

REFLECT! The art of purposeful non-thinking

We see our reflection in the mirror but the reflection is not in the mirror but in our perception. Through the mirror we look out at ourselves. What do we make of what we see? How do we perceive ourselves to be? When we enter a reflective state, however briefly, we withdraw from activity in order to better see what is. Reflection provides feedback on how we are and enables us to modify our direction or behaviour.

Escher's picture, called Three Worlds, shows the reflection in a pond of trees in a winter landscape. On the surface float autumn leaves. Through the surface you glimpse a fish in the depths. This is a powerful metaphor of how we take an illusion for reality, how we can intuit causal patterns and how, with intention, we can gain insight.



World One: – The busy world of daily life, is it all an illusion?

George Bernard Shaw said, " Few people think more than two or three times a year; I have made an international reputation by thinking once or twice a week". Busy bees that we are, we have the illusion that we spend much of our time thinking. It is just not true. In fact mostly our minds are in an automatic state, akin to having a fully active screensaver! Thinking, even when it does occur is a rational activity yet much of what informs life comes from beyond the rational – from the realm of meaning. It is well recorded that creative breakthrough – in art, science or business – comes when thinking stops. A reflective state should take us towards intentional non-thinking.

All too easily we let ourselves be carried along by the flow of our busy lives – no time to stand and stare! To build reflection into our daily routines requires intention. I have often seen teams of capable managers rush into action unthinkingly and unaware. The rush to action is endemic in our culture and the way we do business. It feeds the macho view of thinking as an unnecessary diversion - a view that regards reflection as soft – and presumably regards learning and improvement as a poor substitute for grinding toil. I recommend that

you challenge this idea – whether in others or in yourself. Try the alternative. Take a pause and reflect on how, when and why you reflect.

World Two: – The surface where we see the pattern of events

It is beyond doubt that we could benefit by reflecting more deeply and more often. Intentional pauses provide opportunities for reflection. They suspend automation and make space for truth. There are many techniques to help – using the breath or bodily sensation to bring oneself into being present in the moment. Timothy Gallwey proposes a STOP as being the most useful way to be more in touch with life.

This practical down-to-earth method of institutionalising reflection does not wait for the end of the task.

Every moment is an ending and a beginning and the important thing is to get into the reflecting habit. In the STOP it is possible to get past one's mindset and un-awareness to tune into the hidden reality – perhaps to reveal an error or a threat or to discover what is meaningful - and to learn.

After Action Review, done all too infrequently, is a specialised form of STOP that takes place when the phase of activity changes. It provides a time to reflect with colleagues and stakeholders. This reflection enables lessons to be learned and, one might say, the deeper the reflection the deeper the learning.

World Three: – Beneath the surface, insight and meaning come to life

In strategic leadership programs we run in Yorkshire, participants often find that a well-timed walk by our local lake is an effective way of making sense. When we walk in nature we have the opportunity to meet our self. Not the noisy pre-occupied, self-obsessed self of our busy life, but a miraculous being with profound perceptions: an angel in tune with nature and the universe, whose intuition knows the pattern behind events.

When you truly meet your self, you have a friend for life – an inner guide who will help you in tough times and ensure you achieve a proud legacy. This is the self of which you are the reflection.

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Article originally published in [Leadership Compass](#) Summer 2007