The Reflection Cycle

— a tool for those who lead dialogues and collaboration

Introduction

In this brochure, we present the Reflection Cycle, a tool for those who lead dialogue and collaboration. Our hope is that you can use the Reflection Cycle to develop your leadership by learning from meaningful situations you have experienced.

Dialogue and collaboration are very much in vogue. Sustainability challenges are increasingly being addressed across sectoral and professional boundaries, and citizens are invited to participate in political processes and transition efforts. The traction of such "soft" governing tools mean that public officials, communicators, and consultants are increasingly responsible for leading dialogues and collaboration.

Leadership in dialogues and collaboration is a balancing act between leading and following a group. In many situations, leaders need to take a step back so that the group itself can take ownership of its shared issue. At the same time, other situations require leaders to step forward and provide the clarity needed for the group to achieve its goals.

To lead dialogues and collaboration, you must therefore be able to adapt your leadership style to what the situation requires. You can develop your leadership skills by reflecting on the difficult situations you face. Learning through reflection involves expanding your repertoire of actions by interpreting ambiguous situations and curiously exploring how you can and should act. It's often a matter of questioning what you take for granted—a matter of pushing the boundaries of what you can understand and what you can do.

We hope that the Reflection Cycle, which we present in this brochure, can help you reflect and learn. We, the authors of this brochure, are researchers at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) and Uppsala University. The ideas behind the Reflection Cycle were developed in collaboration with dialogue and collaboration facilitators within the framework of the Mistra Environmental Communication research program.

Developing your leadership through reflection

We suggest that you try the Reflection Cycle, a tool we've developed based on our own research and the work of educator Graham Gibbs.

The Reflection Cycle is a tool to support reflection and can be used after you've experienced meaningful situations in your dialogue and collaboration practice. You can use the Reflection Cycle on your own or together with colleagues in your organization. Or, if there is mutual trust, your dialogue or collaboration group can reflect together on a meaningful situation you have experienced.

The Reflection Cycle facilitates both individual and organizational learning. The specific situations you've faced can enable you to learn about leadership and also be used to inform organizational learning in view of changing the way organisations operate to better support the work of dialogue and collaboration leaders.

You use the Reflection Cycle by selecting a situation that has been meaningful to you in some way. Perhaps it was something that felt difficult or perplexing? Perhaps something happened that you weren't prepared for? Or maybe you were faced with a difficult dilemma?

Once you've selected a situation, go through the cycle's four steps and reflect on the situation. Whether you go through the cycle on your own or with others, it's a good idea to write down your reflections. Writing is a powerful way to stimulate reflection.

Leading dialogue and collaboration: A matter of power

Dialogue and collaboration leaders exercise power by influencing who participates, which topics are addressed, and by structuring communication among participants. How dialogue and collaboration leaders act therefore matters both for the process and the outcome of dialogues and collaboration. Applying power theory can therefore be helpful in developing your leadership skills. Understanding and evaluating situations in terms of power sharpens the perspective of dialogue and collaboration leaders and can enable you to question what you take for granted.

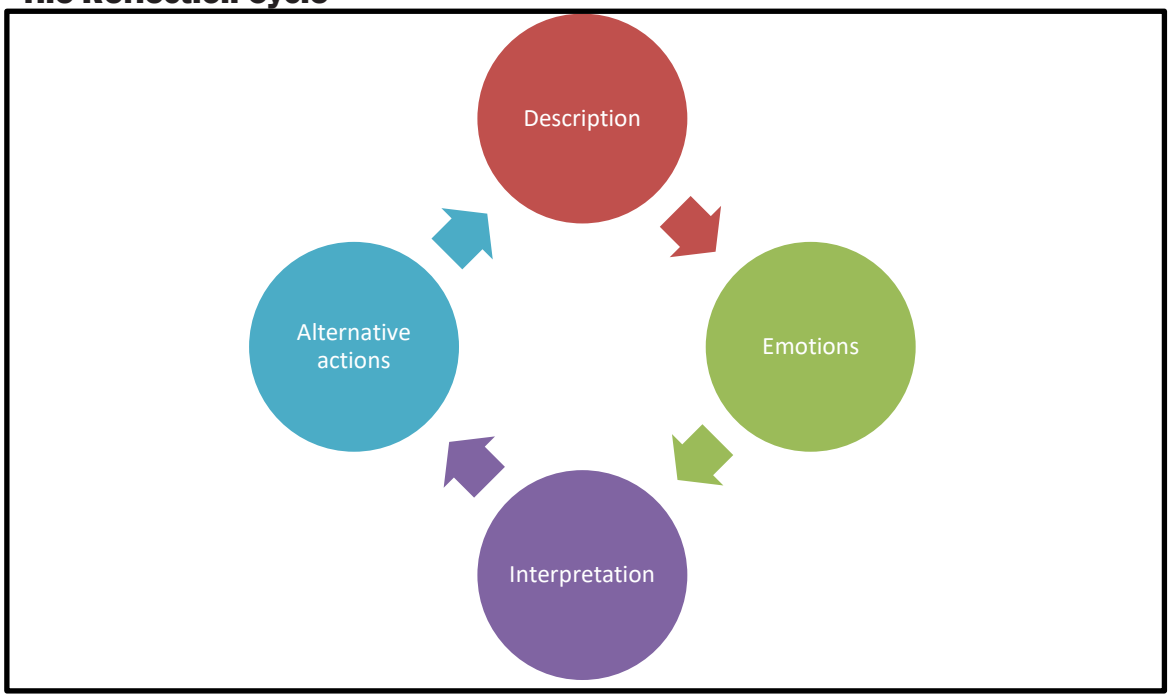
A common (mis)conception in dialogue and collaboration practice is that power is something entirely negative. Dialogue and collaboration are then seen as being about replacing hierarchical power relations with equal, "eye-to-eye" relationships. We agree that it is important to critically examine and transform power relations in dialogue and collaboration work. However, viewing hierarchical power relations solely as undesirable can become an obstacle to the reflection and action of dialogue and collaboration leaders. Dialogue and collaboration are political; they address value-laden issues and involve people with different views on what is the right thing to do. In many situations, it is not possible for everyone to get it their way; therefore, leadership and hierarchical power relations are also necessary in dialogue and collaboration.

