

ROTTERDAM SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT, ERASMUS UNIVERSITY

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Why team reflexivity works

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Assessing a situation before acting may seem like common sense. After all, many languages have an equivalent of the English proverb: ‘look before you leap’. However, people rarely apply this in their daily working lives; we seldom make time to stop and reflect on our processes, and most teams and organisations are action-orientated.

Team reflexivity, the extent to which teams collectively reflect upon and adapt their working methods and functioning, is an important predictor of team outcomes, and most notably innovation. I believe there is enormous scope for this in today’s hectic business environments.

Along with my co-researchers – Michael West of Lancaster University and Jeremy Dawson of the University of Sheffield, both in the UK – I wanted to show how team reflexivity is strongly related to innovation and team performance in general. Teams are too often inclined to follow routines.

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Why is teamwork better and more effective than individual acts and innovation? Individuals within a team can be highly reflexive, but if they keep their ideas to themselves, nothing is going to change at the team level. People need to share and discuss their beliefs. And it needs to be accompanied with real change.

That may work in a safe, unchanging environment where the same tasks are carried out every day, but in volatile, high-pressure environments, teams need to innovate to become more effective.

There hasn’t been much research into how people deal with the issues that arise in their work environment;

it’s mostly been about teams and organisational processes. So, we decided to look into this in more depth. The results of our study (*Team Reflexivity and Innovation: The Moderating Role of Team Context*) were published recently by the *Journal of Management*.

We developed and tested a team-level contingency model of team reflexivity, work demands, and innovation. We fundamentally believe that highly reflexive teams will be more innovative than teams low in reflexivity, especially when faced with demanding work environments. So for the fieldwork we selected 98 primary healthcare teams within the UK’s National Health Service (NHS). The NHS is the perfect high-stress environment, with a high turnover of patients, and teams need to cope with this on a daily basis.

There were many differences between the teams we studied. Some had state-of-the-art equipment and modern buildings. Others had to deal with old equipment and shabby working environments. But if you have a limited budget and resources, it becomes even more important to stop and reflect on how to organise these.

When we examined the results in the context of the need for reflexivity and innovation among work teams facing high demands, we found there



was a link. Higher levels of reflexivity and work demands (higher patient-to-doctor-ratios) produced higher levels of innovation. Moreover, we also discovered a link between reflexivity, the quality of the physical work environment (PWE – the spaciousness and quality of the working area, facilities, and general condition of the building), and innovation. A poor PWE coupled with high team reflexivity resulted in even higher levels of innovation.

This link is especially helpful when work demands are high. All-too-often, in stressful environments, the first reaction of a team to any challenge is to work harder and stick to routines. But that doesn't always work. Our study identified ways in which teams can learn to work "smarter", and showed it is possible to make the best of adverse conditions by reflecting and innovating.

Healthcare is a specialised and intense working environment, but these basic principles can be applied elsewhere. In order to overcome fundamental problems, people need to take the time to reflect before acting. It is much better to change a way of working to cope with the load, rather than burn out.

There are wider benefits to this. As Scientific Director of Erasmus Centre of Behavioural Operations Management, I'm looking into how people make decisions. The default seems to be that people always make the same basic mistakes and errors. Reflexivity is a good way to eradicate default errors and make better decisions.

We are also looking at how students can benefit from guided reflection. Last year, we implemented an online goal-setting programme for all first-year students. The aim is for them to reflect

on, articulate, and plan their desired future in a broad way. Taking time to think about what they want to achieve in life, both in work and in their free time, improves academic performance and student retention.

In the future I intend to extend this study to schools in the Rotterdam area. Furthermore, we are starting an exercise in which student teams reflect on how they will work together in their course, ie, a team charter. This will be piloted in a large first-year course.

All this builds on the work of Amy Edmondson and Anita Tucker of Harvard Business School, who showed that instead of finding root causes of problems, people often found ad hoc solutions and workarounds. But this just papers over the cracks, and it blocks learning from failures.

The bottom line is: if you look for the source of the problem, it may take more time initially to solve, but the problem won't resurface time and time again. Processes will be much smoother as a result. ■

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