

Reflecting Backward To Evolve Forward: Integrating Mindfulness And Optimism Into Your Reflective Practice

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For many, self-reflection can feel uncomfortable. Yet, being uncomfortable is often a step in developing leadership capabilities. These writers discuss ways of expanding beyond the comfort zone – through the art of reflective practice – and into the [growth zone](#).

Imagine your next performance review – it's the first time you've really been excited about it because you have been kicking some serious goals over the past six months. You have a feeling that this might be the right time to put yourself forward for the new Head of Department role. You practice your power pose, stride into your Manager's office and are ready to make your mark ... Fast forward forty minutes and you are shattered. Shortly into the discussion, it becomes apparent that there's a big disconnect between how you perceive your performance and the perceptions of your Manager. You manage to hold your head high, but your self-belief has taken a hit and [Imposter Syndrome](#) sinks in. You had enough courage to ask for time to think about the feedback you received, and to request another meeting in a few days. You really need to regroup and think about your next course of action. Time for some reflective practice....

One of the earliest historical records hinting at the significance of self-awareness were the words "[know thyself](#)" inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo – one of the oldest known sites in Ancient Greece. *Self-awareness* is the ability to tune into your own feelings, sense inner signals and recognise how your feelings affect you and your performance (Goleman, 2017). In their report, [the power of emotional intelligence](#), Korn Ferry Group (2017) indicate that *emotional self-awareness* is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence, which is a key predictor of leadership effectiveness and therefore, a critical component of ongoing leadership development.

A simple way to start exercising your emotional self-awareness is to engage in regular reflection – an active process of probing cause-and-effect, questioning assumptions and considering the meaning of experiences ([Ashford & DeRue 2012](#)). Some simple questions might be:

- What is getting a result or not getting a result?

- How can I obtain feedback about the impact I'm having?
- What do I need to work on to grow / develop / improve?
- What can I outsource so that I can be more productive in my [zone of genius](#)?

Once we better understand ourselves and our impact on others, we can get to work on improving certain qualities or leveraging off them.

Leadership Executive, [Jennifer Porter](#), eloquently said that "reflection gives the brain an opportunity to pause amidst the chaos, untangle and sort through observations and experiences, consider multiple possible interpretations, and create meaning", which is "crucial to [leaders'] ongoing growth and development". One of the common misconceptions of reflective thinking is that in order to engage in a deeper level of reflection, we should keep asking ourselves *why* (e.g., *why didn't that project launch go as well as intended?*). Yet, the empirical work of Organisational Psychologist, Tasha Eurich (in her latest book, [Insight](#)) found that a potential negative consequence of asking *why* could feed into a downward spiral of [ruminative](#) thinking (e.g., *...it's because I'm hopeless at leading a team*). Instead, her research advocates that a far more effective question is *what* (e.g., *what have I learned from that experience so that I can ensure the next project launch is more successful?*). In this way, a more forward-thinking perspective shifts the focus from dwelling on the past to swiftly taking action on enhancing leadership capabilities. Stepping back into the scenario, it could be that while our ambitious middle manager was exceeding a standard of excellence, it was unknowingly at the expense of others. So by asking themselves, *what can I do to build more trust and open communication*, they can create a simple developmental goal to generate greater buy-in from the team.

Adopting this forward-thinking approach and harnessing the wisdom of one of the most influential leadership thought leaders, John C. Maxwell, who said, *reflective thinking turns experience into insight*, we suggest two ways – mindful intent and optimism – through which to leverage that personal insight into something meaningful for your leadership development. But first, set yourself up with a journal – make it something special, not just an exercise book! Block out time in your calendar to write your reflections by hand and make it a regular, non-negotiable appointment with yourself. While we advocate for learning forward, the journal becomes a place where you can reflect and look back – to remind yourself of how far you've come.



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