

What is reflective space and how does it work?

Martin Ringer, March, 2017

Purpose of reflective space:

Reflective space is a term given to regular meetings of teams that are 'hosted' by a trained reflective space practitioner. The purpose of reflective space is as follows:

- To create a 'holding environment' - To give an opportunity for team members to de-clutter their internal worlds so as to be more available to and effective at work
- To provide proactive means of surfacing and dealing effectively with issues in the team that may otherwise develop into unhelpful tensions or conflict
- To provide a place for day-dreaming, creativity and innovation in the team
- To enable the team to provide support at an intuitive, relational and emotional level for each other.

The need for reflective space

The human brain and psyche deals with material that is most emotionally pressing or intense. This is often not directly related to the practical work that is being conducted by a team and/or various members of the team. Normally there is no space to surface and work with this material and so the unaddressed issues sit at the back of 'front of mind' and directly consume cognitive and emotional energy. This sort of material emerges from:-

- Work with clients - identification and counter-transference
- Relationships between team members
- Interaction with the wider organization and the wider world
- Challenging, vexing, annoying or distressing work related matters such as feelings of incompetence, feeling alienated by the organization, poor fit with organizational culture or overload. (To name a few)
- Other parts of team members' lives

How the reflective space works

Participants meet regularly for an hour. Weekly is ideal but some organizations don't see that weekly meetings are justified. Participants are given information like this document that provides background information on the reflective space process. Initially the host – who is from outside the organization – answers questions and works with the team to ensure that all members understand the process and what is expected of them. From then on the host intervenes as little as possible. The role of the host is mainly to help to shape the reflective space so that participants can get access to the kind of material that would otherwise undermine their capacity to work and then to enable them to talk about this. That is, participants: -

Surface material that might have previously been in the personal unconscious of one or more group members or in the 'social unconscious' of the group

Articulate any issues of which they become aware

Explore the nature and build shared understanding through a conversation with the team

"Digest", process etc. the issue to reduce its 'power over' team members

(Different facilitative processes may be needed for each of these).

Reflective space is a place where associations, images, dreams and ideas can emerge but don't have to be turned into a 'product' or an action. The process during reflective spaces is intended to be associative rather than logical. See more about this below.

Often there will be long silences during reflective spaces and these are an essential part of the process. It can be a challenge for the host to decide when or whether to end the silence. Some of the challenges with hosting reflective spaces are as follows:

- Encouraging participants to free up from the rules of conversation. During a conversation participants feel constrained to follow a topic and relate to previous speakers. This is counter-productive to reflective space because participants need to be able to follow their inner voices.
- No longer having to make sense. We're socialized to say things that we think will make sense to the listener, but our own internal free associations arise from thoughts and feelings that may not be shared by others and so voicing whatever comes to mind may sound crazy. But it's the sum of the individual free associations that start over time to form patterns in the collective that would otherwise not surface.
- Feeling useful. There is no fixed role for the reflective space host and so it can be very difficult to feel useful. In normal meetings most organizations expect decisions, outcomes or at least reaching agreement that something has been clarified or resolved. However the reflective space process is one of voicing what is present in the moment and working with associations rather than with reason, logic and shared understanding. Hence, there will often be no clear result from a single reflective space session or even a series of reflective space sessions. The real result of freeing up pre-conscious mental space sometimes remains outside the conscious awareness of participants and of the host.

What does a host do then?

Some ideas that have emerged over reflecting on practice are that the host can do the following:-

- Pay close attention to his or her intuition, flashes of internal dialogue, images that come to mind, feelings and fantasies, wishes etc. Even looking at the clock is a signal of something
- Wonder about the connection between what is going on in the host's own mind and body and how it might be connected with voiced and un-voiced patterns of thinking and feeling in the team
- Describe one's own thinking and feeling when it does seem that it's connected to the dynamic in the team. This is probably not best done as an interpretation but a statement about one's own experience. (Interpretations can be experienced as 'colonizing' the thinking and feeling of team members.)
- Occasionally make observations that are based on one's understanding of group and team dynamics and on one's personal understanding of how human systems and human beings function
- Nudge the team back into reflective space if participants start to conduct team business or planning sessions
- Be real and authentic when you are clear that this is likely to assist the reflective space and is not intended to influence participants to like you, admire you, have sympathy for you etc.

