

SELF-REFLECTION IN LEADERSHIP: DOES THIS DISTINGUISH A GOOD LEADER FROM A BAD ONE?

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Purpose: Self-reflection competence is recognized as a key leadership skill that leads to learning from one's own experiences, drawing conclusions, and shaping one's actions in the future with a sense of job satisfaction. At the same time, research in the field of leadership is insufficient on this topic. Therefore, this article aims to determine the significance of the self-reflection competence of a leader for organizational commitment, well-being, and organizational performance, which can be a measure of good leadership.

Design/methodology/approach: The research was conducted among 200 managers of Polish enterprises from October 2022 to January 2023. In this study, the online questionnaire and convenience sampling were used.

Findings: The analysis results indicate a positive and significant impact of self-reflection competence on well-being, commitment, and organizational results, contributing to the development of a comprehensive approach to leadership.

Research limitations: Firstly, the research sample is not large. Secondly, the study used a self-reflection competence scale that included general statements about reflection. It was not asked how often the leader practices reflection and whether it concerns positive or negative aspects.

Practical implications: Leaders in organizations should remember to practice reflections, which should not be an activity only in exceptional circumstances, but rather a part of the routine of everyday professional duties. Leaders should also engage employees in reflection practices, as collective reflection brings value to the organization.

Originality/value: The significance of self-reflection competency contributes to theory and practice toward a comprehensive approach to leadership.

Keywords: self-reflection, leadership, well-being, commitment, performance.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Many researchers have considered reflection an important part of every learning process (Kolba, 1984; Schon, 1983; Senge, 1999). It is a critical thinking process about our behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and values. People learn through experience, which leads to reflection on that experience and the development of new insights or conclusions that shape subsequent actions in the future. However, a man does not learn from experience but learns from reflection on this experience. Therefore, reflection is an integral part of the learning cycle, both in personal and professional life. Reflection allows us to look inward to clarify personal values and beliefs, and outward to understand how they connect to the greater whole. Critical reflection can broaden perspectives and lead to a more holistic understanding of complex and ambiguous situations (Densten, Gray, 2001; Kayes, 2002). Currently, when the individual's autonomy in terms of their development is increasing and at the same time there is unlimited access to information and its ambiguity, reflection takes on particular importance. Reflective practice has its followers not only among learning theorists but also among leadership researchers.

Goleman et al. (2002) argued that individual learning that uses reflective questions is an effective strategy for developing emotional intelligence and, finally, leadership competencies. Self-reflection is conducting a dialogue with oneself (van Loon, van Dijk, 2015). Research indicates that self-reflection allows leaders to better cope with emotional reactions (Nesbit, 2012), exposes leader potential, and improves leadership effectiveness (Lanaj, Foulk, Erez, 2019).

However, research shows that reflecting on one's actions is not obvious or easy for leaders (Smith, 2001). Some senior leaders believe that taking time to reflect on what has already been done can be a waste of time (Patricia, Castelli, 2016). Moreover, many leaders may experience negative emotions when they begin to analyze not only what they managed to do, but also what they failed to do (Womac, 2020). A study by Olsen and Burk (2014) indicated that people are more likely to focus on negative aspects resulting from reflection, which can further lead to anxiety and stress (Steele, Day, 2018). Therefore, it seems the leaders would like to avoid self-analysis of their actions, which may lead to negative perceptions and emotions.

Despite much research on reflection, there are few studies about leadership, especially in the case of Polish leaders. Moreover, there is no unambiguous research in this area. Thus, this topic is crucial because determining the significance of a leader's self-reflection can contribute to theory and practice toward a comprehensive approach to leadership. Therefore, this article attempts to determine the meaning of self-reflection competencies for leaders in the context of organizational commitment, well-being, and organizational performance, which can be a measure of effective leadership.

The following article is structured as follows. The first chapter reviews the literature on self-reflection and its significance for leadership in the context of organizational performance, employee engagement, and well-being, along with hypothesis development. The next chapter describes the methodology of the study. The following chapters of the article present the research results and discussion. The article ends with a summary, research conclusions, theoretical and practical implications, and research limitations.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. Definition of reflection and self-reflection

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, reflection is “serious and careful thought” (<https://dictionary.cambridge...>, 2024). It is thinking about feelings, reactions, and motives for action, and their impact on what to do or to think in a given situation. Reflection allows not only the description of a person's way of thinking but also the description of how an individual constructs his or her experiences. These experiences are shaped based on the thoughts, feelings, actions, and relationships with others that occur in a specific context. Chudy (2006) combines reflection with the ability to evaluate decisions made and one's behavior. It can lead to a change in the ways of thinking and acting, and even a change in perceiving reality (Mezirow, 2009). Therefore, reflection allows an individual to oppose routine and formulaic nature. This is because the source of reflection is the individual's doubts arising from facing a difficult experience. Reflection is therefore related to the practice of learning. A specific experience can stimulate an individual's reflection, and the result of this process will be learning. However, it is important to remember that experience alone is not a sufficient learning factor. A necessary condition for learning from experience is reflection on that experience.