We propose a shift in perspective. Instead of focusing on the neutral dialogue and collaboration leader—who stands outside hierarchical power relations—we turn our attention to leaders who are part of power relations. We then see that dialogue and collaboration leaders occupy a position within a power system that gives them the opportunity to exercise power and the responsibility to reflect on ethical issues. This shift in perspective may feel instinctively uncomfortable, as we often associate power with something negative, especially in dialogues and collaboration characterized by ideals of equality. However, we believe that dialogue and collaboration benefit from our ability to discuss power, and that dialogue and collaboration leaders can develop their leadership by reflecting on power relations.

To reflect on this, we suggest you try to think of your leadership as a back-and-forth between authority and argumentation. When you lead through authority, you

assume that the group will accept your leadership without you needing to explain how you influence or guide processes and conversations. When you lead through argumentation, you instead communicate with the participants about how the process and conversations should be structured. We believe that your leadership as a dialogue and collaboration leader takes the form of a back-and-forth movement between authority and argumentation. Finding the right rhythm in this back-and-forth movement is crucial to your success as a leader.

The Reflection Cycle



1. Description

The first step is to describe what happened without explaining or judging it.

Supporting questions:

- What was the context?
- Who was there?
- Where were we?
- What did the people who were there say and do?

Advice and Tips:

- In this step and the next, it's important to describe only the sequence of events without explaining or judging the situation. Steps 1 and 2 of the cycle involve describing what happened and how you felt, while steps 3 and 4 involve interpreting and identifying possible courses of action based on these descriptions.
- Remember that it's not just the spoken word that's important in communication. Body language may also have been an important aspect of the situation. In such cases, feel free to include this in your description.
- It can be difficult to remember the specific details of the situation, but it's important, in this step, to provide as concrete a description of the situation as possible. Trying to recall details—even those that may seem unimportant—helps us mentally transport ourselves back to the situation, making it easier to reflect on it. If your memory becomes clearer later in the reflection cycle, you can go back and make the description more complete.

Example

It was at the end of a collaboration meeting. We were in a room at the offices of one of the participating organizations. The table was oval, and about ten people from civil society, the municipality, businesses, and universities were seated around it. We'd had a full-day meeting, and a lot had been discussed. I was now leading a closing round where everyone had the chance to share what they were taking away from the meeting. After a number of comments that I perceived as largely positive, it was the turn of a new participant.

He was the director of one of the organizations, and it was important for the process that he viewed the meeting and the process as meaningful. But he said that the meeting hadn't been good; there had been too little focus on results, and he had a hard time seeing how this collaboration would benefit his organization and the larger issue. As he spoke, he looked concerned, with a furrowed brow and a blank expression. I responded by explaining the purpose of the meeting and the broader collaboration process, and by trying to help him see the value in it all. I tried to convey calmness through my body language.

2. Emotions

In the second step, you focus on what you felt in that situation. By describing those feelings, we can gain access to important information about both the situation and ourselves.

Supporting questions:

- What did you feel? Was it joy, sadness, surprise, curiosity, anger, fear, shame, disappointment, frustration, or some other emotion?
- What made you feel that way? What or who was the emotion directed toward?
- What do you think the others who were there felt?

Advice and Tips:

- Try to avoid explaining or judging at this stage. Instead, answer the questions about feelings as thoroughly as possible.
- Identifying and putting feelings into words may take some practice. Don't give up, even if it's difficult at first.

Example

When the boss said he didn't see the value in the workshop, I felt a little ashamed that I hadn't done a good job as the facilitator. When I decided to explain the value of our collaboration, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was glad that I was able to explain what was valuable, but at the same time, I had a nagging fear that he wouldn't see it the same way. I was also afraid that I was making a mistake by defending the workshop. Maybe it would have been better not to say anything?