From where does the information come that informs the action of the reflective space host?

The fundamental principle informing the reflective space host is that of 'self as instrument'. That is, the host's own internal functioning is the instrument that is mobilized to help shape the reflective space. Here, a key assumption is that the host is sufficiently tuned into the conscious and unconscious currents and swirls in the group for the important information to appear as the *host's own* feelings, thoughts and flashes of intuition. That is we are such an integral part of the group that we 'feel for' the group. Hence, by carefully and selectively

voicing our own experience of being with the group we are in fact reflecting back to the group what is probably happening in the group unconscious.

This means that a host needs to be aware of as many as possible of his or her own habitual 'buttons', strengths, frailties and vulnerabilities. This can be achieved in part by through personal therapy and professional supervision. Formal training in group dynamics, psychotherapy, and organizational dynamics can supplement the foundation of a strong capacity to observe self-in-process in the context of groups and teams.

What other roles are different from hosting a reflective space?

When first starting to run reflective space sessions I was struck that most of the roles for which I had previously trained could in fact be unhelpful if I mobilized them in my role as host of reflective space. That is, a reflective space host is not any of the following:

- A facilitator who ensures that everybody has a say and that the team achieves a purpose and outcome
- An organizational consultant who provides feedback about organizational dynamics and may even suggest interventions
- A clinical psychotherapy group supervisor who works with therapists to improve their practice through reflection on their work with clients (this is most relevant for reflective spaces in mental health settings)
- A trainer or coach for individuals who directly assists participants to learn new skills
- A group and team dynamics coach who intervenes in teams to help them function better.

Some things that interfere with reflective space

- Treating it like a team business meeting. As soon as practical problems become the focus, the team moves away from the intuitive and from leaving space for 'suppressed' material to surface
- Focusing on facts rather than meaning and symbolic elements. Again, facts are relevant to all aspects of team life but the strength of reflective space is that it enables surfacing of the significance and meaning of events in the workplace
- Trying to be logical. Logic is often used to deny the symbolism, significance and meaning of events. Reflective spaces need to tolerate and work with confusion, unease, uncertainty and a-rationality
- Being polite. Politeness prevents surfacing of the essential elements of dislike, anger, frustration and other strong 'negative' feelings that can otherwise enrich the power of the reflective space.

Appendix: A theory of thinking

The following bullet points summarize a theory of thinking in groups and teams that partly underpins the practice of reflective space.

- The external social environment unconsciously 'maps' onto internal thinking/feeling space
- Factors to consider:
 - Clarity of purpose
 - Relative absence of expectation of attack or being ignored both in one-to-one relationships and group-as-a-whole
 - Expectation of responsiveness in the group-as-a-whole
 - Capacity of individual members to manage their internal worlds without becoming victims, bullies or dumping on others
 - Shared responsibility for the health of the reflective space: Creating, maintaining, using and repairing
 - The capacity to tolerate 'negative' feelings without retreating into safety. (Ringer, 2007)

Some related reading

Hinshelwood, R. D. (1994). Attacks on the reflective space: containing primitive emotional states. Ring of fire; primitive affects and object relations in group psychotherapy. V. L. Schermer and M. Pines. London, Routledge: 86 - 106.

Johnston, J. and G. Paley (2013). "Mirror mirror on the ward: Who is the unfairest of them all? Reflections on reflective practice groups in acute psychiatric settings." Psychoanalytic psychotherapy **27**(2): 170-186.

Kranz, J. (2013). Work culture analysis and reflective space. Socioanalytic Methods: Discovering the hidden in organisations and social systems. S. Long. London, Amazon Kindle: Locations 1129-1146 to 1767-1176.

Ringer, T. M. (2002). Group action: The dynamics of groups in therapeutic, educational and corporate settings. London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ringer, T. M. (2007). "Leadership for collective thinking in the work place." Team Performance Management **13**(3/4): 130-144.

Schon, D. A. (1995). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing.

[(Hinshelwood 1994, Schon 1995, Kranz 2013)
(Ringer 2002) (Ringer 2007) (Johnston and Paley 2013)]

Acknowledgements

Thanks for Françoise who has spent many hours talking with me about reflective space and also thanks to the reflective space professional interest group that has added greatly to my understanding of the subtleties of reflective space.