a reflective community as they learn new methods for critical thinking. Individual reflection means to mirror the self in relation to work and the demands from clients/students and private life—the self in relation to context. Reflection functions today as a method for organisational and individual development.

The benefits can be listed at four levels.

(1) Employer—healthier staff, more motivated and competent staff, self-efficacious and communicative, increased staff retention.

(2) Organisation and workteams—increased tolerance towards diversity, better developed communication skills and social bonds with colleagues, students and clients.

(3) Individual—decreased stress levels, better health, boosted self-esteem and self awareness, boosted pride in the work, ability to set boundaries for work, increased trust and capacity to listen to the needs of others and one self.

(4) Beneficiary—increased influence, understanding of mutual needs and respect for own needs.

5.1 Some facts and details

48 people chose to take part in reflection during working hours, including six managers, 15 social workers and 21 teachers. Six people from different occupations in the public sector took part in reflection and later chose to become reflection leaders. Of the 48 participants 35 were female and 13 male that corresponds to the gender distribution in public sector jobs.

When the first developmental project of reflection (1994–1996) was evaluated after four and a half years, it was established that the participants had decreased their sick absenteeism with 30 percent, compared to their colleagues in the same occupation and in the same workplace. None of the 24 participants had left their occupations and all except one participant was still employed at the same place.

It is still too early to establish long-term effects of reflection after the last project. However, the participants describe in a survey one year after taking part in reflection that they experience reduced stress levels and improved health. Karasek and Theorell describe that people experience reduced emotional strain and increased job satisfaction as early as six months after job intervention programmers (Karasek & Theorell, 1990, p. 215).

The result from reflection during working hours is that many participants experience they have developed as persons, both in their professional role and as individuals. One specific skill they describe as an outcome of reflection is a better understanding about how their working life connects to their private life and what makes up its context and surrounding. When there is an unbalance in private life and/or working life, it can develop conditions which can lead to illness unless they find ways to cope or deal with the situation. Evaluation of reflection shows that it leads individuals to cope with work related stress and to stabilise staff retention figures and result in organisational changes in municipal services.

Many of the interviewed staff experiences a decrease in staff return as an effect of reflection. Six workplaces chose to participate in the project and their employees were offered the opportunity to take part in reflection. Four of them decided to continue to provide reflection as part of work during 2007. Reflection as a model for

developing healthier workplaces has spread to other parts of Sweden. A municipality in the north of Sweden, Timrå, has provided reflection on a large scale for all their employees in the municipal health service for elderly (Gavelin, 2004). Dalarna County Research Board is currently providing opportunities for all social workers in the county to take part in reflection during working hours. The project organisers in Karlstad continue to train people to become reflection leaders; these people represent various categories of occupations such as therapists, consultants, human resource consultants. Reflection as a method for developing healthier workplaces is spreading with a faster pace especially in the public sector (Tilander, et al., 2005).

One particular and important result from reflection is that people who have taken part in reflection no longer feel shame for the failures caused by poor management, lack of resources or inadequate work practice—especially when they have no power to influence the conditions. The employees also learn to say no to unreasonable demands.

5.2 Voices from participants

One manager describes that she believes that it is necessary to have an open climate at work which enables an open critique for work practice. It is necessary to start talking about psychosocial environment and work related stress and how employees perceive their work. Her opinion is that the work climate does not always allow employees to discuss job related problems freely.

Free talks are missing to a great extent in our workplaces. People do not dare to take the risk of being punished later for something they have said or thought about. That is why people do not talk freely to each other. (Tilander, et al, 2005, p. 55)

Several participants describe that they have been strengthened in their professional roles after the reflection period. The feedback from students and clients confirms that they played a genuine and significant role in their lives by carrying out their work in their professional roles. One social worker describes:

I did not know that I was as significant to other people as it came clear to me after meeting a former client. It is really nice. My self-confidence got a real boost. (Tilander, 2004)

The participants describe an increased personal capacity to cope with the demands from work after taking part in reflection.

You discover a tool which helps you to handle the works of everyday living. You learn how to set up boundaries for your actions and learn that it is allowed. (Tilander, et al., 2005, p. 45)

Participants also describe an increased capacity for setting boundaries for their work tasks, which in turn means setting a new standard for their workload. They learn to make the distinction between what is regulated and required in their work tasks and what people add to their work tasks according to their own standards. The additional requirements are based on the staff's commitment to their clients and students.