According to the Dictionary of the Polish Language, reflection is "thinking more deeply about something, triggered by a strong experience"; it is “a thought or utterance that is the result of such reflection” (<https://sjp.pwn...>, 2024). Reflection is usually understood as the ability to take the role of an observer to one's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Reflection "largely determines the mental, moral, and technical-practical level of a person" (Chudy, 2006, p. 72). Self-reflection, on the other hand, is defined in the same way, except that it refers to reflecting on oneself. Synonyms of this word are self-analysis, self-evaluation, or self-criticism, which involve reflecting on what happened, wondering why it happened, and drawing conclusions about what could have happened (Womack, 2020). However, it should be remembered that reflection on events is not only a summary of actions performed and not performed but also a reflection on the reasons (sources) of those situations. Self-reflection is also self-awareness understood as awareness of one's thoughts and emotions as well as actions taken and the

resulting successes and failures. Reflection is based on the subjective consideration of knowledge and a critical analysis of its essence (Karaś, 2021). A manifestation of this may be self-actualization, which contributes to correcting actions based on mistakes made (Novikov, Chkhartishvili, 2014). Reflection is an inherent attribute of learning, observing, and taking a broad view of the problem, as well as noticing and taking into account the different contexts.

Reflection is defined as the heart of key competencies (Perkowska-Klejman, 2018). The justification for this statement is that reflective thinking is the basis of human action. This allows an individual own thinking, experiences, actions, and practices to fit into different contexts. Reflection is a metacognitive skill that requires creativity and the ability to think critically.

A model of reflective practice that includes the mentioned aspects: reflection, self-awareness, and critical thinking is summarized in Table 1. Reflection enables the application of theory in practice and the search for new and better solutions. Self-awareness, which is also a component of emotional intelligence, gives an individual the ability to recognize his or her emotions and actions, use intuition to make decisions, or make accurate self-assessments (Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee, 2002). Finally, critical thinking is noticing differences and making decisions thanks to the ability to recognize other people's positions and arguments, reliably analyze opposing evidence, and present own views (Negri, 2018).

Table 1.
Elements of reflection practices

Element	Reflection	Self-awareness	Critical thinking
Source	Existential phenomenology and critical theory	Phenomenology	Skepticism and critical theory
Characteristics	Intellectual effort, consideration	Being aware of one's own emotions, thoughts, needs, possibilities, abilities, limitations, and actions	Criticism of culture and society, recognition and criticism of assumptions resulting from context, search and discovery of alternatives, reflective skepticism

Source: Perkowska-Klejman, 2018.

2.2. Self-reflection competence and effective leadership

The effectiveness of leaders depends on their competencies (Kragt, Guenter, 2018; Sturm, Vera, Crossan, 2017). Competent leaders can better overcome their limitations and are more effective in the workplace (Kozłowski, 2015). Employees who positively evaluate their leader's competencies perform their tasks better, feel higher job satisfaction, are more motivated, and actively support cooperation and communication between all organizational participants (Osborn et al., 2002; Waldman et al., 2004).

One of the most important competencies of leaders is self-reflection understood as the ability to analyze past experiences and draw conclusions from them (George, 2015; Kozłowski 2015). Self-reflection has been recognized as one of the key competencies needed by effective leaders, especially in the face of an increasingly complex and multicultural workplace (Roberts,

2008) additionally characterized by the complexity and speed of information flow (Carter et al., 2015; Baltaci, Balci, 2017). In an organizational context, reflection refers to considering how work-related issues affect an individual's ability to achieve positive outcomes. Self-reflection competencies are considered crucial because they consolidate other interdependent skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, initiative, and the ability to solve problems, assess risk, make decisions, or manage emotions (Perkowska-Klejman, 2018). Various leadership theories emphasize the importance of self-reflection and self-awareness, especially the concepts of authentic, servant, and transformational leadership (Berge, Erzikova, 2022).