My feelings were directed primarily toward the manager. But I also think my fear stemmed from my worry about how the entire group would perceive my actions. It's hard to know how the other participants perceived the whole situation. I noticed that a few of them shifted uncomfortably, so it's possible that they, too, felt anxiety or perhaps frustration.

3. Interpretation

When you find yourself in a challenging situation, it presents an opportunity to learn new ways of handling similar situations in the future. To make this learning possible, you need to reflect on why the situation was challenging and figure out how you can recognize similar situations in the future.

Supporting questions:

- What aspect of the situation was challenging for you?
- What kind of situation was it? How will you recognize a similar situation in the future?

Advice and Tips:

- A situation can be categorized in different ways. This means you can come up with several answers to the question of what kind of situation it was. Trying out several answers to that question can increase your ability to learn from the challenging situation.
- You can improve your situational awareness by becoming better at recognizing different types of situations. Therefore, the answer to this question is important for you to be able to act appropriately in different situations.

Example

I think what made the situation challenging for me was that I was unprepared for the criticism, and that, as the meeting leader, I took on the responsibility of ensuring that the meeting felt meaningful to all participants. I also think the fact that the person who voiced the criticism held power in that context made the situation challenging, because it made it feel important for me to convince him that the meeting was meaningful.

It was a situation where, as the meeting facilitator, I felt criticized by a participant. More specifically, a participant whose opinion I valued highly, since his view of the meeting could influence the ongoing process. In other words, a situation where I received criticism from a person whom I perceived as having power over the process.

I could also view it as a type of situation where a participant expresses a strong opinion that differs from the rest of the group.

A third way would be to view it as a situation where a participant expresses concern that the process was not meaningful to him and his organization.

I can recognize similar situations by paying attention to when participants make critical comments about the content or outcome of meetings.

4. Action alternatives

In the fourth step, you identify what options you have for action when you find yourself in similar situations in the future. We recommend that you consider your options based on the view of leadership as a pendulum swing between authority and argumentation, as described on page 3 of the brochure.

Supporting questions:

- What options do you have if you find yourself in this type of situation in the future?
- How can you use the distinction between authority and argumentation to decide what to do in this type of situation (see page 3)?

Example

If this happened again, I would try to address participants' concerns and scepticism earlier on. Perhaps even before the meeting, by checking in with key participants about how they want the meeting to go. I also think I can get better at sensing the atmosphere during a meeting and perhaps even anticipate that some participants will be focused on results while others enjoy the process and the conversation. In other words, when I feel the need, I could open the floor for discussion both during the process design phase and when I'm facilitating meetings. Perhaps incorporating more elements of reflective facilitation could strengthen the group's trust in me and thus make it more likely that I can act with authority if and when necessary. To take care of myself in this situation, I could remind myself that the others actually seem satisfied. When I think back on my response in step 3, it can also be reassuring to view the criticism as an expression of the participant's concern that the meeting might not be meaningful, rather than as criticism of my leadership.

Advice and Tips:

- You don't have to conclude that you should have acted differently in that situation, but it's important to consider what options you have if you find yourself in a similar situation. Having a wide range of options makes it easier for you to adapt to what different situations require.
- Don't forget to take care of yourself in challenging situations. Some of your options, for example, might be aimed at helping you feel as secure as possible if a similar situation arises. When we're stressed, it's often harder for us to see our various options.
- It may take some effort to interpret one's actions as an exercise of authority, since we rarely use that term in dialogue and collaboration. However, we believe that the idea of leadership as a pendulum swing between authority and argumentation opens the door to fruitful interpretations. That's why it's worth the effort.

Closing remarks

In this brochure, we have introduced the Reflection Cycle, a tool for those who lead dialogue and collaboration. The brochure has described how the Reflection Cycle can be used to learn from experience. We have particularly emphasized that it is beneficial to view leadership in dialogue and collaboration as a balance between exercising authority and being open to discussion. We hope this helps you see your leadership in a new light.

The Reflection Cycle is a tool for reflecting on significant situations. But by using the cycle repeatedly, you can also train your ability to reflect in the moment, when you're in the midst of interactions in your leadership role. By practicing reflection, you can internalize the reflection cycle and make it a habit to intuitively and quickly reflect and adjust your approach when difficult situations arise.

It may also be helpful to pause and let a dialogue or collaboration group reflect together on the situation they find themselves in. When reflection takes place in the moment, there is of course no time to go through all the steps in the cycle. Instead, a few simple questions can be helpful. What is actually happening? How can I/we understand what is happening? What should I/we do now?

However you choose to use the Reflection Cycle, we hope it will be useful in your role as a dialogue and collaboration facilitator.

This brochure was written by a research team consisting of Martin Westin (SLU), Emily Montgomerie (SLU), Fanny Möckel (SLU), Amelia Mutter (SLU), Alexander Hellquist (Uppsala University), and Camilo Calderon (SLU).

The research team extends its sincere thanks to all dialogue and collaboration leaders who contributed to the development of the reflection cycle.

For more information, contact Martin Westin, researcher at SLU. Martin.Westin@slu.se

mistra-ec.se

SLU UPPSALA UNIVERSITET

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