When I came back, I noticed they were busy training three one-year old kids to the nursery service all at once. I stop that! (Tilander, et al., 2005, p. 45)

They also learn that it is accepted among workmates to set up limits for their work.

If you can lower the demands of your work performance to the same level as the expectations from the people in your surrounding, then you will give a good enough performance. (Interview with participant)

The participants learn to accept they have to lower their ambitions in their work. It is impossible to carry out

all tasks they demand from themselves to do, as it is a dead-end route and will lead to ill-health while trying. Being able to say no to unreasonable demands is a fantastic and huge experience for many participants.

You are not a less valued employee even if you cannot live up to your personal standards of performance. (Interview with participant)

Some of the participants who are managers describe how a deeper understanding of the practice and expectations from the self and others shapes organisational practice.

A year after we took part in reflection we had to make a severe cut in our budget. Instead of investing in competence development for the staff, we simply devoted some time and money for developing our workplace here at this school. (Interview with a manager)

This understanding can contribute towards changing prevailing systems and practice. When people change their way of thinking and how they relate to work it will change how they carry out their work tasks and will therefore have organisational implications. When managers and employees develop new ways to communicate about everyday work demands in relation to expectations the work practice can change. One headmaster predicts the long term effects of reflection for the employees' at her school. She expects that a strengthened self-esteem will result in the employees wanting to change their work and the confirming work climate that will coach them to change their work practice.

When we have been successful to develop a work climate where employees experience and feel as valued employees they can develop a stronger belief for themselves. When you discover that you can change your own work situation and that somebody listens to you, that's when you can as an individual develop and increased belief in your self and your own abilities. You dare to change things and you start to trust that things will work out. (Interview with a headmaster)

Another headmaster describes that she and her colleague are acting as role models for their employees and understands that they are stating examples through their own actions.

We are more aware of that our teaching staff needs to feel comfortable in their work and if we can organise work so that they can stop and reflect when needed and if we do it ourselves we can become good role models. We remind our staff to take time off from work—and we keep reminding them that there is a life out there—outside from school. We are 40 hours bosses. We have colleagues who have worked themselves ill. Sick-absenteeism at this school is quite low.

One managing director for a municipal department describes her thoughts about the future of reflection as a method.

Reflection as a method has high priority and I feel that we have the support we need from local politicians. Some of the politicians will take part in reflection themselves. One of the politicians shares our understanding for reflection as she has previously worked as a care assistant.

6. Final reflection on reflection as a method for developing better working conditions

When managers and politicians take part in reflection, it will affect how they choose to manage their organisations. Several managers—among other things—describes that they understood their role models for other people. Moreover they now understand the symbolic value of actions. Some of them also describe that they appreciate that their employees have other lives besides work, which affects what they expect from their employees. They also understand the meaning of giving employees the mandate and resources to control their work (compare Karasek & Theorell and their model for demand and control, 1990).

How can reflection develop new knowledge and change how individuals perceive themselves? When reflection is the part of learning, it requires time between activities in everyday life and the learning process based on these experiences. Learning the art to be able to step aside from actions requires that people have access to time and space to reflect and a dialogue partner to share their experiences with. Reflection will create opportunities for each person to learn from passed experience by relating their emotions to their previous experience by combining mind, heart and actions into the experience. According to Boud (2002), the benefits of reflection in learning situations have been underestimated in the theories of learning. Reflection is not merely a cognitive act as it involves the whole person's being into the learning experience.

Reflection is a form of response of the learner to experience... experience consists of the total response of a person to a situation or event: what he or she thinks, feels, does and concludes at the time and immediately after. (Boud, 1985, p. 18)

This is of particular importance for the people who feel shame to learn more about their emotions that connects to carrying out work tasks. Understanding more about one self in a wider context is to understand the constraints in the working situation. Connected knowing is the outcome of reflecting with a dialogue partner, as it means to “engage the learner's realities and subjective experience, giving space for the learner to consider and reconsider, without haste” (Brockbank, 2002, p. 24). Connected knowing can lead to developing a deeper knowledge about one self and understanding the connection between actions, context and surroundings.