Self-reflective competencies are related to a leader's ability to analyze successes and failures and draw conclusions from them. Reflecting on both failures and successes allows individuals to think more systematically and gain a deeper, more complex understanding of their experiences. Luthans and Avolio (2003) argue that self-reflective competencies create important positive psychological capabilities and build the self-awareness of effective leaders. Self-reflective leaders use introspection to evaluate themselves which causes higher awareness of their strengths and weaknesses (Hinojosa et al., 2014). Effective leaders reflect on their past experiences and seek relevant, different insights before making decisions (Göker, Bozkus, 2017). They are also able to create transparent and honest relationships with others and can overcome emotional limitations. Reflective leaders view learning as a lifelong process and tend to balance the practice of "talking" with "asking" and often rely on the collective intelligence capabilities of the teams in their organizations.

Many studies point to the positive aspects of self-reflection. Self-reflection skills improve performance by enabling people to learn from their past experiences (Anseel, Lievens, Schollaert, 2009; Ashford, DeRue 2012), take personal responsibility for their past achievements (Ellis et al. 2006), and feel more confident about achieving their goals (Di Stefano et al., 2014). Moreover, leaders do not need to spend much time on reflection to get benefits. Spending just only a part of the day analyzing work experiences is enough to improve performance (Di Stefano et al., 2014). Additionally, leaders who practice reflection are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, which makes them more productive (Womack, 2020) and committed to leading and supporting others (Park, Millora, 2012). Self-reflection practices are also a way to develop a leadership role (Steele, Day, 2018) and even self-confidence (Odom, Boyd, Williams, 2012). Practicing reflexivity means being aware of your actions and results, which results in increased effectiveness at work, which manifests itself in good organizational performance. Based on the above arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: A leader's self-reflection competence is positively related to organizational performance.

2.3. Self-reflection and organizational commitment

Leadership development is a group process. Leaders develop through work-based “passive learning” with reflection occurring at the individual and collective levels (Raelin, 2006). Leaders are constantly learning, adapting to a changing environment, and creating new leadership styles that fit employees and the environment. Therefore, reflection is not only an individual process but also a collective one (Göker, Bozkuş, 2017). It involves conducting a dialogue with yourself and others. Through reflection, the need for changes in action or behavior is recognized. Reflection seems to be an important element of a leader's everyday life, which influences decisions about managing people and setting directions for the organization's activities. In this context, reflexivity should not be treated as a separate technique to be used occasionally, but as an integral part of leading.

This is confirmed by research results that indicate that reflexivity is a mediating factor between a leader's information search and team performance and innovation (Wang et al., 2020). Another study indicates that team reflexivity positively affects affective commitment and subsequently employee innovativeness (Wang, Cui, Cai, 2022). Employees who reflect on positive events at the end of the working day experience a greater sense of meaning in work and greater engagement in the routine of work tasks and responsibilities the next day (Sonnentag et al., 2021). Fritz and Sonnentag (2005) found that positive reflection on work during the weekend increased work engagement and reduced burnout after the weekend. Based on the results of the above research, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2: A leader's self-reflection competence is positively related to organizational commitment.

2.4. Self-reflection and well-being

Research shows that the practice of self-reflection contributes to well-being. Reflecting on the positive aspects of their job helps employees feel positive about their work (Fritz, Sonnentag 2006). Employees who reflect, focusing on positive situations that happened to them at work, report fewer health problems, both physical and mental (Bono et al., 2013), have more positive emotions (Sonnentag, Grant, 2012), and better mood the next day (Meier, Cho, Dumani, 2016), and they are also able to recover from occupational stress (Fritz, Sonnentag, 2006).

Moreover, reflection practice in free time also positively affects the level of well-being. People who reflect mainly on the positive (rather than negative) aspects of their work during their free time experience greater vigor and less exhaustion (Casper, Tremmel, Sonnentag, 2019). Thinking about negative aspects of work causes exhaustion and discouragement (Fritz, Sonnentag 2006).

Numerous literature reviews and meta-analyses show that leadership is crucial to employee well-being (Harms et al., 2017; Inceoglu et al., 2018; Teetzen et al., 2022; Montano et al., 2017). Most of the research was conducted among employees. However, there is a lack of research

conducted among leaders. Therefore, it seems important to verify whether leaders' self-reflection can also contribute to improving their well-being.

H3: A leader's self-reflection competence is positively related to a sense of well-being.

3. Research methods

The research was conducted among 200 managers of Polish enterprises from October 2022 to January 2023. In this study, the online questionnaire was used with Google Forms. The link to the questionnaire with the invitation and information about voluntary participation was sent by mail to respondents. A non-random sampling method was used (convenience sampling). The selection of respondents involved selecting research participants based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. The majority of respondents were women (55%). The largest group of leaders were people aged 36-50 (54%), aged 25-35 (35%), and the smallest group were leaders over 50 (6%) and under 25 (5%). The vast majority of leaders had higher education (71%), and almost all of the rest had secondary education (26%). Just under half of the respondents (42%) had less than 5 years of leadership experience; half of the respondents (50%) had experienced between 6 to 15 years; the rest of the respondents (8%) were over 15 years of age. The dominant industry was services (63%), then production (22%), and trade (16%). The respondents were representatives of leaders of enterprises of various sizes - from micro (10%), through small (34%) and medium-sized (28%), to large companies (29%).

The following four measurement constructs were used in this research. To measure self-reflection competencies, a tool proposed by Koźmiński (2022) was used with five statements (e.g. "I draw accurate conclusions from past experiences"). Fry's (2003) scale was used to measure organizational performance with four statements (e.g., "My department is very effective in obtaining maximum efficiency from available resources"). Organizational commitment was measured using a scale from Mulka et al. (2006) with three statements (e.g., "I feel that this is "my" organization and that I am not just an employee of it"). To examine well-being, the scale proposed by Fry, Vitucci, and Cedillo (2005) was used with two constructs: meaning work with four statements (e.g. "The work I do is very important to me") and being appreciated with four statements (e.g. "I feel appreciated as an employee"). The study used a five-point Likert scale.

Descriptive statistics, Spearman's rank correlation analysis between variables, and structural equation modeling were used for the analysis to indicate the relationships (strength and direction) between individual variables. IBM SPSS Statistics was used for modeling.

4. Research results

First, the reliability and validity of the scales used in the study were estimated. Although the used scales were positively verified, it is worth assessing the measurement model in the context of a given research sample. The parameters of convergent validity measured by average variance extracted (AVE) were as follows: self-reflection competencies (AVE = 0.640); well-being (AVE = 0.610); organizational commitment (AVE = 0.686); organizational results (AVE = 0.715) with values higher than required, i.e. 0.5 (Na-Nan, 2020). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient: self-reflection competence ($\alpha = 0.858$); well-being ($\alpha = 0.879$); organizational commitment ($\alpha = 0.760$) and organizational results ($\alpha = 0.866$). A Cronbach's alpha was considered to indicate a satisfactory degree of internal consistency on the level of at least 0.60 (Griethuisen et al., 2014). Next, composite reliability (CR) was estimated, which reached values above 0.7 (Hair, Ringle, Sarstedt, 2013): self-reflective competence (CR = 0.899); well-being (CR = 0.904); organizational commitment (CR = 0.867); organizational results (CR = 0.909). Therefore, it can be concluded that the measures used in the study are characterized by satisfactory indicators, which means a good fit of the variables to the examined constructs.

Construct validity was estimated to assess the relationships between variables. Table 2 presents Spearman's rank correlations between leader self-reflection competencies, well-being, organizational commitment, and organizational performance. Spearman's rank coefficients should be in the range of 0.4-0.9, which indicates proper correlations between the variables (Akoglu, 2018). The results indicate that self-reflection has significant positive correlations with the measured variables. The highest positive correlation was found between the leader's self-reflection and well-being ($r = 0.709$, $p > 0.01$), self-reflection and organizational performance ($r = 0.643$, $p > 0.01$). The appropriate correlation was also noted between self-reflection and organizational commitment ($r = 0.536$, $p > 0.05$). The average value of the studied variables was also calculated. Leaders rated their self-reflection competencies the highest (mean 4.36), next well-being (4.32), organizational performance (4.17), and organizational commitment (4.15).

Table 2.
Correlations between the studied variables

Variables	Mean	1	2	3	4
1. Self-reflection	4.36	1	-	-	-
2. Well-being	4.32	0.709**	1	-	-
3. Organizational commitment	4.15	0.536*	0.641**	1	-
4. Organizational performance	4.17	0.643**	0.677**	0.635*	1

Note(s): * $p > 0.05$, ** $p > 0.01$

Source: own collaboration.

Fig. 1 presents the relationships between the studied variables. The model indicates cause-and-effect relationships between hidden variables and their observable indicators. The fit measures of the theoretical model to the data indicate a good fit: the ratio of chi-square to the degree of freedom (χ^2/df) is 2.504, RMSEA – 0.067, CFI – 0.906, IFI – 0.907. The results of model parameter estimation indicate that at the significance level of 0.01, all parameters are statistically significant. Positive relationships exist between leader self-reflection competencies and organizational results ($\beta = 0.88$, $p < 0.01$), which confirms hypothesis 1. Self-reflection also correlates with organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.77$, $p < 0.01$), which confirms hypothesis H2. There is a positive and significant impact of self-reflection on well-being ($\beta = 0.97$, $p < 0.01$), positively verifying hypothesis H3.