People act in social surroundings which links people's activities with their context. Learning and reflection takes place in these social surrounding meaning that people act in “social worlds”, where the context frames how actions takes place and how they are interpreted (Elkjaer, 2000). When people reflect together with others who represent different social worlds, you can discuss similar or identical problems or situations in a wider context and from different perspectives. As people perceive and understand their everyday life differently, as each learning experience is embedded in each person's previous experience. It then seems necessary to learn and understand more about the context in working life where individual actions and feelings take place. This requires that people are prepared to share their social worlds with each other and that meeting places are organised for these talks.

Reflection makes it possible for individuals to change how they approach their work. In the example of teaching staff and social workers, they found it hard to cope with the demands from national and local government regulations as it conflicted with how they perceived a minimum standard in their work. Instead of continuing on the same tracks, feeling guilt and shame for not delivering a good enough service, they learned to approach their work tasks differently. The outcome of reflection is to develop a deeper understanding of the context of actions which gives a potential to change individual and organisational patterns. The change in the employees approach towards their work is, that they have developed skills to choose between work tasks, and can manage to prioritize with reduced feeling of shame. This change in attitude and approach leads to better health among employees.

6.1 Reflection as a method for learning how to learn about the self

How does this method lead to developing a better work climate and better health? How do participants experience they have developed a capacity to handle stress and that they are better equipped to cope with everyday life at work? How are they surer about their career choice after taking part in reflection? And what implications does reflection have at the organisational level?

Reflection means both doing and thinking. Doing is the activity taking place in the dialogue with one partner and a reflection leader. Thinking is the learning activity in which each individual is experiencing when they learn to reflect. This means that reflection is part of social activity as well as part of individual cognitive, emotional and

existential action. Each individual learns more about oneself by being able to form the words about oneself to another person in a dialogue. By listening to the other partners they have the opportunity to mirror their own thoughts and ideas with the other person. At the individual level reflection provides an opportunity to learn about oneself as part of a context. Through learning more about the self, the participants learn to understand why they act differently in different situations. Reflection as a process means to develop knowledge in three steps (Brockbank, 2002).

Step one in reflection means to develop individual knowledge of how to do things right as in single loop learning. It can be about work related tasks or private matters.

Step two means learning how to do choose the right action when perceiving different signals and expectations from regulations and management and when it leads to a conflict with your personal work ethics and expectations. This describes double loop learning. However, to be able to choose between different actions it requires that the individual must learn how to relate all important aspects of working life to each other. Headmasters can understand how new government regulations can act contrary to regulations from the local government and therefore decide to act in the best interest of the students and the well being of the employees. Double loop learning means that teaching staff can learn to navigate in the stream of information and develop confidence to prioritize between actions.

The third step means to learn about the connection between reflection and the learning outcomes. Reflection can develop personal competencies and skills, which gives them new tools to approach issues both in their private and working life. To be able to reflect on reflection means to be able to conduct critical reflexivity (Brockbank, 2002). When people learn to understand the connection between the actions of reflection and the outcome of personal development and a better health, it will encourage them to continue to reflect.

Some of the participants declared when their lives was in a chaos they return to reflection as a retreat. Many describe they continue to keep a reflection diary. And some of them describe they have changed the way they approach life altogether. To develop individual knowledge of how and when to pull the emergency brake in life, and to take time to think and reflect on matters is a skill and an outcome of reflection. Other outcomes are better founded decisions and a boosted self-esteem, and a strengthen confidence in their choice of occupation.

6.2 Changing from a victim to an achiever

During the project, we have been able to follow the participants. It is apparent they have learned to regard their situation from a different perspective. They no longer view themselves as victims of restructuring and downsizing. The participants strengthen their own thoughts of themselves as they understand that their personal approach and experience are both important and valuable for other people's growth. A deeper understanding of the self is achieved when the participants encounter previous students or clients. Their enhanced self-esteem is reflected in their work practice. The participants develop a more confident approach in their work and are better prepared to listen to clients, students, colleagues and managers, as they understand the need to demand more control in their work. The participants describe that they feel more secure about themselves due to personal development which is based on a strengthened self-esteem. As the number of staff and managers who take part in reflection is increasing at the same workplace, the work climate is gradually changing and more people desire to be part of developmental work as they have developed their skills to critically examine the practice of everyday work life.

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