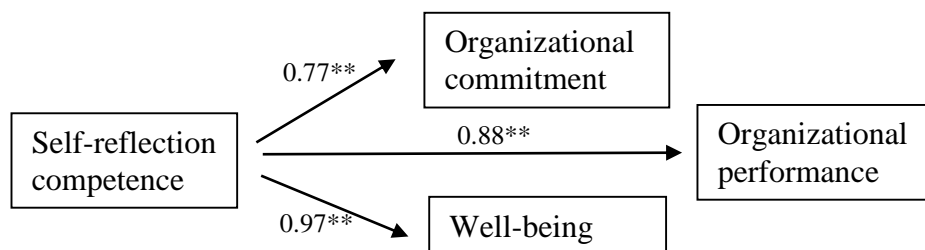


Figure 1. Model of the relationship between the studied variables.

Note(s): ** $p > 0.01$.

Source: own collaboration.

5. Discussion

The research results confirm theoretical considerations on the significance of self-reflection as a key competence of a leader, which may influence the effectiveness measured by organizational performance. The results confirm the existing research on the topic among employees (Di Stefano et al., 2014), but above all, they enrich research in the field of leadership. According to previous research, self-reflection competence is important for a leader (Kozłmiński, 2002) and improves effectiveness (Lanaj, Foulk, Erez, 2019; Womack, 2020). Moreover, the research results also support the assumptions about the impact of the ability to practice self-reflection on organizational commitment in line with previous research (Sonnetag et al., 2021; Fritz, Sonnetag, 2005). This is important because recent analyses indicate the positive impact of leaders also on employee engagement and performance (Donkor, Dongmei, Sekyere, 2021; Daghmi, 2024). This research also confirms that self-reflection does indeed have a positive impact on well-being about work, providing a sense of meaning in work and being appreciated at work. Moreover, this research focused on self-reflection in general, without distinguishing between positive or negative reflection (focusing on positive or negative aspects of work).

Despite this, the research results indicate a positive impact of self-reflection on the well-being of leaders. Additionally, other studies present a positive impact of well-being on organizational performance (Samul, Wangmo, 2021; Rufeng, Nan, Jianqiang, 2023). Thus, the practice of self-reflection is important for a leader's sense of work engagement and well-being, as well as organizational performance, which may lead to the conclusion that self-reflection is what distinguishes a good leader from a bad one.

6. Summary

This research indicates a positive impact of the leader's self-reflection competence on a sense of well-being and commitment, as well as on organizational performance. The analysis results have several theoretical and practical implications. In a theoretical context, they complete the literature on this subject by confirming previous research about the significance of reflection in professional life. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, reflection is an everyday practice that allows everyone to learn from their experiences and develop their potential by analyzing their actions, behaviors, and motives. However, it seems to have become a somewhat forgotten practice in the tough business world. Moreover, this research shows that self-reflection has measurable effects in the form of well-being, a positive attitude to work, increased commitment, and better results. This research also adds to existing research in the field of leadership. The vast majority of scientific studies concern research conducted among employees, excluding the group of employees in managerial positions. Managers in organizations have an impact not only on their work but also on the work of their subordinates and entire teams. Therefore, the research results also have practical implications. Leaders in organizations should remember to practice reflections, which should not be an activity only in exceptional circumstances, but rather a part of the routine of everyday professional duties. Additionally, the leader should engage employees in the reflection practice, as collective reflection also brings value to the organization.

This study has several limitations. First, the research sample is not large. Although it is sufficient to conduct analyses and draw conclusions, they cannot be generalized to the entire population of leaders. Second, the study used a self-reflection competence scale that included general statements about reflection. However, it was not asked how often the leader practices reflection and whether it concerns positive or negative aspects. However, in the context of the results obtained, it does not seem to be that important.

Based on the study, further research directions were indicated. It is worth exploring the aspects of the limitations of the study. First of all, research on reflection should be expanded to shed light on whether only positive self-reflection has a better impact on well-being, commitment, and performance. Reflection on positive and good experiences has a positive

impact on our emotions, but this does not mean that we draw the right lessons from these experiences and the right conclusions for future actions. We usually analyze negative events in detail, considering their causes and possibilities of avoiding them in the future, so we can learn more. Therefore, it would be worth analyzing this thread, as well as the time spent on self-reflection practice - whether it should be a daily or time-to-time routine or used only in exceptional events. Another direction of research should also concern the impact of the leader's self-reflection competencies and collective reflection on the well-being, commitment, and organizational performance of employees. Analyzing the relationship between these variables would contribute to research on a comprehensive approach to leadership.

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